

# Obedience in Body, Mind, and Heart

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**Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church**

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The Season of Epiphany is coming to an end. Next Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday, and the following Wednesday is Ash Wednesday. The Lenten journey to the cross will soon begin. Because we rehearse these events every year, we often feel we already know this story. But, if that is how we think, we do not know it. When it comes to God's Word, we can become arrogant and so forgetful.

We should know how the Word of God today in our readings applies to us just as they applied to God's people Israel, the people of Galilee listening to Jesus, and the people St. Paul wrote to in the Church at Corinth.

Previously, Jesus had told His listeners that He has not come to do away with the Law but to fulfill it. The Law is the Word of God, and Jesus—who stood before that crowd and spoke to them—was that Word of God in the Flesh. He was the manifestation of God, and He was the one who gave the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai for the people of God back in Old Testament times. He was the one in the reading from Deuteronomy who spoke to the Israelites through Moses as they made their way to the Promised Land of Canaan and today to you and me as we make our way to the Promised Land of Heaven.

In the Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy, God had been very clear about obedience to His Law as we heard. Moses told the people, "You have a choice": you can be obedient to the Word of God, the Law, and live not only physically but spiritually; or, you can be disobedient to the Word of God, the Law, and die. These Words of God are for us as well.

Moses added that what God was asking was not too hard. And it is not some distant or remote far-fetched idea. The Word of God, His Law, was in their hearts. It is in our hearts too. God has put it there. All we

need to do is to hear the Word of God and fulfill His Law in obedience. Moses concluded his words with an oath. He asked heaven and earth, all of creation, to be the witness of what he has told the Israelites—love and obey God and His commandments and receive blessings and live; do the opposite and be cursed and die. They had a choice. We have the same one. They failed miserably and frequently, and so do we. Our sinful natures, with the help and support of Satan, wander away from God and His love. We look for the easy way. We look to the ways of this world. We ignore the Word of God and thus we face the condemnation, the curse of God, and death. What a sad and painful commentary on us.

One of the problems with us, and rules, is that we try to justify our disobedience often with common adages like, “Rules are meant to be broken.” In other words, we did not do anything wrong. It was the fault of the rule itself.

A five-star Army general, Douglas MacArthur, is known for that saying, though we seldom hear the second part of his expression, which is “[Rules are made to be broken] and are too often for the lazy to hide behind.” The second part does not roll off the tongue as easily as the first part and has a negative tone that does not fit our modern culture. Since the expression dates back to 1950, it feels considerably old.

We would prefer to use lame excuses to cover our sin. We would prefer to use situational obedience. If it is good for me, then it is good. The light is red for me only if there is someone coming from the other direction. I feel good when I vent and let others know how I feel about them. After all, they need to know how I feel. I despise my boss/neighbor/teacher/father, but I am stuck being around them. As long as they do not hear me complaining about them, it is alright for me to do so. I am doing what I have to do to survive even though I hate it and them.

General MacArthur was removed from command and forced into retirement by President Truman late in his military career due to insubordination. He broke the rules for being obedient and loyal to his Commander in Chief. During the Korean War, MacArthur wanted to

carry out bombing against China and expand the war, and Truman refused. MacArthur, as a rule-breaker, suffered the consequences and then, portrayed himself as a martyr on his way out. His departure was marked by a speech with another adage, "Old soldiers never die." Douglas MacArthur died on April 5, 1964, and is buried in Norfolk, Virginia.

Jesus clarified to His disciples what the Word of God, the Law, required for obedience and blessing. He selected six subjects. Each of the six times Jesus said, "You have heard..." He was not contrasting His interpretation of the Law to Moses' words. He was addressing the interpretation and teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. He was refocusing His disciples, and us, on the meaning of the Law as God had originally intended. Let me remind you, He was God. He was stating what He intended in the Law.

The original Word of God had been altered and amended by interpretations of many rabbis. The scribes wrote these interpretations and codified them. So, these interpretations came to be the Law but they were not the Law of God. The common thinking of the day was that if you did not specifically violate one of the commandments in the Law of God, you were not disobedient. God should be pleased with you. You were obedient and blessed. Jesus addressed that thinking and told the people that there is more to God's Law than just the written words. Jesus was using His authority as God to contradict the authority of the religious leaders of his day. This added to their hatred of Him and His death. Yet, He was God. What He was saying was the Truth. It was a truth then, and it is a truth for us today. The Word of God as recorded in the Bible is God's Word. His truth is solid and sure. If we believe in Him, then, we must believe in His Word.

