

**Sermon, July 28, 2019, 2019, Immanuel**  
Gospel, St. Matthew 5: 17-26

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish <sup>a</sup>the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but <sup>r</sup>to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, <sup>s</sup>until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> <sup>t</sup>Therefore whoever relaxes <sup>u</sup>one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least <sup>v</sup>in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great <sup>v</sup>in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds <sup>w</sup>that of the scribes and Pharisees, you <sup>x</sup>will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

*<sup>21</sup> <sup>y</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of old, <sup>z</sup>‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable <sup>a</sup>to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that <sup>b</sup>everyone who is angry with his brother<sup>3</sup> will be liable <sup>a</sup>to judgment; whoever insults<sup>4</sup> his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to <sup>c</sup>the hell<sup>5</sup> of fire. <sup>23</sup> <sup>d</sup>So if <sup>e</sup>you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> <sup>f</sup>Come to terms 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. <sup>26</sup> Truly, I say to you, <sup>g</sup>you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.<sup>6</sup> (ESV)*

The director Ken Burns made a documentary about World War II called “The War”. In it he interviewed several people who told their stories of how the war affected them and their loved ones. Some of those who told their stories were soldiers, sailors, Marines, and airmen. Some were family members of servicemen. Some were the women who worked in the factories. One, a soldier named Glenn Frazier, was a survivor of the Bataan Death March. He had been in the Army, stationed in the Philippines on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese military attacked American forces at Pearl Harbor, and began the invasion of the Philippines, an American territory. The Americans were caught off guard, their airplanes destroyed on the ground on the first day of fighting. Without air cover, and without reinforcements, they fought a losing battle. Eventually, after a long-fought retreat, and the exhaustion of all resources, the Americans surrendered.

The march to the prison camp became known as the Bataan Death March. Hundreds were cruelly beaten, starved, abused, and killed on the way. The prisoners who survived the march were eventually transferred to POW camps in Japan, where they were again brutally treated, barely fed with disgusting food, and forced to work in subhuman conditions. The prison guards told them that when the first American soldier stepped foot onshore to invade Japan, they would all be killed. When the Japanese did finally surrender, after the dropping of two atomic bombs, the prison guards walked away from the prison, and the American prisoners were free.

They returned to the homeland and hometowns they had never expected to see again. But for many, maybe most of them, the war did not end with Japan's surrender. For they carried with them indelible memories of mistreatment, of cruelty, of unspeakable crimes in their heads. And they felt an intense hatred for their captors, and their nation, enslaving their souls even as they bodily walked in freedom. Glenn Frazier, the man who was interviewed, could not sleep at night for the terrible dreams of vengeance and hatred that came to him. It got to the point where he dreaded falling to sleep at night. Eventually, he came to realize that this hatred of his was weighing him down, crushing him. He felt that he had the right to hate those who had been so cruel to him and others, but knowing that gave him no relief. Deep down, he knew the only way he would ever be able to live again would be to take that weight off. He would have to find a way to forgive those who had mocked, tortured, and beat him. But he just couldn't do it. Not by the utmost effort of will. Not by himself.

Glenn turned to his pastor, and his pastor turned him to God's Word, and to prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ for His Holy Spirit to work in him to do what he could not do himself--forgive his enemies. He followed his pastor's counsel and began praying for the Holy Spirit to give him the power to forgive. Glenn began to be able to sleep again without nightmares. He began to live again, to enjoy life and being free again. Glenn Frazier, by himself, could **not** find forgiveness for his enemies in his heart, but with Christ's heart he could. Christ's Holy Spirit working in him, with him, and through him, finally brought to Glenn the healing that he so desperately sought, and lifted the enormous burden of hate and vengeance off his shoulders. Glenn stopped seeking vengeance in his heart and handed over vengeance to the righteous judge of all--the Lord God.

