

February 12, 2023
Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 5:21-37

MATTERS OF THE HEART.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from the Gospel according to St Matthew, the 5th chapter, which you heard read earlier.

There was a time when much of the world marveled at the American work ethic and American productivity. Unlike other cultures, U.S. workers were known for shunning assistance from others while attempting to improve their own life circumstances by working longer hours and taking less vacation time to achieve their goals. But there is nothing uniquely *American* about taking matters into your own hands to achieve your goals and dreams. It is the desire and work ethic of the old Adam and original sin.

One of the natural man's basic desires is to be God or at least be *like* God. You want to be in control of your own destiny – and that includes your eternal destiny. Because of the sin inherited from Adam, it is more appealing to you and me and all mankind to seek salvation by our own works and deeds rather than the idea of being saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus. A 2020, a George Barna survey found that almost one half of Americans believe that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things during their life, they will earn a place in heaven. Half of those who describe themselves as Christian mistakenly believe that they can earn eternal salvation based upon their own good works. (<https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2020/08/04/1-in-3-us-adults-embrace-salvation-through-jesus-more-believe-it-can-be-earned/>) Only one-third of American adults embrace the biblical teaching that salvation comes through the sacrificial life and death of Christ alone.

In our Gospel text this morning Jesus is teaching believers. He is teaching His disciples, that is, all who have heard His call to repentance and have come to faith in Him. (cf: Matthew 4:17) And that includes you and me. It is culture much like our own. It, too, based its view of righteousness on outward appearances and actions.

You spin the truth to make your actions appear more wholesome than they are. You dress up your sin and transgressions with make-up and new clothes so it does not tarnish your sparkling clean image. Perhaps there have been times in your life when it appeared that you were not going to reach your goal, so you moved the goal posts. Or you were not going to finish the race, so you moved the finish line.

That is pretty much what the scribes and the Pharisees had done with God's Law. They added traditions and ceremonies to the Law which reduced it to a list of dos and don'ts that made them look good and could be kept. It is just like – if you cannot jump over the hurdle, lower it so you can just step over it. That kind of rationalization does not work with God. And while our Gospel text sounds as if Jesus is giving us more Law, more things to do and rules for us to follow, we need to consider the verse immediately prior to our text today, which was the last verse of our text last week. Jesus said:

"²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

When Jesus says that person's righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, He is not taking God's Law and human effort to a higher level. He is merely closing up the loopholes that man had built into His Law that was originally given to the Israelites. When He says:

"You have heard that it was said... But I say to you..." (Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28, 33–34)

... He is not creating new doctrines or Laws. He is essentially saying: *"Regardless of what you have heard, I say to you, this is what this command has meant all along."*

It is a matter of the heart. The spiritual heart. Jesus demands that the believer have a pure heart. (cf: Matthew 15:1–20) The heart is where all God's Commandments are kept. It is obvious when one sins openly and outwardly – but a sin remains sin even when it is committed inwardly in your heart. There are no loopholes, no technicalities, and no gray areas. Jesus fleshes this out in three of the Ten Commandments.

The Fifth Commandment says: ***"You shall not murder."*** (SC 12; cf: Matthew 5:21) Of course, outside of serving your country in war, I doubt that very many of you have ever killed anyone. But how perfectly to you love your neighbor? How quickly do you become angry and lash out with insults toward others? How long do you hold grudges against those who have wronged you? According to Jesus, each of these is just as deadly as pulling out a weapon and taking a life. These sins are matters of the heart.

As odd as it may seem, the Jewish community in Jesus' day was lax on holding on to the purity of the marriage bed. But Jesus explains that the Sixth Commandment is not only about divorce or about having extramarital sex. It is a matter of the heart. Any sexual activity outside of marriage is a sin. But that is not the only way to commit adultery. Jesus says it also comes from having lustful eyes and having mental relations inside one's heart. (cf: Matthew 5:27–28) That is just as sinful. It happens when you are watching TV, walking down the street, or even at the grocery store. And it happens to both men and women alike.

It does not have to be from physically looking at someone. It happens as easily as reading a romance novel or reminisce about that person from the past or dream of someone in the future. When your heart begins to race when you dream of what could have been, it is just as sinful as open acts of adultery. It is not loving your spouse from the heart.

