

February 13, 2011
Epiphany 6

“The Savior’s Sermon: Love by Saying ‘No’”

MATTHEW 5:21-37

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. You can say “I love you” with beautiful flowers, a carefully chosen card, a box of chocolates, a delicious meal or tender and loving words. When you love someone it is not hard to say, “I love you.”

How do we tell the Lord our God how much we love him? Our Lord Jesus tells us to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” One way to show our love and let our light shine for the Lord is saying “No” to sin before it takes over our lives and controls us.

In the early 1980’s Nancy Reagan began a campaign to help kids stay away from drugs. She was visiting a classroom in Oakland. One of the students raised her hand and asked, “Mrs. Reagan, can you give us some advice on how to stay away from drugs?” She responded with the words, “Just say no!” That response gave rise to now familiar “Just say no!” campaign to help students say no to drugs. Just say no. We are the salt of the

earth and the light of the world. Jesus encourages us to live as salt and light by saying not to sins that can creep up in our lives and take us away from the Lord.

Say no to anger

Take the sin of anger. Jesus tells us, "You have heard it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder,'" and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca' is answer to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell." It is easy to see how murder is sin. We think of Cain, Adam and Eve's first born son, taking the life of his brother Abel. We are disgusted with the pictures of people in orange jumpsuits who tortured and killed a 15 year old girl and burnt her body. What most people don't realize is that angry words and thoughts towards other people are also sin in the eyes of God. Think of the brother or sister, husband or wife, boss or employee who uses the words like "Fool" and "Stupid" to put down the other person. Have you ever spoken harsh and angry words against someone you love, even your beloved Valentine?

If anger is not controlled it can take over our lives and lead us to do things that normally we would never think of doing. That is why Jesus tells us how to deal with this problem of anger when it comes up in our lives. "Therefore if you are offering your gift there in front of the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift." Cain brought an offering to the Lord but his heart was not right because of the anger and jealousy he had toward his brother Abel. Today you come to this worship service telling the Lord your God how much you appreciate his blessings in your life. You come with your hymns and hallelujahs. You bring your offerings to the Lord. Let me ask you a very personal question. Is there smoldering anger in your heart towards someone who has hurt you? Is that person a member of your family? Are you having evil thoughts towards some of your coworkers or kids in school? Do you fight with a brother or sister, or haven't spoken to them in years? Then listen here to what Jesus tells you about anger so that it does not control you and eventually lead you to the fires of hell.

You have heard people say, "The longest journey begins with the first step." The battle with anger begins with the first steps towards reconciliation. My father once had a large rock buried in the field. He was tired of breaking his plows on the hidden rock. One day he decided to dig it up and get rid of it. But he did not have the heavy equipment to move the rock that was much bigger than he ever expected. In the cold of winter, he heaped piles of wood and brush on the rock, started a fire and the heat caused the huge rock to split into hundreds of smaller pieces. Love can do something similar to this problem of anger. If human love can break up anger, then how much more does the love of Jesus break up the anger in our hearts and take it away. Think of how Jesus never had an angry moment in his life, even prayed for his enemies. He prayed, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." See his blood pouring from the cross to forgive us our angry moments. Believe that in that blood, and in his love for you that has spared you from eternal death, you possess the power to be forgiven and even forget.

Say no to adultery

Is there another way to show the Lord how much we love him? Jesus talks to us about saying no to the sin of adultery. "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart." You will recall how mighty King David burned with lust for a beautiful woman he saw bathing herself. He invited Bathsheba to engage in adultery with him and then killed her husband Uriah the Hittite. Think of how many marriages are broken and lives are ruined with adultery that begins in lust in the heart.

Just say no to these evil thoughts when they come into your life with the power and strength Jesus gives. Jesus talks about gouging out the eye and cutting off the hand. We want to do everything possible to separate ourselves from what is evil. Turn off the television. Push the button. Change the channel. Paul told young Timothy, "Flee youthful lusts." It was Martin Luther who said in a sermon on these verses, "It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away." Then Luther quoted Saint Augustine who once said, "I cannot keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting off my nose." There is nothing wrong with a man desiring a woman. Remember when you saw your future husband and wife and knew for sure, "That's the one I want to marry?" Jesus is not condemning such thoughts. He is condemning this evil desire to have relations with a man or woman who is not your husband or wife.

Then our Lord Jesus transitions into the subject of marriage and divorce. "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." Jesus is tackling the same problem we have today. We have the attitude that divorce is no big deal. If your wife burns the broccoli get rid of her. Find a new wife that is more pleasing to you. In another place Jesus talked about this certificate of divorce in the laws of Moses that was to be issued to hard hearted unbelievers within the nation of Israel. The religious leaders twisted that law and sanctioned divorce for any reason whatsoever. Jesus says the only reason for a man or woman to seek divorce is for marital unfaithfulness or adultery. In Corinthians Paul also includes under unfaithfulness departing and deserting the other marriage partner. And what happens when a man divorces his wife for just because he doesn't like her? He makes her out to be an adulterer in the eyes of the community. People will say, "Oh, he must have divorced her for being unfaithful to him." And if she marries another man people will say, "Oh, he is marrying an adulteress." Here is how Martin Luther describes the selfishness that often comes into the human heart when someone divorces the other person just because they are tired of that person and looking for something better and more attractive. He says that adultery begins when a man turns his gaze toward another woman. He writes, "With the devil's promptings a person sees only his wife's faults, losing sight of her good and laudable qualities. As a consequence, every other woman seems more beautiful and better to his eyes than his own wife. Indeed, many a man with a truly beautiful and pious wife lets himself be hoodwinked into hating her and taking up with some vile and ugly bag."

Jesus never looked at a woman with lust in his eyes. He was tempted in all parts as we are, yet he was without sin, we are told in Hebrews. Through his purity and his righteousness

and his blood, he offers forgiveness for every sin of lust or adultery. Even David who burned in lust for Bathsheba and committed adultery repented with the words spoken to the prophet Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Then he heard Nathan tell him, "The Lord has put away your sin." It was David who later prayed in Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart O God." What power Jesus has to forgive us and also give us a clean heart.

Say no to bad words

And what about using bad words and swearing falsely? There were those who were very careful about not taking the name of the Lord in vain and swearing falsely or even in a frivolous way. If they did promise something to the Lord in an oath as we do today, they kept their oaths to the Lord. But then they resorted instead to swearing by heaven, or swearing by the earth, or swearing by Jerusalem. "I swear by Jerusalem, that what I am telling you is true." What comes out of our mouths is important. We don't want bad words or lies or even an inflated view of our own importance to come from our lips. Jesus tells us "Simply let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no.'" He calls for honesty and truthfulness, not lies and hypocrisy or even using something God has made to support a lie. Are you working or living in an environment where people constantly use bad language or even take God's name in vain? Then be different. Be the salt and light Jesus has called you to be.

What a privilege it is to begin another week of life on this earth to love the Lord our God because of all that he has done for us to make us his dear children. One way to love the Lord is to say no to sin with the strength he gives. Amen.