Jesus pointed out that the outward acts of obedience are only an external expression of our obedience or disobedience to the Law. For instance, when God gave the sixth commandment, He did not just want people to refrain from murdering one another. He also wanted them to refrain from the hatred that leads to murder. Murder is only the external manifestation of an internal problem.

The scribes and Pharisees dealt only with the external act. Jesus showed that God's concern ran much deeper. Refraining from homicide does not make a person righteous in God's sight. Inappropriate anger makes a person just as subject to judgment in God's heavenly court as the physical act of murder. Anger is internal and from the heart. It leads to vicious external acts in what we say and what we do. True, it can lead to murder, ultimately, but the internal acts of hatred and anger also lead to name-calling, gossip, and personality bashing, and they are murder, just as same as the external act of murder. We cannot help but see this in the world around us today. People make vicious insults and vile verbal attacks. Character assassination is as commonplace as murder itself. This truth of Jesus is clearly evident, and the outcomes are as well.

Jesus said that anyone who comes to God in His House and carries the internal thoughts of hate, anger, and malice against someone, should first go and reconcile with that person.

When we share the peace with each other here in the sanctuary, it is our way of doing that externally. This custom based on the words of Jesus began in the early Christian Church as the "Kiss of Peace" which was acceptable in that culture. We offer our hand in peace and reconciliation. Now, God sees in your heart and knows whether you do this is just for show or whether you are sincere. If you are not sincere, Jesus says you are guilty, guilty of murder, the Sixth Commandment.

Jesus stressed that it is a fallacy to believe that we are just before God by following only the outward requirements of the Law. Adultery is more than the external act. It includes what is in the heart. Lust is in the heart. Lust for another person is the equivalent of adultery. Fantasized immorality, with or without the use of pornographic material, is just as sinful to God as physical immorality (cf. Exod. 20:17). Just because the fornication that takes place in the brain has fewer bad consequences than fornication that takes place on a bed does not make it any less serious or any less sinful in the eyes of God. Jesus says these are equivalent under the Law.

His suggestion, to remove our eye or hand, is metaphorical. His intent is that we should strive to avoid sin internally before our corrupt human nature and the devil team up to cause us to act externally.

Two other illustrations followed. The first requires some perspective.

In Israel, a man divorced his wife simply by giving her a written statement indicating that he divorced her. This was based on the Law as found in Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 24:1-4). Divorce was considered a domestic matter, not something that went through the courts, and it was quite common. In most cases, a divorced woman would remarry another man, often for her own financial and personal security.

The Pharisees focused on the command to give the wife a certificate of divorce. They saw this as fulfilling the Law, being obedient, and therefore acceptable in the eyes of God.

They had dotted the “i” and crossed the “t” with the required certificate of divorce. Jesus said that divorcing a woman amounted to causing her to commit adultery since she would normally be forced to remarry while still being married in the sight of God regardless of the divorce. In the same way, any man who married a divorced woman committed adultery with her, because in God's eyes, she was still married to her first husband.

In His next example, Jesus condensed some of the Old Testament prohibitions about making vows to God and then breaking them (they are found in Exodus 20:7; Leviticus. 19:12; Numbers. 30:2; and Deuteronomy 5:11; 6:3; 23:21-23).

God has always intended for us to tell the truth. He believed our speech should have integrity just as His does. Over time, the Jewish rabbis had developed an elaborate, stratified system of oaths. For example, they taught that swearing by God's name was binding, but swearing by heaven and earth was not binding. Swearing TOWARD Jerusalem was binding, but swearing BY Jerusalem was not. In some cases, they even allowed it to be acceptable to deceive others by appealing to various authorities in their oaths. Jesus was not talking about cursing here. He was talking about using oaths to affirm that what someone said was true

or that someone would indeed do what he said he would do. Jesus cut through all the rabbis' clever reasoning by saying that if oaths that God intended to guarantee truthfulness in speech become the instruments of deceit, His disciples should avoid them. Once again, Jesus got below the external act to the real issue at stake, which had been God's concern from the beginning. His point was that people should not lie under any circumstances. And you and I should avoid saying, "I swear to God," or "I swear on a stack of Bibles."

