

This morning we'll continue our exploration of Christ's, Sermon on the Mount, discovering what it really means to be his disciples. Jesus spoke to the heart of the people in this sermon amidst their corrupted culture. Despite their distance in time and geography, their situation wasn't so different from ours. That's what we're going to talk about this morning and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 5:27-32: Jesus preached, "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."

During Jesus' time the teachers of the law had wrestled over the meaning of the 6th Commandment, "Though shall not commit adultery." Because the penalty was quite severe, that is, stoning, they wanted to get into the gray areas. For instance, what if a couple was separated but not divorced? If one of the persons had relations with a 3rd party was that adultery, and should they be condemned for it?

Because Jesus was always good at cutting to the heart of the issue, he directed men, the usual perpetrators of adultery, to pluck out their own eyes if they looked at a woman with lust. In other words, get after the root of the matter before you start ruining other's lives.

Last week we talked about insulting and demeaning others, and how Jesus said that was like murder, for our nasty words spring from the same rotten root system in our hearts as our outward actions.

Fortunately cursing a person and murder “are not the same in every respect” (Gibbs), however. That’s why we don’t go to prison for our words and our thoughts. But our relationships with each other do impact our relationship with God, and so Jesus wants us to beware, to be conscious of these things, and he wants us to be disciplined in what we think, say, and do so that they lineup with what we believe.

Another cultural-theological issue in Jesus’ time had to do with divorce. As I’m sure you know, even the people of God look for ways to justify bad behavior. We have the best of intentions and we want to do what is right, but sometimes our feelings take over, and our good intentions fly out the window.

In Jesus’ day, the religious leaders had a Bible passage about divorce over which they struggled. It reads, **Deuteronomy 24:1-4, “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, he may write her a certificate of divorce and put it in her hand and send her out of his house....”**

“**Some indecency**”: What does that mean? One group of teachers said it meant adultery. However, the second group of teachers said it meant anything the husband defined as “indecent.” This internal argument among the supposed authorities of the Bible is what Jesus was addressing in his sermon.

And just as he always did, Jesus brought everyone back to the heart of the matter: Relationships. He wanted the men to know that when they divorce their wives, they hurt everyone around them, and they damage their relationship to God. He wanted them to know they had a personal responsibility for the welfare of the woman to whom they pledged themselves before God and man. He wanted them to know that if they look at women lustfully, and that if they divorce their wives, they are unraveling the very fabric of human civilization.

We see this today in our own culture amidst the brokenness of families, and the difficulty it causes on so many levels. And Jesus cares, for what’s going on

between people in their hearts is directly related to what's going on between people and the Lord. How can we hope for a glorious eternity when the only thing we know is sorrow and heartache? How can we share this love which God has poured down on us through his son Jesus, when the only thing that is on our minds is the lust of the flesh?

In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul provided another condition for a valid divorce: He said one could only divorce their spouse if they were abandoned. But Jesus also said adultery was the only reason. So what are we to make of this? Each one was speaking to a specific audience about a problem which was a big one for them at the time.

In their preaching, Jesus and Paul used exaggeration and hyperbole to make their points. Which is to say, even if I plucked out both my eyes and sawed off both my hands, I'm sure I would continue to find ways to sin! On the other hand, this does not give us permission to do whatever we please.

How often have we heard someone say, "Hey, I was just looking!" Jesus was speaking to this, knowing full well that "looking" leads to imagining, which leads to desiring, which leads to scheming, which may ultimately lead one to the moral disaster of adultery, which leads to the implosion of the family.

Jesus wanted us to treat temptation as a very real threat to our sanctity, our relationship with God. He wanted us to get at the root cause of the things that are going on in our hearts.

Jesus was talking to men who treated their wives, their soul mates, worse than they treated their cattle. After all, they would never leave a cow to fend for itself, homeless and without anyway to provide for its daily needs. Jesus was teaching these men to take responsibility for the welfare of everyone in their homes.

So you see why Jesus was severe, talking about plucking out eyes and sawing off hands, and why he stuck his foot right in the middle of this game with words the religious mucky-mucks were playing with marriage and divorce. Jesus wanted to change the way people looked at one another, how they treated each other, and how they thought about their relationship with God. He wanted to change their hearts.

It's the same today. Jesus wants to transform us from the inside out. He wants to come into our hearts and make us into new creatures, children of his Father who art in heaven.

Friends in Christ, Jesus died for our sins, and he left behind an empty tomb on the third day. Fifty days later he sent down the Holy Spirit who now dwells in us all.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us give thanks for everything the Lord has done to lift us up from the darkness of this world.

This week let us call on our Savior Jesus when we are faced with a temptation that threatens to unhinge God's work in our hearts.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.