

The Threefold Purpose Of The Law.

Text: Mat 5:20-26

Suggested Hymns:

345, 610, 270, 284, 355

1) Curb outburst of sin

2) Mirror showing us our sin

3) Rule showing us how to live

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 5:20-26, ²⁰ *“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.*

²¹ *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’* ²² *“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.*

²³ *“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,* ²⁴ *“leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

²⁵ *“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.* ²⁶ *“Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

There are people who contend that Christ preached nothing but the Gospel. But what are they going to make of such passages as these: Luke 12:15, ¹⁵ And Jesus said to them, *“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”* Or John 8:44, ⁴⁴ *“You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because*

there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it.

Or Matthew 22:36-40, ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”* ³⁷ *Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ”* ³⁸ *“This is the first and great commandment. ”* ³⁹ *“And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”* ⁴⁰ *“On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

Much of the Sermon on the Mount is Law. Here Christ clearly preached the Law. And why shouldn't He? The Law of God is holy, just, and good. It is the perfect will of God, the will Christ came to do. No one can deny that Christ was made under the Law,¹ that He lived in perfect obedience to the Law,² and that He vicariously bore the curse of the Law, as we read in Galatians 3:13, ¹³ *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”).*

But this manifold relationship to the Law does not warrant the statement made by others that Christ was a new Lawgiver. What did Christ add to the Law, or what did He take away? Nothing. He did not even advocate a single revision of the Law, but declared it to be unchangeable.

We read in Matthew 5:17-19, ¹⁷ *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ”* ¹⁸ *“For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ”* ¹⁹ *“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

In our text we find Christ preaching the Law, revealing its true meaning, and brushing away the human rubbish which men, like the scribes and Pharisees, had heaped upon it. Let us sit at Jesus feet, as His disciples did then, and hear His instruction on The Threefold Purpose of the Law. May the Lord bless our meditation.

**1. The First Purpose Of The Law Is To Curb, Or Check, In A Measure,
The Coarse Outbursts Of Sin And Thereby Help To Maintain
Outward Discipline And Decency In The World.**

Christ speaks of the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The righteousness consisted in an outward, formal, and mechanical observance of the Law. No Jewish court could accuse them of having killed their neighbour. Their score was clean in this respect, and they were careful to keep it clean.

What induced the scribes and Pharisees to live this way? It was the fear of being dragged into court, imprisoned, and disgraced in the eyes of the people. How could they, the perfectionists of piety, righteousness, and holiness, afford to lower themselves in the sight of the common people?

What would their fellow scribes and Pharisees think of them if they became law-breakers? The command "***Thou shalt not kill,***" the fear of punishment, and the bars of the prison checked and curbed their hands from the actual shedding of blood.

Christ does not condemn the scribes and Pharisees for their outward conformity with the Law. He does not say: "Whoever shall kill shall not be in danger of the judgment." He lets the Law stand and puts His seal on it, saying, ***whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.***

What the Law of God did then it still does today, checking the coarse outbursts of sin and helping to maintain outward discipline and decency in the world. For that purpose it has been placed in the statute books of the nations; for that purpose it was written in the heart of man, whose conscience bears witness to the fact that killing exposes to punishment. Many a murderer has given himself up because his conscience gave him no rest night or day.

Furthermore, in order that the Law may serve as a curb, God gave the sword into the hands of the government, His minister, to execute wrath on the person who does evil. Many a person has been held back from committing murder because he feared to entangle himself in the meshes of the law. The weaponry of the policeman, the iron bars of the prison, the firing squad, and the current of the electric chair help to remind people of God's commandment "***Thou shalt not kill,***" and to stem the tide of lawlessness, and the coarse outbursts of sin.

Then, if the Law of God acts as a curb to rebels and the ungodly, what a shame it is for those who claim to be Christians, but do not abstain from all violations of the law, and are found among the law-breakers! Truly, their righteousness is not better, but worse, than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

2. The Second Purpose Of The Law Is That It Acts As A Mirror, Showing People Their Sins.

If a person regards the mere outward observance of the Law as its complete fulfilment, he has either not seen himself in the mirror of the Law, or he has forgotten what manner of man he was when the mirror of the Law was held before him.

This was the case with the scribes and Pharisees, for they imagined they had met all the requirements of the Law by abstaining from the forbidden deed, for instance, from actual murder. How could they be children of wrath or in danger of hell-fire? Was there anything lacking in their conduct?

Christ points out that the Law forbids sinful thoughts and words and not only sinful deeds. ²¹ *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’* ²² *“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. Christ says in Matthew 15:19, ¹⁹ “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies.”³*

We need the preaching of the Law in order that we may see ourselves not only as others see us, but as God sees us. When we take a real look at ourselves in the mirror of the Law, we find nothing in the way of compliments or congratulations, but everything to bring the blush of shame upon us.

