

Dear holy people of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, for the Lord your God is holy, it can be weighing thing to hear the Word of the Lord on what we are to do and how we are to do it. Weighing because we all too quickly realize just how much we fall short of perfection. Sure, we know we aren't perfect, we know we will make mistakes, but most of us like to think that overall we are good people and that we do alright.

Then it hits us like a freight train, what exactly perfect obedience to law entails. You have heard it said, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Yep, exactly you might think. If someone punches me I'm gonna punch them back, do something to me and payback will be coming. This kind of thinking is nothing but from the evil one. This is completely contrary to that which comes out of our hearts.

In our hearts lies the kind of thinking that we can do what we want, when we want, and that we are to look out for numero uno. Take care of ourselves and our business first and do so as quickly as possible. This is our first reaction and our inclination. Our Lord speaks things we have heard before, not to steal and along with this not to deal falsely, making fair deals. Not to lie to one another, not even those little white lies that we think cause no harm. Not to swear by the name of the Lord falsely, which also entails using his name properly only for prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. You shall not hold hatred in your heart, as our Lord last week placed this on the same line with murder. And even as it was said, "an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth" it was given by the Lord that you will not take vengeance or bear a grudge against others.

And if that were not enough, it is given that you will love your neighbor as yourself. Easy enough to say, but think of what this entails. Not striking back, even to the point of turning the other cheek. Who hasn't heard the phrase, "turn the other cheek?" Even those outside of Christianity know this saying from Jesus. They know it better than the fact that Jesus died for their sins. They may not have any intention of practicing it themselves. But they all agree that the world would be a better place if everyone followed Jesus' words.

But there is a group of people who don't know these words. Who push them aside. Who find reasons to ignore them. We call those people Christians. The truth is that we're terrible at putting these words of Jesus into practice. Instead, we come up with excuses so that these words apply to someone else.

Turn the other cheek? Well, I don't want to give people the idea that it's okay to hurt others. Give someone my tunic when they demand my cloak? I don't want to encourage people to fall into the sin of theft. Go two miles with someone who demands one mile? I have others counting on me elsewhere. Give to the one who begs? I don't want to feed their addictions. Love my enemies? I'd love them to go away, so I can get things done around here.

We have ironclad reasons. We want to protect others. We want to protect ourselves. We want to stand against evil. And being a doormat won't do that. So we strike back. We press charges. We resist. We deny. We stand as a monolith of justice. And in this, we can see how much better we are than our enemies. We have moral superiority. Good must always resist evil, in any form it takes.

And then the Law digs even deeper. Not only is this about your friends and family and those close to you, but even to our enemies. Loving those who love you, that seems like the easy part. It is just the positive side of an eye for an eye. But loving those who are your enemies, that is an entirely different matter. Loving the one lied to you, loving the one who hurt you deep within your heart, loving the one who misused and took your possessions, loving the one who took you for granted, this is contrary to our minds and hearts. Greeting your brothers is easy enough, friendly greetings with those who have difficulty speaking too, with those who we do not know, with those we do know but have something held against them, this is difficult for us. In this way we are no different than the most dishonest of tax collectors and no different than the godless Gentiles.

When we see the truth of whom we are and within ourselves, the dark reality of the sinners that we are becomes obvious. We do not always act and we do not always seem to be the people of God, perfect and holy.

Hear the Word of the Lord, "speak to the whole congregation, all the people, you shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy." Great, if I really want to be a child of God I must follow all of these things perfectly. Ever think that sometimes it would just be easier to give up and do what you want, when you want? Repent and do not lose heart.

You are holy for the Lord your God is holy. The Lord is telling who his people are; his people are holy and perfect. Not because you are without sin, but because it has been declared to you. You are holy for the one who is the very Word of God has come into the flesh to fulfill this Law on your behalf. He came not to abolish this Law, but to be its fulfillment. Our Lord Jesus took on human flesh to fulfill this perfect Law.

Temptation came his way, great earthly glory could have been his. He loved his neighbors even greater than himself. He healed the sick and gave himself for the blind and the poor. He showed love to the sojourners, the foreigners. As others mocked him he refused to get into a war of insults. He wasn't the most popular nor did he earn the respect of the masses. The masses would be the ones who would turn against him and demand his death. He willingly was led to this death. He did not resist the one who is evil. As he was beaten he turned the other cheek. As those who reviled him, those who were envious of his following, and those who were threatened by his proclamation gave all the hatred in their hearts and beat him. To those who mocked and ridiculed him, he loved them, looked upon them, and even asked the Father to forgive them. The cloak on his

back would be taken and his tunic would be the object of gambling for their prize. And he continued to love them. He would not get angry or hold a grudge.

And to you, those who do not receive his gifts with perfect joy, those who do not love your neighbors perfectly, those who despise the name of the Lord when things go wrong, to you who do not stand up and proclaim everything the Lord has given, you shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect. He does not stay away and resist you in your evil, but comes to you and makes you holy. To you is given the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His shed body and blood on the cross is for you. Your sins are forgiven and you are perfect and holy.

What about all that stuff that we must do? It is given to you to do for sure. But it will come naturally through the Holy Spirit given by Christ in you. You will love and serve your neighbors as yourself, you will serve in the vocations given to you in acts of love and mercy, and you will even not resist evil and take apparent losses as you are struck on the cheek and take some losses as you serve those in need. Not because of any merit or worthiness in yourself, not because you are showing yourself to be some kind of super-Christian, but because of who you are and what has been given to you.

You are a perfect and holy child of God, forgiven in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. You are the salt of the earth and will not become useless. You are the light of the world, given the light of the one who shines and overcomes the darkness of sin and death. You are released from the burden weighing on you to earn your salvation, it is yours. You must not trust in yourself to make yourself a temple sacrifice, for you are the temple, the sacrifice has been made, the body of Christ, and God's temple is holy. No one else can lay the foundation given to you, the foundation which is the Lord himself as he gives himself to you in his death and resurrection.

This is the folly to the world, this is what is against the wisdom of this world. The wisdom of this world would proclaim an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You get what you deserve. Foolishness of the world is giving with getting nothing in return, loving your enemies. Foolishness of this world is being given everything without earning it. So, let no one boast in men.

You are the temple of God, given the foundation of the him who takes away the sin of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. Your sins forgiven. You are holy and perfect even as he is perfect and fulfills the Law on your behalf. All is yours and you are Christ's.

Dear holy of people of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom of God. Amen.