

The teachings of the Messiah: "You Have Heard It Said." Matthew 5:17-48

In His day, Jesus was often accused of breaking God's laws by such acts as healing on the Sabbath or eating with unwashed hands, when in reality He was only ignoring legalistic traditions which had grown up around those laws. The Sermon on the Mount was Jesus' extended response to such accusations: saying, that He had not come to abolish the Law but to completely, finally, fulfill every part of it, in a way that no sinful human ever could, but that His followers could also live in such a way that better honors the law which certainly better pleases God.

Jesus then went on to flip our human understanding of the nature of law on its head, showing how both sinfulness and righteousness are not restricted to our external actions, but first begin in our thoughts and attitudes -- in our heart -- which is where God is the first One to see them. As God told Samuel, while we humans look only at the outside, God sees us from the inside.

Thus, the Sermon on the Mount would have us understand that both sinful or righteous living, first begin as a matter of thought, a matter of emotion or desire, which then works its way towards outward action. So, if you can control your thoughts and desires, before they lead to any action; that is the way to *be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.* ^{5:48} Which, if you think about it, is just as difficult as trying to fulfill all of the Ten Commandments by *loving God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength; and your neighbor as yourself.*

So, eventually we come to realize that there is nothing we can do to achieve the righteousness needed for us to live in fellowship with God, which is exactly what the law was placed here to teach us. Such righteousness can only be received by faith, as a gift to us from God, dearly purchased for us by His own payment on the cross. But still, in relation to a life lived by faith, the Law can help mold our thoughts and thus our actions in such a way that, if not perfect, they are still more God honoring.

So how do we move from outward actions which may or may not break human laws to living a life that God would see as "righteous." This is what the Sermon on the Mount tries to describe in five very large, hard to accept sections defining Jesus' idea of holy living.

1. First there are the Beatitudes – the "blessed" verses- in which Jesus describes how our heart's desires can align with God's desires, *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled* (5:6). Being merciful, having a pure heart, being a peacemaker; these are the qualities that should grow in a person truly seeking a relationship with God.
2. In the second "*you have heard it said,*" section, Jesus draws a dramatic contrast between those people living only according to the minimal, external

requirements of God's law, without dealing with their internal, heartfelt, sinfulness. We like to say, *actions speak louder than words*, Jesus says that with God, our attitudes speak both first and louder than any action which might or might not result.

3. In the third section, Jesus contrasts public acts of piety – for display purposes only – with personal, private, heartfelt piety which is where we truly meet God.
4. Then, He deals with how we strive to secure our life and where we store our treasure. Do we worry about our needs and hoard physical belongings, or do we seek God's kingdom, trusting Him to provide for our travels?
5. Finally, the last section contrasts our fallen desires to make distinctions between those we know and love and those we hate, rather than being concerned with loving all others in the same way God loves us.

There is so much that we need to learn stuffed within the Sermon on the Mount, that there have been whole books written and entire seminary courses offered, attempting to unpack and explain these teachings. So, it is probably foolish of me to try to do so in five short sermons, but since that is half the time we have left together, I will try.

How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. So let's begin.

Last week we looked into the beatitudes, Jesus' teachings on how to have a heart hungry for God, this week lets tackle the five times Jesus says, *you have heard it said ... but I say to you*.

However, today's message should come with a warning: it will not be easy to hear; even for us Christians trying to live godly lives in this broken world. Because Jesus' five, "*but I say to you...*" statements dramatically show how broken we still remain; they expose our darkest secrets and deepest fears. There is enough in here to show all of us how far short we have fallen from God's expectation for our lives. So that at the end of our time together today, our best response, mine included, would be to again confess: *Lord, save me, a sinner. Lord, thank you for saving me, a sinner. Lord, help me to live a life more dedicated to You and towards others.*

So let us humbly, prayerfully, with a heart ready for confession, listen to what Jesus would say to us.

<p>You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder'; But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment (5:21)</p>
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Jesus begins this portion of His sermon by expanding upon the sixth commandment – *you shall not commit murder* – to include both our anger or derision directed against another person.

Anger is a natural, healthy, response; it can alert us to danger, it lets us know something is wrong. But our anger needs to be directed only towards correcting a problem that is correctible. When our anger then lingers after the situation has passed or when it is pointed at a person, when it wishes ill towards that person, even if nothing more comes from it, other than you developing an ulcer, Jesus says that you have in effect murdered that person in your heart.

In the same way, when you look down on a person, or when you intentionally insult a person, you have also already murdered them in your heart. In his letter to Christians in Ephesus, Paul advised...

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, do not make room for the devil.

Ephesians 4:26-27

Anger, especially lingering anger easily opens the door for the devil to enter our thoughts. Jesus' solution is that we do not let the day end, we do not offer our worship to God, if we are still holding a grudge against another, or have not tried to resolve a grudge they hold against us. Resolution even with personal – perhaps undeserved – loss beats a lifetime of imprisonment to anger.

The next "*you have heard it said,*" now dealing with God's seventh commandment, is perhaps the most painful for us to hear. Because the devil and our modern culture has finally succeeded in so trivializing the idea of marriage that it's fracturing, in so many different ways, no longer registers in our modern thinking as a sin.

