

Last week we continued our series in Jesus’ famous teaching that we know as “The Sermon on the Mount”. And the basic question we’re asking here comes from the title of a book that helps us understand and apply the Sermon on the Mount to our lives, and that is, “What if Jesus is Serious?” And I think that today’s passage is where the rubber really starts to meet the road for many people...where things start to get real, because Jesus really addresses some things that a lot of people struggle with. Let’s dive into today’s passage, **Matthew 5:21-37**.

More and more over the last few years, I have come to a deeper realization that instead of a right relationship with God governing our lives and extending in to our culture and society, we have instead come up with rules. Rules have replaced self-governance. And we seem to need more and more rules. In 1925, the U.S. criminal code was codified and it took one volume to get it all together. Here’s a picture of that book of laws<sup>1</sup> (**Picture here**). According to a Wall Street Journal Article from 2011 – so this number is probably smaller than the current number – the U.S criminal code in 2010 took up more than 23,000 pages in some 60 books.<sup>2</sup> Those are just the criminal laws that govern us. On top of that is the tax code and who knows what other codes at the federal level...plus state laws, too.



And so the question going through my mind over the last few years is this: **Why do we need so many laws?** What is wrong with us that we need laws for every little thing to keep us on the straight and narrow?

Jesus addresses this in the Sermon on the Mount. He picks out four laws to start with. Three of them come from the 10 Commandments, and one from elsewhere in the Old Testament Torah – “the law” in a little larger perspective. And what we see with each and every one of them is that Jesus takes an item that focuses on an external action, and brings it back to being a

matter of the heart, which was the original intention of the laws. The 10 Commandments, for example, were put in place so our hearts would be right with God and right with people. But over time, the focus simply came to be on the actions themselves...and then they got added onto, as well.

So, Jesus picks on a few of these, and each time, Jesus says, “You have heard it said...but I say...” In their day, this kind of wording was a common way to teach the Hebrew Bible – what you and I call the Old Testament. And the teaching is not contradicting or replacing what they’ve heard said, but explaining it so the listeners would have a fuller understanding. **The meaning is more like, “You understand the Scripture to mean only this, but a fuller interpretation is this...”**

And in each one he takes our focus off of what we *do*, and puts it on *who we are*. This is not because what we do doesn’t matter, but because who we are – on the inside – matters more, and our actions flow out of that. Our attitudes, our thoughts, our words, how we treat others, how we relate to God...all of that flows out of who we are on the inside. I’m reminded of the teaching that Jesus gives later on, in Matthew 15. “The things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart... **“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person”** (Matthew 15:19-20). (Matthew 5:16-20). These things show the defiled nature of a person; they reveal the heart.

By the way, this is a great example of what Matthew writes in the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (5:1), that what we have in this teaching of Jesus’ is the stuff that he used to regularly teach. Besides elevating the condition of our hearts as the primary concern over and above our actions, several of the topics he mentions here are in the sermon on the mount – such as in today’s passage. Jesus taught this stuff on multiple occasions.

So, the point Jesus makes is that it’s the heart that matters. It’s a corrupt heart that leads to murder, adultery, and sexual immorality, and so forth. We can start with murder. Unfortunately, murder is in the headlines a lot. Just this week as I sat down on Tuesday to do a little preliminary work on this

sermon, the jury was just about ready to come back into the courtroom to announce the verdict for Derrick Chauvin. Since then there have been a couple headlines I've seen about murder here in the Seattle area. So, murder happens with some frequency, unfortunately. But Jesus is saying that just because you don't murder that doesn't mean your heart is pure. Even anger falls under God's judgment, so just because you haven't murdered someone physically doesn't mean you're without guilt on this topic.

Now: **Biblically speaking: not all anger is the same. There can be a holy anger...a righteous anger.** We have anger toward our own sin, for example. That's a righteous anger. God expresses anger in the Old Testament with people and people groups who violate their covenant with Him and worship false gods and so forth. That's righteous anger. Jesus, as we probably all know, overturned the temple tables in anger – in fact we looked at John's recording of that event and Jesus' teaching that came after it, on Easter Sunday at the start of this series. That's righteous anger.

The question is: what's holy anger and what isn't – and do you trust that you can discern the difference, especially in the midst of your own anger? We all know our judgment is clouded by anger. I trust my Heavenly Father to know the difference...I trust Jesus to know the difference...I'm not sure I trust myself. **So, we want to be careful with anger, because it's a dangerous weapon.** And if we use it wrongly, Jesus is saying it's in the same category as murder: It kills relationships.

This word, "Raca" (v. 22) particularly gets to this. It's an Aramaic expression of contempt. And when you have contempt for someone, you don't care about them at all. They're so low to you, that they're not even worthy of your anger. That's a relationship that's been killed. And Jesus goes on to say in verse 25 that if we have broken relationships like that, if our attitude toward someone is wrong, we want to mend that - even before you worship God. That's how important it is, Jesus is saying.

