

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 5, 2017
Matthew 5:13-20
“Unreduced Law and Gospel”

It's no secret that church attendance and church membership is declining in America today. This isn't just true among Missouri-Synod Lutherans, fewer and fewer people identify themselves as church-going Christians in America today. Evangelism is difficult—the harvest isn't so plentiful in the United States at the present time: India, Africa and China—yes; America, not so much. There are all sorts of books and articles and conferences about the problem, with all sorts of different and opposite conclusions—each of which spawns a sure-fire, guaranteed program that will turn things around for your congregation.

We know evangelism is tough: in fact, it's literally a miracle that anyone believes. It's God's doing, not ours. We know that the Gospel sounds like folly to those who have no faith—that was St. Paul's point in I Corinthians: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). So the Gospel sounds foolish to those who are perishing: nevertheless, it's only by the Gospel that God saves those who are perishing; so the answer is certainly not that the Gospel is at fault.

Within Christendom, though, many have faulted the Gospel. A lot of popular preachers and missiologists have advised that the Church should move away from “Christ-crucified” and move toward speaking far more of Christian living and obeying the commandments. The Gospel, they say, just isn't doing the trick anymore. How the devil must delight to hear “Christians” declare that we ought to stop telling people about the cross. May God preserve us from ever being ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

But the devil has more than one attack up his sleeve, for he hates all of God's Word. And while it's easy for us to focus on his campaign against the Gospel, he is also busily at work to attack the preaching of the Law, too. In this attack, he makes the most of his allies—the world and your own sinful flesh.

And that, I propose to you, dear friends, is the foundational reason for declining membership in churches in our nation today: the preaching of the Law, as it's supposed to be preached, has been largely silenced.

The proclamation of the Law has been largely silenced in society. Look simply at the practice of political correctness, where the great sin is to hurt somebody's feelings. Just to our north in Canada, a pastor can be found guilty of hate speech for saying that the Bible condemns homosexuality. More and more, it is against the laws of man to preach the Law of God. It is becoming illegal simply to repeat what the Bible says.

Think about what you see on TV, in movies, and hear in popular music today. Not so long ago, a good story was one where the hero fought off evil and temptation in order to do the right

thing, to be an example or a role model to show people what they ought to be doing. That's what's made more recent movies like Lord of the Rings, the Chronicles of Narnia and the "Toy Story" franchise popular—sometimes to the astonishment of critics. Overall, though, the prevailing theme of media remains an anti-morality "do-whatever-you-want-and-it's-okay."

All of this is what unbelief always does to attack the Law of God. But I tell you this: the devil's target ultimately is not the Law. It's the Gospel. See, if the Law isn't preached, then it's so much easier for people to deny that they're sinful. If they don't know they're sinful, then they see no need for the Gospel. So when the Gospel is then proclaimed, they say, "So what? I'm not bound by all those commandments that God laid down and Christians live by. I don't need to be saved from sin because what I'm doing isn't sinful."

We mentioned before those within Christendom who say that the Church should turn from speaking of the Gospel to speaking of "Christian living." In other words, the Church should tell people how to live their lives—they should spend more time laying down the law. This hits close to home in that it's what makes up a lot of the stuff in the local Christian bookstore. It's a disaster for Christianity, and here is why: when a preacher tells you that Christianity is all about Christian living, he's telling you that it's all about following God's commands. The problem, of course, is that you can't keep God's commands perfectly. So how does such a preacher solve this problem? He says this: "I know you can't keep God's commands perfectly. He knows that too. The point is that God wants you to do your best, try as hard as you can. The more you do, the more you'll be blessed." And what happens? People begin to believe that Christianity is all about trying their best: they have a vague notion that Jesus died on the cross, but that's history and the present is about what you're going to do with your life.

Am I making a big deal out of nothing? Hardly. Extensive studies of "Christians" in America show that they believe in what's been labeled "moralistic therapeutic deism." Moralistic therapeutic deism. From back to front, "deism" means that they believe that God exists, but that's He's pretty distant most of the time, most days letting you run your life on your own. "Therapeutic" means that they believe that you really only need to involve God in your life when you're in trouble, when you need help and healing—otherwise, it's just fine that He's far away. And "moralistic"? That means that Christianity is about being moral, being nice. It's all about how you live.

That means that a stunning number of "Christians" in America believe that they can keep God's Law well enough to please God. This can only mean that God has softened up over time, that He's not quite so serious about sin or enforcing His Law anymore: after all, some will say, He used to strike people down on the spot for sin, or call for people to be stoned to death for immorality. But that's not the case anymore, so clearly God has changed how His Law is to be used.

Remember the devil's target here is not the Law. It's the Gospel. Those who think that Christianity is all about doing your best will not think it is about confessing your abject

sinfulness and calling upon God for mercy and grace. The Gospel will sound like folly, and people will cease to proclaim it.

As much fun as it is to throw rocks at other people, let's talk about ourselves a little bit.

