

St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ✠

August 21, 2005

Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe

““When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

“Do not steal.

“Do not lie.

“Do not deceive one another.

“Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

“Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him.

“Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight.

“Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

“Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

“Do not go about spreading slander among your people.

“Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the LORD.

“Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt.

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Lev. 19:9-18, NIV)

You might say that he had good intentions. The expert in the law, in the Gospel for today, had good intentions. He wanted to be justified. I'm sure he intended to perfectly keep God's law: love the Lord his God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength and with all his mind. He intended to love his neighbor as himself.

But there's a reason why they say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It's because people don't follow through on their intentions, no matter how good they may be. As it turns out, the expert in the law had not loved his neighbor as himself, nor had he loved God.

Perhaps that expert in the law should have looked a little more carefully at God's law. Perhaps he should have studied carefully *this* portion of God's Word that we have before us today. Then maybe he would have seen that it's not really about his intentions. It's not about our intentions. God's commands are about *his* intentions. These are **GOD'S GOOD INTENTIONS**. When we look at these words we see that God intends (first of all) **that we be like him**. And second, God intends **to simply be himself, the LORD**.

I've always thought it was amazing how much the Good Samaritan sounds like Jesus. When Jesus explained to that expert in the law what it means to love your neighbor as yourself, it always strikes me that the Samaritan acts just as you would expect Jesus to act. He's compassion-

ate. He's caring. He doesn't ignore people who are in need, no matter who they are. In a sense, Jesus says, if you want to be perfectly loving to your neighbor, be like me.

That is also what God told his people in the Old Testament. Just seven verses before our text God simply says, "**Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.**" I want you to be just like me, perfect and holy.

These verses then describe what it means to be holy in everyday life. It means caring for those who are in need by leaving some of your crops—that was their welfare program. It means not taking what does not belong to you. It means telling the truth. It means being fair and just. It covers every single aspect of our lives, especially as we relate to others.

It even covers our thoughts. "**Do not hate your brother in your heart.**" You could summarize all these things with the simple command: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** That is, love everyone perfectly. God intends that we love perfectly, that we live perfectly. He intends that we be like him.

Now, when I read the story of the Good Samaritan I may see a good description of what Jesus is. But reading these verses I see a pretty good description of someone else. Oh, this person may intend to be loving, but often he is not. And oh, he may do things that look loving from time to time, but only he knows what is really going on inside. Only he knows the little thoughts of selfishness that have prompted his actions. He knows his own hateful thoughts that have led to grudges and slander and revenge. He knows he has not loved God and not loved his neighbor. He knows that he is not as God intended him to be, and worst of all, he knows that God knows.

When you read this list of what God intended us to be, do you see this list of what you have not been? We read these words and come face to face with the gross realization of who we are.

But these words tell us something more. Yes, we are who we are, but here we see that the LORD is who he is. Five times in these verses we find the words, "**I am the LORD.**" God fully intends to remain who he is, to be himself, the LORD.

That leads us to ask, well, "who exactly is the LORD?" And why does he remind us again and again that it is *he* who is giving these commands? Is God reminding us that he is all-powerful and all-knowing so he knows who has broken his commands and so that he can punish those who do? Is God compelling us to love our neighbor out of fear of his divine retribution? If God wanted to scare us into obedience, he probably would have said, "I am God Almighty" or "I am the Mighty One." But he doesn't say that. He says, "I am the LORD."

You might ask, "What's the difference? Aren't they just different names for God?" The word here translated "LORD" is God's personal name for himself. Most other names for God tell us something about him, like something that he has done. For example, the word "God" usually refers to God as a God of power, the one who created the world. If you add the name "Almighty," that makes the point even stronger that God is the Mighty One.

The name "LORD" is a little different. This is the name that is usually printed in capital letters in our Bibles. Some people translate it Jehovah or Jahweh. In Hebrew it sounds very much like the

words, "I am." This name tells us who God is and it opens up to us the very heart of God. And what do we see?

We see the LORD God speaking to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, seriously concerned about their souls' salvation and promising that a descendant of the woman would crush the serpent's head.

We see the LORD promising to Abraham that he would bless him and that all nations on earth would be blessed through him. He is the LORD who makes promises to save us and bless us.

We see the LORD speaking to Moses from the burning bush, calling himself "**I AM who I AM**" I am the LORD, the God of your Fathers. Not only does the LORD give promises, but he remains who he is so that he can keep those promises.

And later on we see the Lord showing his glory to Moses. Moses just gets a glimpse of the LORD, but it's enough to make our mind spin and our hearts pound. This is who he is: "**The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.**"

The LORD makes promises. He lives to keep those promises. And the result is that he shows love and forgiveness.

Now why would God need to remind his people of this 42 times in the eight chapters of Leviticus surrounding this text, right in the middle of law after law after law? Why? Was he doing it to soften his law, as if to say, well I really want you to be nice to your neighbor, but it's not a big deal if you don't. No, he still demands perfection. He still intends his people to be holy like he is holy. So why does he say this?

Could it be that he reminds us *who he is*, because he knows *who we are*? Doesn't he know that we are sinful people who break his law day after day? Doesn't he know that we have the tendency to think that maybe if we work really hard (even though we aren't perfect) we might be able to please God? Or that at least we can be better than most people? Doesn't he know that we also have the opposite tendency to fall into despair, to think that God could never really love me, not me, not after the way that I've treated my neighbor--the things I've said to them, the things I've thought about them. If I can't love my neighbor, how can God love me?

Yes, God knows who we are. And so he reminds us *who he is*. He reminds us that he intends to remain the LORD, no matter who we are. He reminds us that his law does not do away with his promise. He is always the LORD, always the one who makes promises and keeps them, always the one who is compassionate and gracious, always the one who forgives.

People change all the time. What may be important to a person *now* may not be very important in a year, a month, or even an hour. That is probably is part of the reason people don't always carry out their intentions. God does not change. He does not change his intentions. He always has and always will intend that we be like him—holy, as he is holy. He always has and always will intend to be himself, the LORD, the God who keeps his promises of love and forgiveness.

And knowing *that* changes us. The Lord changes us. He changes us from people who hate his rules to people who (as we prayed in the prayer of the day earlier) love what he commands.

Doesn't that also change the way you look at your neighbor? Doesn't that make a difference in how you think about the guy down the street, how you talk about your spouse and act toward your parents? In his great compassion, the LORD changes us, changes our intentions to be more like his perfect intentions.

And so what else can we do, but love our neighbor, as ourselves? What else can we do, but live as God intends? What else can we do?

The expert in the law wanted to justify himself. That led him to ask Jesus what the minimum was that he would have to do. Who is my neighbor? God does not intend for us to justify ourselves. He doesn't intend for us to work our way to heaven. He doesn't require a minimum payment. He requires the full payment, **that we be like him**. But **he is the LORD**, who has made full payment, full satisfaction for our sins. He has justified us. He has forgiven us. May we always find comfort and strength in the unchanging intentions of our loving and forgiving LORD. Amen.