

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 5:21-37, “Gospel Ethics”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/12/2023**

When the gospel of God grabs hold  
of a person, a community, or a nation, something happens.

Jesus begins his explanation of this fact by pronouncing blessings on those  
in whom the Kingdom of God is arriving.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are merciful, for they will receive mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

These blessings are qualities that accompany  
the arrival of God’s Kingdom in the lives of people just like us.

These blessings are indications  
that we are on our way toward a rightly ordered life in the world,  
that we are becoming beatitude people.

These beatitude people preserve and enhance the communities they are in—  
which is to say, they are the salt of the earth.

These people are in tune with and reveal the work of God in the world—  
which is to say, they are the light of the world.

Last week, we looked at Jesus declaration  
that despite this radical reordering of values,  
he didn't come to abandon the Law of God—  
instead he came to fulfill it.

He came to open the way for us  
to live with the grain of the moral universe God has created  
instead of living against it.

Over the rest of the chapter, Jesus explodes what had become  
comfortable truisms from Scripture  
and reveals them to be loaded  
with troubling implications for human relationships.

In Matthew 5, he gives many examples of what this looks like from adultery  
to divorce to swearing oaths by higher powers to demanding revenge  
to loving your enemies.

In each teaching he says, "You have heard it said...  
[and then he mentions a well known moral standard]  
...but I say to you."

He starts all of this with a discussion on murder:

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

When I think about some of the times in my life when I get angry,  
this teaching is uncomfortable to say the least.

There are times when I feel anger come up within me  
that I didn't even know was there.  
Do you ever experience that? That's our personal anger.

This teaching also makes me feel uncomfortable  
when I think about anger that resides on a larger scale.

The form of the Greek word for anger here specifically refers  
to anger that is held onto and cultivated by an individual.  
Jesus is talking about holding a grudge,  
a persistent attitude of anger toward another person,  
which is different from being angry at injustice.

Jesus is drawing out the arc of the law,  
which shows us that nursing anger and making sarcastic remarks  
and publicly insulting a sister or brother's  
integrity all come from the same  
poisonous well as the anger that leads people  
to commit murder.

Jesus gives two examples from real life about how to deal with such anger.

We don't deal with anger by suppressing it  
or ignoring it or playing passive aggressive games.  
We deal with anger by dealing with *the person*  
we are angry with or who is angry with us.

In the first example a person remembers a conflict  
when offering their gift at the altar, which is an act of worship to God.

So there's a connection being made between our relationship to God  
and our relationship to our neighbors here on earth.  
Jesus says that we should put our worship on pause  
until we have settled our earthly disputes.

In other words, don't think that your anger at a person  
is unrelated to your worship of God.

The implication is that  
if we do not have the will to reconcile with that person,  
then we are limiting not only our relationship  
with that person but also our relationship with God.

If we are to live as Citizens of the Kingdom,  
we can't revel in our lists of people we love to hate.  
That kind of practice is directly related to the impulse of murder,  
and it does great damage to our relationships  
with each other and with God.

Put positively it means having the will to reconcile  
with that person or group of persons.

We are called to deal directly and quickly with each other.

Can you see why Jesus tells us these things? It's because he loves us.

It's because he wants our relationships with God and one another  
to be much more substantial and loving  
than the fearful and controlling approach of the Pharisees.

If we are going to be a community where reconciliation  
takes place at all levels then we have to deal

with our anger in obedience to God's universal law,  
"You shall not murder."

Next we come to examples of fulfilling the law that  
have to do with adultery and divorce.

Some people in Jesus' day (and in our own day) had the idea that sexuality  
had only to do with physical contact with another person,  
but nothing to do with your heart.

So as long as they didn't actually *commit* adultery with your body,  
everything else had a green light.

And as long as they had a *certificate* to divorce their wives that said,  
"She didn't commit adultery,

she just burned my dinner and complains all the time,"  
the men could cycle through wives whenever they felt like it.

And Jesus looked at this situation and said,

"You have no idea what you're dealing with here.

If you look lustfully at a woman,

you have already committed adultery with her.

If you want to cycle through women,

you are actually *causing* them to become adulteresses  
through no fault of their own,

and you are committing adultery when you marry them."

The men were selfishly abusing the law and it was causing great harm.

Fortunately, for every grand negative "thou shalt not"  
there is a corresponding positive.

Lewis Smedes in his classic book, "Sex For Christians,"  
says that, "If our sexuality belongs to creation,  
our feelings about it can be of a piece  
with God's feelings about what he made."

Did that blow your mind? It should have.

If our sexuality is something God has created,  
then our own feelings about ourselves  
(not just sexuality "in general," but about your own sexuality)  
can reflect God's feelings about what he has made.  
Because God made YOU.

How liberating is that to hear?

This is a point that applies equally to all people at all ages.  
God has an understanding of every facet of who you are,  
and loves you deeply.

Which means whatever our situation in life,  
whether we are single or married or divorced or widowed, young/old,  
heterosexual or LGBTQ,  
or any other situation you may inhabit,  
we can know that God know all that Jesus created  
and God loves what Jesus has created.

God also knows what is out of place within creation  
and *all* of those categories of people I just mentioned  
have things that are sexually out of place in them,  
because we are all sinful.

But the good news of the Kingdom  
is that we are all invited to the table of Christ.

So the foundational place for us to start is that  
God has made us to be sexual beings  
and knew from the beginning that we would pass  
through many stages of life.

To put it another way, God took dust, and he formed it into a body.

God breathed into the body

(notice that he didn't wrap a body around a soul,  
but put a soul into a body).

All people were made in God's own image, and it was good.

OATHS:

Be people of your word.

Story of getting a washing machine part from a guy's front porch.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus uses some strong language. Horrific language. Its startling stuff! Why?

Because he wants to wake people up!

When we hear words of judgement, we must also remember how Jesus made a way for sinful people to come near to God without fear.

When we hear words of righteousness, we must remember how the beatitudes arrive in our lives graciously over time.

Where have you seen fulfillment of God's holy law happening in your world?

Where would you be called by the Spirit to meet Jesus somewhere on that arc along the grand negative or grand positive of God's path toward wholeness and new life?