

“THE FULL EXTENT OF THE GOSPEL”

A Sermon for The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Many years ago, when our youngest was requiring lots of medical attention and we were struggling to make ends meet in a very small congregation, I went to apply for reduced price lunches for our children who were in school. This meant showing evidence of our personal finances to a social worker at the courthouse.

That was painful enough, but the process didn't make it easier. I had to wait on a bench in the hallway until she was finished with a couple other clients. Then she invited me into the little gray cubicle where we would have the conversation. I sat on an old tablet chair like we used to have in high school, next to her desk, and answered her questions. This was not a nice office. Strictly functional. On the walls there was nothing personal. Only a tiny calendar, and a placard in a cheap frame with one sentence printed on it, and it wasn't "Home Sweet Home." It said "Welfare fraud will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

I was very careful. I did not want my children's father to wind up in jail. For example, she did not want to accept my explanation about mileage reimbursement—that it was not income—but I was very respectful of her point of view. The placard was talking to me.

I think you can imagine how I felt: Under threat. Intimidated. Worried.

That is what the placard was supposed to do. Someone was telling me "Be afraid. Be very afraid to do what is wrong." Whoever wrote the sign actually worded it wrong, but I got the message. Not "fraud," but "I" would be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, if I did wrong. And I knew what that meant. The county prosecutor would be on my case to see I was

punished regardless of the fact that his wife was our choir director. I would pay a price for my wrong deed.

Let's do a little experiment. Let's take that placard and substitute in a few other wrongs. What if you had a sign at your desk, or over the mirror in your bathroom, which said:

- *Impatience will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Injustice will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Unkindness will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Tardiness will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Gossip will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Sanctimony will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Hatred will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Selfishness will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Indifference to the needs of others will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Wrong notes will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Malpractice will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Disregard for the Sabbath will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Lack of faith will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Disrespect for the rights of others will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*

- *Laziness will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Jealousy will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*
- *Inattentiveness to the Word of God will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.*

Perhaps you think the things I've named are not crimes, just because you cannot be arrested for them. Maybe you think only people who sell drugs or lie to government officials need to be afraid of "the full extent of the law." But for Christians obeying the law means to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The full extent of the law means that all of our sin will have consequences—for us, and for the world. The full extent of the law is this, that we are separated from God, our community withers up, our world sickens, and we are finished. All those wrongs I listed, plus countless more, are in fact the law. They are a few of the thousand names for how we fail to fulfill the law.

When we fail by any of those standards and pretend it's okay to do so, that we are just fine anyway . . . we commit "wellbeing" fraud. We think it is well with us, but it is not. We are hypocrites, we are insufficiently self-critical, if we think that an occasional good behavior justifies the occasional bad behavior.

"The full extent of the law," if we are even half honest, should make us realize we are a long ways from good. A long ways from righteous. Anything but holy.

Enter the gospel. Enter Jesus of Nazareth . . . proclaiming "the full extent of the gospel." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," etc.

The law is God saying to us "Look at what you have done." And "Don't you dare."

If "the full extent of the law" means that we will pay, in full, for every iniquity, then "the full extent of the law" is even greater. It means that, instead of us, God will pay. We will be free.

The gospel is God saying "Look at what I do for you." And this is what God promises to do, in the little clippings of gospel we call beatitudes: bestow the kingdom on us, give us comfort, satisfy us, show us mercy, make us his children. Not as a reward for good behavior, not because we somehow manage to fulfill the law, but because of God's own mercy towards us.

Be careful when you read the Beatitudes. If you read them as a rulebook, as law, you should be prepared to hear them say that the blessings of God are only available to you who meet certain criteria. First, you must be poor in spirit, suffer loss, show mercy, be pure in heart, make peace, and on top of that suffer persecution. If you don't qualify for the blessing of God under those stringent criteria, you will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law.

But the Beatitudes are not law but gospel. Nothing in them says "Do this, or else." (People sometimes think that being peacemakers is something they can do that will attract God's approval and blessing. Not so. God does not reward us for telling other people to stop what they are doing. From the context you may see that the way we make peace is by suffering the injustice done to us, for example, by turning the other cheek or going the extra mile or—this is it in a nutshell—forgiving others. Forgiveness is what truly makes peace, and it is not a doing as much as it is a suffering. We make peace when people persecute us and we refuse to be drawn into conflict. (Out in the West they used to call a Colt revolver a "peacemaker." That is not the peacemaking of Jesus.)

The goodness or blessing in all these beatitudes is what God will do for those who are in want. Those who lack. Those who are not able. Those who suffer. He shared this outline of gospel with us to show that the gospel, when stretched out to its full extent, reaches to the very depths of our suffering and woe and bestows peace even there!

The full extent of the gospel will never be clear to those who take the beatitudes as an action plan for themselves, to make themselves lovable or blessable. But read them as a suggestive outline to the full extent of the gospel, and we will be overwhelmed with God can do for us, if we call upon him in any need. Instead of being humiliated and crushed by our God, we will be given life and salvation. Amen.