Concerning the Eighth Commandment, the Pharisees had developed an elaborate system to rank oaths as to which ones you really had to keep, while others you could let slide. In our legal

system today, when called to testify in a court of law, the witness promises to “*tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.*” But how often are these words made into a mockery of the truth?

The devil

“... is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44)

He wants you believe that there are **gray areas** in your testimony and such a thing as a **little white lies**. But when you zoom in really close on those gray areas, you will find black and white dots, where there is as much black within the gray area as there is white. It does not matter what color you paint a lie. It is still a lie. It may have a pretty and pleasant outward appearance, but it is still sin in the heart.

It does not matter if your words are framed in the form of a formal oath or your fingers were crossed. You are responsible for what you say and how you say it. When you are caught you try to take words back or attempt to fix what you said by saying: “*Well, all I said was ...*” or “*What I really meant was...?*” Christians must be able to be taken at their word. So let your **yes** be **yes** and your **no** be **no**. (cf: Matthew 5:37) The truthfulness of your **yes** or your **no** is not changed one iota by swearing an oath.

When you look at others or when they look at you, the outward appearance does not tell the whole story. So, too, it is with our righteousness before God. It is more than an outward keeping of the Law. True righteousness is in the heart. When the heart is pure, it never produces anger, insults, grudges, lust, divorce, or even lies. If you and I truly examine our hearts we would find them void of righteousness and contaminated with sin.

You might not be a murderer or an adulterer, but no one can control the little bitty sins and the huge obnoxious sins that daily pop out of the heart. Your heart and mine are diseased. The heart is the source of all selfish and sinful thoughts and the fountain of envy and anger when words slip out. It might not seem fair. You may think: “*Hey! I was minding my own business and temptation just jumped out in front of me. I can't be responsible for that!*”

Jesus says you are responsible. Of course, in our text He really does not expect you to mutilate yourself sacrificing eyes and hands and other body members. (cf: Matthew 5:29–30) He is using hyperbole, making an exaggeration that is not to be taken literally, but to illustrate the seriousness of the sin. He is saying: “*Stop making excuses!*” It is not your eyes or hands that make you sin. It is your heart that causes sin. To be righteous, your heart has to be repaired. Even the smallest sin proves your heart is not pure, and Jesus demands a pure heart.

While some will say that God has rigged the human life to fail and spend eternity in hell – but it is quite the opposite. You and I might have diseased hearts, but God has given us something better than a heart transplant. It is the medicine of immortality. He has given us the shed blood of Christ that purifies every heart. When you partake of His blood in Holy Communion, it flows through the spiritual heart and makes you righteous. His blood gives you righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.

His blood washes away all your sin. It rinses away the big obnoxious outward sins and the little bitty sins in the heart. Jesus' blood has paid for every murderous thought and every harsh word, every affair and divorce and every lustful look that was a little too long, every perjury, and every promise you broke.

Even though your heart is corrupt, by the blood of Jesus, God declares it righteous. Your sins are forgiven. You were once dead in your trespasses, but His blood has resuscitated your heart and given you eternal life.

By Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit transforms your heart. When King David repented of his sin with Bathsheba, he prayed:

"¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

(Psalm 51:10)

David knew his sins but he also knew the Spirit's promise to change him. A pure heart does not mean you understand or do everything perfectly. A pure heart is the heart that has begun to repent and believe. (cf: Matthew 4:17) It is the Holy Spirit who creates clean and pure hearts, hearts that are cleansed of their own peculiar ideas and filled with what God says in His Word in order to consider everything in a Christian way.

The Holy Spirit enables your heart to produce pure actions. Yes, the sinful nature continues to sin. But the new heart gives you the power to love your neighbor, honor you spouse, and treat others with honesty and integrity, performing good works and deeds that flow from the love of Him who first loved you. All righteousness comes from the heart and everything the new heart produces is from faith in Christ. As the Lutheran reformers write in the Formula of Concord:

"Faith is the only means and instrument by which, and through which, we can receive and accept God's grace, Christ's merit, and the forgiveness of sins, which are brought to us in the Gospel promise." (FC SD, III, 31)

"... after man has been justified through faith, then a true living faith works by love. Good works always follow justifying faith and are surely found with it—if it is true and living faith. Faith is never alone, but always has love and hope with it." (FC Ep III, 11)

Righteousness before God is always a matter of the heart. By faith and through the blood of Christ, you have true righteousness in the heart, forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.