

"You don't have to go all the way"

February 16, 2014

Matthew 5:21-37

21 "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; 26 truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny. 27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. 31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

A lot of times when we consider this portion of Scripture we gloss over a lot of it. We tend to stop the Sermon on the Mount after the Beatitudes maybe including the ideas about Salt and Light and the rest is just the whatever Jesus is saying to those crowds. I want you to take a moment and pull out the Bible in the pews in front of you if you have not already. While our Bibles here are not red-letter most of us are familiar with the concept of red-letters meaning these are the direct quotes of Christ. I say quotes to be clear because the Gospels are written in four very different perspectives and are not autobiographies written directly by Jesus.

I want you to hold them for a minute, it feels kind of good if you have not for a while. We get a tad caught up in our technology and forget the powerful and profound nature of holding the Word of God in our hands. If you have noticed I try to conclude our scripture reading each Sunday with this is the "Word of The Lord, Thanks be to God." Historically this is a call and response understanding for the reading of scripture. Taken from the beginning scriptures of John "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the Beginning." This is a profound revelation made to us and we are so blessed to be able to read it and interpret it and live it out in our lives. So that is why every time we read scripture we say Thanks be to God.

I digress so go ahead and open them to the Gospel of Matthew beginning in Chapter five and then turn all the way to chapter eight. That is the perichophy that we call the Sermon on the Mount. Those three chapters in any red-lettered Bible are all in red. Jesus had gone to the mountaintop and from there he laid down a lot of laws and ways to live. We often gloss over these chapters however because in them Jesus is essentially going over a lot of the laws of Moses and the practices of the Hebrew people.

We have to remember that we do not really know the number whom Jesus is teaching at this moment in time while we typically will denote his 12 follows as The Disciples he had other Disciples who followed him they were just not the ones who traveled all over with him and are who we typically think of when we say The Disciples.

We also need to remember the importance of the Pharisees in the Judaic culture. They were the teachers of the law and held themselves and others to the strict moral law code put in place over time. In today's terms they could be likened to our Judicial system. Flawed as it may be it is what everyone to this point adheres too and each law is supposed to help us all maintain order and religious piety. Recall too that just before our section of scripture today Jesus has said in verse

20 “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Pharisees were known as righteous upholders of the law, it is what gave them their status and rank amongst the Judaic culture. So this has set us up for today’s section of scripture. It is divided into four sections entitled in most scriptural translations: Murder, Adultery, Divorce, and Oaths. Tough topics to discuss at any length but here is Jesus saying not only do we not commit murder but do not even be angry at your brothers and sisters the first step. Jesus is telling us we do not have to go all the way to murder, adultery, divorce, or oaths to be sinning.

That is a hard pill to swallow because we take our personal thoughts as kind of our get out of jail free cards. We have not acted on our thoughts so we have not sinned. And here is Jesus, the example we are to follow saying now wait just one second, you have sinned and to use the section on adultery as an example Jesus says “it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”

Even Jesus preached a hellfire and damnation sermon. A little frightening to contemplate because that image of a Bible thumping, finger pointing, saying you are damned to hell if you sin and do not repent does not fit in with our image of Jesus as the radical, loving all, justice filled person we know in and through the rest of the Gospels.

That is why it is continually important as we read through our scriptures to know what comes before and after. Remember Jesus is talking to the Disciples about them being more righteous than the Pharisees. So that they are held above reproach in the eyes of the law. The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20:2-17 and it is from that time that the people of God have been trying to do their best to follow them. Every law and mode of living up to this point has been about living under these commandments. We know them do we not? Of course we know them in the King James Version but you should be able to say them with me:

I am the Lord thy God ... Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images.

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long.

Thou shalt not kill.

Thou shalt not commit adultery.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.

Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house.

These are the laws that the Pharisees upheld. Jesus takes it a step further thought. Not only shall we not kill but we should also not even contemplate being angry towards our brothers and sisters because we still will face judgment for our anger and lack of forgiveness towards them. We should not even set foot in the sanctuary if we are angry at another.

I do not know about you but I confess that sometimes I come to church angry, frustrated, and a variety of other less than reverent emotions some days. This life of faith that we have been called to live is a difficult one and every day I have to as I am sure we all have to remind ourselves that we need to follow the examples of Christ. And that my friends is what Jesus is laying out to his Disciples as he is talking to them and exhorting them to be above reproach in their behavior. Jesus is reminding them that the life of faith is not easy but if we can catch ourselves before we go down that slippery slope we save ourselves from a life of sinful sliding or backsliding as you will. We know this to be true.

I know for a long time there I was more comfortable not going to church each Sunday. I had gotten sick and was dealing with some other things in this life of mine and just kind of did not go during college. I also would start going out on Friday nights get quite rowdy and wake up Saturdays too tired or even hungover to really be able to function. And then

it was really easy to say yes to also going out on Saturday night as it was still the weekend and then even Thursday night since I did not have classes on Friday. It got easier and easy to slide down the slippery slope away from God and what God called me to be as a person of faith.

Now I admit this was during college and typically that is a time of exploration and I had a pretty severe wake up call that set me back to the path that led me here today. But we all know how easy it is to fall out of the Habit of faith and that is what Jesus is warning us against and helping the Disciples to guard against.

Holding ourselves accountable for our faith can be and is a difficult thing. It is really easy to roll over and hit the snooze button instead of getting up when we just do not see the point in going because it is not what we had hoped for or expected on Sunday morning. But Jesus here is calling the Disciples to task to say it is not just what I give you but how you live it out and take it to the next level that matters. And if you turn to chapter seven because I know you have been hanging on to your Bibles this whole time. If you turn there and read about the wise and foolish builders who build their homes on sand and on stone. Jesus' entire sermon ends saying build a foundation that will not crumble by taking it to the next level of faithfulness and throughout he has given countless examples of how to do so. It is up to us then to build our house on the foundation of our choosing sand or stone. Amen.