

SERMON

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Immanuel Lutheran Church - Bartlett, Illinois
Pentecost 21, A - October 18, 2026
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees

- “plotted how to entangle Jesus” and
- Jesus was “aware of their malice”.

In fact, they were extremely upset at Jesus.

When He had arrived in Jerusalem,

- He had “cleansed” the temple.
- With a whip in hand
- He drove out the money changers--
- along with the sheep and cattle there--
- turning over the money changers’ tables
- and the benches of those selling doves.

That was an attack on the religious establishment--

- and the Pharisees were one with the establishment....

Yet they were **not** scoundrels.

- The Pharisees were among the most religious people who ever lived.
- It has been said that without their religious devotion,
- the Jewish religion may likely not have survived

- with all the takeovers by pagan empires--
- invasions and exiles.

And the Pharisees were highly respected,

- certainly not used to being called hypocrites--
- and white-washed tombs--
- or to be told that despised tax collectors and prostitutes
- would go into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them.
- But Jesus had said those things to them.

It is clear that Jesus taught it is possible

- to be very religious without being right with God.

And that's where we come in--

- we who are gathered here on Sunday morning
- good religious people
- at a time when many have abandoned the faith
- or at least are no longer attending church on any regular basis,
- some flirting with other religions with other gods....

What can we learn from

- the very religious people of Jesus' day
- and from Jesus' criticism of them?

Their problem was

- that in trying so hard to be faithful,
- they lost the true spirit of what it was all about.

Theirs was a rule-book religion--

- religion that had lost its soul.

The Pharisees had an endless number of “religious” rules,

- with, for example,
- endless details involved in keeping the Sabbath Day holy.
- If dealing with a minor problem like a damaged finger,
- even placing a bandage on it was illegal until the Sabbath,
- that weekly day of rest, was over.

The problem was that keeping the rules or the traditions

- had become of more concern to the Pharisees
- than loving everyday people with real needs and hurts and sins.

Instead, they looked down on those

- who did not or could not keep the rules as well as they did.
- Among them were people like the shepherds
- watching over their flock by night
- at the time of the Birth of Jesus.

The demands of their daily work--

- living out-of-doors

- with all the problems that went with that,
- like the lack of personal hygiene,
- made them socially unacceptable.
- But they also were unable to leave the sheep for worship
- causing them to be called “unclean” by the Pharisees.
- Yet it was to those “sinners” that the angels appeared
- to announce the birth of the world’s Savior--
- who would come to be known as the “Friend of Sinners.”.

Often rules begin with the best of intentions,

- but they easily become ends in themselves.

A rule book way of relating to God loses sight of grace--

- God’s unearned, undeserved love.

After all, God chose Israel and delivered them from Egypt

- long before they even had the Ten Commandments.

There was nothing in them as a people

- that caused God to show them that favor.

- It was all about God’s grace

- and His intention to save the whole world through His chosen people.

To paraphrase a New Testament passage,

- in the Pharisees there was a “form of godliness”

- but the power of it-- the heart of it-- was being denied. (1 Timothy 3:5)....

Earlier in the chapter from which our Gospel reading is taken today we come upon the story of Jesus cursing a fig tree.

“Early in the morning, as Jesus was on His way back to the city, He was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it, but found nothing on it except leaves. Then He said to it. ‘May you never bear fruit again.’ Immediately the tree withered.’ (vv. 18,19)

Quite an object lesson for the disciples.

- And it needs to be the same for us.
- It’s always much easier to be religious,
- to go about our duties at church, for example,
- than it is to love our neighbor.
- It’s always easier to wear religious robes and to use religious language
- than to speak up for someone who is being treated wrongfully,
- or to spend our precious time helping out someone in need,
- or to change the way we’ve always done things
- in order to act lovingly toward someone who desperately needs some love.

But that’s how we live out true love for God.

Not just **looking** like a fig tree-- looking religious--

- but to bear the fruit expected from who we are.

When we truly understand that we ourselves are saved by grace--

- by undeserved love--
- rather than by our own often unsuccessful efforts at keeping rules--
- even the basic Ten Commandments--
- our response will surely be love for God--
- with lives offered to God's glory in thanksgiving.

And lives that are offered to God will be loving their neighbor--

- because not only is that is God's will for us.
- It's how we show our love for Him whom we cannot see.

And sometimes love **will** need to take priority

- over a strict following of traditions and rules--
- especially over the way we personally have always
- thought and done things.

Put another way,

- we may be rightly feeling strong disapproval
- of someone's background and past wrong decisions.

In what has been a crumbling society

- we will be meeting more and more people like that--
- people from what in the past we would have considered
- horrible family backgrounds and personal backgrounds.

We will need to recall how our Lord Jesus

- met people where they were

- and was a friend to them.

He did not wait for them to be sinless,

- but came to take care of even that problem Himself.

He as perfect Son of God.,

- did not act like the Pharisees and look down on them.

Neither should we.

