

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity; Matthew 5:20-26

[THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT EXPLAINED.]

A Sermon by Martin Luther; Taken from His Church Postil, 1523

1. In this Gospel the Lord takes in hand the office of extolling and explaining the law of Moses, for It would not have been becoming for him to have insisted in an unfriendly manner to make the people pious. He is not a lawgiver, but a Saviour, who never takes aught from anyone, but always gives. So he also in this instance proves his kindness in explaining the law and gently instructing; as there is need and want, he does not sternly insist, as did Moses, who without much ado wished that people were either pious or dead. For this reason Christ's action on this occasion is to be considered one of great benefit to us, in that he teaches us where we fail and come short. Here he particularly treats of the failings due to wrath, which causes so much havoc among men, as is seen on every side, yea, nearly the whole world is under its sway.

2. Now let us examine the command, "Thou shalt not kill," in the sense the Jews took it, and how we should take it. The Jews considered those only murderers who committed the act of murder with their hands; while those who abstained from the outward act were considered by them as pious. In like manner they treated Christ. Having delivered him to Pontius Pilate for trial, they remained without, thus fancying to be innocent of his blood, and to have perfectly kept the law, John 18:28. Again, Saul acted the same way toward David; he believed himself to be godly so long as he only did not kill David with his hand, 1 Sam. 19. Thus they have interpreted the law, failing to see that its roots run into the heart. In view of this Christ here says to his Christians: "I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven."

3. This is a strong, yea, a dreadful sentence, whereby all false saints and hypocrites, who go about with their own external works, are condemned.

4. But how have we interpreted this commandment? A little better, that is to say, doubly worse is our interpretation. On this wise: it is indeed a matter of the heart that we are to be free from hatred. But a man, according to our conception, may conduct himself friendly and thus banish hatred from his heart. So we have made it a question of free will going from bad to worse. The Jews have made it a matter of deceptive appearance; we placed the issue with free will. Thus the hypocrisy of the Jews rests in their works; ours in our thoughts. For we argue thus: Well, I will forgive him, will be good to him, and thus lay hold of the doing in the strength of our free will, then it shall be accomplished.

5. Well, how then are we to do? We are to take the following position: There is not a man on earth,

unless he be born again, who does not become angry, and give forth evil words and evil deeds; nature cannot do otherwise. For there stands the law and says: Thou shalt be a fine, sweet-tempered man in heart, in words and in works; and no evil fibre shall be found in thee. Well, where am I to find such a man? My mother does not give him to me; he must come down from heaven. For there is not a man on earth, so far as he is flesh and blood, that can help becoming angry and giving forth evil words and actions. But if I abstain, it certainly is because I fear the sword or I seek a selfish end. If I do not curse, if I do not calumniate, either the sword or hell deters me, the fear of death or of the devil; these I have in my mind and abstain, otherwise, I could not abstain. Not alone this, but I would actually murder and massacre, wherever and whenever I could. By nature I cannot produce a single kind word or action. If I do, It certainly is hypocrisy, since the heart at least always remains full of poison. This you now hear from Christ, who so explains the law as to cause you to feel ashamed in your inner heart. He would say: Thou art not sweet in heart, thine heart is full of hatred, full of murder and blood, and so thy hands and eyes would also gladly be full of the same; nor canst thou prevent it, any more than thou canst prevent the fire from burning, for it is its nature to burn.

6. A person might here say, What then am I to do? I feel all that within me, but I cannot change conditions. I reply, Flee to the Lord, thy God, lay thy complaint before him and say: Behold, Lord, my neighbour has injured me a little, has spoken a few words touching my honour, has caused some damage to my property, this I cannot suffer, therefore, I would cheerfully see him killed. Oh my God, how gladly would I be amiable to him, but, alas, I cannot! See how wholly cold, yea, dead I am! O Lord, I cannot help myself, I must stand back. Make thou me different, then I will be godly; if not, I will remain like I have been. Here you must seek your help and at no other place; if you seek it in yourself, you will never find it. Your heart perpetually bubbles and bolls with anger, you cannot prevent it.

7. Now, this is the sum of the law: You are to be kind, amiable and benignant in heart, word and deed; and even though they take your life, still you are to suffer all in love, and render thanks to your Lord. Behold, thus a great deal is included in the short sentence, "Thou shalt not kill," Christ lived up to this; do the same, and you are a good Christian. When nailed to the cross, his name, which was above every name, and his honour were profaned by the Jews, while they reviled him by words of the following and similar import: Well, what a nice God he has! If he be God's son, let him come down! Let his God come now, in whom he banked and boasted so much, and help him! Mat. 27:43, Mark 15:32, Luke 23:35. Such words pierced his very heart, hurting him more than all his other sufferings; still, he suffered all this with patience; he wept over his enemies, because they would have no part in the great benefit to be derived from his death, yea, he prayed for their sin. And in the face of this we are ready to snarl and growl over the least trifle, when asked to yield even a little to our neighbour.

8. Here you see how far we are still from Christ. It is indeed necessary to suffer with Christ, if we would enter with him into glory. He has gone before, so we should follow, as St. Peter says, 1 Epistle 2:21f.: "For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who when he suffered, threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously." Now see what kind of an example St. Peter places before us; truly we should emulate it, endeavouring to be

and to act like him. But this we cannot do by nature, it follows that we without exception are the devil's own, there being not a man on earth that is found not guilty. Hence the sentence holds good: You must be likewise skilful, namely, good at heart, or you belong to perdition.

