**Matthew 5:20-24,43-45** August 12, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** The 5th Commandment [P-12]

*Matthew 5:20I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. 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.’ 22But 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, 24leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift…*

*43“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

**When “Do No Harm” Is Not Enough**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Some of the stuff that you hear is hard to believe. I mean, you can believe it, you have to believe it, it actually happened. But it is so terrible and sad that you don’t want to believe it.

I won’t go near the genocides that have plagued human history. The moment you start to research them you are horrified at the facts and driven to tears by the personal testimonies.

But evil lurks nearer than that. A couple months ago, not ten miles from here, police arrested a man coming out of the woods, sweating profusely. Following the arrest, a quick survey of the nearby woods found the shallow grave of a murder victim. Two have been indicted and are going through our county’s justice system. You almost can’t believe what some people do!

This last week an apparent drug deal gone bad led to a nearly fatal stabbing. It happened in this zip code, just a couple miles down the street. One man stabbed another five times. Thank God the one man’s life was saved and the other was arrested. A gruesome stabbing, and all for drugs. You can hardly believe what some people do!

A couple months ago a homeless man showed up here and said he needed to get up to Louisville. He would find a place to stay up there. A member offered to help and take him up there. After half a dozen stops at places that didn’t meet his price, this man started hurling racial insults and threats at the clerk behind one counter, finally pretending to draw a gun (thankfully he didn’t actually have one!). You can hardly believe what some people do!

Co-workers have different opinions on a subject. They start by disagreeing and end by arguing. Each goes home and while venting to their spouses uses all kinds of choice words about the “Idiot” at work. You can hardly believe what some people do!

Oh wait, you can. Because you have been there. You have witnessed it. Dare I say it, “You have even done it”? Genocide may be worse than an insult, but Jesus says both are offenses against God’s Fifth Commandment.

I can’t claim to know exactly why Jesus did it, but in his Sermon on the Mount, as he explained God’s standards for right and wrong, Jesus started with the Fifth Commandment. In Matthew 5, Jesus didn’t start explaining God’s Law with the First Commandment (where I probably would have started—but then Jesus was a lot smarter than I). He started with the Fifth Commandment. And as he started with the commandment that is supposed to be in the middle, he said these words: ***“I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** You are going to have to take my word for it because we generally have a very bad impression of the Pharisees. But in the eyes of the first century Jew on the street, the Pharisees, for reasons too complex to explore here, were regarded as the holy men, the do-gooders of 1st century Jewish society. So Jesus says, “You, who sometimes skip church, who cheat on your taxes, who maybe even look at things you shouldn’t look at on the internet, if you want to get to heaven by what you do, you are going to have to be way holier than you are right now, holier even than the holiest person you know.”

And I think—I can’t prove this—but I think that is the reason Jesus starts with the fifth commandment. Because if there is any of the Ten Commandment that 99.9% of people can say they have obeyed, it is this one: “You shall not murder.” Yep. I may have stolen candy from Walmart when I was a kid. I may have dishonored my parents. I may not always kept the Sabbath day holy. But I have definitively *not* murdered anyone. I got this one.

**Jesus says, “You Have Broken This Commandment!”**

And Jesus says, “You think so, do you? Let me tell you… ***You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you…”*** Jesus speaks with an authority that no human being, not John the Baptist, not Moses, not Abraham, ever dreamed of claiming. ***“I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”*** Jesus says that you might think that the Fifth Commandment applies to masterminds of genocide, or murderers, or even attempted murderers. Jesus says, “No. If you have ever been angry with another person, ***you will be subject to judgment.”*** “Subject to judgment”—that’s just what he said about murderers, and it’s what he says about people who get angry with other people.

Ever been angry with anybody?

Jesus goes further. ***“Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin [the Jewish Supreme Court]. But anyone who says, “you fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”*** Jesus explores what God really means in this commandment, and he informs us that the Fifth Commandment isn’t just for genocidal maniacs, it’s also for people who call other people unkind names! Insults break this commandment because insults prove that we have stopped being concerned about other people. God hates that!

But wait, what about those words that Jesus mentioned. “Raca” – what does that mean? And what does it mean to say, “You fool”? Since childhood, whenever I heard these words of the Scripture, I always thought that the word “Raca” and “Fool” must have been really insulting and offensive words in Jesus’ day. There must have been something that, when someone said “Raca” in the marketplace there was a sudden silence, because nobody could believe that somebody actually said that word in public.

