



# Pastoral Intern Ben Blobaum

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**SERMON – 6<sup>TH</sup> PENTECOST**

**MATTHEW 5:2-37**

**FEBRUARY 12, 2023**

Prior to entering seminary, I worked for seven years as a full-time domestic missionary, in ministry to prisoners, gang members, and the formerly incarcerated. My work took me into nearly every correctional center in Illinois. On one of my prison visits, I met a young man, and to respect his anonymity let's call him Jose; I met Jose while he was serving a multi-year prison sentence for drug-related offenses.

I corresponded with Jose throughout the remainder of his incarceration, and I learned that he grew up only a couple of miles from where I lived and attended church in Chicago. In my letters, I invited Jose to come to our church after completion of his sentence. And when he was released, Jose did indeed come to our church.

However, Jose had been unable to arrange stable housing and was presently living on the street. I offered that he was welcome to stay with me and sleep on my couch for as long as was necessary, with the proviso that he actively pursue employment and housing and that he stay sober.

Things got off to a great start: using my connections, I was able to get Jose hooked up with a landscaping job within a couple of weeks. Jose loved the feeling of waking up in the morning and, with coffee in hand, heading off to work, breathing free air as a free man.

He was also attending church with me regularly, and, many evenings, when Jose returned from work, we'd talk religion and study God's word. On the weekends, Jose would even help as a volunteer in my prison ministry.

However, when I started trying to help Jose obtain alternative, stable housing, he had "reasons" for rejecting each of the places I recommended. This continued for a couple of months, during which time Jose started returning home later and later at night, and some nights not at all.

I had my suspicions that Jose was using drugs again, but I didn't have any conclusive proof. That is, until the day that Jose asked to borrow some money. When someone who is working fulltime and has virtually no bills to pay asks you for money, there are really only a couple of explanations: either the person was robbed or is using drugs. And Jose didn't report having been robbed.

I told Jose it was time to leave, and, after much protestation, he did. The next day, I got a call from Jose...from a nearby suburban jail. I got in the car and went to visit him. He had apparently been stealing bikes and selling them at pawnshops to support his heroin addiction, and he had finally been caught.

I asked Jose if he might be willing to share with me what had been going through his thoughts and on his heart since his arrest. His reply surprised me. "I'm honestly relieved that I got caught," he said, "I was so tired of running and hiding, always looking over my shoulder; now, I don't have to run anymore; now I have a second chance."

It's funny, most people talk about getting a second chance when they're *released* from prison, but, here, Jose perceived *detention* to be his ticket to a second chance at life.

What makes sense of this? Only the mercy of God's *judgment*.

There's a common tendency to view God's mercy and his judgment under the law as antitheses, as though they were opposed to one another. And certainly, that will be the case in the Final Judgment, when God's patience with wickedness finally runs out, and those who refused his mercy to the bitter end will have no more chances for repentance.

But if there were one thing that I'd wish for every Christian to know, it is that, until that End, in this life *all of God's dealings with mankind are mercy*.

This is true of the law and judgment of God. The law of God expresses his good and perfect will for human existence. What this means for sinners, then, is that the law works as a mirror, showing us that we are not what God created us to be. And God's judgment of us under the law is his unequivocal "no" to what we have become as sinners.

But God's "no" to human sin and corruption is never merely to scold. When through the law God says, "don't," he means, "don't hurt yourself; don't hurt others." In other words, the law is one of the ways that God shows his primal care for his human creatures.

Moreover, the "no" of God's judgment is his "no" to our self-degradation, to our defilement and to the diminishment of our humanity; it is God's "no" to our becoming beastlike, ruled only by base instincts. "*Do not be like horse and mule,*" the psalmist warns, "*for they do not have understanding*" (32:9).

Well, thank God! Thank God that he cares so much for us that he isn't content to settle for the mess we've made of ourselves and to simply let us go our way.

In other words, thank God that he loves us enough to give us his law which tells us the truth when we go astray, when we take the path that we read about in our Old Testament lesson today that leads only to death and damnation.

And so, thank God for his judgment which says "no" to our self-destructive, damnable ways. *That* is sheer mercy.

