

“What Do You Think?”

Matthew 5:17-48

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

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Does this section of the Sermon on the Mount make any of you nervous? As we heard these readings did Jesus leave anyone out? In these readings we have some of what are called the hard sayings of Jesus and it's pretty obvious why they're called that. Sometimes people come into a church and they want to know, "what are the minimum entrance requirements to get into heaven?" In other words, "what's the least I have to do to keep from going to hell?" Basically they're looking for a list of the things they must do and also a list of the things to avoid. They want to know, "what's the least I have to do to get in." But nowhere in the Bible is Jesus ever interested in the minimum requirements. Here Jesus says, "the only requirement is that you be perfect. Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." What Jesus wants is you – all of you.

As Jesus travelled around teaching he did amazing things. We are told, for example, that he healed many people of their diseases and that they came from far away to see Jesus and to be healed. But we're also told that Jesus didn't always follow the rules of the Jewish leaders. For example, he healed on the Sabbath, which was prohibited. He spent time with sinners and even ate with them, a sign of friendship. Over and over again Jesus disregarded the traditional Jewish understanding of the law so that people began to say that Jesus was doing away with the very foundation of the Jewish faith, the Law of Moses. So Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets." Then he says that not even the smallest mark in the Law will pass away.

The Jewish or Hebrew Scriptures, what we know as the Old Testament, are divided

into three main sections: the Torah, which includes the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Law or the books of Moses; the prophets; and then all the rest, which include history, poetry, and wisdom literature. So when Jesus refers to "the Law and the Prophets," it's a way of referring to the whole Old Testament. He's telling us that the Old Testament is still vitally important for us today because it's the Word of God and we are still expected to obey the commandments. In fact, as we will see shortly, Jesus requires his followers to do more than just obey the Law outwardly. He shows us that God has a higher standard. He is concerned with your heart. Jesus says that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes were basically religious lawyers. They were a class of teachers who studied the Scriptures and then came up with detailed rules about how to keep the Law. For example, keeping the Sabbath meant avoiding working. So the scribes came up with rules to define what was considered work. A person could not carry any food on the Sabbath that weighed more than a dried fig. Any more was considered work. Nor could he write more than one word on a page on the Sabbath. Healing was prohibited as well. If a person was injured steps could be taken to prevent him from getting worse but nothing could be done to make him get better. All of this was the work of the scribes. Jesus also mentions the Pharisees, who were a sect of Jews who separated themselves for the purpose of keeping all of these laws. That was their highest aim in life, but it was very legalistic. They were keeping the "letter of the law" but ignoring the spirit.

I think we need to pay close attention to this. Too often throughout church history

and even today these words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount have been used in a legalistic way. They have been used as rules that are imposed on other people to control their behavior. We read these things and want to say to others, “see, Jesus says you aren’t supposed to do that.” But if we do that we have totally missed the point! This passage is not about guilt and shame. Jesus is not saying, “bad dog.” Friends, this is God’s Word and He’s speaking directly to *you*. So as you read these words and as we talk about them, don’t think about how your spouse or your child or your parent needs to hear this. Instead of hearing a list of rules that you have to keep or a set of standards that you think you can’t meet, just let God speak to you with love and grace.

Jesus uses a style of teaching that was common for rabbis. He says, “you have heard that it was said...,” quoting from the Scriptures, and then his teaching follows. Only Jesus does something different. Most rabbis would have followed with the sayings of another rabbi. But Jesus says, “But I say to you...” Jesus challenges the tradition of the scribes on the basis of his own authority. No wonder people were astonished at his teaching. Using this format he gives us six examples of ways that the Jewish people at the time had distorted God’s desire for them. These are all ways that the people were technically keeping the Law but in reality were breaking it.

The first is “you shall not murder.” I like this commandment. I haven’t killed anyone this week so I’m good, right? Jesus says, “Not so fast. Everyone who is angry with a fellow believer or insults him or calls him a fool is guilty of murder.” Uh oh. In a law court, generally you can only be punished for *committing* a crime. In most cases it’s not a crime to *think* about committing one. Jesus is showing us that it’s not just the outward behavior that God is interested in.

He is concerned about our inner desires and motivation. The anger that he refers to is a deep, long-lasting, brooding anger as opposed to a quick temper. It’s that anger that smolders and tries to find ways to hurt the other person. He’s alluding to the anger that Cain had for Able that eventually led him to murder his brother. Jesus warns us that if we come before God and remember that we have some unresolved issues with another person then we need to be reconciled first. Anger is the companion of hate and hate is the opposite of love. But reconciliation is the antidote to anger. If you’ve ever felt like there was some kind of barrier between you and God, that he didn’t seem to hear your prayers, you might want to reflect on your relationships with other people to see if there is some unresolved issue.

The second command that Jesus looks at is, “you shall not commit adultery.” Everyone understood this. But Jesus raises the bar again and says, “everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Again, a pure heart is the best guarantee of pure actions. Jesus then gives us a shocking command. “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.” A lot of people get tripped up by this verse. Jesus doesn’t mean for you to take this literally and cut off your hand. Of course your hand or your eye can’t cause you to sin. It’s a matter of desire. Jesus is making a dramatic point that you should take extreme measures to protect your mind and get rid of whatever is tempting you to sin. It’s that important.

The third area Jesus addresses is divorce. This section in particular is one that has been misused as a weapon to hurt people whose marriage has failed. The context of this saying is ancient Israel where women had no rights. A man could divorce

his wife for virtually any reason but a woman could never divorce her husband. The scribes based their argument on Deuteronomy 24:1, which says, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her ..." It goes on to describe the man giving her a certificate of divorce. There were two schools of thought that arose in Israel concerning divorce, both focusing on this idea of "indecency." One school was very conservative and interpreted this to mean only sexual immorality. The other school, however, was much more liberal and interpreted this to mean *anything* that the man found displeasing, including burning a meal or speaking disrespectfully. One rabbi even said that finding a more attractive woman was sufficient grounds for a man to divorce his wife. This was the situation Jesus was addressing and once again Jesus presents God's way as being a higher standard. Jesus is giving us the goal and ideal of marriage, not a punishment for divorce.

In each of these areas Jesus tells us that our behavior is important. We are to obey God's Law. The Ten Commandments still apply today, even if it doesn't seem like it sometimes. But life in God's Kingdom, under His rule is not simply following a set of rules – do this, don't do that. To truly be a follower of Christ means that our hearts are changed. As the Apostle Paul writes, "be transformed by the renewing of your minds." We must get control of our *desires* as well as our actions. That's hard. Impossible, actually. At least on our own. But I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit you are now able to be transformed, to know what God desires of you, and to actually change your mind. And I think that when we truly bring our desires in line with God's desire, we will see our lives changed in amazing ways.

Amen