

Our scripture this morning is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, in which He described the traits of people that would follow Him and live according to His teaching. In the sermon Jesus made a statement that His listeners would have found amazing, He said that He had come to fulfill the Law, speaking with an authority that no other person had ever dreamed of assuming. Right at the beginning of His ministry it is said of his hearers: "They were astonished at His teaching; for He taught them as one who had authority and not as their Scribes" (Matthew 7:28, 29).

In our passage Jesus discussed murder, offerings, adultery, divorce, and oaths. But He didn't just repeat them as they had been stated and explained by the Old Testament prophets, Jesus gave them richer meaning by explaining how God truly intended God's people to behave and think in the light of the new life Jesus came to give. He made a fundamental change without altering God's standards: He dealt with the attitudes and intents of the heart and not simply with the external action.

The Pharisees taught that righteousness consisted of performing certain actions, and not doing others. But Jesus said righteousness centered in the attitudes of the heart, and He set an even higher standard than the Ten Commandments by explaining that anger is murder in the heart; lust is adultery in the heart. Time will not permit us to go through all five laws in our text, so I will try to focus on two: murder and offerings, or anger management and true worship.

According to Neighborhood Scout, the City of Flint has a population 124,939. Last year there were 2,326 violent crimes committed, including 39 murders, 140 rapes, 475 robberies, and 1,672 assaults. It is believed by many that many murders are "crimes of passion" caused by anger among friends or relatives. It sounds like we are in need of anger management. But Jesus did not say that anger leads to murder; He said that anger is murder. The Pharisees taught that murder consists of taking someone's life. But Jesus said the commandment extended not only to the act itself but also to the internal attitude behind the act.

It is true that there is a holy anger against sin, but here Jesus talked about an unholy anger against people. In Greek there are two words for anger. There is one that described being like the flame which comes from dried straw; it quickly blazes up and just as quickly dies down. The word Jesus used described habitual anger. It is the long-lived anger; it is the anger of the person who nurses their wrath to keep it warm; it is the anger over which a person broods, and which they will not allow to die. This is the anger than needs managing.

Jesus described a sinful experience that involved several stages of anger. First there was simple anger, assuming a position of superiority over another. This anger then exploded into contempt and derogatory name calling: “Raca!” This is to call a man a brainless idiot, a silly fool, an empty-headed blunderer. It is the word of one who despises another with an arrogant contempt.

These words added fuel to the fire so that the person said, “You fool—rebel!” Here Jesus used a word which means a moral fool. This person is *playing the fool*. The Psalmist spoke of the fool who has said in his heart that there is no God (Psalm 14:1). Such a person lived an immoral life, and who in wishful thinking said that there was no God. To call a person this kind of fool was not to criticize their mental ability; it was to cast dispersions on their moral character; it was to take their name and reputation from them, and to brand them as a loose-living and immoral person.

So Jesus says that the person who destroys their brother’s name and reputation is liable to the severest judgment of all, the judgment of the *fire of Gehenna*. Such wrongful attitudes should be dealt with and made right. Reconciliation between brothers and sister must be accomplished whether the “innocent” (5:23-24) or the “offending” (verses 25-26) brother or sister takes the first step. Without reconciliation, gifts presented at the altar mean nothing: Even on the way to a court trial a defendant should try to clear up any such problem. Otherwise the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court of 70 members, would send them to prison and they would be penniless. Anger is really such a foolish thing, and must be

managed. It makes us destroyers instead of builders. It robs us of freedom and makes us prisoners. To hate someone is to commit murder in our hearts (1 John 3:15).

Remember this does not give us permission to go ahead and murder someone we hate, since we have already sinned inwardly. Obviously, sinful feelings are no excuses for sinful deeds. Sinful anger robs us of fellowship with God as well as with our brothers and sisters, but it does not put us into jail as murderers. However, more than one person has become a murderer because he or she failed to manage their sinful anger.

Jesus also reminded the Jews of a principle about worship that they already knew well. The idea behind sacrifice was if a person did a wrong thing, that sin disturbed the relationship between them and God, and the sacrifice was meant to be the cure which restored that relationship. But there were two important things to consider, first, no sacrifice could atone for deliberate sin. If a person committed a sin unawares, if they were swept into sin in a moment of passion when self-control broke, then sacrifice was effective; but if a person deliberately, defiantly, callously and open-eyed committed sin, then sacrifice was powerless to make things right.

Second, to be effective, sacrifice had to include confession of sin and true penitence; and true penitence involved the attempt to rectify any consequences sin might have had. The breach between humans and God could not be healed until the breach between person and person was healed. If a person was making a sin-offering, for instance, to atone for a theft, the worshipper had to first restore the stolen item to its owner; and, if it was discovered that the thing had not been restored, then the sacrifice had to be destroyed as unclean and burned outside the Temple. The Jews were quite clear that a person had to do their utmost to put things right before they could be right with God.

We sometimes wonder why there is a barrier between us and God; we sometimes wonder why our prayers seem unavailing. The reason may be that we ourselves have erected that barrier, through being at odds with our fellow Christians, or because we have wronged someone and have done nothing to put things right.