Jesus said the integrity, the truthfulness of our words, should be enough. Our responses of "yes" and "no," when spoken as good and upright people, should suffice. The problem lies in the fact that often we say one thing, and, in our hearts, we believe or harbor the opposite. Another problem is that people do lie. They hide the truth from others for personal gain. They use deceit to cover up their sinful ways.

I am sure that you can relate to this living in the world we live today. Jesus said that an oath sworn to God—the words, "I swear to God"—should not be necessary if we are known for telling the truth and if our heart is pure.

Jesus was teaching His disciples, and us, that what matters is obedience, which is not just what we do overtly in the eyes of God and this world; it also is what we do covertly in our hearts and minds. Both are important in obedience to the Law and in the eyes of God. We cannot be hypocrites and appear to obey the law of God outwardly while at the same time being disobedient to the Law of God in our hearts. Being a Christian is a whole body, mind, and spirit commitment.

The conflicted church at Corinth was having that problem in our second reading today. St. Paul had established that church based on the Gospel. Now, he heard that the Corinthians were calling themselves Christians but were behaving more like the people of the world around them. How could that have happened? The spiritual truths that Paul had taught the Corinthians were not appearing in their behavior. St. Paul called them immature Christians. They exhibited jealousy and strife outwardly, bickering and squabbling while claiming to be loving Christian people. They had favorite pastors and church leaders which caused division and

disunity. They did not see the need for unity of purpose with each other and God as they fulfilled their mission in “God’s Church” in Corinth. They demonstrated exactly what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel reading. But for them, their hearts had given direction to their outward behaviors, and they were disobedient and disloyal to their Christian calling and faith. They were also impeding the work that God had set before them. Their internal sinfulness had leaked out and influenced their words and actions.

The lesson here is shown in a story. A Frenchman living in Paris was extremely adept at stealing famous works of art. In Paris, there are a lot of those at the Louvre. He was exceptionally talented at deceit, avoiding detection, and covertly getting the paintings out of a building. He had successfully done so on many occasions in homes, businesses, and other small art galleries. Now, he was planning his biggest “heist” at the Louvre itself. He entered the building, removed the painting, cleverly eluded the guards, and managed to get a famous work of art out of the Louvre and into his van. However, after driving only a few kilometers, his van ran out of gas. Ironically, his van happened to stop right in front of a policeman who was on the lookout for him. The policeman arrested him immediately and then, scratching his head, asked, “How could you be so clever at stealing a painting from one of the most prestigious art galleries in the world, and then be so foolish, as to forget to check your gas tank before your theft?” The thief replied, “I had no Monet to buy Degas to make the Van Gogh.” It turned out that the thief was not such a good thief after all. He was successful in stealing priceless works of art, but he was inept at using common sense to plan a successful getaway with his ill-gotten gains. Consequently, he suffered punishment for breaking the law.

Christians are called to be good Christians. We cannot be inept. We cannot give the appearance of being Godly people externally and woefully sinful and disobedient internally in our hearts and minds and souls. It is not just what we do that matters so that those around us may know us as Godly people externally. That is not all that matters to God. Our internal obedience to His Law matters too. While others only see what is on the outside, God looks at our hearts and knows us. He really

knows us. Jesus taught that obedience to God's Law is not only following the letter of the Law. It also means following the spirit of the Law. Both were equally important.

We know that God has placed His Law on our hearts, on the hearts of all people. We call it conscience. We also know that our sinful nature strives to lead us to sin and disobey our loving God. We are often inept Christians.

Next Sunday, we will remember and celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus. It is the last Sunday in Epiphany. It is a transition from the Season of Epiphany to the Season of Lent. It is also a transition in the ministry of Jesus as He turns His face to the cross. He goes to the cross for us because He knows of our sinful natures and our disobedience to God and His Law. He knows we are cursed and doomed to death. Yet, because of the love and mercy of God for us, He sent Jesus to die for us and our disobedience to His Law. He took our hypocritical selves and gave us His perfect and pure self so that we would receive forgiveness in faith, so that we might be blessed and live, even though we merit being cursed and death.

With all your heart and mind and soul, remember the Words of God as spoken by Jesus. Strive to fulfill the Law and be obedient to it. Do not be a Christian hypocrite by exhibiting external godliness and internal sinfulness. Seek reconciliation and forgiveness. Recognize your need for Your Savior and pray for His forgiveness each day. The Law was created by God for our good. It brings us to the foot of the cross. It opens our eyes to the mercy and love of our God and the sinless sacrifice of our Savior for us. Thanks be to God and His Law. Amen.