- He became known as the Friend of Sinners.

- We need to be friends of sinners too,

- not automatically reject them when we might help,

- even the “least of people” in whom He tells us

- we do it to Him.

Traditional ways of thinking and acting--

- and even religious rules--

- may have had good reasons for their existence--

- but they are not there for their own sake.

- They need to pass the test of love for God and love for our neighbor.

Recall how Jesus Himself was condemned for breaking the rules

- in order to put human need first--

- healing on the Sabbath Day for example,

- or allowing his hungry disciples

- to pick some grain to eat from the field on the Sabbath Day.

He broke the rules--

- broke out of the way things had “always been done”

- in order to meet a need.

He said,

“For the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath....

- and,

“The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”

That claim for those who had ears to hear,

- gave a glimpse into His being much more than just a human rabbi.

- He was both man and God... by whom the Sabbath itself was created.

Of course, we are not the Lord of the Sabbath as Jesus was.

- And it is all too easy for us sinners to decide that

- if love is all that is important,

- we will go the opposite direction.

- We can break most all the commandments by

- finding some way to decide it is the loving thing to do.

And it's not that our Lord Jesus taught us to ignore the Ten Commandments.

- The opposite is true.

- He taught that we are to do more than follow the Law in an outward way.

- He taught we break the commandments when our **hearts** are not right:

So our **hating** someone is breaking the Fifth Commandment

- “You shall not kill.”

- Just **lusting** is breaking the commandment

- “You shall not commit adultery.”

In other words, Jesus taught us to take the Commandments so seriously

- that we realize that we cannot keep them as we should--

- that **we** are truly sinners

- and that **all** have sinned and fall short....

SO THAT we are then driven to see our own desperate need for the

- love beyond comprehension that sent Jesus to the Cross--

- after living a perfect life on **our** behalf,

- then dying the death **we** deserved.

- All that WE MIGHT BE FREELY FORGIVEN by grace

- which we receive as pure gift by faith which is also a gift of God....

The Church’s greatest missionary ever, the apostle Paul,

- was, before he became Paul, a very strict Pharisee whose name was Saul.

- He kept all the rules and traditions meticulously.

- He despised and persecuted those who believed differently from himself.

- He even presided over the stoning of
- the Church's first martyr, young Stephen.

But then the risen Lord Jesus met him

- on the road to Damascus.
- And what a change took place at his conversion!

Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountain, but have not love, I am nothing.”

In meeting Jesus, Saul MET the One

- whom he had been despising and persecuting--
- those in the body of Christ, the Church.

But instead of receiving condemnation,

- the terrified Saul was there himself overwhelmed by grace--
- unearned love and acceptance.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”

Paul would write to the Romans,

“AND are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the Law.” (Romans 3:21 ff.)

What a turn-around! What a conversion!

It wasn't that Paul had given up trying to please God.

- He gave his **life** to the work of the Gospel.
- But now not to earn God's favor by following the rules
- or doing things the way they had always been done.

His new life of thanksgiving was because

- God had shown him favor while he was still in deep darkness,
- and helpless on his own.
- It was a response to God's grace.

The same Risen Lord who once met Saul on the road to Damascus

- comes to meet us today in His Holy Supper.
- And He comes with the same overwhelming grace.....
- In spite of our own failures to love--
- and refusals to change to do so--
- sometimes even in church,
- sometimes even using religion as our excuse.....

“See how they love one another!”

That is what the pagan world said of the first Christians.

- What a powerful magnet that love was
- for drawing more and more to Christ!

As we strive to be faithful in our own God-forsaking world,

- let's never forget to love others as our priority.

Saint Paul writes,

- "Love IS the fulfilling of the Law."-- Romans 13:10

That means doing more than keeping the outward rules.

- Especially in this kind of changing, even crumbling society,
- there are lots of very damaged people out there
- from very different backgrounds than the way things used to be--
- with many who desperately need to hear
- a word of grace and hope,
- with its gift of a brand new life.

May we respond like Saul to that grace--

- in lives offered in Christ's own mission for the whole world.

Even if we have been like Pharisees--

- and most of us do have that tendency at one time or another--
- even if we have failed to put love first,
- grace means we can change....
- start all over, fresh and new-- like being born again and again and again.

When we are connected to Christ like branches to the vine,

- nothing is impossible. .

May we all understand that God's grace is truly needed by **us**

- and there also for **us**,
- so that we may be all that He intends us to be for others--
- not just people who try to keep and teach rules,
- biblical or man-made.

By the way, the Ten Commandments themselves

- were not given to make life miserable
- but are packed with concern and love for the well-being of us sinners
- but that is material for another sermon.

Now may we all offer ourselves to taking His own love to all the world.

- A huge task, beyond our own abilities,
- that is true.
- So let's concentrate doing that where God has placed us.
- bearing fruit that is eternal
- right in this confusing, rapidly changing time,
- even with its damaged and changing people.

May we be the friends of sinners.

- just as Jesus was and is for us.