Some years ago the newspapers told about a poorly dressed woman who went to a doctor, asking him to make an X-ray examination of her heart free of cost. She said she was very poor and couldn't pay.

The doctor consented to do the work. But when he turned his machine a little below the heart, he saw a concealed pocket in which was a purse with five twenty-dollar gold pieces.

“Your heart is very bad,” he said; *“you lied when you said you were poor.”*

The Law is an X-ray, which penetrates the darkest recesses of our heart and reveals the evil thoughts and desires that are lurking there.

A mother took her little daughter to church and listened while the minister preached a very earnest sermon against sin, trying to bring the subject home to

his hearers. The little girl listened with wide-open eyes, and suddenly turning to her mother in great distress, she whispered, “*Mum, he means us!*”

The Law points to each one of us, saying, “*You are the person!*” It punctures all the inflated opinions in regard to our good character and conduct, until we realise that our righteousnesses are but filthy rags and that we deserve nothing but wrath and condemnation.

It helps to keep us humble and prepares the way for the Gospel-message, wherein we are told that Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one who believes; for He was made sin for us, He who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

The hymnist writes,⁴

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;
No merit of my own I claim,
But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

An old man once said that it took him forty years to learn three simple things: first, that he could not do anything to save himself; secondly, that God did not expect this of him; thirdly, that Christ had done it all for him. Knowing these things, the grateful child of God says with Paul, as it is written in 2 Corinthians 5:15,¹⁵ *and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.*

3. The Law Serves As A Rule In All Walks Of Life, Leading The Christian To Know What Are Truly Good Works.

Firstly, let us look at a brief summary of our text. Here Jesus shows how deficient the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were in their keeping of the commandments. According to their traditions, they could keep the Fifth Commandment simply by refraining from the outward act of murder. But Jesus points out that the commandment could also be violated by one’s words and even thoughts.

Jesus refers to the three levels of courts that functioned in Israel. The lower courts dealt with civil matters, and the intermediate courts handled criminal cases. The highest court was the Sanhedrin, which consisted of 70 men with the

high priest presiding over them. Only this court could consider matters of war, or imposing the death penalty.

There is such a thing as righteous anger, which is concerned about God's honour and God's truth, but here Jesus speaks about sinful anger, which is concerned about revenge and may involve hatred. Such anger may not even be evident to other people, but God is aware of it, and it deserves God's punishment.

What Jesus illustrates here is that even sinful desires or evil words are transgressions of God's commandment and deserve the severest punishment. We read in 1 John 3:15 that ¹⁵ ***Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.***

Therefore don't approach God in prayer or in worship with anger in your heart or with righteous anger in someone else's heart against you. If you have wronged someone, go to that person and attempt to be reconciled before approaching the Lord's altar.

Unrepented sin is a barrier to any kind of God-pleasing worship, and these words are appropriately applied to our preparation for receiving the Lord's Supper. Genuine repentance will always lead to a sincere effort to undo the wrong of which one has been guilty.

The thing to do is to settle matters quickly with the person you have offended. Do it before you even appear in front of the judge. A convicted criminal in prison could not, at that time, pay his debt to society by simply serving his time. Restitution had to be made. He might have to sell his property, or perhaps his wife or children could manage to pay his debt; sometimes family members would even be sold into slavery to pay such a debt.

But anyone who is condemned by God and cast into the prison of hell will never be able to regain his freedom, no matter what the members of his family might be willing to do for him. That would be the fate of anyone following the example of the Pharisees. The righteousness of Jesus' disciples had to surpass that of those false teachers. This is possible only when Christ's perfect righteousness is imputed to sinners through faith.

This leads on to the second part. The Law teaches us Christians which works we must do to lead a God-pleasing life. In this way the Law is a rule or guide for us. Here we learn that a good work in God's sight is whatever a child

of God does, speaks, or thinks, in faith, according to the Ten Commandments, for the glory of God and the benefit of his neighbour.

The Law of God is holy, and it teaches us how to live a holy life. It tells us to love God above all things and our neighbour as ourselves. As an expression of our love to God we are to bring our gifts to the altar. As an expression of our love to our neighbour we are to be reconciled to him, carefully keeping watch over our thoughts, words, and deeds, lest our Old Adam, whom we still carry in us, mislead us to hasty words and deeds, displeasing to God and harmful to our neighbour.

Jesus says in John 15:5, ⁵ ***“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.***

The Law sets such a high standard that, no matter how we try, we cannot attain perfection. But as often as we find that we have departed from the rule of God’s Law, let us go to Christ, who kept the Law for us, confess our sins, ask Him to forgive them, and in the strength of that forgiveness, return to walk the way of His commandments with rejoicing.

Let us conclude with the words of the Psalmist, as written in Psalm 119:9, ⁹ ***How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.*** Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Gal. 4:4

² John 8:46; Matt. 17: 5; 1 Pet. 2: 21-23

³ cf Jeremiah 17:5

⁴ Hymn 331