

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Septuagesima Sunday, January 28, 2024

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 285, 283, 289, 284, 291.

Lessons: Isaiah 64:1-9, Romans 14:5-15:6, Matthew 18:1-10.

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:17-20

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

The laws of men are constantly changing. Whether they are national laws, state laws, county or local laws, men are constantly changing them. There are always new laws. Old laws are removed from the statutes. Courts interpret, explain, and modify human laws.

But God's Word, including God's Law, is immutable, unchangeable, irrevocable, and will endure to the end of time, until Christ comes to judge the living and the dead. Today Jesus Christ assures us that

GOD'S WORD WILL ENDURE FOREVER

- 1. Jesus came to obey and fulfill the Law of God.**
- 2. Jesus warns against living and teaching contrary to God's Law.**
- 3. Unless we are more holy than the holiest people, we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus came to obey God's Law, and fulfill everything written in the Old Testament. He assures us ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”*** The expression, “the Law and the Prophets,” is a designation for the entire Old Testament Scriptures, the same 39 books we have in the Old Testament section of our Bibles today. From Genesis to Malachi, there is one primary message: all people are sinful and deserve punishment from God, but God promised to send a Savior from sin. Through faith in that coming Savior, people living before the time of Christ received God's forgiveness and eternal salvation.

Jesus is that promised Savior. He came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. He came to keep all of God's commandments perfectly and to fulfill all the promises about the Savior that are contained in the entire Old Testament. He assures his disciples here that this will certainly happen, because not a word, not the smallest letter, of the Scriptures may be set aside as long as this world endures. Scripture is God's inspired Word. Jesus said on another occasion ***“The Scripture cannot be broken,”*** (John 10:35). We properly speak of the Bible as being inerrant and infallible and Jesus does the same thing here and in many other places. Jesus has committed himself to the whole law and the entire Word of God. Can his words be any clearer?

The Bible and Christians emphasize that Jesus kept every one of God's commandments perfectly. He did this in our place, for certainly no human can obey God's Law perfectly. And perfect obedience is necessary to earn salvation. God spoke plainly to mankind when the very Scriptures Jesus is talking about said ***“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”*** (Leviticus 19:2, NIV84) Perfect obedience is required as we read in the book of James: ***“For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”*** (James 2:10, NIV84) ***“Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.”*** (James 2:9-10, KJV)

The very Son of God, who would have the authority to set aside or modify any part of the Word of God, places Himself under the Law, as we read in Galatians: ***“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law.”*** (Galatians 4:4-5, NIV84) By fulfilling every letter of God's Law he fulfills the Law and the Prophets.

After Jesus makes it clear that he came to obey God's will and God's law perfectly, he talks about that Law of God. And remember, this includes the entire Scripture: ***"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."*** Peter reminds us in the New Testament, also writing by the inspiration of God: ***"the word of the Lord stands forever. 'And this is the word that was preached to you."*** (1 Peter 1:25, NIV84)

The Messiah is speaking. God's Word will not change. He affirms that the Law and the entire Word of God shall and must stand unchanged. God revealed all the words of the New Testament to us as well as all the words of the Old Testament as a divine revelation. So long as the earth shall stand, the sacredness of the Scripture shall remain so that not even an iota, the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, nor a tittle, the slight projecting point on some of its letters, the part of a letter printers today call a serif, shall disappear.

2.

Then Jesus gives us a terrible warning: ***"Anyone who 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."***

Here he warns most strongly against false teaching and against offense, that is, against causing someone to sin and teaching others to do so.

In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus' disciples come to him with the question ***"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"*** He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ***"I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."*** (Matthew 18:2-6, NIV84) The King James Version translation correctly uses the word "offend" for "cause to sin". ***"But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"*** (Matthew 18:6-7, KJV)

There we have one of the clearest teachings against the sin of causing offense found in Scripture. Causing offense or giving offense, which are the same idea, is causing someone to sin. That can be causing someone to believe error or false doctrine that can weaken a person's faith or even destroy it. In worldly terms, giving offense is 'setting a bad example'.

