

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

As our gospel lesson was read today, it would be easy to strip it of its context and come away with the impression that it is a unit unto itself. That impression is wrong. We must remember that it is but a part of a long sermon that Jesus preached from the mountain, a sermon that spans three chapters in Matthew, five, six, and seven. We're still just in chapter five.

We must remember that this sermon was preached to those who in humble repentance had gathered before our Lord Jesus Christ; the opening words of His sermon must surely have still been echoing in their ears. "*Blessed,*" he called them. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied*" (Matt. 5:3-6).

As we consider Jesus' preaching today, these Beatitudes must still ring in our ears, though for us they may have become faint, as they're two weeks distant. Jesus' earlier words remind us that our God grants us this blessedness, though undeserved. They remind us that our God is a giver God, who justifies us poor sinners freely in the forgiveness of our sins, that He counts us righteous through faith. That is, He accounts us "*perfect, as [our] heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matt. 5:48), as Jesus says His disciples are to be.

Yes, the righteousness of Jesus' disciples is to exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes (Matt. 5:20). It is to exceed that of a simple, literalistic reading of the law. Jesus wants to strip us of every pretense of a righteousness by our own doing. "*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'*" How many have said this in their pride: "I've got this one down. I've never murdered anyone"? That's too simple.

Instead, examining ourselves first by Luther's explanation of this commandment, we see how often we do fail. Luther sticks with the outward and physical, but as he explains, the commandment is not just about manifest killing; it's also about injury ... hurting and harming. That also breaks this commandment. Even more, it's not just about the injury we commit by doing something to someone; it's about the injury we cause by not doing what we ought — not helping and defending our neighbor in his physical need (see Small Catechism, Explanation to the Fifth Commandment).

If that isn't impossible enough, Jesus goes even further. It's not just what our hands do or don't do — sins of commission and omission we call them — but it's what our hearts feel, what our minds think, what our tongues say. Anger is dangerous; it can lead to lashing out with the hand or with the tongue, calling

people names, putting the worst construction on things. But Jesus doesn't just condemn harsh words or violent deeds; He condemns even the anger itself. It makes one "*liable to judgment*." And He makes here no provision for so-called "righteous anger"; as St. James says, be "*slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God*" (James 1:19-20) (see Jeffrey Gibbs, "The Myth of 'Righteous Anger': What the Bible Says About Human Anger," November 27, 2018, [concordiatheology.org/2018/11/jeff-gibbs-the-myth-of-righteous-anger](http://concordiatheology.org/2018/11/jeff-gibbs-the-myth-of-righteous-anger)).

Nor does your churchly show of piety relieve you of your guilt because of anger, angry thoughts, angry words, angry deeds against your neighbor. The prophet speaks the Lord's words to us: "*I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings*" (Hos. 6:6). Therefore, Jesus says, "*leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother ....*"

Some discernment may be needed here. If your anger did not result in some outward manifestation of evil against a person, and has since cooled, it may not be necessary or even wise to go and confess that to your neighbor. But certainly evil words and deeds should be confessed to him — not just to God in secret or in private confession to the pastor, but to the person you've harmed. Be reconciled first. Then confess it, too, to God, and hear the comforting words: "Your sins are forgiven you. 'The blood of Jesus has cleansed you from your sins' (1 John 1:7). Go in peace." As blessed disciples of Christ, who humbly come before Him in repentance, remember, "*Yours is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matt. 5:3), yours by faith in Christ.

Similarly, when it comes to the sixth commandment against adultery, Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'*" Again, we might think that we have this down, that we've not committed adultery. But here again, it deserves closer examination. Luther, for example, teaches us about the outward things we are to do and say, leading a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, husband and wife loving and honoring one another. Even if you have put to death in you sexual immorality and impurity, how often does one hear obscene talk come even from the mouths of Christians! St. Paul also says, put it away (Col. 3:5, 8).

But Jesus again says more and considers the inward: "*I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" These sins of the tongue and of the heart are aided by the eye, and temptation is all around us. Jesus is serious about these sins. He uses a bit of exaggeration, but the point is well made. This lust is sin, and this sin condemns. It leads to being thrown into hell.

There is no excusing it; no justifying it. On the other hand, neither do we have to surrender to it. We acknowledge it's part of the sin with which we are born, and we can't help but sin. But that doesn't mean that we should give up trying to live righteous lives, for we also acknowledge that we have been born from above by the waters of Holy Baptism. St. Paul says to the baptized, "*consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*" He says, "*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace*" (Rom. 6:11-14).

Marriage is one of God's institutions of grace. It was instituted because "*[it was] not good that the man should be alone*" (Gen. 2:18). And so God made woman, and God instituted marriage. Divorce on the other hand is of the law. Jewish law spoke of releasing your wife with a certificate of divorce (see Deut. 24). But Jesus said divorce is not good; it wasn't God's intent for marriage in the beginning, and divorce has many consequences. Except for marital unfaithfulness — fornication, it is not permitted. Yet modern Christians have not heeded Jesus' words here. Christians today divorce in numbers similar to unbelievers. It ought not be so. The husband and wife said "yes." They said, "yes" before the Lord. They should live according to their word, for Jesus said, "*I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak*" (Matt. 12:36).

What righteousness the law sets before us Christians! "*You shall be perfect*" (Matt. 5:48). Surely, Jesus does not "*[relax even] one of the least of these commandments*" (Matt. 5:19), and yet, let us be clear, neither does He set this right understanding before us as a standard for us to fulfill on our own so that we might be righteous. No, Jesus sets this right understanding of Moses before our eyes that we might recognize our utter inability to do what the law demands. This is how we sing it: "What God did in His Law demand And none to Him could render Caused wrath and woe on ev'ry hand For man, the vile offender. Our flesh has not those pure desires The spirit of the Law requires, And lost is our condition" (LSB555:2).

But in His sermon, Jesus has identified Himself as the fulfiller of the law and the one who will accomplish our salvation, which He'll do by carrying our sins to the cross and dying there. And so we turn to the Lord for our salvation, for salvation is God's domain, God's doing, as St. Paul says: "*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the*

*righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4).*

So, let us turn to the Lord; let us return to Him in repentance and faith, coming to Him, poor in spirit, and taking to heart His words of blessing to us, His reign and rule over us. Let us strive to live holy lives, walking by the Spirit, but recognizing the weakness of our flesh. Let us trust in our forgiveness, our righteousness, our perfection, our blessedness, by His grace, through faith. And let us come to the altar where we'll meet our Lord and partake of Christ's Holy Sacrament of the altar that we might receive His grace and be strengthened in this faith and in holiness.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.