

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity (2022)

First Be Reconciled

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“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven . . . So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:20, 23–24, ESV)

The Lord’s Sermon on the Mount is the first of five major discourses presented in St. Matthew’s gospel. Here the apostle records for us that after ascending a mountain, Jesus sits down and begins to teach His apostles, who are separated from the crowd which have followed. However, when Jesus begins to speak to His apostles, the crowd can hear Him, and they intently listen as He teaches His apostles new and crucial truths and revelations regarding those who would follow Him.

In His sermon, our Lord Jesus reveals His divine authority as He begins His authoritative exposition of the Torah, including anger as a violation of the Fifth Commandment, ***“You shall not murder.” (Exodus 20:13, ESV)*** Lust as a violation of the Sixth Commandment, ***“You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14, ESV)*** and more as He warns against a grudging spirit (judging), and an eye for an eye spirit (retaliation) as well as other sinful traits which hamper one from being a true disciple of Christ, thereby hampering a disciple’s good deeds that flow from their relationship with Christ. Such behavior has a direct impact on one’s righteousness. Jesus warns, ***“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (v. 20)*** Here, our Lord refers to the good works of a disciple of His.

However, these words of Jesus are puzzling to many. They ask, “How do I know my righteousness is good enough to get into heaven?” or “How can I measure my righteousness?” Such questions can have a negative effect on one’s faith if they do not understand that Jesus is not talking about the righteousness that flows from the Gospel, that righteousness which brings salvation and eternal life, but that righteousness which ***“exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.”*** So the first thing to remember is that although the Pharisees and scribes do possess a certain kind of righteousness, it is not a righteousness connected to Jesus. They are not disciples of Jesus. Thus, their “good works” are not truly “good works.” Works done out of faith in Jesus.

By contrast, the disciples of Jesus receive blessings from Jesus. Listen to the Beatitudes. Disciples of Jesus are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13, 17). Therefore, disciples of Jesus do their righteousness by letting their light shine, even imperfectly, as their righteous good works flow from their love and relationship to Jesus. Moreover, it is not something whose quantity can be measured, but rather it is a righteousness that has quality and relation. And last, but certainly not least, the righteousness of a disciple that Jesus speaks of is not a cause of their entrance into heaven, but rather, the righteousness of which Jesus speaks is a righteousness of good works, which are the inevitable fruit of a disciple’s union with Christ. Everyone who enters eternal life will be accompanied by their abounding righteousness.

But Jesus says that righteousness is marred, even lost when a disciple forgets the true intent of the Torah.

Thus, Jesus begins His authoritative teaching of the Torah with the sin of anger, associating it with the Fifth Commandment, saying, ***“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”*** (*Matthew 5:21–22, ESV*) Murder makes one liable to divine judgment, but as we see, the Fifth Commandment encompasses more than just murder. Jesus expands our understanding of this commandment, saying that you can “murder” someone in your heart and with your words. Resorting to bitter insults and malicious thoughts about another, drinks from the same poisonous cup as murder. In the eyes of God there are no essential differences; murder, anger, and bitter insults all have the potential of leading to eternal damnation, especially if these sins are directed at a fellow brother in Christ.

Expanding on this truth, Jesus then provides us with an example of how we can avoid falling into the consequence of the deadly trap of anger and thereby come under God’s condemnation of the Fifth Commandment.

Our Lord says, ***“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”*** (vv. 23-24)

Sound advice, but how do we understand this statement when we no longer worship as did the Jew, offering sacrifice at the altar of the temple? However, if we are led by the Spirit, then with open ears and heart we can hear our Lord say His teaching is clear, and it is taught throughout Scripture. If you are a believer in Christ Jesus, you cannot pretend that your horizontal relationship with your fellow believer is not connected with your vertical relationship with God. In fact, your vertical relationship with God directly affects your horizontal relationship with your brother and sister in Christ. If a broken horizontal relationship is left unrepaired and unnourished, it can and will damage your vertical relationship with God. If you remember that you have sinned against your brother and he has something against you, you cannot come to church and act as if all is well, you cannot act as if nothing needs to be done!

Open or secret envy, anger, and hatred toward your brother in Christ is a serious offense in the eye of God. The ultimate result is that such sin is a sin against the Holy Spirit, coming from a hardened heart. Moreover, the hardened heart refuses to admit that it is wallowing in sin and malice, rather it wants to believe its antipathy toward its brother is a virtue, which amounts to poking God in the eye with a lie. So our Lord Jesus warns you, be on the lookout and do not be fooled by your own hypocrisy and pretense. He says to you, ***“if you are offering your gift at the altar,”*** with a hateful heart, don’t.

If you intend on serving God, offering your sacrifice, but are guilty of harming a brother or of being angry with a brother, you should know that God wants no part of your sacrifice. Lay it aside, drop everything, and go immediately to your brother and be reconciled. Tough words, but words which our Lord expects you to take to heart and obey.

True enough, the “altar” Jesus speaks of in vv. 23-24 is not to be equated with the altar of the modern church, but there is a true theological connection with the Lord’s Supper in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in verses 10 and 11. A disciple of Christ must not approach the Eucharist when they are harboring division, anger, bitterness, or a competitive spirit against a

fellow communicant. Coming to the altar rail and receiving the Lord's Supper with anger and bitterness in your heart against a fellow communicant, invites God's judgment. All who are disciples of Christ Jesus have been reconciled with God by His Son's death and resurrection. Therefore, cast all bitterness and division aside and be reconciled with one another.

Who are we to come to the altar rail to receive the body and blood of Jesus, seeking the promised benefit of that blessed meal, the forgiveness of our sins, if we are unwilling to forgive each other? If we are unwilling to be reconciled? Receiving this blessed Eucharist while harboring anger or bitterness toward another tells God that you seek the forgiveness He promises you through the life, death, and resurrection of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ, but you are unwilling to offering your forgiveness to another. In modern vernacular, that is pure hypocrisy. But worse, it is a serious sin against the gift that God offers you, a sin which carries the burden of the loss of eternal life. So if you are coming to the altar to receive this blessed sacrament and remember that someone has something against you, that you are harboring resentment, anger, bitterness, or jealousy against a brother or sister in Christ. Stop! Go first and be reconciled, then come and receive the blessed gift you sought at first. The gift of God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus offered to everyone who believes that the body and blood of Jesus was given and shed for the forgiveness of your sins.

The Gospel Reading for today are words our Lord spoke at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount. He had much more to say, much more to offer, much more with which to bring comfort and blessing to all those who heard Him, and at the end of His sermon, St. Matthew tells us, ***"The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes."*** (Matthew 7:28–29, ESV)

As then, we today are also astonished at our Lord's wisdom. More importantly, today we know He is the One with authority as He leads us, His people, His sheep, in His Church, offering us the blessings He came to earth to give: Forgiveness of our sins, Reconciliation with His heavenly Father, Justification before God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Gospel, the gift of holy Baptism, our adoption as children of God, the gift of the Lord's Supper, and the joy of anticipating eternal life. It is amazing how much He did for us, bringing it to fruition by His willing sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross where He shed His holy, precious blood in His innocent suffering and death. There, on Calvary, He died to reconcile you with Himself, He died to reconcile you with His heavenly Father. Thus, He instructs you to see in Him the true message of reconciliation. Therefore, today, recognize His command to reconcile and go to your brother with whom you are estranged, with whom you are angry, and be reconciled that you may receive the Lord's blessed gift of His body and blood in the blessed Eucharist, receiving that for which you came, the forgiveness of your sins. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.