

“WITHOUT EXCUSE”

Matthew 5:21-37

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany (Series A)

February 12, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 21 through 37. It is on page 684 of the pew Bible.

This week we continue to read through Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount.” Jesus teaches with a level of authority not shared by other teachers of the day. So in this passage he corrects some common misunderstandings about God’s Law by teaching its strict and literal interpretation. And by doing this, Jesus leaves us all without excuse.

Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 5, we begin reading at verse 21.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² 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. 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 Come to terms 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 until 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 everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² 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.

³³ “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.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath 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 take an oath 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.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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Murder, anger, adultery, lust, divorce, and lying.

I should say at the outset that I have no desire to offend any of you. However, if any of us can get through this sermon without being offended, there is probably something wrong. Jesus brings up some issues that might hit close to home. In fact, that seems to be his intention. He wants to offend you. That’s the point.

But I should correct myself already. Perhaps we should use the word *convict* instead of *offend*.

Now, what’s the difference? Both offense and conviction are painful feelings. And both might occur in us when someone like Jesus calls out our sin. But here’s the difference, at least in my mind: when someone offends us, they push us away. We say, “Huh, if that’s what you think, then I don’t want any part of you.” We get offended, and our defenses go up.

But conviction is different. Conviction breaks down our defenses. It still causes pain in our hearts, but instead of pushing us away, it humbles us and perhaps even draws us in for mercy.

And this is what Jesus’ words should do to us today. They should convict us. For sure, Jesus says some harsh things. If his words don’t cause us pain, then we’re not really listening very well. But do not take offense at Jesus. That’s the wrong response. Rather, when Jesus calls out our sin, we should be convicted. We should be humbled before God’s holiness, and we should be drawn in to find mercy, because that is really the point of conviction; it should result in repentance and forgiveness.

So let’s start with the sin of murder.

You might be relieved to hear that we’re starting with murder. We generally like this command, and not just because we prefer to not be murdered. If someone asks us which commandment is the easiest to keep, we would probably say, “The one against murder.”

According to our government, at least, the vast majority of people are not considered murderers. Even if we include abortion in murder statistics, the number of people involved climbs to a large minority.

Now, you might be thinking, “Pastor, why do you have to bring up abortion? It’s such a controversial issue that you’re only going to upset someone by insisting it is a sin.”

Yeah, that’s possible. But it is a sin, and if we don’t call it one, then we can’t forgive it, and forgiving it is much better than ignoring it. When our consciences accuse us, “we flee for refuge to [God’s] infinite mercy.”

So the number of murders in our land is high—too high. But this still does not convict most of us as murderers. We still have a way of feeling morally superior to ... at least some people.

But before we use the sin of murder to justify ourselves, Jesus says, “Not so fast. Why don’t you add your own name to that list?” Or, more precisely, he says,

“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.” (5:21-22)

Just when we think there is one commandment that allows us to feel morally superior to at least a few people, Jesus snatches it away.

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Now, Jesus isn't replacing the Fifth Commandment. He's not even adding to it. He's simply interpreting it to mean what it always meant. And by doing this, he abolishes the interpretation that the only thing forbidden by the Fifth Commandment is literal murder. Every word or deed that harms our neighbor is the sin of murder.

When God gave the Fifth Commandment, he did not intend to say that we can do whatever harm we want to people as long as we don't kill them. That's ridiculous. God forbids everything that intentionally harms our neighbor.

So the *Small Catechism* gets to the point of the commandment when it says, “We should fear and love God so that we do our neighbor no bodily harm nor cause him any suffering, but help and befriend him in every need.”

The principle taught in the Fifth Commandment is not simply, *do not murder*, but, *do not hurt your neighbor at all*. And Jesus applies this to our words. It is not simply deeds that harm our neighbor and violate God's will, but deeds *and* words.

So Jesus brings out the full meaning of the Fifth Commandment. He teaches us to be kind and to make peace where we have sown discord.

This is good. But it also creates a problem for us. Jesus leaves us without excuse. We have all broken the Fifth Commandment and are rightly called *murderers*. We have no excuse.

This exposes a common myth about God's Law that was very popular in Judaism and, sadly, continues to exist among Christians. Here's the myth: *God's Law is attainable*. That's a myth. It's not true.

We might assume that if God gave us a commandment, then we must also be able to keep it. We think, “God wouldn't command us to do anything, unless we also have the ability to do it.”

The truth is, God gave us his Law, because he does want us to obey it. The Law is his will for how he wants his creation to function. But it doesn't mean we can keep it—not perfectly. It simply means God *wants* us to keep it. And to whatever extent we do keep his commandments, that is a good thing. If the commandment, “Thou shalt not murder,” reduces the number of murders, that is a good thing, even if it doesn't eliminate all murders. God gave us his Law because his Law is good for us.

And generally speaking—not always, but generally—obedience to God's Law does make life on this earth better—but only life on this earth. Obedience to God's Law will not earn us entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, simply because we cannot keep God's Law. It is *not* attainable—not for fallen and sinful human beings.

So in addition to teaching us God's will, the Law also teaches us something else. It teaches us about ourselves. It teaches us that we are sinners who break God's Law on a constant basis. It convicts us of our sin so that we will recognize the need for a Savior. It leaves us without excuse.

And this is good. Everything God's Law does to us is good, even if we might not like it—even if it condemns us.

So Jesus correctly teaches the Fifth Commandment, and he leaves us without excuse. And this is a good thing. So do not take offense at Jesus. Do not pull away. Rather, draw near for mercy.