9. What then must we do? You must do as follows: You must acknowledge that you are condemned by the law, and the devil's own property and that you are unable to rescue yourself by any power of your own. Therefore you must flee to God, pray him to change you, or all is lost and ruined. This was well understood and observed by those highly learned, but they argued thus: If we preach that the whole world is condemned and the devil's own, what is to become of the sanctimonious priests and monks, for then they too would be condemned? God forbid! Wait, wait, we will sharpen our tongues, bore a hole into the paper for our God, make a comment and say thus: Why, God never meant it in that sense, for who could keep it? He did not command it, but merely suggested it to such as wished to be perfect. Again, the perfect are not under obligations to be so, it suffices if they strive after perfection. Many large books, called *Formas conscientiarum*, treatises to comfort and acquit the consciences, have been written on this subject. Thomas Aquinas was about the leading heretic in this line. Later the same doctrine was confirmed by the Pope, and diffused throughout the world; this explains the later origin of the Orders, which aimed at perfection. Well, God be praised that we have understood the error, so that we can avoid it.

10. We comfort consciences in a manner quite different, namely thus: Dear brother all this is addressed not to the monks and priests only; Christ is not trifling with his words; it is a direct command, you must conform to it, or you are the devil's property. This is our way of comforting. Alas! exclaims our nature, Do you call that comforting? It is rather a transfer of souls to the devil. True, friend, but I must first take you down to hell before taking you up to heaven, you must despair in the first place, then come to Christ, behold his example, how he conducted himself: toward his enemies, in that he wept over them. But the bare example alone moves you; yet, it does not help you to any extent.

11. In view of this lay hold of his word and promise, that he will change you; this only will help you. Pray thus: Oh my God, thou hast placed Christ, thine only beloved Son, before me as an example, so that I might lead a like life; but I am not able to do this. O my God, change me, grant me thy grace! God then comes and says: Behold, since you know yourself and seek grace from me, I will change you and do as you desire. And though you are not so perfect as Christ, as indeed thou should be, I shall nevertheless have my Son's life and perfection cover your imperfections. So you see we must always have something to keep us in the right humility and fear.

12. This is true comfort that does not rest on our ability, but on the fact that we have a gracious God, who forgives our sins; on the fact that we believe in Christ and not in our own worthiness, he cleansing us from day to day; on the fact that whenever we fall short we should always place our hope and trust in Christ. See, this is the main drift of our Gospel. Now let us briefly run over the text and consider the contents.

Concerning the Four Grades of Anger.

13. The Lord here notes four grades or degrees of anger or wrath. The first is the anger of the heart; and that is the main grade; it should be so pure that you are not sensible of it. But this cannot be in our present state. Hence when you are sensible of it, come direct to Christ and ask him graciously to change you; ask him to extinguish the fire where it starts to burn; you cannot work a way out by your own efforts.

14. The other grade is "Raca," which means an angry, unfriendly expression with the eyes, with the neck and with the whole countenance, and in whatever other way it may be made. This too should by no means be. So you should at all times know when and how to obtain help.

15. The third grade consists in saying, "Thou fool." This implies the use of all kinds of scolding and profane words, by which our neighbour is degraded. This should also be laid aside; but we should defend and protect our neighbour with the utmost zeal, wherever we can.

16. The fourth grade consists in gross murder with our hands. The meaning is that we are to help our neighbour with our hands, give and advance to him, so that he may be sustained. For if I behold a poor person lying in distress and fail to help, protect and give, so that he may be sustained, I murder him with my own hand.

17. Now if you want to see and know who you are, you must not judge yourselves by those whom you love. Nature teaches that we do not want those we love to meet with any ill. But judge yourself by your enemies, and you will soon see who you are. Do you find that you are not in your heart kindly disposed toward them, nor kind in conduct, but speak evil of them, failing to help them with your hands, you are a murderer.

18. But in that our Lord says: "Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire," he uses the language in vogue in the civil courts, when the accused is brought before the court, the question of guilty or not guilty is first discussed; afterwards the deliberations are on the penalty to be imposed; and lastly, the culprit is delivered over for punishment. The same holds true with these grades of wrath; that is to say, as they advance, the one is punished more severely than the preceding. There is indeed but one hell, but there is a variety of penalties and punishments, and of these the one is always nearer infliction than the other: just as he is nearer death concerning whom the question is being debated what death he is to die, than the man just cited before the court. The Lord himself further explains his words when he says: "If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whilst thou art with him on the way; lest haply the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou has paid the last farthing."

19. Here you see what God demands of us, that he does not want anything done even for himself unless it be done in love, after the proper relation has been established with one's neighbour. So you

see, anger cancels all good deeds that might be done, for instance fastings, self-mortification, giving of alms, and other like deeds. And God in the first place, wants those to be reconciled who live in discord, they, asking the pardon of the ones they have offended, as indeed is proper. This is the meaning he would convey when he says: "If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother," that is, ask his forgiveness. Again: "Agree with thine adversary quickly;" and even though he does not come at once to you and beg pardon, be kindly disposed toward him nevertheless and forgive him. See how God has balanced both sides: on the one hand, offended, we are to be kind and forgiving, on the other hand, the offender is to beg pardon, so all things, may go well.

20. Now one might ask: You tell us not to say, "Thou fool," but how about Christ often calling his disciples "fools" and "unbelievers," Mark 16:14, a great and strong slander for a Christian? Reply: We must judge according to the condition of the heart: that determines the nature of our actions. Christ and Paul rebuke and reprove harshly, but they have the best of intentions, hence their words are to be counted good deeds. Even as a father oftentimes calls his son a fool, yea, and adds bodily correction, yet he does all this out of love, in that he is always kind in his heart to his son; so Christ and the Apostles and all the faithful act; whatever they do, they do from a paternal and maternal heart, hence they are truly good deeds. Therefore we must judge such questions according to the heart and the person. This may suffice for the present on this Gospel.

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