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'
But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart

Matthew 5:27

The modern response snidely asks, *why is God so hung up on sex?* The answer is that God is not so concerned with the act as He is with **the idea of a lifetime of committed marriage between a man and woman – where the two come together to live as one for the blessing of all creation - as the best expression of our being made in God's image.** This is why the act of marriage, as described in

the Genesis creation story – *where a man leaves his parents and clings to his wife, the two becoming as one flesh* - was the very first commandment that God gave us.

When a man and a woman commit to live faithfully together for the rest of their lives, being parted only by death, they are in a personal way reenacting and affirming not only the image of God in which we were originally made, but also the same sacred relationship which God wants to have with each of us. Anything we do which undermines this sacred relationship we have with our spouse or with God, Jesus calls adultery.

The Old Testament prophets labeled Israel’s wandering away after other gods as “adultery” as cheating on their marriage with God. Jesus calls the church His bride and Himself the bridegroom, meaning that we now live with Him in a similar committed, faithful, lifelong, relationship – yes a marriage if you will – for the blessing of the world.

In chemistry, “adulteration” literally means the adding of a foreign substance to something that was pure, so that it is no longer pure. In the same way adding any action or thought to a marriage that was intended to be forever holy, breaks the purity of that relationship.

If we do anything to damage, to weaken, our current or future marriage, Jesus calls this “adultery.” Thus premarital sex, living together outside of marriage, cheating within a marriage, gay marriage, fanaticizing with pornography, and yes even letting a marriage die – divorce – is all adultery. It is all a sinful denial and defacement of the image God living within us and the sacred relationship we had both with our spouse and with God.

No wonder the devil has worked so hard to undercut our thinking on marriage. If in the past you have also struggled or failed in these areas, the best you can do is say “Lord forgive me a sinner,” then seek to make what amends you can, and determine to live your life for the better thereafter.

<p>you have heard it said, 'You shall not swear falsely,' But I say to you, Do not swear at all! <small>Matthew 5:33,34</small></p>

Now, Jesus brings us back to the second commandment against using the Lord’s name in vain. Perhaps we are not so concerned with this anymore because the idea of a person honoring their word has also been greatly cheapened by our culture.

In Jesus' day, the act of swearing an oath was similar to signing a contract. And in His day it was also becoming so abused that Rabbis had ruled any oath which didn't mention the name of God could be broken. Of course the basic idea involved here is the intrinsic honesty of an individual. If you intend to be God honoring in your dealings with another, then you need give no oath as insurance. Old timers lament that there once was a day when a person's handshake was their word. Jesus says that still should be sufficient for His followers. If we do not intend to steal, cheat, or in any way harm another, then our personally given "yes" or "no" should be sufficient.

Next Jesus brings up the idea of revenge.

You have heard that it said,
'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.
If anyone strikes you on the right cheek,
turn the other also Matthew 5:38

Here, His advice to "*turn the other cheek,*" actually expands upon God's commandments restricting revenge. The original instruction of "*an eye for an eye*" is Biblical; it was the first law given in an attempt to apply a just penalty for each crime; thus preventing revenge seeking from escalating (Leviticus 24:17-22). So, "*An Eye for an eye,*" is still a valid legal response. But here Jesus is asking us to go beyond mere legality to also offer forgiveness. Many times I have heard a person say, *I can forgive them what they have done to me, but I will never forget.* Jesus would reply, "*then you haven't forgiven them.*"

Jesus went on to teach His disciples to pray, *forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.* If you want to you can use "debts" or "trespasses," the meaning is the same, it is the condition implied in this prayer that should give us pause. Did we just ask God to base His forgiveness of our sins against Him upon how well we have forgiven others their sins against us? That's exactly what we are saying. Thankfully, hopefully, God in His graciousness does not have to abide by our fallen advice.

Then there is the second bit of Jesus' advice that has moved into our modern speech: "**go the extra mile.**" Jesus will return to this idea in a later portion of His sermon, but His advice here, to *give to whoever asks of you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you,* is a call for us to **live a life of absolute unselfishness motivated by love.** Of course that would be a life we could only live if we had a great faith in God to guide, care for us, and protect us, which is also stated in the prayer Jesus taught us.

Finally Jesus deals with the idea of who should we love, who can we hate.

You have heard that it was said, 'love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you, Love your enemies
and pray for those who persecute you,
so that you may be children of your Father in heaven

Matthew 5:43-48

While the Bible does say "*love your neighbor*," which Jesus also included as part of the "greatest commandment," nowhere does it say, "*hate your enemy*;" this is just another fallen rationalization to justify our own unwillingness to love the stranger (Leviticus 19:18).

With this teaching, Jesus once again turns us towards imitating the heart of God, Who causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on us all, no matter how righteous or unrighteous we may be.

The Bible clearly teaches that our own salvation is based upon God continuing to love us even while we were actively rejecting Him, *while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). So if we want to live as "children of God," we must begin to think like God. It is a hard command for us to "*be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*," but that is exactly the goal towards which Jesus would have us strive every single day of our lives.

That is what these five "*you have heard it said*" declarations are all about:
remembering how our relationship with God is reflected in our relationship with others, and unfortunately how sadly we have fallen short of this goal.
This realization should daily bring us to our knees in prayer, asking God to forgive us our sins and helping us to learn how to forgive others in the same Godly way.

Why don't we begin right now to offer up such a prayer.