

Epiphany 6
February 12, 2017

“Jesus Shows Us How Much We Need His Righteousness”

MATTHEW 5:31-37

²¹ "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.

My son Joel was attending a basketball game while he was a student at UCSB in Santa Barbara. They had the custom of picking someone from the crowd at half time and letting them shoot the basketball from half court. If you sank the basket you would receive a free meal every day for six months at a popular restaurant near the university. Joel was chosen from the crowd. He took the shot. It went into the basket, spun around and then came out. He came close but not close enough. If only they would have let him take the shot right beneath the basket, he could have made it.

When it comes to keeping God's laws people often think it is easy to do like making a close basket. If breaking the fifth commandment is only the sin of murder then lots of people in this community could say, "I have never broken the fifth commandment." That's an easy shot, a slam dunk with a very low basket. However, if keeping the fifth commandment includes not being angry with other people, then I am in big trouble and so are you.

This morning we want to take a closer look at how Jesus sets the bar very high for keeping the commandments. He wants anyone who reads these words from his Sermon on the Mount to realize how desperately they need his righteousness to be saved.

The sin of murder

"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 answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell." When you are really angry at someone it is so easy to call them bad names. "You fool. You moron. You knucklehead." Look back at some of the angry words you said to a brother or sister when you were younger. Or what about the angry words you spoke in your car when someone cut you off or tailgated you ten feet from your rear bumper.

When we were living in Santa Barbara, our twelve year old neighbor boy was running late for school. He ran out the door. His mother called him to come back because he had forgotten something. He turned around and shouted loudly, "Shut up you old hag." He broke the fourth commandment by disrespecting his mother. He broke the fifth by showing anger. "You shall not murder" includes more than just punching someone with the fist or saying angry words. It includes angry and unloving thoughts. Yes, it even includes angry thoughts you may have had towards your wonderful 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 pops 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." Are you angry with someone? Then before you come to worship the Lord and bring your offerings to him, straighten things out between you and them. You have heard of families where siblings haven't spoken to each other for years. Ephesians 4 says, "In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold." Remember how Cain was so consumed with anger towards his brother Abel that he went out and took his life.

The good news for us this morning is this: Jesus was never angry even toward his worst enemies. He prayed as they were nailing him to the cross, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." In Jesus you have the perfect life you could never live. In Jesus you have perfect sacrifice on the cross that completely removes every sin of anger. This even includes the sin of not loving each other as we should. Also in Jesus you have the power to forgive. With Paul we can say, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." By exposing our problem of anger, Jesus wants us to see how much we need his righteousness. He does the same with the sin of adultery.

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." It is easy

to see how a man like King David committed adultery with the beautiful woman named Bathsheba. He even killed her husband to cover up his sin. But where did the adultery start? It started when he saw her bathing and he lusted over her. Someone can boast, "I have never had relations with another woman who is not my wife." Does that mean that person has never committed adultery? No, Jesus includes looking at a woman with lust in the eyes as the sin of adultery.

Because this sin of lust is so dangerous, Jesus uses strong words to help us say "No" to bad thoughts. "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." Do you recall the man who was hiking in a slot canyon in Utah when a large rock fell on his arm? The only way he could get free and stay alive was to cut off his own arm. Jesus is calling for radical surgery to get rid of lustful thoughts when they rise up in our hearts and minds. It is obvious that removing an eye or hand would not get rid of the problem. We need to attack the root of the problem and that is the heart.

Years ago Nancy Reagan was talking to a group of kids in the Bay Area about staying away from drugs. One girl asked her for advice on staying away from drugs. Mrs. Reagan said, "Just say no!" That started the famous "Just say no!" campaign. Paul told young pastor Timothy, "Flee youthful lusts."

In his lectures on this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Martin Luther said, "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." It is Jesus who gives us the strength to say no to these evil thoughts and to get them out of our lives.

Jesus has more to say about this sin of adultery. "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. In our society today, we have the attitude that divorce is no big deal. If your wife burns the broccoli get rid of her. If the man in the office looks better than your husband, flirt with him and see what happens.

At Jesus' time the self-righteous, holier-than-thou Pharisees justified getting rid of their wives by falsely misinterpreting what Moses said about a certificate of divorce. And what happens when a man divorces his wife just because he doesn't like her? He makes her out to be an adulteress 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 a woman who committed adultery" even though it was the man's fault.

Here is how Martin Luther describes the selfishness that often comes with adultery, "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 spent time with women friends like Mary and Martha. As much as he loved them, he never once gave into the sin of lust and adultery. In the perfect life of Jesus and the perfect sacrifice on the cross those who have committed adultery with another man or another woman can be forgiven. And those who have had lustful thoughts can be washed clean and made whiter than snow. Jesus wants us to see how desperately we need his righteousness. We certainly can't find it in ourselves.

The sin of bad oaths and bad words

Jesus also exposes the sin of taking the Lord's name in vain through bad oaths and bad words. "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.'" When you make an oath using the Lord's name you want to keep it. It's OK to swear when serving our country, or in a court of law, or a marriage or serving as a pastor or leader in the church. At the time of Jesus there were those who would swear by heaven, or by earth or by Jerusalem or even by their head. That was a discredit to God's name. Today we hear people say, "I will swear on my mother's grave" or "Cross my heart and hope to die" or "I swear on a stack of Bibles." You don't need to swear foolishly or take God's name in vain to underscore something you are saying. You don't have to send texts with the letters OMG. You don't have to use foul language to be more emphatic in what you say. Jesus tells us, "Simply let your answer 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

Jesus always glorified his heavenly Father's name perfectly in everything that he said. As we heard last week we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The words that come out of our mouths can be used to glorify our Father in heaven just as Jesus did. How often we fail to give full glory to God's name when we grumble and complain or if we use foul language. In Jesus we have the righteous and pure life that covers us of all the times we have failed to give the name of our God the honor it deserves. We have in Jesus strength to give full glory to our heavenly Father.

I desperately need Jesus' blood and righteousness and so do you. Through his blood we are washed clean of all our angry thoughts, impure thoughts and poor words that come from our lips. So we can say joyfully with the prophet Isaiah: "I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with the garments salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness." Amen.