So, if Jesus is serious about that, then we better not be cultivating anger. No growing it, tending to it, fertilizing it, watering it, and consuming it like it's food for life, because it's not. It's leads to death, not life. And, if Jesus is

serious, then the consequences are pretty dire, as well – “life in prison” is sort of how he puts it, and I would suggest is equivalent to “hell” that he speaks of shortly after.

He goes on with others: do not commit adultery and do not divorce your spouse, except on the grounds of marital unfaithfulness. There’s a similar theme in these two: in both, the problem on the surface is adultery. The deeper problem is lust. Jesus is saying that adultery is not just physical. It’s committed even when the heart lusts after another person. **The word for “lustfully” (“epithumeo”) is the same root word as the word for “covet” in the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment in the Greek translation of the Hebrew (Exodus 20:17).**

Let me back up for a moment here. The 10 Commandments were originally written in Hebrew, along with nearly 99% of the rest of the Old Testament – about 270 verses were originally in Aramaic out of more than 23,000 verses in the Old Testament. Aramaic was spoken in Jesus’ day (we see “raca” here) and was almost certainly the common, everyday language for them. But the entire Old Testament was all translated into Greek in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries B.C. And the Greek word for “covet” from the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment – which is “do not covet your neighbor’s house” – is the same word translated as “lust” here: “epithumeo.” When you “epithumeo” someone’s house you covet/lust for it. When you “epithumeo” someone, you lust for/covet them.

**So, the root issue behind adultery – which is what leads to divorce – is lustfulness and covetousness.** This is a problem of the heart; it’s a problem of not being satisfied with what you have...what God has blessed you with...of wanting something more or something different. Adultery and divorce are an external manifestation of what’s going on inside a person. Lust isn’t someone else’s fault. Sometimes men blame their lust on women. If you’re a guy and you are lusting after a gal, it’s not her fault. Maybe occasionally women blame men but it seems to be more of a male problem.<sup>3</sup> Regardless, it’s the one who’s lusting whose heart is out of line. So again, Jesus is raising the bar and bringing this back to our hearts and how we govern ourselves.

And by the way: Jesus is certainly *not* serious about doing self-harm to correct the situation. There are two reasons we can be sure of this. For one, that solution is completely contrary to anything that Jesus ever taught – he’s about healing, nor harming. And second, cutting off a limb or gouging out an eye *doesn’t actually solve the problem*. Jesus is using hyperbole and perhaps even some sarcasm here to illustrate the point: an external solution doesn’t *actually* solve what is an internal problem. But he *is* serious – he certainly seems to be, anyway, and it does line up with other teaching of his – that doing whatever it takes to correct the heart is better than the alternative: that your body ends up in hell. The word here is gehenna, and it referred to the city dump in a valley outside Jerusalem. It was a slow burning, stinky place...but it came to be a symbol of hell as we think of it and as clearly taught in Scripture.

**Lastly, Jesus addresses “oaths.” This is related to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment – “Don’t misuse the name of the Lord” from Exodus 20:7.** A false “oath” misuses the name of the Lord because oaths by definition called on a deity to witness them. This was something that spanned across different cultures. In fact, it’s not just a past-tense thing. For example, even today in a marriage ceremony where the bride and groom make an oath to each other when they say their vows, they say, “...before God and these witnesses...” We acknowledge God’s presence and invoke His name as a witness to our commitment and our vow. So, to break an oath that is made in God’s name, is to misuse the name of God. And just as a brief note of explanation: because of the holiness of God’s name (they wouldn’t say the name “Yahweh”), the Hebrews came up with other ways to essentially invoke God without actually saying his name – which is why Jesus talks about taking an oath by “heaven” or “earth” or “Jerusalem” – they were all substitutes for “God.”

The point Jesus is making, again, is what we might call a “heart” issue, and that is of integrity. Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no.” Be the kind of person on the inside whose word is backed up by your actions. And by the way: God’s name need not be invoked in an oath for this point to remain; God witnesses every word we say, regardless. In fact, this is arguably the biggest problem with our Christian witness in the world today: we