As Jose will tell you, however, God's mercy...hurts. Here again is a paradox. We tend to imagine God's mercy only in terms of *relief* from affliction. But in a fallen world, for sinners who have become like horse and mule, God's mercy must often take the form of bit and bridle, to curb us when we inevitably turn from his path of life.

Listen to how Jose later explained the mercy of God in his life: *God sent me to prison to save my life*.

Prison hurts. There's no two ways about it. I've sat with grown men in prison as they have wailed heavy and soul-tormented tears. Prison hurts. But Jose's statement was his recognition that, if God had not *mercifully* intervened, he would have hopelessly remained on a path of self-destruction, a path that would have, in the end, led him to hell.

It was through his *judgment* that God intervened. And painful though God's judgment was for Jose, by it

his life was saved. Sheer mercy.

Had we never sinned, our experience of God's mercy would be only pure bliss; nothing would taste sweeter. And God's law would be an absolute delight to the ears.

Instead, having turned from God's word, humanity came under God's judgment, God's "no" to the whole fallen enterprise of human wickedness.

And so, there became *two* ways, or two paths, for humanity: one of life and the other of death. And because our default path as sinners is the way of death, God's mercy must now take the form of intervention, through the giving of his righteous law.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus reveals what has been God's true intention in the law from the very beginning. The Pharisees and religious leaders in Jesus' day occupied themselves vigorously with *outward* obedience to God's law.

And so, for example, they may have convinced themselves of their own righteousness, thinking, "well, I've never killed anyone; I've kept the Fifth Commandment. Thank you, God, that I'm not like those *real* sinners, the murderers."

But Jesus is revealing that the inner meaning of the law has always been directed to the human heart, such that "every one who is angry with his brother...or insults him" has broken the Commandment and is, therefore, "liable to judgment" (Mat. 5:22).

Jesus reveals that the Commandment is not kept by merely refraining from killing another person, but that God's true intention in the law is *a human heart in which there is no malice at all, a heart in which there is only love that actively seeks the good of the other.*

In other words, the law of God shows us just what glorious creatures we were made to be and the glorious lives that God intends for us to live. Put differently, the law gives us a portrait of the very image of God in which we were created.

And God's judgment of sin under the law is God's "no" to anything less than the glory of God.

Our problem as sinners should therefore be immediately apparent. If God's law calls not merely for outward obedience but for a pure heart – a whole human being in whom there is no struggle against righteousness – then God's law calls for someone other than who we can be.

The law calls for Jesus Christ. In our Gospel lesson last week, Jesus explained that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus fulfilled the law of God *for us*, obeying the will of God all the way to our deserved place on the cross, crushed under the weight of God's judgment and wrath against sin.

When, in his dying breath, Jesus says, "it is finished," he is acknowledging to the Father, "I have accomplished all that you sent me to do, I have fulfilled your good and perfect will, for the salvation of the world."

And so, in his crucified and risen Son, God says, "yes," to the world. Jesus himself is God's "yes" to sinful humanity, his irrevocable, all-embracing "yes" to everyone who believes in him.

God's mercy through the law alone is not enough. But God's mercy in Jesus Christ is superabundantly *more than enough*. For in him we are put to death, raised as a new creation, and given a new, clean heart, a heart that once again delights in the law of the Lord.

God's merciful judgment through the law hurts. But God's unsurpassable mercy in Christ Jesus heals and is matchlessly sweet.

To save us from the way of death, God rcifully works through both law and gospel: through the law, God shows us the truth of our sin and exposes the wickedness of our hearts, but *precisely* so that we might cry out for help and deliverance from the Lord.

The law is intended to make us despair of our own efforts, that we might flee to Christ. For it is in Christ alone that God's life-restoring, heart-purifying mercy is freely and abundantly given. In him alone, God flings open his arms to humanity and says, "yes."

By the mercy of God's "no" through the law, Jose was brought to face the truth of himself in a prison cell. But God did not abandon him in that cell, Someone else was in there with him: the risen and living Christ. And through the gospel, Jose heard God's "yes" in him.

Nearly eight years ago, for the second time in his life, Jose was released from prison Since then, he has completed a bachelor's degree in Communications, works full time, has been sober for almost eleven years, and...is a Christian.

In the "no" of his judgment through the law, in the "yes" of his Son Jesus through the gospel, *all of God's dealings with man are mercy.*

Amen.