

The Call to Fidelity

A couple of weeks ago Bob introduced this section of the Sermon on the Mount by noting how, when Jesus would start teaching on a subject, He would say, “You have heard it said” and that, when He did that, He was referring to the law, or to a common saying that was supposed to interpret the Old Testament law. “You have heard it said, ‘Do not murder’”, or “You have heard it said, ‘Do not commit adultery’” - those ones are right from the Ten Commandments. Or, “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy’” and that was taken from the command in Leviticus to love your neighbour, but then this interpretation was added on to it - ‘hate your enemy’. But then Jesus would reinterpret that saying in a whole new way, in a way that focussed on the relational dimension more than the dimension of external action, the deed that was committed.

When it came to “Do not murder”, Jesus said, “But I tell you that being angry enough to think about killing someone makes you subject to judgment - so don’t get carried away by your anger.” While the Jewish person who obeyed the law of Moses would agree that it’s right to love your neighbour, Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for people who are persecuting us. Jesus took what the law said, the legal language, and interpreted it to His listeners as being about what’s in our heart. He was also saying that the law was framed for our benefit, to provide the basis for good relationships among human beings. If we follow the spirit of the law, we will be able to carry on meaningful, generally peaceful and helpful relationships with those who live around us, those with whom we have frequent contact. If we refuse God’s law, and the message it brings about our heart, we are more likely to live in conflict.

Today we’re going to look at the other three sayings that Jesus expanded on, sayings that once again point to our heart condition, our attitudes, and the fruit that those attitudes bring. So let’s read the text of Matthew 5:27-37:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, 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. And if your right 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 go into hell.

It has been said, “Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.” But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.” But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot even make one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’, ‘no’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Now we have something to talk about!

Always, when reading the Bible, we have to remember that the context is important. Jesus has just said that He hadn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Now, He is taking samples from the law of Moses and showing how they are fulfilled, or, what their full meaning is. As we've seen, the religious leaders of the day had focused their attention - and the attention of those who listened to them - onto external obedience to the law. "Don't murder" was simply, "Don't commit the act of murder." Jesus began this section of teaching by saying that murder begins in the heart, with anger, with judgment, with condescending attitudes towards others.

Now, He shows how His coming fulfills the laws related to marriage and to swearing oaths as a way of making your commitments more binding. Again, the focus of the rabbis, the teachers of the day, was on externals and so they would have understood the command against committing adultery as limited to the actual act. Jesus says, "No, because that's not where adultery starts." It starts in the mind, and it continues in the mind, usually for a long time, before it ends up being acted on.

These were the early days of Jesus' ministry and it was probably too early to think that there would have been large numbers of women in the crowds that were following Jesus. We know that He called His disciples to come up the mountain where He began to teach them, but we also know that when He had finished the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds were amazed at the authority of His teaching. Whatever the number in attendance at this part of the Sermon, I'm going to assume that most would have been men. To these men, He says, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Looking lustfully is not the same thing as looking admiringly. Even in this sexually charged society, you can see a person and think that they are handsome or beautiful without thinking any more about it. That is normal, that is acceptable, and it's not what Jesus is talking about here.

The next stage in the process that leads to sin is the stage called 'temptation'. In this stage, an idea comes into your mind that is not right, not good, not appropriate, and you have to deal with it. Is this sin? No, it's not, because the Bible teaches us both that Jesus was sinless AND that He was tempted in every way as we are. Let me read a familiar text that will remind us of this - Hebrews 4:14,15:

That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Jesus the Son of God. Let us cling to Him and never stop trusting Him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same temptations we do, yet He did not sin.

When we are tempted, we are being enticed to do something, take some action, that is disobedient to our Lord's commands. The draw to take that action is not something you've done wrong because it comes at you from outside yourself - it comes from the enemy, Satan, the father of lies, the deceiver. But, although temptation itself is not sin, how we respond to it can be. If we resist the temptation that is presented to us,

refusing to let it linger in our mind, we're fine. If we give it time to plant itself in our imaginations, we've already stepped over the line. That's what I think Jesus is saying in this passage. The lust comes as one possible response to the temptation and it feeds the imagination with ideas that are inappropriate, perhaps immoral, leading away from God's plan for wholesome relationships between men and women.

But then we get to what seems to be Jesus' solution to the problem, His method for dealing with temptation: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." Now, before you get upset and start to question God's grace in this, please understand that Jesus wasn't telling His audience that they had all better gouge their eyes out, but He was saying that it's better to be short in one area of physical health and strength than it is to be filled with cancer in your spirit. It's better to face a visual temptation with your eyes closed, living as if you were missing that eye, than it is to face the final judgment with this kind of guilt - a guilt that will be exposed there.

The old-timers called this "the mortification of the flesh". We don't very often hear the word "mortification" spoken these days, but let me give you a definition: mortification, based on the Latin "mortem", which means death, in Christian theology signifies the putting to death of sinful desires. That's the sense. If you do hear the word spoken in conversation today, it is most likely to be used in the sense of extreme embarrassment, as in, "I was mortified", and the person might even say they died of embarrassment.

What we need to grab hold of from this teaching of Jesus is that sin is serious and it needs to be taken seriously - we need to resist temptation from the moment it confronts us ... and never let down.

Let me give you the testimony of one man who took this area of temptation very seriously and who developed a strategy for overcoming it:

I have made a covenant with my eyes, not to look with lust upon a young woman
... (Job 31:1)

Later on, Job says that if he has committed this shameful sin, may his crops be taken by someone else and, in v. 12 he describes it as a devastating and destructive fire. Let me be very frank with you all: there's a ton of stuff on your television set, your computer, or in the movies, that you should make a covenant not to lay your eyes on. Change the channel, walk out of the movie, close the tab - don't give a place for things that aren't good.

