

Matthew 5:21-37 New Living Translation (NLT)

21 “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ 22 But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

23 “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, 24 leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

25 “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, 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 hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, 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 be thrown into hell.

31 “You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’ 32 But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

33 “You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’ 34 But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. 35 And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

People: Thanks be to God.

We’ve been journeying through the Gospel of Matthew for the past few weeks. Last week we dove into The Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps the most beautiful and yet the most difficult words in the whole Bible.

We considered Jesus’ blessing upon His followers to BE SALTY and BRIGHT.

We love being BLESSED and being called SALTY and BRIGHT. (Well, maybe not so much being called SALTY, but rather, being called THE SALT OF THE EARTH and THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.) That makes us FEEL GOOD, VALUABLE, WORTHWHILE...

After the challenge and blessing to BE SALTY and BRIGHT, we read this words:

17 “Don’t misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. 20 “But I warn you—unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven! (Matthew 5:13-20 NLT)

And suddenly, Jesus’ words sneak up on us and body slam us to the ground, like a huge professional wrestler. Jesus goes from talking about SALT to MURDER! LIGHT to ADULTERY. BLESSING to LYING.

Who of us like murderers? Adulterers? Liars? Probably none of us, if we’re truly honest. But Jesus cuts to the heart, and we each find ourselves GUILTY in many ways, in our hearts. Who of us can honestly say we have NEVER been ANGRY? LUSTFUL? UNTRUTHFUL? Sin is a matter of the Heart before it ever becomes a reality.

Dr. Dawn Chesser: Reflecting on this passage, suggests that Jesus calls His disciples, not just to *understand* the law differently, but to *live* differently because of this new understanding. Not to “do” something, but to “be” something.”

“Don’t just do this outwardly because the law prohibits it.” But rather, “Be a different kind of person altogether because you follow not just the letter of the law, but because you live the Spirit of the law.”

Sin is a matter of the heart before it becomes an action. A reality. A sin. Jesus begins to delve into some deep areas, that make many of us blush. Truthfully, I am not totally comfortable addressing these topics this morning.

Where does He go?

anger, relationships, and dishonesty

Anger. “According to Jesus, anger is the underlying condition that disciples need to address. Anger left unchecked might not result in murder, but it can be incredibly destructive.”

Jesus tells us: that “we must be reconciled with our brothers and sisters; which is to say, we need to deal with our anger and find ways to make peace—before we can come to the Table of the Lord.” Whenever we share in the Great Thanksgiving, we begin with these words: “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” One the one hand, we emphasize that all are welcome at the Table, but the truth is, not all are welcome. The Table of Grace is open to all, but “the condition for coming to the Table is a repentant heart and a life committed to living in peace with others.” (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

How often do we take this invitation seriously? How many of us recuse ourselves from participating in the holy meal because we are holding onto a grudge against an individual or a population of people? How many of us refuse, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, to work

past our feelings of animosity, and continue to engage in name calling and insults, even while we consider ourselves to be faithful Christian people? (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

Jesus says, “You’ve heard it said ... “You shall not murder,” but I say to you, work on your anger and find a way to make peace even with your worst enemy.” *This* is what transforms the world. (Chesser)

Be a different kind of person because you follow, not just the letter of the law, but because you live the Spirit of the law. Sin is a matter of the heart before it becomes an action. A reality. A sin.

Jesus steps a little deeper.

“He confronts our **relationships**. He tackle two issues: **adultery** and **divorce**. Again, Jesus points not to the laws themselves around adultery and divorce—but rather, to one’s motivations, one’s heart, and one’s thoughts.” (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

(Feminist scholar) Amy Jill Levine notes that “*this* is important as it calls into accountability the way that men viewed and thought about women.” She strongly believes the “focus on *thought*, and not just *action*, implies an objection of the way men view (and treat) women.” And while these words seem to be directed at the marriage relationship, they could be expanded to show us how to treat other people, (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

When have we had thoughts that have belittled others? How have we failed to care for sacred relationships (with friends or family members) by holding on to our grudges, harboring resentments, and refusing to find a path to reconciliation and peace? (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

ADULTERY is listed as a SIN. but Jesus comes along and rattles the routine in a major way. He says, yes, ADULTERY is a SIN. but before you think you are free from sin, think again. He says this SIN starts in the heart. It starts with innocent, but impure thoughts. Lustful thoughts. That is where sin takes hold. That’s where sin is conceived.

Story of Woman Caught in Adultery. John 8

In this story, Jesus turned the tables on the accusers. He didn’t say they were wrong. He didn’t say the woman was not guilty. He simply asked for the one without sin to be the first to throw a stone. He got to the Heart.

You see, Sin is a matter of the heart before it becomes an action. A reality. A sin.

He taught love, mercy and forgiveness.

Law was important, but grace and love cover a multitude of sins.

He saved a woman’s life that day, but He also taught a lesson to the others. We all stand in need of love, grace and forgiveness. None of us is greater than another. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. We all have sinned. None is perfect.

While some of us sin outwardly, others of us have already sinned in our hearts. And just because no one can see our sin does not mean that our hearts are pure.

Sin is a matter of the heart before it becomes an action. A reality. A sin.

“The final category Jesus addresses is **dishonesty**, even though Jesus speaks of **oaths (vows)**. An oath is a ritual action of swearing to honor a promise made to another person. When we swear falsely, that means we have failed to uphold our end of the bargain. In essence, we have lied in our promise by failing to deliver on it.” Sadly, “we live in a time when honesty and truth-telling are no longer normative. People swear to tell the truth, and then they blatantly lie, whether in court, in

politics, in the media, or even in communities of faith. A man's word is no longer assumed to be his honor." (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

"Again, Jesus is speaking of the breaking of an agreement, but *this* is a deeper issue of character. If we are not honest ourselves, how can we expect others to be honest with us?"

"What Jesus is saying to his followers... is that we need to think about our character by concentrating on our roots. Discipleship is less a matter of what we do as it is a matter of who we are. We need to pay close attention to what is on the inside, in our thoughts and our feelings, what is in our hearts."

(Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

"The good news is God knows we can't do *this* perfectly. We can try, and we can pray, and we can work on healing our anger through reconciliation, and we can work on our relationships by doing unto others as we would have them do unto us, and we can work on honoring our commitments. We can work on our spiritual selves. But we will surely be working on it for all our lives and continuing to make mistakes. But we need not worry. This is not the end of us because, as John Wesley put it, we are going on to perfection when our righteousness will be abounding, exceeding even that of the scribes and the Pharisees. And in the meantime, there is grace enough to carry us along, despite our human failure. Praise be to God for grace in Jesus Christ." (Dr. Dawn Chesser, Discipleship Ministries)

Come and See. Come and follow.

Be Salty. Be bright. Be the presence of Christ wherever you go. Be a disciple who brings out the best in others.

Live differently because you follow the Spirit of the law.

Live in such a way that you invite others to be disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen.