

Law and Gospel Applied
 Matthew 5:21-37
 6 Epiphany A
 February 12, 2017

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 5:21: “But I say to you.” This is the Word of the Lord.

I. Three Foundational Teachings

Jesus is still teaching His disciples about the Law in our Gospel lesson for today. In part, He continues a theme that came out in last week’s Gospel lesson: God’s Law remains God’s Law. That’s a teaching foundational to the faith: God’s Law remains God’s Law. God hasn’t relaxed it, softened it up or dumbed it down. His Law is not something that you can keep: it’s there to show you what you should be doing, what you fail to do, and how much you need Christ and His forgiveness.

We are not the first generation to say that God has softened up over time. It was happening at the time of Jesus, too. Since the Pharisees taught that people were saved by doing good, the rabbis were busy interpreting God’s laws in ways that made them keepable. So when Jesus taught His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, He wasn’t changing God’s Law by making it harder to keep: He was teaching the disciples what God had intended all along. This is the Law He still intends for you today. So it doesn’t matter what “you’ve heard said” by others; what matters is what Jesus says to you.

As Jesus demonstrates this with a number of practical examples, He introduces two more important teachings: one is that your love for your neighbor affects your love for God. In His Law, God gives commandments about loving Him, sometimes called your “vertical relationship” with your Father in heaven. He also gives commands about loving your neighbor, sometimes called your “horizontal relationships.” You’ll be tempted to split these apart, to say “My love for God saves me, even if I lack love for my neighbor.” But it is not so. If you do not love your neighbor, your love for God will fail.

The other important teaching is this: Jesus speaks of a wide variety of sin. Some of them will get you life in prison from civil authorities, while others won’t even get you a slap on the hand. In some ways, they are very different. In other ways, they are all the same.

These are our three foundational teachings for looking at the applications in this text. First, the Law still applies in full. Second, your love for your neighbor is related to your love for God. Third, the wide variety of sins in some ways are all the same.

So here we go.

II. The Law Applied

Jesus begins: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.”

Anger, insult and murder: a sin of thought, a sin of word and a sin of deed. You can see a progression that plays out on the evening news: someone gets angry, so someone insults and someone gets murdered. In this world, anger, insult and murder are three very different things that merit very different punishments. Anger might punish you with a loss of friends if you can’t hold it in; and an insult might get you a civil suit for slander or libel, though it’s unlikely. Murder, on the other hand,

invites serious imprisonment. So they're three different sins with different consequences: and, if it's all the same to you, if you're angry with me I prefer to be insulted rather than murdered.

But these three sins are all the same to Jesus: they all bring judgment, even hellfire. Jesus is not saying that an angry thought or a hurt feeling is the same as an actual murder, but He is saying that all three have the same sinful root. If you commit any of these sins—in thought, word or deed, you're not looking out for your neighbor. You're wishing or inflicting harm on him instead. In other words, you're not loving your neighbor. You're not looking out for his interests. That's what these sins share in common.

They also share this: each of these sins puts you at odds with God. I'm not saying your neighbor is a saint. Your neighbor might be a jerk. But God loves your neighbor so much that He sustains his life, gives him daily bread, and—far more importantly—has given His Son to die on the cross in order to redeem him. If you're angry at your neighbor, by definition you don't want God taking care of him. If you insult him, you speak ill of one to whom God have you speak His saving Word. If you kill him, you take a life that God has given. If you hate him, you are declaring that God is wrong to love him. But why would God hate him and love you?

The devil will tempt you to such sins, to bear grudges and retain anger against others. Every situation will be different. In some cases, somebody will have hurt you very much: righteous anger makes sense, but your anger will never be righteous. In some cases, it's your own fault: it's not that they've sinned, but that you just don't like them. Either way, that anger is a fire that seeks to destroy your faith. Repent of it. When it flares up, repent of it again. If you've got something against a brother, go and be reconciled. If they've got something against you, go and be reconciled. But do not ever believe that you are justified to remain angry at someone for whom Christ has died.

Jesus continues: “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Lust and adultery. There's obviously a progression there too, often by way of pornography. There are various degrees of consequences too. Lustful thoughts are among the most common of sins, while adultery destroys marriages, lives and the future of children. Yet in a sense, they're all the same to Jesus: according to God's Law, all of them lead to “your whole body be[ing] thrown into hell.” Lust and adultery share the same sinful root. God is the Creator of each person. He gives to each beauty and body as He sees fit, as well as the ability to help bring more life into the world—what power and privilege! He also places great worth on each individual. With regard to a person's body and procreative powers, God declares to each, “You are of such high worth that, before another can be intimate with you, he or she must promise before God and man to be faithful to you for the rest of your life.” That's what those marriage vows are about.

But lust devalues others. It declares, “You don't have that kind of worth in my eyes. You're not worth as much as me, and so I feel entitled to use you no matter how I want in order to please me.” That exercise of lust may be in the form of thought, or emerge in adultery, even violence. By lust, you determine that someone is an object to be used, not a neighbor to be served. It doesn't matter if that “neighbor” is part of the adult film trade who devalues herself and invites the sin: who are you to confirm her in her sin and debasement? She is also one for whom Christ died: who are you to encourage her to remain impenitent?