Jesus gives another piece of practical advice: if a quarrel, or a difference, or a dispute is not healed immediately, it can go on breeding worse and worse troubles as time goes on. It has often happened that a quarrel between two people has descended to their families, and has been inherited by future generations, and has in the end succeeded in splitting a church or a society in two. If at the very beginning one of the parties had had the grace to apologize or to admit fault, a grievous situation may never have arisen. It reminds us of the Hatfields and the McCoys and their 13 year feud. If ever we are at odds with someone else, we must get the situation put right immediately. It may mean that we must be humble enough to confess that we were wrong and make an apology; it may mean that, even if we were in the right, we have to take the first step towards healing the breach. When personal relations go wrong, in nine cases out of ten immediate action will mend them; but if that immediate action is not taken, they will continue to deteriorate, and the bitterness will spread in an ever-widening circle. This reminds me of several counseling sessions I had last week. A woman came to me and said a friend was upset with her and she didn't believe she had done anything wrong. Later the other person came to talk and she was distressed about family matters that had nothing to do with the first person. I encouraged them to talk and on Friday they had reconciled their issues.

But Jesus may have also been saying "Put things right with your fellow-*worshipper*, while life lasts, for some day—you know not when—life will finish, and you will go to stand before God, the final Judge of all." Once a year, on the Day of Atonement Jews all over the world stop to put things right with God, but this only worked if first they put things right with their neighbor." A person must live so that the end will find them at peace with all.

A scripture that frightened me as a child were verses 29 and 30. Jesus made a surgical demand: He insists that anything which is a cause of, or a seduction to, sin should be completely cut out of life. The Greek word used refers to anything that is a trap of sin or anything which causes a person's destruction. The words can imply a hidden stone in a path against which a person may stumble, or of a cord stretched across a path, deliberately

put there to make a person trip. Or the words give the meaning of a pit dug in the ground and deceptively covered over with a thin layer of branches or turf, so when the unwary traveler sets foot on it, they are immediately thrown into the pit. It is like the situation the New York Congressman found himself in last week over his communicates over the Internet. What he thought of as just harmless fun Jesus recognized as sinful intents from the heart.¹ In saying “do not” Jesus was teaching that we must not see others as objects to be used,² nor must we treat temptations as fun and games.

Thanks be unto God, Jesus’ surgical words were not to be taken literally. What He meant was that anything which helps to seduce us to sin is to be ruthlessly rooted out of life. If there is a habit which can be seduction to evil, if there is an association which can be the cause of wrongdoing, if there is a pleasure which could turn out to be our ruin, then that thing must be surgically excised from our life. The best way to defeat such thoughts is to fill life so full with Christian labor and Christian service that there is no time for these thoughts to enter in; to think so much of others that in the end we entirely forget ourselves; to rid ourselves of a diseased and morbid introspection by concentrating not on ourselves but on other people. The second way to defeat evil thoughts is to fill the mind with good thoughts, Bible reading, spiritual music. We are not to withdraw from life and say, I will not think of these things. This will just cause us to think about our temptation. We can never succeed by trying to save our own lives; but only by flinging your lives away for others.³

Sinful anger and temptation must be faced honestly and must be confessed to God as sin. If it is anger, anger management means we must go to our brother or sister and get the matter settled. If it is temptation we must separate ourselves from the source of temptation so we can truly worship. Either way, we must do it quickly. The longer we wait, the worse

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:30

²Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 606

³Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Matthew : Volume*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 133

our bondage becomes! We put ourselves into a terrible prison when we refuse to be reconciled (Matt. 18:15–20) or when we refuse to leave the source of our sin.⁴

Jesus' way of life is the only way to safety and to security. To some extent every one of us has a split personality. There is part of us which is attracted to good, and part of us which is attracted to evil. So long as we are like that, an inner battle is going on inside us. One voice is inciting us to take the forbidden thing; the other voice is forbidding us to take it. Plato likened the soul to a charioteer whose task it was to drive two horses. The one horse was gentle and obedient to the reins and to the word of command; the other horse was wild and untamed and rebellious. The name of the one horse was reason; the name of the other was passion. Life is always a conflict between the demands of the passions and the control of the reason. The reason is the leash which keeps the passions in check. But, a leash may snap at any time. Self-control may be for a moment off its guard—and then what may happen? So long as there is this inner tension, this inner conflict, life must be insecure. In such circumstances there can be no such things as safety. The only way to safety, Jesus said, is to eradicate the desire for the forbidden thing for ever. Then and then alone life is safe.

Since this is our nature, it means that every one of us stands in danger of the judgment of God. Even if we have lived a life of outward moral perfection, there is none who can say that he or she never experienced the forbidden desire for the wrong things. For the inner perfection the only thing that is enough for a person to say is that we are dead and Christ lives in us. We Christians say as Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2:19, 20) Jesus' standard kills all pride, and forces us to Jesus Christ who alone can enable us to rise to that standard which He Himself has set before us. I pray that will believe this and take action.

⁴Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mt 5:21