

The Sixth Sunday after Trinity  
St. Matthew 5:17-26 [Exodus 20:1-17; Romans 6:1-11]

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You all know the proof texts. We are saved by grace, not by works. (cf. Acts 15:11; Ephesians 2:5, 8; 2 Timothy 1:9) You all know what Lutherans confess according to the Third Article of the Creed. "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him..." Through no merits of your own are you saved. Your salvation is wholly and completely dependent upon Jesus Christ and the work He has done.

From the cross, you have heard the completion of that work. As the last words of Jesus from the cross are numbered to 7, His penultimate word was τέτελεσται—it is finished! (cf. John 19:30) With that, He commended His spirit to the Father and breathed His last. The work of your salvation was accomplished, completed, finished. And if Jesus has completed the work, then there is nothing left for you to do. It is finished, and salvation is yours by completely and wholly by the grace of God.

It is for that reason that many Lutherans today balk at all talk of works. The Ten Commandments become little more than a list for confirmands to memorize. Outside of catechesis and confirmation, though, there is no practical use for the Ten Commandments for many Lutherans.

However, the Books of Moses are still in the Christian Bible—the same one Lutherans confess to be the inerrant Word of God. That includes his Second Book, and that includes the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter. You heard it this morning. The Israelites, fleeing Egypt, were camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai. On the mountain, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. These were the works that the Israelites were to do and not do. By keeping these commandments, they would be perfect and holy as their Father in heaven is perfect and holy. (cf. Matthew 5:48)

The fact that, in your Bibles, God says, "Do this," and, "Do not do that," should indicate that these are works that you should be about doing and not doing. But, at the mention of having works to do, the Lutheran mind—yours included, as I see the looks on your faces—gets a little uncomfortable. You would rather talk about grace, and understandably so. "...[B]y the works of the law no flesh shall be justified." (Galatians 2:16b) In fact, many Lutherans would rather not do the work at all, allowing grace to be a sort of get-out-of-jail-free card; which it is, but not at the expense of works. It's so bad among Lutherans, that many profess—openly or only within their hearts—that the grace of God somehow nullifies the law and the works that they command.

How did Jesus put it? "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." Again, Jesus did not rip Exodus from the Bible. When He said, "It is finished," from the cross, it was not license to live however you want. If that's what Jesus meant, then it would be enough to get everyone baptized and then forget about them. You would only have to be baptized to be saved, then you would never need to set foot in a church again. You could live your life however you liked. You could love God or hate Him, respect Him or deny His existence; in the end, it wouldn't matter, because you were baptized.

Paul, writing to the Romans in today's Epistle, wrote, "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection." That on it's own, sounds like it confirms the idea that Baptism is the only thing that is important—what happens after Baptism is inconsequential. But the context of this verse denies that.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

There it is...right at the end of verse 4. "We should walk in newness of life." Baptism brings about this newness of life, and it is your work as one of the baptized to walk in it. What does this mean? "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." How are you to know of your sin? Well, that Second Book of Moses, chapter 20, comes in handy. There in the Ten Commandments, you have the short list of the commands of God that you have transgressed—you have not done anything that the law requires, but have done everything that it prohibits.

The Law shows you your sin. By way of the Law, the Holy Spirit brings you to contrition and repentance. By grace, you confess your sins, and are shown, once again, the mercy and grace of your God who took your place under His own wrath.

Your transgressions—the sins of the world—sent Jesus to the cross. There, Jesus shed His blood as the propitiation for your sins. You are covered in His blood, your transgression is atoned for—you are made clean. Your unrighteousness is taken from you and you are made the righteousness of God in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:21), a righteousness that far exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

Having been baptized, you now bear in you a New Man in Christ Jesus. This New Man seeks to keep the law that Jesus fulfilled but did not abolish. Here is the New Man's use of the Ten Commandments: the framework for good works, the guide for God-pleasing acts.

But, there is a problem, one that is ripe among Lutherans. There is a refusal to do work. This refusal is seen as an acceptable behavior; after all, the Lutheran goes to church every Sunday, which kind of makes this refusal to work—the breaking of the commandments—acceptable.

Compounding this is the knowledge that God is a forgiving God. So, many question, "Why bother? Since God is in the business of forgiving sins, why does it matter if I do the work or not?" So quickly is forgotten the context of the baptismal life.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

Dear Baptized, as a Lutheran, you confess that good works are necessary. That very phrase is found in the Augsburg Confession, Article VI: "Also they teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits, and that it is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will..."

More importantly, these attitudes stand in stark contrast to what Jesus said, "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven...Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect." By holy inspiration, the apostle Paul exhorts the Christian to "run the race," "fight the good fight," and "keep one's eye on the prize." (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:24; Hebrews 12:1; 1 Timothy 6:12; Philippians 3:14) The exhortation to the Christian is to do the work required in the Ten Commandments—in the whole Law of God. Yes, the Book of Exodus—even the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter—is still part of your Bibles!

So, which function of the Law is this? Does it matter? The Holy Spirit is at work in His Law in all of its functions—curb, mirror, and guide—at all times. For even when you do the work that the Law requires, you do not do it perfectly—you are not perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect; at least, not of yourselves. That's why the Spirit is always at work in the Law to bring you to repentance. And you are here, in the Divine Service, where God in Jesus Christ is in the business of being merciful and gracious. There's work to do, and this is His work: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.