

Kingdom Rules

Matthew 5:17-26

6th Sunday After Epiphany

Rev. Don Best

Bethel Presbyterian Church

West Union, IA

February 16, 2020

Gospel Reading

For the last two Sundays, our gospel reading has come from chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew, and this week, we continue in that same chapter. If you were paying close attention last week, you may notice that, this week, I am messing around a bit with the lectionary readings. I will be re-reading the last part of our reading from last week, and the first part of the reading prescribed for this week. Occasionally, the stopping and starting verses seem a bit arbitrary, and moving them around makes more sense, at least to me.

This week, I will be reading verses 17 through 26 of Matthew chapter 5. It is important to remember that Jesus is teaching his disciples, and therefore, he is teaching us, the church. It is also important to remember that Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Listen now, to Jesus' teaching about the Law, and the kingdom of God:

¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.

¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to

the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Sermon

This is the third straight Sunday that we have heard from Matthew, chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount. This is the last Sunday, at least for a while, we will hear from this section of Jesus' teachings. Two weeks ago, we heard the beatitudes, or blessing statements. At that time, we heard that as the kingdom of God, the Church, we should be the blessings to those who Jesus listed: poor, hungry & thirsty, meek, and so on. Last week, Jesus told us that we were salt and light; that we should flavor and illuminate the world. That who we are is to impact how we live our lives; not for just ourselves, but for the world. This week, Jesus will clarify where he stands on the Law and the prophets, and call us, as his disciples, to a higher righteousness. Each week, we were reminded that Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of Heaven, the kingdom of God, and this should influence how we hear what Jesus has to say.

Our reading begins with Jesus talking about the law and the prophets. These two categories make up the bulk of Jewish scripture; what we call the Old Testament. In general, the law is the covenant which God made with the people of Israel. God promised to be their God, and in turn the people would follow the law. The law showed the people how to live life as the people of God. The Law also defined the people of Israel and set them apart from the other nations that lived around them. The prophets were sent, by God, to the people to instruct them, and correct them, when they deviated from the law. The prophets spoke to the people about God's judgement, and God's promises. The Law told the people how to live as God's holy people, and the prophets instructed the people when they strayed from God's plan for them.

Jesus cautions his disciples not to think that he came to destroy or abolish the Law. It is not clear why Jesus would say this, but certainly when Matthew was writing his gospel, there was some idea in the early church that the old law, the old covenant, no longer applied. Throughout history, and even in some parts of the church today, some people think that the law and the prophets, the Old Testament, no longer apply; at least not to Christians. Jesus makes it clear that this is not the case. Jesus has come not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them.

Next Jesus says that not one letter or stroke of a letter will pass away. This was a common way of saying that the law and the prophets was important.

Jesus was claiming a very high view of the law. The law was God's gift to Israel, in the same way that scripture is God's gift to the Church, and to us.

If Jesus came not to abolish the law, then why would Jesus appear to violate the law? Why would Jesus have so much conflict with the religious leaders of his day? The answer lays in the interpretation of the law. Jesus came with a different interpretation of what the law meant. In verse 20 of our reading, Jesus says: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Righteousness meant living rightly according to the law. Righteousness for the scribes and the Pharisees was concerned with the observance of tradition, public displays of piety, and adhering to the letter of the law, but Jesus called his disciples, to a higher righteousness. Jesus reinterprets the law in light of his relationship with God. Jesus becomes the new hermeneutic, the new model for understating, and living by the law. The law is not changed, not one letter or stroke of a letter, but it is interpreted with a higher righteousness. That righteousness is spelled out in the rest of our reading.

To illustrate this higher righteousness, Jesus turns to the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

The law prohibits murder, and calls for judgment, but Jesus elevates that liability to anger and insult. While the law has always prohibited the act of violence, the new understanding expands the law to the emotions that might cause that action. The old understanding of the law was punitive, Jesus calls for a more preventative approach to the law.

Jesus' higher understanding of the law encompasses both religious and secular life. "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison."

The higher burden of the law applies to brothers and sisters of the church, and relationships out in the world. There is no distinction between areas of our life.

The responsibility lies with us to put away our anger and resolve issues between all people in all parts of our lives. As disciples of Jesus, the one who came to fulfill the law and the prophets, we seek to live righteously in ways that are consistent with the new interpretation that Jesus provides us.

Finally, remember that Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God. Everything we have talked about for the last three weeks is about the kingdom of God; the future and present kingdom of God. And this higher righteousness is no different. The higher righteousness is rooted in the kingdom of God. It is rooted in who Jesus is, the Son of God and proclaimer of the Kingdom, and this higher righteousness is lived out in who we are as the body of Christ, the church. Because this higher righteousness, this new interpretation of the law is rooted in the kingdom of God, we are not alone in seeking to live it out. By his presence Jesus enabled his disciples to live into the kingdom and with the presence of the Holy Spirit we are empowered to live into this higher righteousness as well.

Let us pray:

God of Moses and the prophets, the statutes you gave in ancient times are still with us today; the law you gave your people, is our law today. As we hear your Son reimagine the law, help us to know the higher ground; the higher path to righteousness, in your name and in your kingdom. Send your Holy Spirit to inhabit us, and fill your Church with the righteousness of your Son, our teacher and Lord.

AMEN.