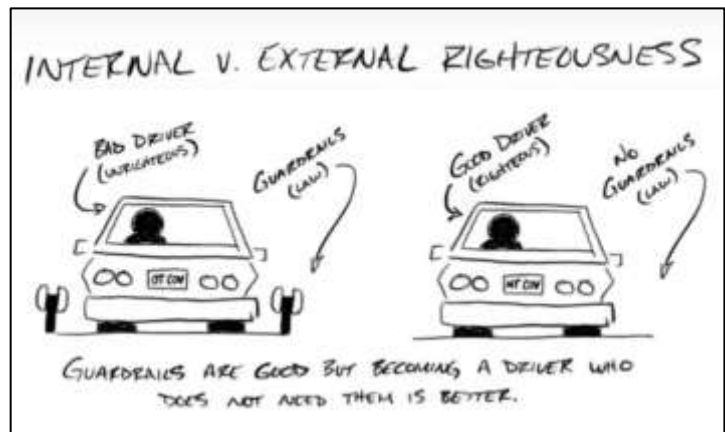
Christians say one thing about what we believe, but then oftentimes live completely contrary. We say “yes” to God on Sundays...we say the Bible is God’s Word...but then we say “no” on Monday and live contrary to Scripture. We drag God’s name through the mud when we do that. It’s a form of misusing God’s name. So, take truth-telling, and truth-living seriously. If we profess to love God and love our neighbor – the two great commandments according to Jesus – then let’s live like it. Let’s take Jesus seriously on that.

**In all of this, Jesus is seeking to show that righteousness is not centered on our actions or even what we say.** All that kind of stuff is just an exterior manifestation of what is going on inside of us. If we focus on that exterior stuff, we’re focusing on the wrong thing. It’s like the story about an 85-year-old grandfather who was rushed to the hospital with a possible concussion. The doctor asked him a series of questions: “Do you know where you are?” “I’m at Rex Hospital.” “What city are you in?” “Raleigh.” “Do you know who I am?” “Dr. Hamilton.” The grandfather then turned to the nurse and said, “I hope he doesn’t ask me any more questions.” “Why?” she asked. “Because all of those answers were on his badge.”<sup>4</sup> The doctor was focusing on the wrong questions.

The right question to ask in regards to our own righteousness – our own right relationship with God first, and with other people in a close second... **The right questions to ask are about the condition of our heart.** It is inside of us where righteousness really resides; that is what really matters.

And it’s not that rules and laws that govern our exterior are wrong. God gave the 10 Commandments, for instance. They help to govern our lives. But they aren’t the end-all, be-all. They’re not the main point, and can’t change the heart; they’re there to help us see when our hearts are out of line. Sky Jethani puts it like this in his book, with **this drawing** (next page):

A bad driver (unrighteous) needs guardrails (the law/rules) to stay safe; a good driver (righteous) does not. Guardrails help a driver to stay on the road in an emergency...they can prevent a complete disaster; but even hitting a guardrail causes damage.



“Guardrails are good, but

becoming a driver who does not need them is better.” Isn’t it better to be a driver who doesn’t even need the guardrails? I have three kids who now know how to drive (giving you fair warning). Never once have Gwen or I suggested to them that guardrails are something you want to use to keep you on the road!

Similarly, the laws we have – even the Biblical laws such as the 10 Commandments – are not what we really want to use to keep us on the straight and narrow path of life and faith. So: **The better way to go is to have your heart in tune with Jesus so you would naturally stay on the straight and narrow path.** Do we really need to be told, “Don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, and don’t say one thing and then do something else”? I mean, we really ought to be saying, “Thanks, Captain Obvious!” And yet we need to be reminded of this stuff and be reminded of how serious these things are because we tend to view ourselves through rose-colored lenses.

So: How’s your heart?

Is it in tune with God and staying on that straight and narrow path? No matter how much so it is, no one is perfect. To be sure, when we stray off the path and hit a guard rail, or bust through the guard rail, the good news is that God forgives us through Jesus Christ. His life, his death, his resurrection together fulfill the law and the prophets, as we saw last week; and through faith in him, God sees our hearts as righteous. **As a result, the cross is the ultimate “guard rail”: Jesus’ death makes us right in God’s eyes even when our hearts are far from him.** It’s the law above all laws, the place where love and justice intersect to make us truly righteous and bring our hearts in tune

with our heavenly Father. We all need that final guardrail of the cross in our lives, because no one's heart is perfect; no one is perfectly righteous, except Jesus. And so Jesus' invitation here in the Sermon on the Mount and throughout his ministry is to trust Him.

So, let's be people whose hearts are like Jesus': open to the leading of the Spirit, and in tune with our heavenly Father. And when our hearts do get out of whack: when we commit murder even with our anger; when we lust and covet, when we lack integrity...when these things happen, we can confess those things, and give thanks and praise to God that he's given us laws to help us see our faults and get our hearts back in tune with him. And he's given us Jesus, who is so serious about this stuff that he stepped down from heaven, lived, died on the cross and rose from the grave...and he is the one who gets our hearts in tune with God for eternity. Let's pray...Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://extent-of-regulation.dhwritings.com>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304319804576389601079728920>

<sup>3</sup> Women are certainly capable of lusting...but there's tends not to originate with "looking" at a person lustfully, the issue Jesus raises here.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rd.com/jokes/doctor/>