Flee lust. It is destructive enough in its consequences for this life. Far worse, it will destroy your faith: you cannot so rob others of the worth God gives them—even just in your own mind—and at the same time embrace the worth that God gives you in Christ. You cannot say, “I am a child of God, bought by the blood of Christ” and at the same time say, “That person is worth so much less than me.” Such disdain for your neighbor is contempt for God’s Law and a denial of your need for grace.

This is a difficult sin to flee from, because it doesn’t feel like disdain or harm. Perhaps this is why Jesus goes on to say, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.” Most people are as tempted to stop lusting as they are to rip out an eye to fix the problem. Fleeing this sin will not be easy or pain-free: but this sin will lead you into hell. That’s what Jesus says. Repent.

On a related note, Jesus goes on: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” This is a difficult one to speak of because it’s such a sensitive and painful subject, especially for those who have suffered it. These are not the only verses to speak of divorce in Scripture—I Corinthians 7 comes to mind, where spousal desertion is grounds for divorce. But we should note that Jesus is especially here warning against a casual approach to ending marriage. Divorce is a messy thing, too much to talk about here. The point of this passage is that it’s a serious thing: again, the consequences in this life and the harm done to family are horrible. But beyond that lack of love for neighbor, a divorce puts asunder what God has joined together for life. Planning one, especially scheming to bring one about, is going to do serious damage to faith. Should marriage be in your future, choose carefully. If you are married now, work hard in service to the other. Where your sin threatens marriage, repent and pray. If you’re ready to give up, don’t. God hates divorce: that’s His Law. If you have undergone divorce, you are not forsaken. It’s a tangled web to sort out in the aftermath, and it will almost certainly include grief and repentance. But God is faithful.

Finally in our text, Jesus says, “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Aside from those oaths that He permits (like marriage vows and court testimony), Jesus warns against taking oaths. To swear an oath by God is to bind Him to your promise, and you don’t have His permission to do so. To swear by heaven or earth is to use His creation as collateral, and you don’t have His permission to do that, either. If you break your oath, you communicate to others that misusing God’s name is no big deal. If you’re one for adding silly little OMG’s to your text messaging, you communicate that God’s name itself is no big deal. But more than that, you demonstrate to God that you’ve got little respect for His holy name: and to take God’s name in vain is to break the Second Commandment and invite God’s condemnation. That God doesn’t strike you down doesn’t mean He’s softened up. Rather it means He is patient and merciful, so that you might repent before the Judgment.

Anger, murder, lust, adultery, divorce, oaths: some we would call “big sins,” others we would call “little sins.” All have consequences in this life, and that is a blessing because those consequences are meant to warn you of the greater consequence of hell if you hold onto these sins and do not repent.

Ultimately, that’s what makes them all the same. That’s what Jesus says.

III. The Gospel Applied

But that’s not all that Jesus says. He speaks this Law to show you how dangerous and deadly is sin, so that you might repent and declare, “I have offended God, and I deserve judgment! Oh, that God would take it away.” That’s when you’re ready to hear the Gospel.

The Gospel is this: where you deserve God’s righteous anger for your sins, God took out that wrath on His Son on the cross instead. Jesus has suffered the judgment, the condemnation and the hellfire in your place on the cross so that He might deliver you from judgment and hell. Though you are guilty of anger and insults, hell is not for you because Christ forgives you. Even if you are, literally, a murderer, Jesus has laid down His life so that you might have life forever.

Where you have reduced and demeaned others by your sins of lust, you have also demonstrated your poverty of sin. But Christ has died for you, too. The holy Son of God has given you worth—you’re worth the price of His own innocent, precious blood. Rather than live for Himself and His own gratification, Christ offered His hands and feet to nails and His back to the scourge in order to deliver you. He does not require you to pluck out your eyes or hack off your limbs in order to atone for your sin: He’s suffered for you in His body already. He gives grace freely. For your adulterous thoughts, you are forgiven.

Where you have undergone divorce, it probably still gnaws away at you because you know your sin, your part, and you’ve got to live with yourself. Confess your sin, for you hear this Gospel that Christ has died to lay down His life for His bride, the Church, of which you are a part: and though you or others prove faithless, He is always faithful with forgiveness for you.

Likewise, there is forgiveness for you where you have misused God’s name and broken your word. Though you demonstrate your failure and faithlessness, the Lord remains faithful. He has made good use of His name to baptize you, and continues to speak His Absolution to you in His name. He gives you His Word that He forgives you for all of your sins, and the Lord always keeps His Word.

Dear friends, as Jesus demonstrates in this text, the consequences of sin are devastating—but they need not be for you. Christ was devastated on the cross in your place, and bids you to confess your sins and trust in Him. For in Him, your sins are all the same—they’re all gone! For you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen