**Matthew 5:21-37** February 16, 2020

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*Matthew 5:21[Jesus said,] “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. 23Therefore, 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. 25Settle 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. 26I 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.’ 28But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If 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. 30And 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.’ 32But 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.’ 34But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 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 even one hair white or black. 37Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”*

Dear fellow beloved by God, God who loved us from eternity,

I have a special folder in my filing cabinet. This file doesn’t have a name, but it doesn’t need one. I know right where it is and what is in it. You see, someone once told me he kept a “Yikes” file with all the weirdest and worst. His reasoning was something along the lines that, when you are in a tough time you can open the Yikes! file and thank God for what you have.

Well, I did that for a little while. Then I realized that a “Yikes” file, for me at least, may give me good reason to say, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other sinners…” but a “Yikes” file really doesn’t build me up. So instead, at the advice of someone else, I started another file. In this file I keep the encouraging stuff: the heartfelt Father’s Day cards, children’s refrigerator art with “Welcome home, Dad!” scrawled across it. There are some cards of appreciation from members. In that folder is a Valentine’s or two. *This* is the special file folder I was talking about. It’s the sort of file to open when you’ve made some mistakes, when you wonder how much good you are doing, worried that much of what you do comes to nothing, it is good to remember thankful people who took the time to say, “I appreciate you!” I only open that file once or twice a year, but it is worth its weight in gold.

Of course, God doesn’t need a file like that. Unlike me and you, he makes no mistakes to worry over. He requires validation from no one. And yet… and yet God, too, loves to get those Valentines, the Father’s Day notes. He loves it when we through our lives create refrigerator art for God’s kitchen. These are the presents we get for God. Not things he needs, but things he loves. We call it “good deeds.”

So we, as beloved, blessed children in Christ Jesus with the wind at our backs and the eternity of heaven in front of us sometimes ask, “What can I do for my heavenly Father?” Or the way pastors more often hear it: “What does God want me to do at this point? How can do what he wants?” That is a great question! It’s a question that should often be on your mind. It’s a question that today’s reading answers:

**What can I Get for God?**

Jesus, preaching this sermon to his believers, explains what—if they really want to know—he explains what they can do to please God. For the most part, his answer is the Ten Commandments.

The funny thing is that when Jesus starts explaining the Ten Commandments, he doesn’t start at the beginning or even at the end, he starts right in the middle. ***“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder.’”*** That’s the Fifth Commandment. Now why do you think Jesus started with that commandment? I think because it’s the easiest one to keep!

When I have a confirmation class, as we go through all the lessons—and usually adult information classes too—at one point or another I ask this question: “The fifth commandment says, ‘You shall not murder.’ Have you broken this commandment?” Now if the someone is really watching me, they see the twinkle in my eye, and they know this is a trick question. But for the most part people are slightly offended and say, “Of course not! I’ve never murdered anyone!”

Of all the commandments, this is the one the most people have kept. “Sure, there are murderers, but not me. I have not broken this commandment!” they all insist. And with this easiest to keep of all commandments Jesus takes our natural human arrogance and he grinds it to a fine powder.

***“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder.’ 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.”***  “You mean just insulting someone can get me sent to hell?” “Yes,” Jesus says. God hates insulting words as much as he hated it when Cain raised his fist against Abel and became the world’s first murderer. Angry words are disrespect for another of God’s creation. Even anger in the heart which never makes it out of the mouth, that is sin.

But Jesus isn’t content with talking about the Fifth Commandment. ***“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 with her in his heart. 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…”*** into what? ***“Hell.”*** And the same thing for making oaths and for divorce. God does not merely demand that you do the right thing, he demands that you say and even think the right thing. Anything less is insufficient to God.

Jesus speaks heart-piercing truth, serious about God’s law on three important points.

**A. Sin is *anything and everything* short of perfection.**

Thoughts that we might think of as the most natural kinds of thoughts, thoughts that we make excuses for, namely anger and lust, are sins God hates. Of course, about hatred it is said, “You can’t put me in prison for what I’m thinking.” About lust people spew filthy excuses like, “You can look, but you can’t touch.” Jesus disagrees. Maybe before the laws of the land you can wallow in mental filth out of the law’s reach, but not before God. God will judge our thoughts just as much as our actions.