The more I have looked at Jesus’ words here over the years, the more convinced I am that Jesus was *not* speaking of a particularly vulgar or offensive word. Jesus was, I think, using some of the mildest insults there were that could still be called insults. It’s not cuss-words that Jesus is condemns. It is words like, “You dummy!” when meant as an insult.

Jesus’ point is this: this commandment is broken with every un-kind word you say. This commandment is broken even when you simply feel anger in your heart at someone else. These are deep, dark, filthy, black-as-night sins. Jesus himself declares it to be so.

Every feeling of anger, is a lack of love. Every insult, even mild insults, tear other people down. I don’t care how people talk on the YouTube video, I don’t care what people say in the check-out line. God doesn’t care. What is sin and not sin is not determined by the faithless and godless of this world, but by God. And we, if we are the least bit serious about our faith, are going to stop conforming our standards of behavior toward other people to ways of this world, and start conforming it to God’s way.

**Anger, Insults, Require and Need Forgiveness!**

So serious is this that Jesus says, ***“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at 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.”*** So serious are these issues of anger and verbal insults that the Son of God himself says, “If you have done these things, you *must* be reconciled.” Even if you are up in front of church, in the middle of the service, and remember that someone else has a legitimate grievance against you, you need to settle it. Now, I am not sure how literally to take Jesus’ words. Should I stop my sermon? Should the organist quit playing in the middle of a hymn? Should the usher drop the offering plate? I don’t know. But let us not quibble over details just here. What we do know is that this proves how seriously God takes loveless words and angry feelings!

Woe to us! For who has not been angry? And who has not insulted other people, whether in their presence or not? And who of us, if confronted with our iniquitous sin of anger and angry words, does not instantly go on the defensive and say, “But they *were* acting stupid!” “But they hurt me!” Or when caught dead to rights still try to play the victim, “But I just can’t help saying it!”

Woe to us! Daily we fall short of what God wants. Daily we show what we really think about our fellow creatures, and it isn’t pretty! Daily we show how badly we need Jesus, not as a law-giver, but as a sin-remover. When we think back on the shameful way that we have treated other people, and bad-mouthed them in the privacy of our homes, we should thank Jesus that he really loved you and me. He didn’t go to the cross, muttering out of one side of his mouth, “These stupid people!” He went willingly, lovingly, patient with our weakness, concerned for our lostness, and he forgave us.

**Doing Better Than Doing No Harm**

Long, long ago, there was an ancient Greek man. Though he had a strange name, perhaps you have heard of him: Hippocrates. He is respected as the father of the practice of medicine. Most doctors take an oath which is a form of an oath that Hippocrates suggested for doctors. In that oath, doctors promise, to “do no harm.” “Do no harm.” That would be the way that some people would sum up the Fifth Commandment: Harm no one.

But Martin Luther, when he wrote his meaning for this commandment, realized that “to do no harm” is not enough. Not because Martin Luther thought so, but because Jesus said so! Martin Luther wrote, “We should fear and love God that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, *but help and be a friend to him in every bodily need*.” “Doing no harm” is only half the picture!

Jesus paints the other half, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.***

This makes even the Golden Rule look like tinsel – nice, but kind of light. The Golden Rule says, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” But here Jesus goes three steps farther: “Love enemies; pray for persecutors.”

It has been my experience that most people feel like they at least sort of follow the Golden Rule. But when Jesus says, “Love enemies, pray for persecutors,” people stand in awe. God asks the impossible here! Jesus’ words start to put faces, horrible faces, to God’s commands. “Love your enemy” reminds us of the person who insulted and laughed at us in public. And years later it still hurts us. “Love them?” Others remember the abusive care-giver, the bully who sucker-punched us, maybe people who are still getting away with it even now. “Pray for them?” God, you can’t be serious!

Virtually every single self-aware Christian who ever hears this verse of the Bible says, “This is hard.” Some even say, “This is impossible.” But people who have seen and felt and remember what Christ has done for them, after they say, “This is impossible,” they say in a humble and serious voice, “Lord help me. Help me to love my enemy. Help me to pray for the mean, the cruel.”

Doing no harm is not enough. Doing positive good is where it is at.

This is when people begin to see the real glory of Jesus. When they see in you and me the reflection of one who loved his enemies and, for those who persecuted him, prayed, *“Father, forgive them.”* Amen.