

Grace Lutheran Community, 12<sup>th</sup> February 2023:

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

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The sermon text for today is based on the Gospel,  
Matthew Chapter 5, verses 21 to 37.

Provided by The Lutheran Church of Australia

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We're inclined to be very negative about the Pharisees, but we need to begin today by giving them some credit. They were totally committed to the law of God, which had been revealed to Moses on the mountain. You couldn't accuse them of being slack.

Jesus doesn't criticise the Pharisees because they are interested in God's law, but because they've gone about things the wrong way. They were interested in the outcome; God was interested in the attitude.

Jesus shows us that the Law of God, that is, his will for the way human beings should relate to another, is not something that we, as Christians, can ignore. Jesus said: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.' Jesus wasn't tearing down the precious gift of God's law, which he had given to Moses all those centuries ago. Through his life, he showed us how the law of God should be lived. From the heart. It wasn't just a matter of going through the motions, and making sure you didn't get caught out on the big things. That's why the Ten Commandments are still God's guidelines for the way people should relate to one another, even today. Which is why they're also an integral part of our Catechism.

The Pharisees tried hard to obey the letter of the law. And failed. If we try the same approach we are doomed too. It's mission impossible. If you're not convinced, what Jesus says today about life in the kingdom will convict you.

Following God's law isn't a matter of not getting caught on the big things and ignoring the little failures. Take, for example, the fifth commandment. 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder.' It was said to Moses by no less than God himself. So it's the authoritative word of God. 'But I tell you' Jesus says. 'There is more to this commandment than you've been taught. It's not just the act of murder that's the problem, but the attitude that leads to it.'

You and I can sit here comfortably while Jesus talks about murder. But suddenly Jesus widens the net, and we're caught. 'Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement.' Who hasn't been angry? Who hasn't cursed or muttered about someone else, someone here today in this church as well. What kind of impossible standard is Jesus laying down? It's not so hard to evade the letter of the law, to make ourselves as small a target as possible. Murder is a big thing. But anger. Everyone gets angry.

Or what about the other commandment that Jesus focuses upon. 'You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' Does that mean that if I haven't committed the physical act, I'm safe? No, Jesus says. 'I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' It's not just the act but also the attitude. You and I aren't off the hook just because we haven't done the deed in the flesh.

What is Jesus asking of us, by tightening up the law of God so much that we have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide? He's pointing to the inherent dishonesty in our human nature that makes us think that we can appease God by only committing little offences. God sees into the heart. He is showing us that our need for him and what he brings us is greater than we ever appreciated. We simply cannot obey God's law as natural human beings.

What's needed is a whole new approach, a change of attitude. Which is exactly what we, as kingdom people, have received from Jesus. A new heart and a new mind. The Holy Spirit to safeguard our thoughts and direct our actions. God's law, as Jesus teaches us here, forces us to examine ourselves. Jesus asks us to be honest about our deception, our self justification, in which we excuse our anger, or our lust, because we can't help it.

And even then, we still fail. We aren't always people of integrity. We drag our old nature around. 'Don't hide your failures', Jesus says. 'Bring it out in the open, repent of it, and aim for kingdom values.' 'When you fail, remember that I died for you, so that your sinful failures would be forgiven. Remember my words at the Last Supper: 'this is my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'

The reality of forgiveness means that we can honestly confront our failures. Our anger at our spouse. Simmering disputes with people in this congregation. Threats and spiteful words against workmates. Lustful thoughts, even the act of adultery itself. The sad dissolution. Breakdown of a marriage, which breaks the promise of a life-long union. All the things which Jesus today brings to our attention. We can let God's word convict us and lead us to say, 'I'm sorry.' It's then that we are freed from our failures, to begin fresh and energised.

Free to live in a loving, constant relationship with Jesus, who promises us; "I am with you always, to the end of the age." There'll never be a time when we're on our own. Free but guided and protected by a loving God, who asks that we call him Father, and who is always listening for our prayers.

This is the background against which we must place the words of Jesus today. Words which people have criticised for being unrealistic, harsh,

impossible. Today Jesus gives some shape to his call that we are to be 'the salt of the earth...and the light of the world'

What Jesus never meant to do in the Sermon on the Mount is to give us a complete handbook entitled 'How to be a Christian in 3 easy lessons.' Instead, he focuses on certain aspects of life and teaches us how kingdom values are to be lived out in that environment.

As kingdom people, Jesus urges us to let go of the sins and failures of the past and to aim to live like him. He specifically addresses our life in relationship with others and with a spouse. Don't let anger rule. Let the fruits of the Holy Spirit be in evidence: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Seek reconciliation with people who have wronged you. Why? Because that is what God has done for you. He has sought you out and made peace through Jesus. God doesn't nurse grudges. Nor should you. Try as hard as you can to live in peace with other people. Don't let things deteriorate to the point where legal action is contemplated. Be aware of the temptations to adultery that you face. Work hard at growing your marriage relationship. Give it your all in the strength God graciously supplies.

These are some of the ways that kingdom people live out their personal relationship with Jesus. This is just a tiny segment of the whole shape of kingdom life. Place yourself at God's service, and let him fill in the whole picture of life under his guidance. Amen.