

But I Say...

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

Living Differently

This is our last week with the Sermon on the Mount for a while, but it's important to remember that context. When He saw the people on the hillside that day, He started His sermon by giving them the beatitudes – the attitudes and behaviors needed to be blessed by God, and to live life God's way. Last week we heard Him tell the crowd that there's a high calling placed on those who seek citizenship in His kingdom, and that also includes us. We're called to live life differently than our neighbors when we follow Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we're also called to live life differently than the way we lived before we started to follow Him. We're going to take a look at a little more of the Sermon on the Mount, and further examine the idea that Jesus takes the morals and laws in the Old Testament, and expands them beyond anything the original hearers could have possibly imagined. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 5:21-37. **Read Matthew 5:21-37.**

Living how Jesus says to live in our passage is unlike anything most people in the world have ever seen. Looking through each situation and the actions being addressed, we have to look past them at the kind of character to which they point. This is the whole point of the structure Jesus uses in this section. "You have heard it said... but I say...". Three different times He says it. "You have heard it said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment,'" (verse 21), "You have heard it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,'" (verse 27), "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,'" (verse 33).

Each time, He gives a different view of how we ought to act. It's not just an opposite view, it's an expansion of the meaning. He's taking the meaning from the letter of the Law, and expanding it to help us understand the nature of citizenship in His kingdom. Look how He reacts to each of the commandments He previously mentioned. To the commandment not to murder, Jesus says, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell," (verse 22).

Expanding the Meaning

Murder isn't just a literal, external act we do. We can have a murderous spirit that shows up in the things we say. In our attitudes, thoughts about, and treatment of others. When we have that anger – that rage – towards someone else, what are we supposed to do? "If you are offering your gift at the altar and remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar and go be reconciled to them; then come offer your gift," (verses 23-24), Jesus says. That's

powerful. Here we are, sitting in worship this morning – Christians all over the world are worshipping this morning – and how many are sitting with a spirit of resentment and bitterness towards a sibling in the family of God? Lord forgive us.

Jesus gives us real-world, practical application. “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together 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. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny,” (verses 25-26). You look at our society – the people we put on pedestals and make into idols – and you see this all the time. They get lawsuit happy, and drag stuff through court for months or years. I’ve been through this personally.

Back when our girls were younger, Kendra and I had my two older kids living with us. They both got into some trouble with the Juvenile Court system. Rather than rapid justice, their cases were “continued,” or what we would call “postponed,” for months at a time. Now, as part of that process, you have to show up in the courtroom that day, and the lawyers and the judge talk, and they say, “well, we’re going to continue the case,” which means, no trial today.

So, you end up wasting a lot of time, taking numerous days off work, to attend court hearings which then do not happen. For anyone in that sort of situation, it is a sort of emotional prison. What should have been addressed and settled in a couple weeks or a month at most, took the court system over a year to finally get things in order and deliver that Constitutional right to a “speedy” trial. Part of the problem in their particular case, and I suspect in many cases – boils down to multiple people thinking they knew what was best – and that their way was the best way, rather than letting some natural consequences for kids’ misbehavior to occur.

Adulterous Disposition

To the commandment against adultery, Jesus says, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It’s better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It’s better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell,” (verses 28-30). Adultery isn’t just something we physically commit. An adulterous disposition leers at others in order to take and selfishly consume without regard. Now that’s a hard pill for Americans to swallow, because friends, we’re an adulterous nation. We rob and pillage the natural resources of other countries blind, and then gripe when other nations ask us to limit our consumption on nonrenewable resources.

Now friends, I don’t want you to think I’m going Green on you. I’m not a “tree hugger,” though I do like being able to be outdoors and breathe fresh, clean air. Our society has to be more responsible in how we interact with the creation the good Lord’s

entrusted to us. The school I'm at has a one-to-one ratio for kids and electronics. Each student has a Chromebook. Does anyone here have a Chromebook? Let me tell you what I found out a few weeks ago about them. They have a shelf life of four years. That's how long you can use them. After four years, the battery stops charging, the system stops updating. It breaks down. They're designed to fail. And do you know where the Chromebooks end up? In landfills, leaking all those toxins from the batteries into the groundwater that people are drinking. That's scandalous, and a sin. Lord, forgive us!

Jesus speaks about divorce in our text today. "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," (verses 31-32). When you look at those, He's implying a problem with the ease in which divorce can be chosen. There were guys in Jesus' day divorcing their wives because they burned their food. The ladies were getting a few streaks of gray, and the guys decided they were trading them in for younger models.

Committed to the Truth

I'm not telling you anything new here, people do this even today. So what does Jesus' statement say about our willingness to be committed to someone else? A similar meaning is seen in Jesus' teaching about oath taking. He says, "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.' But I tell you, do not swear at all; either by heaven, for it is God's throne, or by the earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one," (verses 33-37).

