

Murder in the Heart

Call to Worship: Psalm 66:16-20

1st Scripture: Matthew 19:16-30

2nd Scripture: Matthew 5:17-26

Hymn #218- *All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name*

Hymn Insert- *His Mercy is More*

Hymn Insert- *The Power of the Cross*

Introduction

Having sought to unlock the key to the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount (last time), we now transition into the second major section of the sermon, where our Lord addresses the faulty teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees, who have distorted and misused the Law of God, given through Moses.

And we saw that the key to unlocking this sermon, is summed up in recognizing the following:

1) Our Lord is not adding to, or changing the Law, in any sense, whatsoever, in this sermon. Rather, He is fulfilling it, leaving the Law in place, unto its full and proper obligation, until heaven and earth pass away. And so, He is correcting what has been falsely taught by the Scribes and Pharisees; He is stripping off the layers of mold, with which, they have covered the true intent of the Law.

2) While all of the Law remains in tact, as we have seen last time, it reaches and meets the church, as a people who have reached full maturity. The shadowy sacrifices of the Old Covenant have now reached their substantial perfection in Christ. The shadowy laws of separation, which separated the Israelites from all of the nations, have now reached their substantial perfection in the church, taking on the spiritual element of being separated from the world and from sin. And the moral laws still apply, but in accordance with their true, proper and principled intention, which is to take precedence over merely observing the letter, which brings us to our final key observation.

3) In keeping with what we have gone over last time, God is concerned with prioritizing the “spirit” of the law, over and above the “letter” of the law. This is not to say that the letter should not be observed, but simply that the spirit and principle of the law should be given the priority.

All of that said, we now turn to the six, “You have heard it said...but I say to you,” statements, made by our Lord, as He seeks to correct what the religious leaders have been falsely teaching about the Law. And again, it is important that we realize that our Lord limits these statements to addressing a handful of Law matters, as opposed to going through the whole of God’s Law, for two reasons. First, He is dealing with some of the most obvious abuses of the Law, which the Scribes and Pharisees have been teaching the people. And second, He is establishing the singular, overarching principle, that God is concerned about the heart and the spirit of the law, and not simply the outward actions and the letter of the law.

I. Murder in the Heart

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, *You shall not murder*, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.”

Our Lord then begins by addressing what the Jews have been taught from their leaders (throughout the ages), who have sought to expound God’s Law, but have fallen far short of its true intent. And so, here He states, “This is what you’ve been taught; this is what you have heard about the intention of the Law, concerning the reality of murder. You’ve been taught by your Scribes and Pharisees, that those of old had stated, that committing the act of unlawful murder will put you into the position of having to face the judgment.”

And so, what then is the problem with this teaching? Is our Lord implying that those who commit the act of murder are not in danger of being put to death, in accordance with the Law? Of course not! And so, what is His issue here? He is emphasizing what the religious leaders *have left out*, and not what they have actually stated. In other words, they have limited the warning to simply avoiding the physical act of taking someone’s life unlawfully, giving the impression that one only has to fear being brought into facing grave consequences and ultimate judgment, if they commit the actual act of murder, with no concern for the inner desires of the heart.

And so, our Lord, with the utmost divine authority, corrects the false teaching of the religious leaders by adding, “But I say to you...” (Note: “I,” not in contradiction to the Law of Moses, but in contradiction to the teachers of Israel—it would be a complete contradiction for

the Lord to now be speaking contrary to the Law, when He has just stated that He came to fulfill the Law, and that not one jot or tittle of the law would pass, until heaven and earth pass away. Our Lord, as the One having all authority, is contrasting Himself with the religious leaders, and His teaching with their teaching. That's why He doesn't say, "You have heard or seen that it is written in the Law of Moses or in the Scriptures...but I say to you...").

And so, He states, "But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." That is to say, that, whoever harbors anger or bitterness in his heart toward his brother, for no lawful reason (perhaps out of envy or jealousy), is in danger of the judgment. You see, our Lord peels back the actions and gets to the very heart, itself. You may not commit the actual "act" of murder, but the very motivations for such an act of murder can still exist in a heart that is full of hatred, bitterness and jealousy. Something may be restraining you from committing the actual visible crime, but God sees the intentions of the heart, and if you are harboring inner hatred and bitterness toward a brother/sister, that is murder in God's sight.

