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Pentecost 23

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Putting the ‘Christ’ in Christians!”

Text: Matthew 22:34-46 (Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Rules are made to be broken.” You’ve heard that. Maybe even said it. But we know it’s not true. We usually say something like that *right before* we intentionally break a rule, **or** *right after* we have broken a rule, **or** while we are trying to get someone else to break a rule with us. We say it so that we can get away with breaking a rule that we don’t agree with, or think is unreasonable; hoping to shrug it off; hoping that others will too. Because misery loves company. If I am the only rule-breaker in the room, I stand out like a sore thumb, and I’m pretty uncomfortable. But if everyone’s in it with me, then I don’t feel so bad, and if I don’t *feel* so bad then I’m not so bad, and if I’m not so bad, I must be doing pretty good! And so, yeah, I’ve broken a few, some, *many* rules . . . but, you know, after all, rules are made to be broken! (wink, wink!)

But against that rather cavalier attitude towards sin comes the thundering voice of God that we heard this morning from the Old Testament: ***“You shall be holy.”*** When it comes to God, there are no exceptions, no loopholes, no “wink, wink!” And just because it comes from the Old Testament doesn’t mean it doesn’t apply to us anymore! It most certainly does. His rules, His commandments, were not given to be broken. They are to be kept, and if you don’t, it will cost you your life. ***You shall be holy.*** Not: try to be holy. Not: be holier than the next guy. Not: feel holy. You *will* be . . . or else.

The question for us, then, is this: What does it mean to be holy? How can I be holy? And, what must *I do* to be holy?

Now our first inclination, when thinking about holiness, is to do what the Pharisees did: turn to the Law. Because our thinking goes like this: holiness means keeping the Law. Keeping the Law means being good. Therefore if I am good, then I will be holy. Right? Right! Okay. So they turn to Jesus: ***“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”*** (If you’re going to be good and holy, might as well start out with the *great* commandment!) And in response, Jesus gives him *two* answers – sort of answers (1.) and (1a.), if you will. ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all***

your soul and with all your mind.” And, *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* Love God, love your neighbor. *“On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”* These two statements are a summary of the Ten Commandments. If you do this, you will be holy. Which actually doesn't sound so bad, does it?

Except there's one really giant problem. One thing about these two statements that show us that the Commandments were not given to make us holy, and that they, in fact, *cannot* make us holy. And it is simply this: **you can't command love.** You can command actions, you can command deeds, you can command behaviours – but you can't command love. Because as soon as you command someone to love you, or to love someone else, the very opposite happens: they hate you. They hate you for asking them to do something they don't want to do, and in fact, can't do! And so I'm supposed to love the God who is not just *asking* me, but *telling* me, to love someone who is (quite frankly) *unlovable*. To love someone who has hurt me. To love my enemy. To love my neighbor who plays his music too loud. To love my children when they fight and yell and scream and sass and deliberately disobey. To love the guy who drove up the shoulder in the traffic jam and cut me off. To love the lady who dented my car and didn't leave a note. To love the doctor who performs abortions! To love my spouse who cheated on me. To love the kid at school who makes fun of me. To love the person who tattled on me and got me in trouble. To love the person who stole my idea and got the credit for it. To love my boss who continues to make the stupidest decisions on earth! *To love these people!* We *might* be able to restrain ourselves and not hurt these people back. We *might* be able to hold our tongues and not say anything bad about them. We *might even* be convinced to do something nice for these people – even if we have to grind our teeth the whole time! But *love* 'em! You can't be serious! It takes every bit of power in us to just *tolerate* 'em!

But God is serious. These Pharisees got more than they bargained for. They came to test Jesus with their question. But while Jesus passes the test, it is the Pharisees who fail it. They cannot do this. Same as we. Be holy. Love God. Love your neighbor. And as much as we may try to water these down, or make excuses, or make ourselves feel better, there is only one thing these three things are: Be holy, love God, love your neighbor are strike one, strike two, and strike three.