When Jesus speaks about "the least" in the kingdom of heaven and "great" in the kingdom of heaven, the contrast is between "least" and "great", not between "least" and "greatest".

We don't have a complete understanding about the least in heaven and the great ones. We don't know exactly how Jesus will fulfill for believers exactly what he is saying here. We do know that he spoke to his closest followers about sitting on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. In Matthew 19 we read of Peter asking Jesus ***"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"*** Jesus said to them, ***"I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first."*** (Matthew 19:27-30, NIV84)

Any contradiction of God's Word is a serious matter. Those who teach God's Word to others bear a heavy responsibility. ***"If you hold to my teaching,"*** Jesus said, ***"you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"*** (John 8:31,32, NIV).

In our text today Jesus warns that anyone who does not hold to his teachings ***"will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."*** Anyone who deliberately contradicts what he knows to be God's truth cannot even be a Christian. But even a sincere believer may become guilty of teaching contrary to God's Word. This may be due to ignorance or to a faulty way of attempting to understand the Scriptures. One example of this is trying to explain in

a logical way mysteries of God that are clearly beyond our comprehension. Although Scripture tells us everything we need to know for our salvation, it doesn't always tell us everything we think we want to know.

Such false teachers may not necessarily be excluded by their false teaching from the kingdom of God as long as they still know Jesus as their Savior, but God will regard them as ***“least in the kingdom of heaven.”*** Scripture makes it clear that we are to ***“Beware of false prophets”*** (Matthew 7:15, KJV) but we leave final judgement to God.

We'll have to wait until we get to heaven to see how God demonstrates their status in his kingdom. For now it is important that we simply realize that any deviation from God's truth exposes one to the danger of losing more of God's truth and finally losing out on eternal salvation. So Christians want to evaluate all teachings on the basis of their study of the Scriptures, not merely what men say about the Scriptures. Christians want to discover 'What does God really say?'

Christ makes it clear that if anyone sets aside even those commandments that seem small and not very important, whoever disregards as much as one of the little letters of the Hebrew alphabet, whose presence or absence may change the meaning of an entire passage, such a person is declared to be the least in the kingdom of heaven. The claim that he was sincere in his convictions will not be accepted as an excuse, and his sin will only be made greater by his teaching it to others.

On the other hand, whoever teaches in entire conformity with the Bible, who teaches not only the Gospel, but the Law in its great purpose of preparing the hearts, who keeps silence with regard to nothing, who does not add to God's Word or take away from it, he shall be great in the kingdom of heaven and he shall receive the reward of faithfulness.

3.

Jesus goes on and says ***“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”***

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were commonly regarded as examples of righteousness, the holiest of people. They believed that God should be fully satisfied with their personal righteousness and that their place in God's kingdom was secure. But Jesus declares that we have to do better than they do if we are ever to enter into the kingdom of heaven. If you want to use the system of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, Jesus tells us, you will have to outdo them by keeping the law perfectly. He will go on to explain that this involves, not only outward acts, but also words and even one's inmost thoughts and desires.

Such perfection is obviously beyond the ability of any of us, so we need to look beyond ourselves for the righteousness that benefits anyone before God. Only Christ the Savior can provide this perfect righteousness for us. He gives us the credit for Christ's perfect obedience to God's law, and because of that God welcomes us into his heavenly kingdom.

If anyone plans to try to earn heaven, his righteousness must be perfect, greater than the holiest people on earth, or those who seem to be among the holiest.

But the Bible tells us, and all Christians believe this, that sinners are righteous before God only through faith in Christ Jesus. He is our righteousness. He lived the perfect life that God demands and that we cannot even begin to attain – and we get the credit for Christ's work. Now we want to strive for righteousness in our own thoughts and words and deeds. Such things are fruits of faith. God gives to us the righteousness of Christ because he obeyed God's law perfectly. We read in Romans ***“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”*** (Romans 8:3–4, NIV84)

It is the Gospel which tells us what God did for us to make us holy. Without the Gospel there is no salvation. God's love endures forever. Thank God that Jesus kept that Law for us, in our place! Amen.