

SERMON

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Gustaf Wingren

Matthew 5:(17–19) 20–26

SERMON AT HIGH MASS, THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, 11 FEBRUARY 1940

IN GAMLEBY CHURCH.

Text: Matt. 5:20–26.

Hymns: 349:1–2, 77:1–3, 25:4, 346:1–3 (134:1–3), 71:7–8 (123:7–8).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray. Read Psalm 139:23–24.

“For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever says to his brother, ‘You fool,’ shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You wretch,’ shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.”

The text has been read.

When we hear these words of Jesus, we easily come to think that the whole thing is a matter of morality, a matter of how we are to behave toward our neighbour. And that is also, in a way, right. Jesus does speak of how we are to be toward our brother. But if we stop at that, we have not understood the text. For the text is not first of all a speech about our doing. It is a speech about God’s _____ work. It is a speech about what God does with us, and about what we, for that reason, become.

Jesus sets his word against the word of the ancients. “You have heard that it was said to the men of old.” And then he says: “But I say to you.” He does not set himself against the law. He sets himself against a certain use of the law. The scribes and the Pharisees had taken the law and made it into a means by which a man could stand before God. They had taken the commandment “You shall not kill” and made it into a fence, inside which a man could believe himself righteous, if only he had not shed blood. Jesus breaks down that fence. He says that the commandment reaches into the heart. Anger is of the same kind as killing. The word that despises the brother is of the same kind as the hand that strikes him down.

This is not a new law, harder than the old. It is the old law, driven in to its depth. And when the law is driven in to its depth, it no longer leaves any man standing. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” The Pharisee’s righteousness is a righteousness of the outer deed. It can be measured. It can be displayed. Jesus’ word makes an end of that righteousness. What he requires is a righteousness that no man can display, because it is not his own. It is a righteousness that is given.

Here we must be careful. It is easy to take Jesus’ word and make of it a new Pharisaism, only finer than the old. The old Pharisee asked whether he had killed. The new one asks whether he has been angry, and believes that he can answer no. But that is only to move the fence a little further in. It is still a fence. It is still a righteousness a man lays hold of for himself. Jesus’ word allows no such fence. “Every one who is angry with his brother.” Not the one who nurses his anger. Not the one who lets it break out. Every one who is angry. The word leaves no remainder, in which a man could set up house and call himself righteous.

And the words that follow drive the same point home. “Whoever says to his brother, ‘You fool,’ shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You wretch,’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” It is not only the deed. It is the word. The word is not a little thing beside the deed. The word is the deed, brought out into the open. With the word we set the brother aside. We give him a name that is not his name before God, and by that name we are finished with him. That is why the word stands under the same judgment as the hand. A man can keep his hands still and yet, with a word, have done the killing the commandment forbids.

The law, so heard, is not a ladder. It is a _____ of the law that shuts. It does not tell us how far we have come. It tells us that we have not come in. “You will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” That is not a threat hung over a work still to be done. It is the judgment on the

righteousness we already have, the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, the righteousness of the measured deed and the weighed word. That righteousness does not open the kingdom. It is itself what stands outside.

What, then, is the righteousness that exceeds? The text does not set it out as a programme. It does not say: do this, and you will have it. It speaks of a gift at an altar, and of a brother who has something against us, and of a way to a judge, and of a debt that must be paid to the last penny. These are not three moral counsels. They are one and the same word, turned toward us from different sides.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” The gift is not refused because God has no use for gifts. The gift is left lying because it is not yet a gift. A gift carried forward while the brother is shut out is something else. It is a thing we hold up, so that God shall look at it and not at what stands between us and the brother. God does not take that thing. He looks at what we had hoped he would not see.

Therefore: go first. Not in order that the going should earn the right to sacrifice. The going is what the word does with the one who has heard it. He cannot stay at the altar with the case still in his hand. The word has taken the case from him. He goes to the brother because he no longer has anything of his own to set against him. The reconciliation is not a work he adds to the sacrifice. It is the sacrifice, begun where the brother stands.

“Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.” Jesus takes the picture from the road. Two are walking. One has a claim. The court is ahead. While they are still on the road, the matter can be settled between them. When they have come in, it is no longer theirs. The judge has it, and the guard, and the prison. The picture is not a piece of advice about lawsuits. It is the same word as the word about the altar. There is a time, and the time is the way, and the way is now. Afterward the debt is no longer in our hands.

“Truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.” Who pays the last penny? The word does not point us to a reserve we still have. The penny is the whole debt, down to what we do not reckon. Anger reckoned as nothing. The word of contempt reckoned

as a trifle. The Pharisee's righteousness reckoned as enough. None of it pays. The prison in the picture is the place where a man is left with a debt he cannot discharge. That is where the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees ends. It does not end in the kingdom. It ends before the judge, with the last penny still unpaid.

Here the text has brought us to the one who speaks. "But I say to you." The "I" is not a teacher who tightens the old commandment and then waits to see whether we manage it. The "I" is the one who has the right to say the word, because he stands where the word leads. He does not speak from outside the judgment. He speaks as the one who goes under it. The greater righteousness is not our overbidding of the Pharisees. It is his. It exceeds theirs because it is not pieced together out of deeds we can count. It is the righteousness of the one who pays what the prison holds.

So the text is not a later moral, laid on top of the gospel. It is the gospel's own word about the law, spoken so that no one shall come before God with the Pharisee's measure in his hand. The door it shuts is the door we would open with our own righteousness. The door it leaves is him. We do not come in by exceeding the scribes in carefulness. We come in by the righteousness that exceeds theirs, which is his, given where we have nothing to pay with.

The brother remains. The text does not let us turn from the brother to Christ and thereafter forget the brother. The gift at the altar and the way to the brother are not two ways. The word that judges our anger is the same word that sends us. We go because we have been met, not in order to be met. The reconciliation we seek is not a condition we fulfil. It is what the forgiven man does when the case has been taken out of his hand. He has no name left to lay upon the brother. The names "fool" and "wretch" have fallen under the same judgment as his anger. He can only go and be reconciled.

And if he will not? The text does not give him another way. It does not say that the gift may be offered all the same, if the brother is difficult. It leaves the gift lying. It leaves the man on the road, with the accuser, while there is still time. That is the seriousness of the word. It is not a seriousness we add. It is the seriousness that is in the word itself, because the word is true. Anger is judgment. The contemptuous word is judgment. The unpaid penny is prison. Nothing in the text softens that. What the text does is to set, over against that judgment, the one who says "But I say to you," and to call his righteousness the righteousness without which no one enters.

We come, then, not as those who have a righteousness to show. We come as those who have been told the truth about anger and about the word that kills. And in that truth we meet him who has paid what we cannot pay.

To him be honour and praise, now and always. Amen.