

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
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Sermon by Pastor Bart Brauer  
***But Jesus tells you***

—Matthew 5:21-37

“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” That’s what Jesus says in his sermon on the mount in Matthew chapters five through seven. Today he expands on that thought and explains what he means.

The righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law was a technical righteousness. Technically they could say they were righteous; at least that’s how they appeared to other people. “Technically I haven’t murdered anyone. Technically I have not committed adultery against my wife or with any other woman. Technically my divorce from my wife was done right. Technically I have kept my oaths and technically I have been truthful.” But according to Jesus, technical righteousness is no righteousness at all. Technical righteousness won’t get anyone into the kingdom of heaven.

But Jesus is not technically speaking to the Pharisees and teachers of the law here. Jesus is talking to his disciples, to people who would come and follow him. He is going beyond what human courts define as legal, going beyond what prevailing society deems as being “on the right side of history,” whatever that means. Jesus is teaching what it really means to fulfill the law of God. Jesus is telling you these things.

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not murder,’ but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”* There is certainly a place for righteous anger in a Christian’s life, as Christ himself displayed in his own life and ministry. But Jesus tells you not to become sinfully angry. When you harbor hatred in your heart for someone and you bear a grudge and you make your blood boil at the mention of that person’s name. No one else may be able to detect what’s going on in your heart, and you may technically say, “I haven’t murdered anyone,” but Jesus tells you that you are liable to be judged and you are answerable for such a sin.

Sin happening in the heart doesn’t easily stay there. Eventually out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks, and the hatred comes out as verbal contempt. Now come out the insults and the name calling. In biblical times it was “*Raca!*” probably meaning something like, “You empty head! You airhead!” That wasn’t a nice thing to say to someone. Even worse was “*You fool!* You moron!” Now as you are saying those things, you’re not necessarily clenching your fist—not yet, at least—you’re not picking up a weapon, and I suppose you might technically say, “It’s not like I’m murdering someone.” But Jesus tells you that if your heart’s hatred comes out in verbal contempt for someone, you deserve to go to hell. You are subject to the punishment of hellfire.

Do I even need to say how easy it is to do this in our day and age? You don’t even have to say it in person. You don’t even have to publish it in print. All you have to do is find a computer keyboard and type away, or plant your face in front of a phone camera and record a video, expressing your hatred and contempt for someone you don’t personally like. And you may defend yourself, saying, “I’m not killing anyone!” (which, by the way, isn’t always true because words can kill, even when you don’t intend them to). But nevertheless, no matter what your technical legal defense may be, Jesus tells you that you just earned hell for yourself.

Followers of Jesus need to guard what goes on in their heart and gauge what comes out of their mouths. And if you have said something or you have done anything that has wronged your brother or your sister in Christ, you don’t just let it sit there. You may tell yourself, “Well, that person just needs to get over it, and we need to move on.” But Jesus tells you something else. Do whatever is in your power to restore and reconcile. Before you come to God’s house to worship him, before you put your offering envelope in the plate or punch enter for your electronic giving, there’s something else you need to do first. It’s urgent, Jesus says: *“First, go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”*

That’s how it needs to work for your worship life in here. That’s also how it needs to work for your civic life out there. If you have done something wrong, don’t wait to apologize, don’t hesitate to make amends. That only allows the bitterness and resentment you may have caused to take firm root in the other person’s heart. *“Settle matters quickly,”* Jesus tells you. Work for a peaceful resolution right away. Failure to do so may result in long-term pain and punishment for you.

Jesus moves onto the next commandment. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’* Marriage is the life-long union of one man and one woman. The two become one; they also become one flesh with sexual intimacy. It’s an exclusive relationship. The wife is exclusively for her husband, and the husband is exclusively for his wife. No one else ever belongs in that relationship between those two people. That would be adultery.

But Jesus tells you that *anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart*. The common sentiment is, "You can look but you can't touch. As long as you don't actually do anything, you're okay." Why don't you ask the woman whose man is hooked on pornography whether that is technically okay? Why don't you ask the wife who notices her husband lustfully looking at other females whether that is technically okay? Or why don't you ask your Lord Jesus whether it's okay to lust with your eyes as long as you don't do anything with your hands? Jesus tells you, "If your right eye makes you sin, get rid of your right eye. If your right hand makes you sin, get rid of your right hand." That would be a lot better than what will happen to you if you don't check your sexually immoral thoughts and don't prevent yourself from sexually immoral actions. You don't have to have an affair to go to hell. You just have to want one.

