

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ANNO ✚ DOMINI 2023

“Not to Abolish but to Fulfill”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Toward the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, our Lord Jesus Christ says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Of course Christ did not come to abolish, or get rid of, the Law. The Law of God is good and wise, as we sang in the opening hymn.¹ It is not sin, as we are tempted to think whenever we don't like what the Law says, but because the Law is of divine and not human origin, it is by definition good. For God gave the Law to His people from Mount Sinai, and not as a punishment. The Ten Commandments are not rules to be followed in order to show God that we deserve to be rescued, but what does it say? “God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’”² God rescued His people from slavery, *then* He gave them His Law, teaching them how to live as His people in this world He created. This is why the Law doesn't go away the second Jesus shows up. For He says, “truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota [that would be the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet], not a dot [the smallest part of a letter from the Hebrew alphabet], will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”³ The Law is *so* good it remains in effect until the end of the world, when it won't be needed anymore, because sin will be no more, death will be swallowed up in victory, and the devil will be roasting in the eternal fire prepared for him and his angels.

As for the Prophets, it is through them that God spoke to His people of old. They didn't speak their own thoughts, but faithfully communicated God's Word. And God's Word, as we read in the Gospel of John, is truth. So, if Christ were to abolish the Prophets, then He would be abolishing truth, even truth concerning Himself. “The Scriptures bear witness about Me,” He says.⁴ So, what sense would it make to get rid of them? The whole point of the Prophets was to point forward to *Christ*, calling sinners to repentance and faith in the promised

¹ LSB 579:1.

² Exodus 20:1-2.

³ Matthew 5:18.

⁴ John 5:39.

blessing of Abraham.⁵ Just because their message wasn't always well received doesn't mean they weren't right.

In fact, of all the gospel writers, Matthew seems particularly interested in showing that Jesus is the *fulfillment* of Old Testament prophecy. Far from abolishing the Prophets, Jesus's very life brings them to actuality: (1) He is conceived and born of a virgin, as the prophet Isaiah foretold; (2) the wise men saw His kingly star when it rose, as it says in the Book of Numbers; (3) they learn from the prophet Micah that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem; (4) they bring Him gifts, as we read in the Book of Psalms; (5) after fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's wrath, Jesus and His family return, fulfilling the words of Hosea, "Out of Egypt I called My Son"; (6) Jeremiah laments those who would not survive; (7) Jesus grows up in Nazareth, that He might be called a Nazarene; and (8) He begins His ministry in Galilee, so that what was spoken, again, by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled. And that's just in the first four chapters!

Now, I read this week that the chance that any one man might have lived and fulfilled just these eight prophecies is 1 in 10^{17} . That's 1 in 100 quadrillion. Just to help you wrap your mind around that, say you took 10^{17} quarters and laid them on the face of Texas. They would cover the entire state two feet deep. Now, let's say that you marked one of those quarters and stirred it all up, then blindfolded a man and told him to go out and pick up one quarter and say it's the right one. The chance that he succeeds is the same as the chance that Jesus would have fulfilled just eight of the prophecies made about Him.⁶ And He did. So, no, Jesus did not come to abolish the Prophets, but to fulfill them, that we might know exactly who He is.

And that's really important when it comes to what He does with the Law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law," He says. But why *would* anyone think that? It's because He forgives sins, right? At the end of Romans 5, Paul says, "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."⁷ By grace we have been saved through faith. But that doesn't mean we're free to sin that grace may abound. The Law is good; it's sin that's the

⁵ Genesis 12:3.

⁶ Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p. 193.

⁷ Romans 5:20-21.

problem. So, the solution to sin couldn't simply be to throw out the Ten Commandments. That'd be like throwing out a perfectly good recipe when the problem is you're a bad cook.

And that is the problem. God wants us to keep His Commandments perfectly. Even one small infraction makes us guilty of the entire thing. But since we fall into sin, we can't keep God's Law perfectly, not even as Christians. This is Jesus' point as He goes on to explain the deeper, spiritual meaning of the Fifth Commandment: "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."⁸ Just because you haven't physically murdered anyone doesn't mean you're perfect. That's what the scribes and Pharisees thought. Outwardly they appeared very righteous, and the people held them in high esteem. But later Jesus calls them "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness,"⁹ Their public image was nothing but a facade, a coverup, for the hypocrisy and lawlessness festering beneath the surface. This is why we confess that we have sinned against God in thought, word, and deed, because sins of the heart are still sin, and the tongue is a world of unrighteousness. To God, perfection is more than skin deep, it goes all the way down to the heart. And that's true of *all* the Commandments.

So, where does that leave us? Liable to judgment, to the council, and to the hell of fire. Not that we need a lot of help to discern this, but because the Law is written on our hearts, we know it innately, at least to a degree. We know we don't measure up, which is why we're always trying to hide our imperfections and point out others'. We despair in our heads about what failures we are and how far short we've fallen of God's holy will.

But that's not the solution to sin, either. That's not why Jesus came, to condemn us for our failures, but because of His great love for us, and because *we* could not fulfill the Law, He, who fulfilled not just eight but *all* the prophecies made about Him, proving His identity as the Messiah, came to do it *for* us. He

⁸ Matthew 5:21-22.

⁹ Matthew 23:27.

took our place under the Law, submitting Himself to it, in order to fulfill all righteousness, as He says to John the Baptist.¹⁰ And unlike us, as the Son of God, He was actually able to do it. He was perfect, as His heavenly Father is perfect, keeping the Commandments as God intended, so that by His obedience the many should be made righteous. Our sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake. His grace is sufficient for us, no matter how many and great our weaknesses. For He was judged in our place on the cross, was insulted, even endured the hell of fire, that we might be set free from sin. He paid the last penny of the impossible debt we owed to see us reconciled to the Father.

And so, here we are, offering our gifts at the altar, the sacrifice of thanksgiving for all Christ has done. The Law is still good, and just because we can't keep it perfectly doesn't mean we shouldn't try. The Law is our guide, even as it threatens and accuses us. It teaches us to love what God loves, and to hate what He hates, so that we too might live as God's people in this world that He made. But when it comes to entering the kingdom of heaven, we know that our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, for we belong to the Son of God, who *is* our righteousness. He came to fulfill the Law for us, and we are rescued through faith in Him.

In † Jesus' name. Amen.

SDG

¹⁰ Matthew 3:15.