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The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

February 12, 2023

Jesus Calls Us to Be Holy

In this third week of messages from the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is again molding the will of his followers—and we are also followers of Jesus. Today we learn that Jesus came to free us from sin. He did not come to free us to sin. The commands in today's Gospel and in the other readings remind us of just how holy our God is. The dire warnings in the readings remind us just how holy God wants us to be.

Sermon

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, ^e and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And 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 or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ^j ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, 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. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, 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.' ⁿ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Introduction: From the first book of the Bible to the last book, the Bible tells us that God forgives our sins. The first book of the Bible tells us how God's first human creatures sinned and how they passed their sin on to the rest of the human race. The last book of the Bible tells us how God demolished the power of sin and how he will destroy the forces of sin at the end of time. From beginning to end the most important truth in the Bible is that God forgives the sins of the world and that he does that because of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. That truth that God forgives sins is what the Bible calls the good news or the gospel. When Jesus began his

ministry, he said, **The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.** You and I believe the good news and so we follow Jesus.

When Jesus sat down on that mountainside and delivered his famous sermon, he was talking to people like us. The people who heard this sermon were people who followed Jesus because they believed the good news; they believed that Jesus forgave their sins. So Jesus didn't talk much about forgiving sins in this sermon. These people had heard that good news many times over the past year and they believed it. They were so convinced about Jesus that they were walking with him and talking with him and putting their hope in him.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explains to believers what following him is really all about. Following Jesus means that believers are blessed as they give up on themselves and put their sights totally on Jesus. Following Jesus means that believers are salt and light to preserve the world and guide people to God. Following Jesus means that believers live by the commandments that come from God. Jesus said, **Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.**

There's not so much good news in what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount. The good news is that he came to free us *from* sin. Today he wants us to remember that he did not come to free us *for* sin. He lays out just how holy God is and just how holy God expects us to be. The question for today is not "How shall we be saved?" The question we ask today is this:

How Then Shall We Live?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus talked about a wide variety of components or actions of life. The section of the sermon we're looking at today treats three of those components: Murder, adultery, divorce. Each component could fill its own sermon. What catches our attention as we look at the components together is they include basic truths that Jesus wants us to understand. Jesus' words run like a thread through all of them. What Jesus says here helps us find the answer to the question: How Then Shall We Live?

What does Jesus say? **You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister, will be subject to judgment.** The Fifth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not kill" and the Sixth Commandment says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." We learned those commandments when we were kids and everybody we know pretty much agrees with them. The first thing Jesus wants us to know is that his idea of obedience includes more than on-the-surface obedience. Murder is a sin but so is anger. Adultery is a sin but so is lust. Stealing is a sin but so is cheating. Lying is a sin but so is gossip. For us following Jesus means more than obeying the letter of the law. Obedience means living in love because love is the fulfilling of the law. Whatever we do that is less than love is sin.

When we do sin, Jesus says this: **If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.** Jesus wants us to fix our sins and to make fixing them a priority. Here fixing sin is even more important than worship. It won't do to let sin fester. Anger hardens, lust controls, cheating becomes a habit. When we sin we need to admit it now and confess it now and change it now before it controls us and destroys us.

Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. **You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** Sin is more than what our hands do, more than what our eyes do. Sin starts inside us, it starts in our hearts and emotions and thoughts. David wanted Bathsheba and wanting Bathsheba is what led him to sinful sex and

blatant murder. Sin is never an accident; sin starts as a seed and grows into a weed. We can't just reform sin; we must destroy our sinful hearts.

Following Jesus is this serious: **If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.** People who aren't followers of Jesus will accuse Jesus of commanding us to mutilate and maim our bodies. But they miss the whole point Jesus is making. Jesus urges us to do whatever we need to do to control our sinful passions. We may have to cut something out of our lives. Some of us will have to stop laughing at dirty jokes; some of us will have to put controls on our internet access. Some of us must never spank because for us spanking always comes from anger. Some of us must stop playing sheephead for quarters because gambling can become addictive. Some of us have to give up the evening cocktail when alcohol starts to control us. Jesus' followers learn to gouge the passion out and cut the passion off so that our hearts do not control us and then eventually condemn us.

Jesus wants his followers—he wants us—to be terrified by sin. Whoever speaks out in anger, he said, **will be in danger of hell fire.** He repeated that thought and he repeated twice: **It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.** Jesus doesn't pull any punches. St. Paul didn't either when he wrote to the Christians in Thessalonica; we heard his words in the Second Reading: **The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.**

Of course, people around us don't live holy lives and sometimes their bad examples influence us. Jesus gave an example. The Lord has always hated divorce but in Moses' time he regulated divorce to protect innocent women from guilty husbands. But that regulation didn't make divorce acceptable. God still hated divorce. Jesus insisted that marriage is for life no matter what people think and do. Society's sins never justify our sins. A lot of people get angry, a lot of people cheat, a lot of people gossip. But what others do doesn't matter to us. Jesus says to us, **Be holy because the Lord your God is holy.**

Someone has said that Christians preach the gospel to make the uncomfortable comfortable. That's very true. The good news about Jesus takes the guilt of sin and the fear of sin and the sorrow of sin—it takes it all away. But someone has also said that Christians preach the law to make the comfortable uncomfortable. That's what Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. He doesn't threaten us or condemn us; he explains to us, he clarifies for us, and instructs us. He taught his followers on that mountainside and he teaches us today how he wants his followers to live. He eliminates confusion about sin. He encourages correcting sin quickly. He reveals the source of sin in our hearts. He urges us to get rid of sin's passions. He warns about sin's consequences. He eliminates sin's excuses. He calls on all who follow him—he calls on us—to be honest about how we live and to strive for holy living. **How then shall we live? We will follow God's example as dearly loved children and will walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.**
Amen.