

For the Love of God!

February 16, 2020

Matthew 5:21-37

For the past couple weeks, the Gospel readings have been breaking down Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" into individual sections, each building upon the last. This week is no different, digging deeper into just what it means to be "exceedingly righteous" and to have "righteousness greater than the Pharisees and the scribes." However, up to this point, the descriptors given of what a "disciple" is/does have been physical. They are humble, are kind to others, fight for the downtrodden and marginalized, etc. What needs to be understood here is that much of these instructions were thought to be "action oriented" (i.e. it was one's outward behavior only that made someone a disciple or "righteous"). Today's section though takes that assumption and expands upon it, explaining how righteousness is more than just skin-deep. It's more than just one's actions. Rather, "righteousness" digs down to one's very soul and thoughts, and Jesus explains it in relation to four different "sins."

The first of the four that Jesus tackles is "murder." This word "murder" we understand as being the taking of another person's life outside of the context of defending yourself or another person, whether intentionally or not. Jesus expands upon this idea though, dictating that "murder" in fact does not have to involve the physical taking of another person's life, but can very well be as simple as begrudging another, being angry with another, or speaking unkindly of someone else. Put another way, Jesus is saying that it is sinful to not address the issues we have with one another, but rather to talk *about* those with whom we have issue and letting our distaste for another simmer and boil. Being that we are children of God, the same God that loved the world so much that He gave His only Son for our salvation, we must reflect that same love, and harboring grudges, hatred, and not resolving issues is the antithesis of the attitude of a disciple of God. Jesus doesn't stop here, though.

Jesus then moves on, speaking next of the sin of adultery. Now, we hear this and we think of someone having an affair and betraying the trust of their spouse. However, Jesus explains that it's more than just engaging in these types of relationships that are sinful. Truly, it is also the carnal lusting after another person that is a sin. Lusting after another person, especially another person's husband or wife, is to commit adultery in your heart, the source of your morals and faith. To lust after another person is to express a willingness to commit adultery or to cause them to commit adultery, which itself is just as bad as actually doing it. This is partly to do with the first-century image of women as objects and the therein refusal to recognize women as those made in God's image just as much as men are, a very provocative statement in Jesus' time. This however is not all Jesus has to say about adultery.

On a somewhat related topic, the third "sin" Jesus speaks about is that of "divorce." He says that to divorce a spouse for any other reason besides adultery is to cause the spouse in turn to be adulterous as well as those with whom the now ex-spouse is married. We have here a strong emphasis placed on the covenant that is marriage, saying that, though the Law allows for a man to divorce his wife should he find something "objectionable" about her, the only justified reason for a divorce to happen is lack of chastity. Anything less than that again ties into the

objectification of fellow humans and the demeaning of them in doing so. Though not explicitly stated, Jesus is making a provocative point here that men and women are equal, that neither men nor women are objects to be used for the satisfaction of the other.

Lastly, Jesus speaks about “swearing” or taking of oaths. Now, this is something we are familiar with as humans. If we are ever called as a witness to a trial, we must swear to tell “the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Children have many different forms of making “oaths”, including but not limited to “pinky swears” and a favorite when I was a child, “Cross my heart and hope to die.” When an elected official is inaugurated, they are “sworn” in and swear “to uphold the Constitution”, to uphold bylaws, and to do what is in the best interest of all persons they represent. While there is a possible view of this being in relation to taking the Lord’s name in vain (i.e. “I swear to God . . .”), what this is likely in reference to is actually the simplicity of being honest. Jesus is emphasizing the necessity only to answer “yes” or “no,” saying that anything more than that, any reasoning that needs to be added to one’s answer of “yes” or “no”, is “from the evil one” because it might be perceived as deception and/or manipulation. Imagine for a moment that you made cookies while babysitting your child or grandchild. You told them not to have a cookie, but they take one anyway. You ask them if they took one, and they say, “Yes, but I bumped the cooling rack and one of them fell on the floor. I figured no one else wanted to eat it. So, I ate it to save everyone else the trouble.” In this situation, this reasoning given is an attempt to lessen the trouble if not to get out of it. The reasoning given to a “yes” or “no” is perceivable as manipulation of a situation to result in one’s favor. If we as God’s children live in an honest relation to one another, do we really need more than just “yes” or “no”?

In the end, what this boils down to is love. If a person has hatred and anger towards someone, there’s no room in that person’s heart to love that same person who also is made in God’s image and is a temple for the Holy Spirit. If a person views another person as anything less than a beloved Child of God and an equal, or if one casts another aside, what capacity does that person have to love another? If a person is dishonest and/or manipulative, if a person does only what is in their own best interest and does/says whatever it takes to get what they want, what love have they for anything/anyone except themselves? To be a disciple is more than just to act lovingly or to speak lovingly. To be a disciple is to love. Period. To be a disciple is to be able to forgive others because you love and value them as an equal and, out of that love, wish to be in an honest and loving relationship with them. To be a disciple is to have the relationship with one another that not only does God want to have with us but that God wants us to have with one another. In closing, I ask you all to consider not just how you act or speak but how you think. Do you not just act and speak with love, but do you exemplify that self-same love with your heart?