Our sinful nature, however, cannot stand to hear Jesus say that. We are convinced that we are pretty good people, or at least no worse than anyone else. We are convinced that God’s laws are made for people with mug shots on TV, people who make a living out of pedaling influence, people who sell drugs and manipulate others, terrorists and dictators. One of our sinful nature’s favorite excuses is, “Well, what I’m doing isn’t hurting anyone.”

Some day this past week, I don’t remember which one, I was in the car listening to the radio. A talk show host, who is a very religious man—not a Christian man, but a religious man who has a lot of respect for Christians—was talking about just this Bible passage, ***“…anyone who looks at a woman lustfully…”*** He said, “I agree with just about everything that Jesus says, but his words about lust being the equivalent of adultery—I just can’t accept that. That’s unreasonable.” What arrogance! I had to turn the channel his blasphemy was so offensive.

This upstanding religious man, who has great respect for Christians, is going to be condemned to hell unless he repents. Not because of that comment that he made, but because he freely admits that he needs no Savior. He shaves all the edges off God’s law so that he can imagine what a good person he is before God. He is sure that, like that proud Pharisee of Jesus’ parable, he can save himself.

The second thing that Jesus’ teachings on the Law impress on us is that

**B. God Will Punish Sin.**

In this reading, time after time, Jesus tells people that even thought sins deserve the fires of hell. I have said this before but I must say it again because so many people find the concept of hell offensive. Of all the people in the Bible, more than anybody else, *Jesus* says that God’s ultimate punishment is the fires of hell. Not just because of things we all can agree are bad, like murder and rape and genocide. He applies it to people who get angry, to men and woman who have lustful thoughts, to people who use God’s name for evil purposes or for just plain no good purposes. Sin is a big deal in God’s eyes, and regardless of what we think, the lawgiver says that all sin has the same sentence: eternal death.

The third thing that comes across in Jesus’ teaching of the Law is that

**C. We need to deal with sin—AT ALL COSTS.**

We don’t have time to explain as in depth as I would like, but 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.”*** In the Old Testament up to the time of Jesus, there was only one temple and one altar on which to make sacrifices. Hold that picture in your mind. Jesus says that even if you are there, in front of God and the whole nation of Israel, but in a sinful situation, you need to abandon your offering and go take care of your sin. The preacher ought to step out of the pulpit mid-sermon. The parishioner, just as the elder is about to lay the wafer in her hand, ought to quickly turn around and go out the door. Deal with sin. Now!

In his exposition on adultery, Jesus said, ***“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.”***

Again, Jesus says something extreme. He speaks hyperbole. I would not say that he is exaggerating, but that he is speaking of the most extreme example. We should be terrified at the thought of doing anything that is a clear and present danger to our soul’s eternal well-being. When we are near something that time and again leads us into sin, we need to get away from it! If that device in your hand is a portal to pornography or wasteful gambling or incessant gossip that you just can’t say “No” to, get rid of it. If certain situations lead you to compromise your godly principles, avoid those places, times and company. Dare I say it: find another job! How many a Christian has played with sin saying, “Don’t worry pastor, I can handle it” and finished their life far from God! Oh, how I mourn those people!

Where does this leave me? I started with a file folder full of great memories, created by wonderful people. I suggested that if we want to do beautiful things for God, the way we find what is on God’s Christmas list is to go to God’s Law. Those are the things he really wants.

But when Jesus takes us to that Law, we stand before it in awe and fear. It demands what I cannot summon. Even with the best of intentions I always fall short. Even when I concentrate, I miss God’s target. And that’s at my best! Usually my intentions are not the best.

All of these thoughts about God’s law lead me to one thing: Jesus; not Lawgiver Jesus, but Savior Jesus. I am a thankful, saved, yet still-sinning Christian. As I try in my childish ways to thank and serve my God, I must simply rest myself *in* Christ Jesus. I must go about every day, to every place, with him as my companion. Knowing that he is there, richly offering forgiveness for all my faults and sins. As I go about living for God, Christ at my side corrects my childish spelling on the Father’s Day cards, gently folds my hands when my attention wanders, in short, through his divine life lived in obedience, Christ Jesus fills up all the things that my weakness is unable to complete. And I need to be strengthened in that by regular contact with the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

I am comforted to know that things offered through faith in Christ Jesus bring a smile to God’s face. And smile he does! “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace.” Amen.