Like, Glenn, the former prisoner of war and prisoner of his own hate, we too must forgive our enemies, even pray for them, no matter how evil they might be, how unjust they might be, how cruel. For their sake, and for our own sake. But can we do this? Please take a moment to look into your own hearts. Do you have a long-standing grudge against somebody who has done you some wrong? God commands "Pray for him or her". Maybe someone has abused you, even a trusted relative? God commands "Forgive him". Has somebody been cruel to someone who you love? God commands, "Do not seek vengeance on them." Has someone betrayed you? God commands "Love them." Has a brother or sister in Christ treated you unfairly? God commands "Do not separate yourself from them by avoiding Sunday worship"

Can you do this? Are you able to obey these commands of God? If so, you have been blessed, because only the Holy Spirit of God working in you could empower you to truly forgive your enemy, the one who has sinned against you. The natural human inclination is to strike back, to return insult for insult, injury for injury, to get even, to get revenge when insulted or injured, to hold onto your righteous anger.

But this is not what God wants you to do. He wants you to leave judgment and punishment in His hands, and in the hands of those whom He has set in positions of

authority to administer justice. He has put rulers and authorities and judges in temporal authority to enforce the laws, to bear the sword, as Luther puts it, so that you might live in peace and quiet with our neighbors. He has set pastors and teachers in positions of spiritual authority to speak his Word, not their personal word, but His, so that His children may live in peace with each other, with their neighbors, and so they might live God-pleasing lives.

God wants you to walk in His way in thought, word, and deed. He wants you to love and help our neighbor, no matter how much they have wronged you. He wants you to forgive whatever wrong they may have done to you. “Again, how can I do this?”, you ask. Martin Luther asks this question in a sermon he preached on the sermon text for today:

“A person might here say, What then am I to do? I feel all that within me, but I cannot change conditions. I reply, Flee to the Lord, thy God, lay thy complaint before him and say: Behold, Lord, my neighbor has injured me a little, has spoken a few words touching my honor, has caused some damage to my property, this I cannot suffer, therefore, I would cheerfully see him killed. Oh my God, how gladly would I be amiable to him, but, alas, I cannot! See how wholly cold, yea, dead I am! O Lord, I cannot help myself, I must stand back. Make thou me different, then I will be godly; if not, I will remain like I have been. **Here** you must seek your help and at no other place; **if you seek it in yourself, you will never find it.** Your heart perpetually bubbles and boils with anger, you cannot prevent it. “

Like the survivor of the Bataan Death march, we must admit our own helplessness to forgive others.

Luther goes on to say:

“In view of this lay hold of his word and promise, that he will change you; this **only** will help you. Pray thus: Oh my God, thou hast placed Christ, thine only beloved Son, before me as an example, so that I might lead a like life; but I am not able to do this. O my God, change me, grant me thy grace! God then comes and says: Behold, since you know yourself and seek grace from me, I will change you and do as you desire. And though you are not so perfect as Christ, as indeed you should be, I shall nevertheless have my Son’s life and perfection cover your imperfections. So you see we must always have something to keep us in the right humility and fear.

This is true comfort that does not rest on our ability, but on the fact that we have a gracious God, who forgives our sins; on the fact that we believe in Christ and not in our own worthiness, he cleansing us from day to day; on the fact that whenever we fall short, we should always place our hope and trust in Christ.”

Through hearing God’s Word, and receiving the Lord’s body and blood, and in answer to your prayer, the Holy Spirit leads you to the source of your strength, the source of all healing and forgiveness: to your Lord Jesus Christ, to His command to you to be holy in thought, word, and deed, and to His pronouncement of forgiveness when you fall short. You go to the source, His very body and blood, His very Word of absolution, His very promise to be with you forever. His Holy Spirit is making you even now new creations, with new hearts, with gentler speech. He is making you faithful witnesses to His truth and grace. You come back here, to your church, to the source of truth and grace, to Jesus. For here, in Christ, you have been adopted into an eternal family, born from above in the waters of Holy Baptism. Here you are fed and nourished by God’s Word, body and blood. Here you are guided by teaching and preaching, admonished if necessary, but always forgiven in repentance. Here you pray for forgiveness and forgiving hearts, and here you receive them to strengthen you not for a death march, but for Life March, to the Promised Land, to heaven, the resurrection, the new heavens and earth, and life everlasting. In Jesus’ + name. Amen.