

Marion weekly update

MAY 29, 2022

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON May 22, Sermon on the Mount Part 3, Matthew 5:21-30

Continuing our series on the Sermon on the Mount, we are now getting into the more specific things that Jesus is striving to address. Yes, He's addressed a bunch of stuff already through the beatitudes and discussing the Law and the fulfilling of it, but he's not gone directly into the Law itself. This is where that begins.

Remember, up to this point Jesus is priming the audience for what He's about to share. He's going to take time to clarify and deepen their understanding of the Law by focusing on intent over letter. He reversed the language of the ten commandments from "don't do this" to "do this", He switched the concept of blessing from material to spiritual, and He forecasts the Law being completed even though they are presently still under it. This is significant. Jesus is informing legalism because the covenant of grace hasn't yet been established. And through doing He gives all of us insight into the "why" of the instructions God has given to help us live rightly before God and into a full and faithful life.

We'll be looking at things today through a broader lens. Certainly we could unpack these first two behaviors, murder and adultery, individually. What we've seen is that while doing so can be helpful, clumping them together and seeing the larger theme can be equally as helpful.

We begin with murder.

Jesus dives so much deeper than the behavior. Yes, killing is bad. But we see over and over again how sticking to the letter of the law makes it easier to find loopholes. It's easier to figure out how to justify bad action so long as we don't necessarily commit the BIG action. Here we see a breadth of attitudes and spirits that equate to murder. Why do they do this? They do it because without them murder would be rarely if ever committed.

First He centers on anger. This is tricky and sticky. All of us get angry. It's unavoidable. But Jesus goes on to attach it to other things. He talks about genuine insult and devaluing. When He mentions the word Raca, He is talking about devaluing another person to the point of seeing them as worthless. "Fool" is also a value judgement. What I believe He is speaking to is an overbearance to entertaining our anger towards one another. The more we entertain it, the easier it becomes to write one another off. They become and object not a person. If we write someone off, it becomes all the easier to mistreat them, perhaps the ultimate mistreatment being murder. We cast forward here to Jesus' words that if we judge another harshly we should expect that same harsh judgement to be rendered our way by God.

So quickly we see this is about more than just a command against a physical act. It is about a spiritual condition. Is our condition patient or harsh and hasty? Is our condition forgiving or bitter? Is our condition compassion or callous? Jesus is honing in on the condition of our spirit and heart as being the root of all maltreatment, the worst of which is murder! It's a call to self-examine and to listen to those around us.

We also see that this condition is essential to whatever we offer to God being acceptable. While I don't know that Jesus literally is calling someone to bail on worship before the offering if they remember they have an issue with someone, I do believe that Jesus is suggesting an urgency to putting hard feelings to rest. It reads very Isaiah. Remember in Isaiah we read several times the idea that the fast God calls for is to cease wickedness, abuse, strife, and all the other stuff we do to one another. The rituals and offerings are second place. They mean nothing if our hearts aren't right with one another and with God. So it is with our anger and relationships with each other.

Before approaching God with what we have to offer materially or even in service, the first step is to make sure our hearts and relationships are as right as they can be on our part.

Jesus is trying to help them understand that the law against murder isn't some simple behavioral prohibition. It is rooted in the content of our hearts and spirits. From the heart, actions spring. If our hearts are angry and judgemental, even if

we haven't committed the act of murder, we have still allowed ourselves to go far afield from who God desires us to be. He then moves to adultery. While murder and adultery may seem distant from one another, the point Jesus is making puts them in lock step. Once again, this isn't merely about an act. It is about a spirit.

Also note that His instruction seems very male centric. Anyone who looks at a WOMAN lustfully. In this era, the man was central. Jesus is focusing on who would be the initiator of an adulterous relationship, the man. This will come back to us next week in significance. The woman was property, and that mattered then.

This particular passage has had some extremes of interpretation. Some go so far as to consider it sin to find someone simply attractive. Personally I don't stand with this understanding. It's certainly possible to find someone attractive and not necessarily burn with desire for them. The other is much more specific and dialed in. It's about having such a desire with someone that were the opportunity to present itself to engage one another it's already a foregone conclusion. Yes, it will happen. This I tend to find more in keeping with Jesus' words.

Comedians have made light of this in many different ways but really staying tied to the same thought. They joke that how faithful someone is to their partner is tied less to devotion than to opportunity. "You're only as faithful as your options". But there's a nugget of something real here. You can have someone who has a wildly adulterous heart but never commits the act because there's never the chance. You can have someone who has every chance to commit adultery yet never does so because their heart is faithful.

Once again, we see Jesus coming down on the same point. Sin is a heart thing just as much as an action thing. With adultery the point isn't all that dissimilar from murder. It's about value and regard for the other.

To see someone is merely an object of desire is to devalue them to the status of a tool for satisfaction. It is judging them unworthy of the respect and regard of genuine relationship. Just like His teaching on murder, to devalue someone's worth makes it all the easier to mistreat them for our own designs and agendas.

So yes, the behaviors of the law are problematic. What is moreso is the spirit and heart that opens the door for the behavior to happen. This is what Jesus is getting at.

Finally, we come upon the "stumpy" passage. If something in the body tempts you to sin cut it off/carve it out. This is clearly not to be taken literally. Even the most literal Christian that still has all their appendages and such is witness to this. If they weren't they'd be missing something. All of us would. Everyone is tempted and whatever we attribute it to would be gone.

None of us do. This doesn't negate the passage.

In order to ease temptation, the idea of carving things out of our lives is genuinely wise. It may not be an eye or a hand. It may be a place we visit, an item we purchase, maybe even a relationship. "If the bakery causes you to shoot your blood sugar through the roof, stop going through the bakery." "If tailgating causes you to drink way too much, stop tailgating." Cut out the sources of the temptations that cause us to give in to our lesser natures.

All of us have it. Not all of us have the same one. But as broken humans with a sinful nature all of us have areas of temptation unique to our own experience and senses. What is the best way to avoid temptation? Avoid the circumstances that stoke it. Yes, it might mean avoiding circumstances that we enjoy, but it's worth it if it keeps us faithful before God.

All of this is foundational to a strong witness for Christ.

As we go through our days and lives, what are the places in our hearts that need tending? What spirits and attitudes need the grace and inspiration of God to transform more into the spirit of Christ? Where is our personal peace and contentment distracted by things that need not interfere? Finding them and letting God deal with them is life giving and inspiring.

As much as it is personal, it's also communal. When we do this the content of who we are changes more into the image of Jesus. Being more like Jesus not only changes us, it changes the world around us. And isn't that what it's about? Making the kingdom of the world more like the Kingdom of God. Seeing the "rules" in their intent is all about this purpose. It's not avoiding an act, it's cultivating a spirit. And that spirit changes the world.