On a related matter there's divorce. Evidently it wasn't all that difficult to obtain a divorce in Jesus' society. The law of Moses even provided a proper, legal way to do it. There needed to be an official certificate from a court of law in which a man stated that he was officially giving up his legal relationship with his wife, even to the extent that he could never become married to her again if she ever remarried and was divorced by someone else. So I guess a man could go through the legal channels and then tell himself, "Hey, technically I did things the right way in dissolving my marriage."

It's not hard to obtain a divorce in our society. It might be a little expensive, and there may be some added difficulties when there are kids involved, but it's not all that hard. You don't have to prove adultery anymore. You don't have to prove anything. You just have to say you don't get along. Your legal adversary, also known as your former bride or your former groom, can't even really contest the ending of the marriage. If divorce is what you want, technically you can get it. But Jesus tells you that *anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness* (when sexual immorality has occurred), *makes her the victim of adultery*. Some Bible translations will say something like "makes her an adulteress" or "makes her commit adultery," but the way Jesus says it sounds more like "anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality makes her to be adulterized, makes her adulterized" (if there's such a word). People cast aspersions on her: "Well, maybe she was sleeping around, maybe she did something immoral that drove him away." And if she does get remarried, other people may still look at her that way, or look at her new husband in that way. Say all you want, if you divorce when you really have no reason from Jesus to get divorced, Jesus tells you that you are sinning against and you are insulting your spouse.

I know this may all be pretty heavy, but there's one final matter for today: the taking of oaths. "*Do not break your oaths, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.*" That's biblical. Moses taught those things. The problem was that the society around Jesus had kind of made a mockery of oaths. You know how kids might play a game of tag and then make up a bunch of dumb rules as to whether a tag counts or not. When I was a kid, it was, "Doesn't count! I was on goals!" or "You can't tag me back!" Well, the teachers of Jesus' day had a whole bunch of rules as to which oaths really counted and which did not. "Did you swear by just the temple or by the gold in the temple? Because if you swore by the gold, then it counts." "Did you swear by the altar or by the gift on the altar? Because if you swore just by the altar, that doesn't count." Evidently in such ways you were supposed to prove the validity of the oath you took and the promise you made.

It is very important to you, as a follower of Jesus, that people can trust what comes out of your mouth. In everyday life you don't have to swear to God that you are telling the truth, or you don't have to text the right slang (omg or stg) to let someone know you are being honest this time. Jesus tells you not to do that. "*Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' No.*" Foolish, unnecessary oaths are the language of the devil. They take God's name and the things of God and trivialize them. Don't do that. People should be able to trust your integrity. They should be able to trust what is coming out of your mouth, and that you are going to do what you promised to do, just because you said it.

So how righteous do you think you are? Do you think your righteousness surpasses the technical righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law? As you listen to what Jesus teaches, you start to grasp what the law of God is really all about. It does address actions and it does address words, but it even reaches down into the very depths of the human mind, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. As you listen to what Jesus tells you, you come away with a better understanding of yourself. But it's not a pleasant understanding. The natural inside is evil. There's sin in there. Subject to judgment. Liable to hellfire. That's why in his Ten Commandments hymn, Luther concludes every stanza with, "Have mercy, Lord!"

One man's righteousness truly surpassed technical righteousness. Only taking oaths when necessary and keeping every promise ever made. Having perfect regard for marriage. Never a lustful urge. Maintaining perfect peace with people, as far as it depended on him. Not a drop of sinful anger from his mouth or even in his heart. It's astonishing that anyone could even fulfill the law of God and live a life like that every minute of the hour and every hour of the day after day after day. But that's exactly what Jesus Christ did. He fulfilled all righteousness. As for you, by believing and trusting and having confidence in him, who also suffered the judgment you deserved, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is credited to you. It's now your righteousness as a gift, and the kingdom of heaven is truly yours. This is the saving grace of God.

So now you are a follower of Jesus. Practice his commands. Teach his commands to others. Do what Jesus tells you. It's all good, and it's all for the praise of your Father in heaven. Amen.