

Ash Wednesday, 2006
Text: Matthew 5 & 6
Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL
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✠Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ ✠

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

There has been much debate of late in our society over the place of the Ten Commandments. Some folks would like to see them in courthouses and as monuments on public property. Others think such religious emblems should be kept out of the public square. Wherever you come down on that debate, you have to admit that the Ten Commandments are an odd symbol for Christianity. For they are, at best, only half of the story.

The Ten Commandments, and God's Law in general, serve several purposes. First, these laws, and the punishments attached to them by the very nature of things as God made them, help curb outward sin. If you know there is a law against stealing and that there is a punishment attached to it, then you will be less likely to steal. Thus the Law of God written on our hearts and on the tablets of Moses helps keep outward sin in check. This is why folks like to see the Ten Commandments up at courthouses – God's Law is the basis for all human law that can be called just.

In a Christian's life the Ten Commandments also serve to show us the way to thank God for his gifts to us. They are words from our Father in heaven about what makes him happy and about what is best for us. They are a picture of what love should look like.

But there is yet another function of the Law which cannot be missed, the function it always performs against us weak sinners: that of an accuser. The Law always accuses us of not keeping it. It always shows us our sin, our imperfections, our need for a Savior. That may sound harsh. You may be tempted to think through the Ten Commandments and say, "I've kept those. I don't steal, I don't murder, I've not cheated on my spouse, I go to church to worship God – I've kept these laws." Indeed, outwardly most people live fine and upright lives and could honestly say that in the main they keep these Laws.

But then look at what Jesus says in his Sermon on the Mount when he takes up the teaching of His own Law. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'²² 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. . . ." Who can pass that test? Who meets this standard? It is not just the outer life that God judges, but the inner thoughts and emotions as well! Jesus' words accuse each and every one of us. They point at us and say – there is something wrong with you. Your heart is not right. Even at your best you are only a liar and a hypocrite: for even when you do the right thing outwardly you are thinking evil thoughts and wishing you could get away with doing the thing you wish you could do.

Yes, we fallen human creatures are broken. Sin has deformed us and we are lost on our own. That is the message of the Ten Commandments. That is why I think it is so odd that so many Christians get hung up with making sure that the Ten Commandments hang in public places as symbols of Christianity. The Ten Commandments give no specifically Christian message – indeed the only message they give is death to the sinner as Jesus' preaching makes clear. In this, the Ten Commandments are but half the story at best.

For the same Jesus who spoke these words of condemnation against all people, who said that neither you nor I nor any other person could keep his Law and therefore deserved nothing but wrath from God – this same Jesus said, "I have not come in to the world to judge the world, but to save it." This Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This Jesus is he who died on the tree of the cross under the curse of the Law, as St. Paul says. He stood in your place as the sinner that you might go free. He died your death as the penalty for sin. God made him who knew no sin to become sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.

That is the Christian message and the Christian hope. Not the Law of the Ten Commandments, but the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Good News that though we have earned nothing good from God, still he gives us all good things in Christ. This sure hope has been made yours in the gift of Holy Baptism. This gift is confirmed and delivered to you once again in the Lord's Supper. For here the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world fills you with his own body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. All your trespasses against the Law of God are forgiven and covered by the sacrifice of this Lamb. Tonight you receive the fruits of that sacrifice in the Holy Supper. There is no greater gift on earth than this

Supper of the Lord's body and blood. It is our most precious treasure. For in this miraculous, mysterious meal, the Lord himself fills us with his Life and gives us forgiveness and salvation. This Lent as you ponder your need for repentance, for turning away from your sin and toward Jesus (for that is what repenting means – turning away), return often to his Table to receive this gift. For this is how Jesus comes to you.

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

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

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