



Matthew 5:21-37 - <sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> 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. <sup>23</sup> “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup> “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. <sup>26</sup> I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> 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.

<sup>31</sup> “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> “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.’ <sup>34</sup> But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; <sup>35</sup> or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. <sup>36</sup> And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup> Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

## *Jesus Takes His Word Seriously*



*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. (Revelation 1:5b-6)*

Sometimes the most important lessons are the hardest ones to learn. Sometimes the most important lessons are also the most unpleasant ones to learn – usually because they involve some sort of significant change in my way of thinking or operating; a change that never occurred to me, a change that doesn't come naturally to me. Those important lessons might be unpleasant because they reveal something about me that I don't like to see. In our gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus is teaching one of those lessons. Take his words to heart and take him seriously – because Jesus takes his word seriously.

One of the underlying problems Jesus addresses here is a superficial understanding of the law of God. The religious experts of Jesus' day had added their own interpretations, limits, and applications to the clear law of God, so much so that in the minds of your ordinary, every-day 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish person, the Pharisees' version of God's law came to rule the day. But their interpretation of God's law was based on a faulty understanding – that God's law was meant as a sort of ladder to climb higher and higher toward God's holiness. So, how can a human being do that? How can I achieve a seemingly unattainable goal? It's simple, really – I change the rules of the game. I play around with what God's law says, so that I can twist it to fit my lifestyle and play to my strengths. In short, I compartmentalize God's law until it becomes something I can neatly and nicely keep. The Pharisees did that and if we're honest, so do we. In the Christian church, it's a short leap to make to think that the holy standards of God really don't apply to us – after all, we're Christians! God's law is for those people "out there," those "really bad" sinners whose stumbles, falls, and sins are so blatantly obvious to everyone in the world that, as a result, we feel safe hiding behind the mere name of our church affiliation.

Jesus cuts through every human notion about God's law and shows us in no uncertain terms where we stack up in comparison to the holiness and perfection God demands. He doesn't leave us any wiggle room. Nothing's off the table: thoughts...attitudes...words...actions. Jesus shatters my human ideas about how to get right with God. I may never have been taken to court by a brother or sister in Christ, but Jesus shows that my petty excuses for holding a grudge against someone, even someone in the church, deserve the fire of hell. He doesn't let my vengeful thoughts off the hook either – he calls those thoughts what they really are – cold blooded murder. Jesus tells me that when I speak anything less than the truth, those words are just echoing the voice of the father of lies – Satan himself. Jesus points out that a promise of any kind – marriage or otherwise – is something that he takes seriously, and so should we. Perhaps this next one has taken on a more pointed significance given the culture around us. We live in a world where human sexuality is viewed as recreation and entertainment. But before we console ourselves with the fact that we've never been physically unfaithful to our spouses, listen to what Jesus says, **"I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."** And the same goes for the ladies. As our culture and country gets more and more hyper-sexualized, it's easier and easier for us to be lulled into some sort of attitude that says, *"I can't help it – it's all around me!"* We twist God's law to make it fit our way of life, not the other way around. We trick ourselves into thinking *"As long as I don't physically cheat, it really doesn't matter what I put before my eyes, or what thoughts I entertain in my mind."* Or, *"It's how I'm wired – it's only natural."* Yes, it's natural...and that's the problem - a desire born from the sinful nature!



So what's Jesus' solution? **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. 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.** If Jesus is speaking literally, we'd all be walking around as some maimed and disfigured people. If we had to lop off a part of our bodies to make up for sin, Jesus knows that we'd sooner run out of body parts than ever bring ourselves closer to God. So what's his point? Sin is serious. The law of God is serious. Deal with both of them as such. God's perfect standards aren't suggestions that I can mend and bend until they fit with my idea of justice and fairness. Sin isn't something to play around with, like it's no big deal. For those who think that way, Jesus warns about the very fires of hell. Jesus takes his law seriously. The truth is, it's not really your eye or your hand or your feet that lead you into sin. It's your heart. Jesus takes his law seriously and when I take it seriously, and really look deep down to the root of sin, deep down in my own heart and sinful nature, the law of God cuts me to the core. I can't keep the sharp edge of God's law at an arm's length, where it can only hurt those "bad sinners." I'm confronted by my sin, I'm confounded by the my ugliness I see, and left on my own I'm condemned as sinner.

