

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

The Great Invitation: This, Not That

We’re in the midst of this worship series, “The Great Invitation” which we began after Christmas and which will conclude at the beginning of Lent, which is only a few weeks away. The point of this worship series is to invite you to listen to what Jesus tells us; we’ve been focusing on the book of Matthew, particularly the 4th and 5th chapters, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which is a rather long sermon. And in Matthew, Jesus comes across as the new Moses. So whereas Moses goes to the mountain to receive the Law from God, Jesus, as Messiah and Son of God, gives a sort of new Law. I say “sort of” new Law because Jesus is not replacing Moses’ law but he is exposing the limitations of the Law by exposing our own corrupt nature. You may recall that the last verse of our scripture passage from last week was, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees – the legal experts of the day – you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That would have shocked Jesus’ audience, because everyone assumed that the scribes and the Pharisees were the most righteous people around; if they didn’t qualify, who would? And so today’s message really addresses the question, “How then do we enter the kingdom of heaven?”

There is nothing wrong with the Law, but Jesus is saying that Law in itself does nothing to change the human heart. We are in tax season, and so I think tax law is a good way to illustrate the limits of law. There are accountants who work for the government and there are accountants who work for the private sector and for individuals, and if you gave a set of all your 2016 tax records to a government accountant and another set to a private sector accountant (who you would pay), you would fully expect that they would disagree on how much tax you should pay. They are both bound to the same laws, but they would disagree on just how to interpret those laws and how to apply those laws. The whole reason we have lawyers has to do with the limits of the written law as far as implementing those laws in a way that seems just. And it is our human nature to interpret laws in ways that serve our self-interest the best.

Furthermore laws are intended to curb our *actions*, but laws do little to curb our *thoughts*, which also tend to be marred by our corrupted hearts. This is exactly the point that Jesus is making in today's lesson. He begins by referencing the written Law; "You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder, and whoever does so will be liable to judgment.'" That's the Law that's on the books, and it's a good law to have; it keeps people from killing each other. *But the law does nothing to address the underlying reason that people commit murder to begin with, and that is anger.* And so Jesus, getting to heart of the problem, says, "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire." Now whenever I hear the word "hell" my ears perk up, because even though I'm not convinced of a place underground where people go to be punished, *I know that Jesus aint kidding around.* I mean, Jesus says we're liable to hell for calling someone a fool, and I know a lot of people who have called people much worse! Just watch Jerry Springer. Anger is not just the root cause of murder. Anger can also be the reason behind discrimination and other forms of injustice, especially misdirected anger. A person loses his job and his anger causes him to point fingers at everyone. It may not be *right* that he lost his job, but that doesn't give anyone a right to scapegoat. Jesus says we need to be rid of such anger toward others. And the church actually has a mechanism that should help us identify such anger; each time we serve communion, our liturgy begins with, "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." So even though we Methodists make a big deal of announcing that the Lord's table is open to everyone, it actually isn't; it isn't open to those who **don't** love him, who **don't** earnestly repent of their sins, and who **don't** seek to live in peace with one another. If any of those apply to you, you should recuse yourself of the Lord's Supper and go out and do what is necessary to make yourself acceptable at the Lord's table; I respect those people who earnestly examine their hearts before taking communion and say, "no, I can't do this right now," because they recognize the sin that is lodged inside them and just how important it is to eliminate it.

Jesus references a second written law: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." He goes on to talk about divorce. Here Jesus is looking beyond the laws on adultery and divorce to the **motivation** in our hearts for committing adultery or seeking divorce. And keep in mind that Jesus' audience would have been predominantly men – women didn't have as much freedom to be out listening to preachers in the middle of the day. So a lot of this has to do with the objectification of women – that's usually the reason a man commits adultery or seeks to divorce his wife; he's looking at women as simply objects for his

own pleasure. It's bad enough to actually commit adultery or divorce one's wife simply out of desire for another woman, but even to consider another person as simply a tool for your own pleasure indicates that you really don't *love* the person you're objectifying. I had a pastor who told me a very insightful thing when I was a youth pastor dealing with teenagers. He said that when a teenage boy says to a teenage girl, "I love you," what it usually means is "I love the way I feel when you're around me." That's objectifying the other person. You say you love them, but what you really mean is that "you make me feel good; you are an object for my own pleasure." How many relationships are founded upon mutual objectification? Everything is fine as long as both parties are gaining pleasure from the other, but when someone stops gaining pleasure, or finds another object that provides him or her with **more** pleasure, someone is dumped. Jesus is saying here that adultery and divorce are symptoms of a much more serious disease called objectification.

Finally Jesus addresses dishonesty. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God." An oath is a ritual action of swearing to honor a promise made to another person. When we swear falsely, that means we have failed to uphold our end of the bargain. In essence, we have lied in our promise by failing to deliver on it. It seems quite clear that we live in a time when honesty and truth--telling are no longer normative. People swear to tell the truth, and then they blatantly lie, whether in court, in politics, in the media, or even in communities of faith. A man's word is no longer assumed to be his honor. We live in a culture where lies are so normal. I get mail addressed to Mr. Bethel Parsonage that says "Important: Open Immediately" and I've opened enough of those letters to know that it's nothing but a sales pitch. What do you do when you get a call and the recorded voice on the other end says, "This is not a sales call"? Each week the NYPD issues alerts about phone scams or computer scams. The lie is the norm. What Jesus is saying is that the issue is not the lies and dishonesty themselves but the *character* of the person who lies. It is our character that needs to change if we ever expect to have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees and thus gain entry into the kingdom of heaven.

So Jesus presents the problem, but what is the solution?

There seems to be but one answer; we need to live in Christ Jesus. What does that mean? It means that we recognize him as the One who holds all authority in heaven and earth, and so we acknowledge him as Lord of our lives. We put our faith in him, because we know that we don't have a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. And so we surrender our lives to him and ask him to bring about the change in our character that so desperately needs to take place. And we gain the assurance that this change will indeed happen because Jesus defeated all the powers of evil on the cross, and we too can look forward to resurrection and life everlasting in Jesus Christ, because, unlike us, God is true to his word, and he has promised us that though we die we also shall live with Christ eternally.