You've got an old sinful nature, and your sinful nature is very much into sinful pride: so while you're willing to admit that you do things wrong, you're also tempted to say that some of your sins are all right. You're tempted to hold onto grudges and just stay angry at people you don't like. You'll be tempted to believe gossip and assume the unsubstantiated worst about people. You're tempted to let your eyes wander to trash and let your mind dwell on it because it's not like you're letting it rule your life. You're tempted to hoard what you have for yourself, and let others help the less fortunate or support the proclamation of the Gospel. Why? Because you're forgiven, right? And you're better than you could be, better than you used to be. God's not seriously going to nitpick over little sins like these, is He?

That's how you take God's Law and start to relax it, acting as though the Lord isn't so concerned about all of His Law anymore, just the "big sins," whatever those might be (usually defined as "whatever others are doing that I don't like"). And what happens then? Since you don't see the need for forgiveness for those common, everyday sins, the Gospel doesn't seem so important anymore. The effect on your faith is this: you're the salt of the earth—what a privilege! You've got a faith to live and proclaim, a faith that's built upon Law and Gospel. But when your "faith" is no longer repentance for all your sins and trust in the Gospel, you and your faith lose your taste. The Law you believe is no longer the Law (because you've changed it) and the Gospel you believe is no longer the Gospel (because you've changed that, too). Your faith is becoming useless so that you're only good for being thrown out, the least in the kingdom of heaven. You're the light of the world—what an honor! But if you stop believing that you need Christ to remove all of your sins, your light has gone out.

For all of this, Jesus makes a vital declaration: "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus can't make it any clearer than that: not one dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished, until heaven and earth pass away. God hasn't relaxed His Law: sin is still sin, and the wages of sin is still death. You don't have the luxury or the authority of relaxing that Law, because God doesn't grant it to you: if you do, you'll be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. Or, as some have suggested, the very least in the kingdom of heaven is the one who isn't even in it.

It's a stark warning: one of the most dangerous sins is believing that a lot of sins don't matter anymore. If that's what you tell yourself, you'll be open to all sorts of sins. If that's what you tell

others, you're leading them astray, away from the Gospel, too. How silly to believe that Christ has saved you from sin, but then to shipwreck your faith by clinging to stupid, little, everyday transgressions. Judgment awaits the one who doesn't repent of these sins. That's the stark law of this text. And should you think that this is much ado about nothing, it only demonstrates how much this Law is necessary for you.

There is Gospel in Jesus' words here, too: wonderful, abundant Gospel. He says, "I have not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but to fulfill them." Jesus says He has come to fulfill the Law. There's another option: rather than abolish the Law or fulfill the Law, He could have come to enforce the Law. Jesus could have come and said, "I have come, here and now, to enforce the Law, to pass judgment on sinners and condemn you now." Were that the case, we'd have no hope. But He didn't. He will come to judge the living and the dead on the Last Day, but He came first to deliver us from judgment. How? He tells you—it's why He came.

He came to fulfill the Law. He came to keep it, every last part—dotting the I's and crossing the t's. He lived a perfectly holy and righteous life according to God's holy Law, and He taught that Word to others, too. That would make Him great in the kingdom of heaven—the Greatest! It also means that He didn't have to die, because the Lord declared in Leviticus 18:5, "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them." Because He kept all the statutes and the rules, He didn't have to die, because the wages of sin is death.

But He did die, because He came to fulfill the Law; and the Law declares that "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). But look! And rejoice! Jesus fulfilled this part of the law, too. He took upon Himself the sins of every sinner, you included. He took your place in judgment: He suffered condemnation and death on the cross. You might say that, on the cross, He became the least in the kingdom of heaven, because He was the One outside the kingdom suffering hell for your sin. The cross is proof that God doesn't relax His Law, because the Son of God suffered every last bit of judgment for the sins of the world.

Then He rose again. Risen again, He declares that He has fulfilled the Law for you. He says, "You know where it says that the one who keeps the Law will live? I kept it, and I give you the credit for My keeping it; so you will live. And you know that part where it says that the "soul that sins shall die?" I fulfilled that, too. I died your death for your sin, and that is why I forgive you. I no longer hold your sins against you."

This is Good News: Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law or enforce the Law. He came to fulfill it for you. And because He has done so, you have eternal life in Him.

So "let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." Let the light which shines forth from you be the light of Christ: let the good works that people see be your contrition for sin, your respect for God's holy law, your faith that Christ is your Savior, your freedom from enslavement to sin—even the comfortable, casual, everyday sins. All of these are God's gifts to you, Christ living in you. This is the life of the Christian made alive in the Gospel.

Christ came and saved you by fulfilling the Law, by living a perfect life, by dying in your place and rising again. That is the Gospel we are given to proclaim: that is the power of salvation to all who will believe. God grant you always to acknowledge His Law in its full, unrelaxed holiness and severity, for that Law will drive you to Christ and the grace that He has won. God grant you all the more to rejoice in that Gospel of Christ and Him crucified, for it is the news that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen