

**Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 16, 2014**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Matthew 5:20-37 (NIV)**

For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. 21) "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22) But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23) "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24) leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. 25) "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26) Truly I tell you, you will not 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 tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29) If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30) And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. 31) "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32) But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33) "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34) But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37) All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Dear friends in Christ;

You have heard it said that you can see the Great Wall of China from outer space. You have also heard it said that food dropped on the floor is safe to eat if you follow the “5 second rule.”

You may have heard these things but the reality is that you can not see the great wall of China with the naked eye from the space station. Research shows that bacteria don't really wait 5 seconds before latching on to a piece of food dropped on the floor.

Popular opinion and conventional wisdom don't always agree with reality. In our text for today Jesus debunks some commonly accepted ideas about God's law to show us just how impossible it would be for anyone to enter the kingdom of heaven by keeping the Law.

**Theme:** Jesus Explains the Law to Us

1. To show us what he did for us
2. To show us what we can do for him

Our text for today begins at the same place that we ended last week. Jesus said, **“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Jesus shows why that is true by explaining the Law and its impossible demands for us so that we will better appreciate what he did for us by living a sinless life for us.

Notice how Jesus contrasted conventional wisdom with the truth with the phrases “You have heard that it was said” and “But I tell you.”

**21) "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22) But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28) But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

**33) "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34) But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all:**

With his words Jesus wants us to understand that when it comes to God’s law there’s more to it than meets the eye. If it was just a matter of avoiding certain behaviors or actions like killing someone there might be some who could claim that they have kept the commandment that prohibits murder. Jesus uses 3 commandments, the 5<sup>th</sup>, the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> to show us that it’s not quite that easy. It appears that people were familiar with these commandments in part. But they didn’t have a thorough understanding of them. Jesus provides that fuller understanding and explanation.

What does Jesus say about the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment? Even anger subjects you to judgment. There’s a bit more. **Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.** The word Raca seems to suggest an angry word accompanied by an angry gesture. All of a sudden the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment becomes a bit more complicated to keep, doesn’t it?

How about the 6<sup>th</sup>? Even a lustful thought condemns. And what about other sins in regard to the marriage relationship? **It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' 32) But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.**

This is the first of some challenging concepts which Jesus presents to us. Let’s put this in the context of the Pharisees and their “keeping of the law.” Sadly the Pharisees did not have a very high regard for marriage. It was a common practice if one of them wanted to get rid of his wife all he had to do is get the proper piece of paper. In this way he causes his wife to be looked at as one who is guilty of adultery since unfaithfulness is the only acceptable reason for a divorce. Anyone who would marry this woman would also come under suspicion.

Jesus’ explanations of the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment were at odds with the commonly accepted teachings of the Pharisees and they are still at odds with popular opinion today as well. Lax laws and the popularity of immorality don’t make divorce and sexual sins acceptable in God’s sight.

Now let’s consider another challenging teaching in regard to the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. **29) If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30) And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.**

Are we to take these words seriously? Should we really poke out our right eye if it causes us to sin or cut off our right hand if it causes us to sin? Jesus wants us to understand that sin has serious consequences. But there’s more. Jesus also wants us to understand that it’s not the eye or the hand that causes us to sin. If that

were the case it would be easy to avoid sin, simply get rid of the offending body part. But getting rid of the right eye wouldn't stop the left eye from causing us to stumble and we if get rid of the left eye well our mind's eye would still imaging all kinds of sinful images. You see the problem isn't with our eyes or our hands is it? It goes deeper than that as Jesus himself explains in Matthew 15:19. **Out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.** (NIV)

With his words Jesus is pointing out that even such drastic actions as cutting off a hand would be inadequate in enabling us to enter heaven by our own works.

And how about the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment which deals with swearing and the proper use of God's name? Jesus says that there's no need at all to ask God to serve as our witness. A simple yes or no spoken by an honest man will be sufficient in most cases.

**"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34) But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. 37) All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.**

A person taking an oath asks God's to be his witness that he is telling the truth or that he will keep his promise. He's also asking God to punish him if he is not true to his word. The Scribes and Pharisees understood that such a use of God's name was wrong so they developed a solution to avoid coming under God's judgment. They would swear by heaven, or by the temple or by the earth or by Jerusalem or by their own heads. Their concept of oaths provided them with a way to avoid telling the truth or being bound by their word. That was not at all pleasing to God.

This brief consideration of Jesus' words about the Law has shown us the impossibility of gaining salvation by the Law. We'd have to agree that the Law makes impossible demands of us. The law exposes our many sins and our guilt. It shows us our need for a Savior. But Jesus explanation of the Law has done more than that. It has shown us what he did for us. Simply put Jesus did the impossible for us when he kept the Law in our place and offered his perfect life as the sacrifice for our sins.

Humbly we confess our sins and trust in Jesus' forgiveness. That's our life of repentance isn't it? And as we live this life of repentance we seek to express our thanks to Jesus for doing the impossible for us and for taking away the eternal punishment which we deserved. When we speak of the uses of the Law we often say that it shows us our sins and that was true of these words from our text. We also say that the Law serves as a guideline for those who have been saved by faith in Christ Jesus. And that is also true of the words of our text.

Jesus explains the law to show us what we can do for him as an expression of our faith and thanks.

Our examination of Jesus' teachings in this section of the Sermon on the Mount has exposed our sins. Be assured that Jesus no longer condemns you for your sins because he has taken them all upon himself. Take to heart the words of Jesus spoken to a woman whom he had forgiven: "Neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin." (cf. John 8:11)

Now let's consider some of the lessons that we can do for Jesus. Jesus spoke about the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment and pointed out the dangers of hate-filled words and actions. Set aside anger, fits of rage, don't get involved in bullying.

Jesus himself offered some practical advice to his disciples that we can apply to our lives. 23) **"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24) leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. 25) "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.**

Don't harbor grudges, settle your differences quickly. Don't let sin interfere with your relationship with God.

Moving on to Jesus words about marriage and the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. Jesus' words about adultery speak to those who live together before marriage as well as those who are unfaithful to their spouses with an encouragement to make a change in those relationships so that they are relationships which are not contrary to God's law. Such actions may be commonly accepted in our society and culture – but remember the contrast that Jesus set up between what is accepted and what is right.

Recognize the danger of lust and struggle to keep it out of your hearts and don't accept it as normal. The solution is a cleansing of the heart. We need to pray without ceasing: "Create in me a pure heart O Lord and renew a right spirit within me." And as we pray that prayer let us use the power that God provides for the cleansing of our hearts, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament on a regular basis to empower us to live pure and decent lives which honor the marriage relationship.

To those who are married Jesus would encourage you to do make your marriage a priority to do all that you can to honor and love your spouse including being willing to forgive their short-comings.

And then let us consider our conversations. Jesus words about not taking oaths as a part of our normal conversations remind us to be careful how we use the name of the Lord. Sadly God's name is frequently thrown around in a rather careless and unnecessary way by many including Christians. And sadly we often fail to use God's name appropriately in prayer, praise and by telling others of the Lord's love and forgiveness.

Be honest and truthful in your conversations. Speak the truth always so that others don't have reason to question your promises. These are tall orders. But they do reflect the desires of the new man which God has created in us through faith.

In this regard we will never achieve perfection but that does not give an excuse to fall back into the ways of the world. We will continue to fight the good fight of faith struggling against sin even as cling to our Savior's forgiveness. Ours will be a continual life of repentance – acknowledging our sins, setting them aside and trusting in Jesus for his forgiveness.

May the Lord strengthen and encourage us to live such a life with the understanding of what Jesus has done for us.

Amen.