There are relatively few places in the gospels where Jesus is more intent on exposing the depths of human sin than he is here in his Sermon on the Mount. We listen to these 17 verses of Matthew 5 and it's a terrifying walk down "Guilty Conscience Lane," a stunning-open-honest-pride-shattering reiteration of all the ways we've failed God and our neighbor. After a scathing rebuke like this, where do you stand? Still towering high on the heights of your personal goodness? Or do you, like me, find yourself in the back of the room with the tax collector saying, "**Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.**" It doesn't sound like there's much "gospel" in today's gospel lesson. It doesn't sound like there's much good news (gospel) in our gospel lesson until we remember who's speaking these words.

In this section of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus impresses on us just how seriously he takes God's law. He does that to show us just how seriously he takes God's gospel, too. The one who speaks these words is the one whose heart never harbored a bitter thought against his neighbor; and he lived that way because he knew you couldn't. The one who speaks these words is the one whose words were always honest and true, because he knew that yours wouldn't be. The one who speaks these words is the one who lived a perfectly chaste and decent life in his every thought, word, and action, because he knew that you couldn't and you wouldn't. Jesus cuts through our sinful nature's excuses for sin. Jesus shows us just how serious he is about his law so that he can point us to the law's ultimate fulfillment – himself. Earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**" Why did Jesus come to fulfill the law? Certainly not for his own benefit as the Holy Son of God. Why did Jesus come to fulfill the law? To do it perfectly in every way – all for you. God takes his word seriously – and that's why **the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us**, to become one of us, to take our every sin upon himself, and die the death we rightly deserved.

This is the beautiful, serious truth of the gospel – Jesus, the one who never sinned, now covers you and me completely in his perfect obedience and righteousness before God. Jesus, the one who had no reason to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand, is himself entirely cut off from the Father, forsaken by God – all so that you and I would never have to be forsaken by him. Jesus takes his word seriously – and it led him to the cross of Calvary and the empty tomb of Easter all for you.



Jesus takes his law seriously, but Jesus also takes his gospel seriously – so that’s why he connected the power and the promise of his death and resurrection to the waters of Holy Baptism. There, on the day you were baptized, and every day since, Jesus calls on you to die to sin and live for him. And as you drown your sinful nature and all its excuses for sin in Baptism’s cleansing flood, you arise a completely new being – covered in the righteousness of Christ, draped in his forgiveness, his love, his Father’s adoption. He covers you head to toe – like Ophelia’s baptismal gown – he covers you head to toe in the peace of knowing that Jesus takes his gospel seriously, and that he loves you seriously.

So now what? Well, it’s kind of been a recurring theme in the Sermon on the Mount – you’re blessed, you’re salt, you’re light, so you get to be different. If you doubt that, remember how seriously Jesus takes his gospel – his love for you. You get to love sincerely. You have your Savior’s power to let go of that grudge. You have your Savior’s purity to cleanse your mind and heart every day. You have the voice of your Savior that equips you to speak the truth in love in every situation. But no matter how much we grow in our Christian living – and God’s grace sees to it that we do grow! – No matter how much we grow in our Christian living, there will be times when we stumble, fall, and sin. Today, we’re reminded how serious God is about his law, but never forget how serious God is about his gospel. He knew your sin and he sent his Son to take it away. He saw your eternal death, so he sent Jesus to defeat death by rising from the dead. That powerful, life-giving, liberating message of the gospel is what moves us to take seriously God’s love for us and God’s love in us as we live our lives for him.

In this section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he points us to what we might call, “Greater Righteousness.” He shows us the true nature of God’s law and the holiness it demands. He shows us the true nature of our sinful hearts and how far short we’ve fallen. And in so doing, he shows us the true nature of his love for us. The “greater righteousness” that the law truly demands is exactly what Jesus gives fully and freely to you through faith. It’s a hard lesson for our sinful pride, but thank God that our Savior teaches it all to point us to his love!

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)*