But it is exactly to strike us out that God gave the Law, the Ten Commandments, and this summary of it. Contrary to what many people think, God did not give the Law to teach us how to be holy, or to make us holy, but to show us that we're not holy, not even close; and that no matter how hard we might try, it is simply beyond our grasp. We've fallen and we're broken, and *all the king's horses and all the king's men cannot put us back together again.*

But, Jesus wants you to know, what *all the king's horses and all the king's men* can't do, the King's Son can! There is a way to holiness, to *wholeness*, again, and that is why Jesus follows up the Pharisees' test question with one of His own. That if we want to be holy, we would stop looking at ourselves and what *we* can do, and start looking outside ourselves, to someone else. And so He points the Pharisees away from themselves – and what seems at first to be a totally unrelated question, turns out to be the very answer they were looking for! And so Jesus asks them: ***“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?”*** They answer: A King's son. ***“The son of David.”*** And they're right! Jesus does not dispute them. But that is only part of the answer. For the Christ is not only David's son, David also calls Him his Lord. *How can that be?* Jesus asks them. How can He be both David's son and David's Lord at the same time? There is only one answer: that David's Lord, the Almighty God, became David's son in the flesh. That the King of the universe came down into time and was born in David's household, to one of David's descendants. That the God of love so loved His enemies – the unloveables – that He came down to save them. To love with a love that we do not possess. To love them to death. To come and not command this love and holiness, but live it, and show it, and give it.

Well, the Pharisees ***“are not able to answer Him a word,”*** for they do not yet see that this man standing before them, Jesus of Nazareth, is this Christ. And as we stand before Him this day, and every day, we also cannot answer Him a word! As we stand before Him as sinners, we have no justification, no excuse, for our behaviour and sin – for our lack of love. We cannot glibly shrug it off or hope to get away with it. *Our* words only condemn us.

But while our words condemn us, **His Word saves us!** His Word which points us not to ourselves and what we are able to accomplish, but to Him and what He has accomplished for us. His Word which points us to the cross. The cross which shows our lack of love for what it really is. The cross which shows us the love of God, who would endure this for us. The cross where we see the verdict of God upon our sin – guilty, most guilty, and deserving of death! – but where we also then hear the verdict of God upon you and me – ***“Father, forgive them.”*** . . . And with that, the King's Son has made us whole again. He has lifted up those fallen into sin, and put us back together again. Back together with God. And His resurrection was the proof of that – proof that all our enemies – sin, death, and devil – were defeated by Him. ***All put under His resurrected feet.*** Sin paid for and forgiven. Death defeated and stripped of its power. Satan's head crushed.

And so where before was only brokenness and death, there is now holiness and life. In Him. By Him. From Him. A holiness and life that we cannot do, but can only ***receive***. For what do we do in Holy Baptism but ***receive*** the Word and Spirit that come to us and

give us new life. What do we do in Holy Absolution but *receive* the Word of forgiveness that comes to us and declares us holy and whole. What do we do in Holy Communion but *receive* the body and blood of the Word made flesh that comes to us and puts us back together again. Back together again as children of God. Back together again as the Church, the Body of Christ. . . . And in receiving the life of God, we receive His love. The very love that He commands. And so we can now begin to love – to love God and to love our neighbor, to keep the Commandments – not to *be* holy, but because in Christ Jesus, we *are* holy. Because we have been given His holiness. Because now we are simply giving back to Him what He has first given to us.

And that is why the fights that we hear about so often today are so misguided. The fights about posting the Ten Commandments in school rooms, in courtrooms, and in other public displays, thinking that by doing so, we will become a Christian nation. It just is not so. Because it is not the Ten Commandments that make us Christian. It is not the Golden Rule that makes us Christian. It is not being nice that makes us Christian. These things cannot. There is only One who can make Christians – the Christ Himself. The Christ of the cross. The Christ of the empty tomb. The Christ ascended into Heaven, and who will soon return again. The Christ who is both David’s Son and David’s Lord. Because it is not about what *we* do, but about what He has done. Then and now, always the same.

Therefore we can be sure. Therefore we can rejoice! Therefore we can sing (as we just did!), “*Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart*” and know that those words are true. Not because of me, but because of Him. And therefore we can also pray with confidence the last verse of that hymn, and know that it is true for us as well:

*Lord, let at last Thine angels come,
To Abram’s bosom bear me home,
That I may die unfearing;
And in its narrow chamber keep
My body safe in peaceful sleep
Until Thy reappearing.
And then from death awaken me
That these mine eyes with joy may see,
O Son of God, Thy glorious face,
My Savior and my Fount of grace.
Lord Jesus Christ, my prayer attend, my prayer attend,
And I will praise Thee without end. (TLH 429, v.3)*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.