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Let’s keep going. Jesus goes on to do say similar things about adultery:

“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.” (5:27-28)

The Sixth Commandment does not merely forbid the literal act of adultery. It forbids all forms of sexual immorality, whether they are sins of deeds, words, or even thoughts. So Jesus jumps from the literal act of adultery, all the way to lustful thoughts. And by jumping this far, he also includes everything in between. And there is a lot in between. You don’t need me to expound it all for you. And I’d rather not. If it is a sexual thought, word, or deed involving anyone who is not your husband or wife, it is a violation of the Sixth Commandment—plain and simple. If you are still unsure about something, you can ask me later, but the mere fact that you are wondering about it, probably means you already know the answer.

Even the lustful thoughts that occur only in our minds are still sin—for two reasons: first, because God sees our thoughts and judges our hearts; and, second, because thoughts often lead to outward actions. The more you lust after a person, the more likely you will be to pursue a sinful relationship. The more you look at pornography, the more likely you will be to engage in other outward acts.

Never mind that these things are sinful in themselves, but they also lead to further outward sins. And sexual sin has this unique ability to escalate and entrap us.

So Jesus teaches his disciples to take radical measures to cut off the temptation before it leads to deeper sins. He says,

“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. (5:29-30)

Even if this sounds a bit radical, there is an inescapable logic to what Jesus says. But before we all tear out our eyes and cut off our hands, let’s think about this for a moment. Is it really our eyes and hands that cause us to sin? Or does sin arise in our hearts? And by *heart*, I don’t mean the literal muscle that pumps blood, so don’t cut that out either. I mean our sinful flesh—our immaterial nature—which has been corrupted since the fall into sin. So God calls us to wage war against the sinful nature. It is not your literal eyeball that causes you to sin. And it is not your eyeball that tempts you either. It is the things your eyeball sees that tempt you. So we should cut off those temptations.

If something tempts you, get rid of it. If there is a restaurant where the servers cause you to lust, don’t go there. And don’t make it a matter of boycotting the restaurant. Don’t consider it a protest against that business. Make it a protest against your own sinful flesh.

Or if there is a TV show that causes you to lust or cultivates anger in your heart, stop watching it. Cut it off. And, again, don’t make it a boycott. You don’t need to tell Facebook. Just make it a protest against your sinful flesh. Avoid the things that tempt you.

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So lust is the first of two specific kinds of adultery Jesus mentions. The other form is divorce. And I realize this might be another sensitive issue, but Jesus brings it up, and we have to deal with his words. And if the Law condemns us, then “we flee for refuge to [God’s] infinite mercy.”

Much like our society today, many of the Jews, perhaps even a majority, believed it was lawful to divorce your spouse for any reason. I don’t know how common it was, but they had their version of “no-fault divorce,” even though there really is no such thing in God’s eyes.

In Deuteronomy 24, Moses gave some protections for women who were divorced. And there was a rather loose interpretation of this that became popular by the time of Jesus. They twisted Moses’ words to allow for divorce in virtually any circumstance, when Moses never said anything remotely close to that. I’ll spare you the technical details, but if you want them, let me know, and I’ll be happy to walk through it with you.

Jesus corrected their misunderstanding by teaching what the Old Testament always taught—that divorce always involves adultery. If adultery takes place before divorce, it can provide legitimate grounds for an innocent party to seek divorce. But if adultery has not already taken place, then the divorce itself results in adultery. Therefore, it violates the Sixth Commandment. And Jesus corrects the misinterpretation by returning to the original meaning of the Law.

Now, I should note that Jesus does not say everything there is to say about divorce and legitimate grounds for it. What he says is certainly true, but it is not exhaustive. If you want to talk more about this, let me know, and I will be happy to walk through the various Bible passages with you.

And, again, you might be wondering why we have to talk about this. Divorce is such a common thing in our society, that maybe we should just let it go. But Jesus doesn’t let it go. We have to maintain that divorce involves sin, and if we don’t call it sin, then we can’t forgive it.

So Jesus teaches the full meaning of the Sixth Commandment, but this does not enable us to fulfill it. It does not enable us to attain righteousness through the Law. In fact, it does the exact opposite. It reveals to us our depravity. It leaves us without excuse. And this is good, even though it hurts.

The same thing happens when Jesus goes on to talk about lying. And I won’t spend much time on this except to say, it is not just breaking a sworn oath that is sin, but all forms of dishonesty (5:33-37). Again, the Law leaves us without excuse. And this is good, even though it hurts.

So it’s okay if Jesus’ words cause you pain, but do not take offense at them. Do not pull away. Rather, accept the conviction. Be humbled. And let us draw near for mercy, because that is what Jesus gives us. The Law shows us our need for a Savior. And Jesus is that Savior.

It is a good thing that Jesus exposes all of us as murderers, adulterers, and liars, because it’s true. He sets us all on a level plain as sinners without excuse. But he does not leave us there.

Jesus came, not merely to *teach* the Law, but to *fulfill* the Law (5:17). He practiced what he preached. He obeyed the Law for us, but still suffered the condemnation of it.

He took the nails you and I were supposed to take. He shed the blood you and I were supposed to shed. He did this to forgive the sins of murderers, adulterers, and liars everywhere. This is done. It’s history. You can’t pull out those nails any more than you can undo your own

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sin. But that’s what the nails did. That’s what the blood did. It is his sacrifice—and only his sacrifice—that cleanses murderers, adulterers, liars, and every kind of sinner you can imagine.

This is our refuge.

Jesus teaches us the Law because he wants us to obey it. And he also wants to leave us without excuse, so that we will know to flee for refuge to the only thing that can save us—God’s infinite mercy. God is merciful to you for the sake of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ alone. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.