God's people don't need to use oaths because they ought to already be committed to telling the truth – the oath is implied every time they open their mouths. They should be committed to the Truth – Jesus Christ! All of these contrasts which Jesus draws for us are invitations to have the spirit of the law flow freely out of our transformed spirits. When we accept the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, Son of God, on the cross for our sins, He not only washes us clean, but He sends His own Holy Spirit to take up residence on the throne of our hearts. His presence changes and transforms us into different people than who we used to be.

The presence of the Holy Spirit shows us that we aren't just our choices, but our choices help us measure what – or who – is ruling our hearts and minds. The character we see Jesus exhibiting in this chunk of the Sermon on the Mount is the exact character He shows in His life, and His death. He shows Himself to be committed at the deepest level. He never takes the easy way out. He lives and breathes

righteousness into every relationship, thought, and action recorded in Holy Scripture, because every relationship, thought, and action flowed through Him from the Father.

Friends, I know there may be people in tough, abusive marriages, or going through a divorce. I've been there, done that. I'm not saying you stay. Jesus doesn't tell us to stay in abusive, unsafe, unfaithful situations. We have to focus on what Jesus wants us to focus upon, which is what we can control. I can't control anyone else but me. Just like you can't control any other person, except yourself. Jesus invites us to take stock of who we are as individual people, self-identifying as His followers. He invites us to examine our character and what motivates us. If we let Him be King of us – even if we've been divorced, and done all sorts of sinning – He's thrilled to use us to further His kingdom. If you have doubts about that, check out the first 42 verses of John 4.

From our Hearts Flow our Actions

Out of our hearts flow our actions. Good, wholesome motivations and humble attitudes can serve as a good safeguard against sin – and help us examine our transforming lives through the lens of the Holy Spirit. When we consider these shockingly common situations which Jesus puts together in the Sermon on the Mount, we see a clear message about our choices. What consumes us – which is usually ourselves and our selfishness, our desire for comfort, and the easy way out – is where our allegiances really lie.

Each of these situations also have an impact on the community. Our anger leads to the discipline of the community. Reconciliation is prompted by church involvement. There are real-world consequences for not addressing the wrongs we commit against others.

Adulterous, self-seeking spirits significantly impact our ability to trust and be in relationship with one another. Consider, though, how having to take drastic action to rein in lust can also have an impact on those around you. As you “cut off your arm,” or “throw out your eye,” in order to stop sinning. Today that might look like getting rid of computers and smart phones, finding and setting up accountability partners with mentors older than you who've been through what you're going through, and so on. You end up asking and needing other people to make sacrifices in your behalf. Even when they are lovingly willing, it's important to recognize their sacrifice. Oftentimes we walk into situations and relationships with an expectation that “person X will do what we want, because they have a job title of Y.” We take people for granted.

Similarly, divorce without necessity and taking time to heal that addresses one's own shortcomings in why the marriage didn't work out only leads to issues in the next relationship. I know some people who have been married three or four times. The tendency is that closing the door on the marriage relationship gets easier and easier

with each unsuccessful marriage. Even the oath section speaks to a communal setting – religious, political – both, I suppose. As they say, “no one is an island!”

The Cross of Christ

This past week I read a report on the state of marriage from the Barna Institute. It’s something they put out each year. One in two marriages in the United States will end in divorce. “Three out of four people sitting in pews under age 60 were raised in married homes. The trouble is 54% of children born in the U.S. reach their 17th birthday without a married mom and dad in the home.”¹ That’s sobering.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUngl7QyeHY>. Artificial intelligence – it’s a computer. They plug “love” in, and it spits out cutesy hearts. But then they put in “love the way Jesus talked about it,” and suddenly we start seeing people. Did you notice that? The Gospel, in a word, is about relationship. Horizontal – between us and God, and vertical – between us, and fellow humans. What do you get when you put them together? The cross. The cross of Christ restores those broken relationships. We need it! The world needs it! It’s in terrible shape, spiritually. You know this, church. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know. The world is in desperate need of Jesus and His love. People are desperate for relationship. Despite all our shortcomings – all our sins – He loves us anyhow. He gets us. That’s why He took the nails. He knows us, but loves us despite our sinful nature. That’s great news! It’s the best news the world has ever heard – and that some have yet to hear.

Just out of curiosity, how many here plan to watch the Super Bowl later today? If you do, pay close attention to the commercials. My understanding is that Jesus is going to be talked about in a couple commercials, similar to the video we just watched. Someone has invested millions of dollars to get Jesus featured in the biggest sporting event in America later on today. So pay close attention and see if you catch the Gospel proclaimed, and if you do, use those commercials as talking points during the game and tomorrow when you’re at work. Because friends, we’re all called “to tell the old, old story of Jesus and His love!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we come to You this day, as Your children, growing to maturity, in whom You are at work, through Your Word and Spirit. You make us servants of Christ and vessels for Your service. Use us Lord, to shine the light of Your love in the world, and to bring You glory and praise, through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

¹ Barna Institute State of Marriage Report, accessed 2/7/2023, at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zZzMti12SFcj05w2iS4EdBkhxzddk1nP/view>