We could spend more time on this paragraph - it is an important one - but we need to move on to some other important passages.

Twelve women were sitting around a table talking about life when one of them asked for a show of hands: "How many of you have been faithful to your husband throughout your marriage?" Only one hand went up. That night, one of those women shared this story with her husband and then told him that the one who had put her hand up wasn't her. He was shocked, but then she quickly added, "But I have been faithful to you." "Then why didn't you put your hand up?" "I was ashamed." Not 'awkward', not 'embarrassed', but 'ashamed'. And that story was told in McCall's Magazine in 1973.

If you were one of those people who would have felt social pressure to be sexually 'out there' in 1973, you would probably feel like there was something wrong with you if that question was asked of you today.

But we know that this was not God's intention for us from the beginning, from Creation. His intention was that we would be, like He is to us, faithful to one another, faithful to the vows we have made, faithful in the intimacy of marriage.

In this next paragraph we read that Jesus said, "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce'." What is that all about? The certificate was given for the woman's protection, so that she could not be exploited further by her ex-husband or by others. It was a reluctant concession to the hardness in men's hearts, not a free-wheeling permission, as the Pharisees presented it in Matthew 19. Now Jesus goes on to say, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

The woman who has been unfaithful is already an adulteress. Under the Old Testament law, she would be executed by stoning, but Jesus doesn't call for this. In fact, it would have been difficult to get permission from Rome, who now ruled over the Jewish nation, to conduct an execution for this kind of offence. But while not calling for capital punishment, Jesus does say this is a legitimate reason for pursuing divorce. But in saying that, He doesn't minimize the covenant of marriage or treat it like something that isn't as important as it once was. He says that anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Why? Because, the one-flesh union that God instituted from the time He created man and woman in the first place, cannot be broken and thrown aside. It endures, even through divorce. Here's the last verse of Genesis 2:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (v. 24)

The text doesn't say that they'll be 'one flesh' until they are legally divorced - there is the sense of a union that can't be dissolved, even if the two parties go their separate ways, even if they remarry.

If you have been divorced and have remarried, you will have experienced some of the emotional and spiritual tension that that produces. It is difficult and it is painful, because it tears apart something that has become a part of us, part of our physical being. It's like a surgery, except that it involves the removal of something vital to our well-being, including our physical, spiritual and emotional well-being. I know that there are quite a number of you who have been through divorce and those I have spoken to about it don't treat it like a wonderful, liberating experience that they would recommend to their friends. The Bible doesn't see it that way, either, and it calls us to value fidelity in marriage as it calls us to honour our word in other areas as well - which is the final portion of Jesus' teaching for today.

The Old Testament teaching about making vows or oaths is clear: they were encouraged and they were to be accompanied by a commitment to fulfill them.

You shall fear Yahweh your God. You shall serve Him and hold fast to Him and by His name you shall swear. (Deut. 10:20)

You shall not swear by My Name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD. (Lev. 19:12)

If a man ... swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. (Num. 30:2)

According to the people who study these things, the last time a successful candidate for the office of President of the United States ran a campaign with promises they intended to keep was in the 1950's when Dwight Eisenhower was elected president. Since then, it's been all about telling the lies that people want to hear and being convincing enough that they will vote for you. That's a long way from what God commanded in terms of oath-making, but Jesus takes it even further.

Jesus says that anything you add to a simple "yes" or "no" is from the evil one. If you have to swear that you are telling the truth, then you're not to be trusted, so Jesus says, "Don't swear by anything", not by heaven or the earth, Jerusalem or even your own head, but be a person who means it when you say "yes" and who means it when you say "no".

The theme in all three of these sections we've looked at today is "fidelity". Will we be faithful to our marriage partner? Will we be faithful to our marriage vows? Will we be trustworthy in our speech, in the promises we verbalize? And in each case Jesus calls us to a higher standard.

We live now in a world where lying, whether it's in politics, in the media, in business, or in interpersonal relationships is expected, if not condoned. Once in awhile someone will express shock that a promise wasn't kept, but it's all part of the game and no one is really all that surprised. But that slackness about telling the truth should never be the mark of a follower of Jesus. We are truth-tellers, just as we are truth-seekers. We came to faith looking for something that was real and trustworthy and Jesus says, "That's Me!" and then He tells us that that's what He expects of us, as well.

There are tons of reasons why faithfulness is on the decline in our world, but most of them have to do with a world view that is primarily selfish and sinful. It's easy for people who want to avoid responsibility or accountability or selflessness to find excuses for throwing off what they call the 'shackles' of religion. What they are really doing is throwing off the call of Jesus to be a faithful people, a people who have integrity, who can be trusted, who follow through on their commitments. Why? Because that's what God is like with us. He makes tons of promises and He is faithfully carrying them out. He has a plan to redeem and to restore people who have been broken by the evil in this world, and, through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross, He is carrying it out. And Jesus says, "You are to be like My Father in heaven."

Again, the question we ask is why should we be expected to be like God? Isn't that a bit much? And again, as Bob shared with us a couple of weeks back, the answer has to do with God's purpose for us IN RELATIONSHIPS. His wonderful commands are

key to us living well, to having great friendships, to enjoying secure love, to being trusted, respected, even honoured by our community. And obedience to God's commands gives life to our spouse, to our children, to our church, and to our thirsty world.