Consider the example of Cain and Abel for a moment. In a very real sense, Cain had already murdered Able (in his heart) before he actually struck him dead. Cain had unlawful anger and jealousy toward his brother, because Abel's sacrifice was better than his. Indeed, Cain, rather than deal with his own sin, concerning the failure and shallow nature of his sacrifice, had hardened his heart (and dug his heels in), and he hated his brother, who actually did what was right in the sight of God. But notice, he didn't simply, immediately strike his brother. He added fuel to the fire of his pride, and continued to feed his anger, which in turn, developed into a fierce jealousy and hatred of his brother. And eventually, what was inside, came out, and he murdered Abel. But, even before the actual act, what existed in the heart of Cain was wicked and murderous, and could have incurred the righteous judgment of God, in its own right. Now, this doesn't lessen the gravity of the act itself (the act certainly made matters much worse), but murder had already existed in his heart, before the act actually sprang out of his heart.

Now, our Lord then moves on to expose how such anger could also be revealed, which ought to have required some form of punishment from their own judges, in so far, as it manifested a murderous heart toward a brother. Notice, he adds, "And whoever says to his

brother, ‘Raca’ shall be in danger of the counsel.” Here, we have an example of an individual outwardly slandering his brother and tarnishing (or murdering) his reputation in some sense. And so, something has come out of him, which is less than the actual act of murder, but nonetheless, requires legal action on the part of the courts (the council). The term “Raca” here, actually means “You blockhead,” or “You empty-head,” and the reason why such a statement is worthy of being condemned, is because, particularly in anger, using such terms indicates contempt, disdain and a strong disrespect for your brother.

And then, finally, our Lord takes it even one step further. He adds, “But whoever says, ‘You fool’ shall be in danger of hell fire.” Wow! If that seems pretty harsh, then maybe we have failed to realize just how concerned God is about our words, and how, by them, we could either express love or hatred toward others. The idea here is that, out of anger, an individual takes aim at a brother’s life and soul, by calling him “worthless” or “useless.” It is to take that which bears the very image of God, and to utterly despise it; to rob it of its true value. It is an act of murder against the soul of an individual. [From “brainless” (strong insult) to “worthless” (murder)]

And so, all in all, clearly, we find that our Lord pulls back the curtain of action, and gets to the heart of the motives, inner thoughts and words, showing that the danger of facing judgment in this life, and even ultimately facing eternal hell fire, is by far not limited to actions. This is why the Lord Jesus Christ states elsewhere that every “idle” or “careless” word spoken will be brought into judgment. Now, we will come back to this in a few moments, but for any of you here, this morning, who think that you are not that bad, ponder all that I have just said, and ask yourself what hope you have of pleasing God and meriting His favor by your own efforts! Murder begins in the heart, and murder is executed by our words!

All that our Lord has stated so far, then leads him to declare what He states in verse 23. Verse 23 is an, “In light of what I have just said” statement. He states, “*Therefore* if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (vs. 23-24).

Notice, the profound and sobering nature of these words, brethren, and consider their meaning, carefully. Consider how serious our Lord takes these matters, even within the context

of His worship and the church. Our Lord here states that if you have offended your brother in some way (particularly by your words, in accordance with the context), then make sure you go and rectify that situation first, before offering any service to God. In other words, God would rather you wait; or better yet, keep Him waiting, to make sure you have alleviated any unresolved conflict with your brother/sister first, before offering up your sacrifice (of any kind) to Him! This is one of the reasons that Pastor Doug and I have stressed not taking the Lord's Supper, if you have any bitterness toward someone in the body, or if you know that you have really offended someone in the body in some way. [i.e. unresolved conflict]

Consider what this really meant in the Old Covenant context. If an individual came to the temple and wanted to offer up a sacrifice or a free-will offering to God, and there, they realize that they have not sought to resolve a matter with one of their kinsmen, God would have them put the sacrifice in some holding place there, for a time, until they have gone back and sought to resolve the conflict. And then, they could return to offer their gift to God. That's how serious the matter is to God. He says, "No, Go take care of your heart with your brother first, and then I will accept your gift, but until then, it is not acceptable to Me." Now, we can translate that into serving in various ministries, taking the Lord's Supper, or in offering any form of service of worship to our God, in the New Covenant context, but I think you get the point.

Now, brethren, the encouraging thing about this statement of our Lord's, is that, it does offer an avenue of reconciliation, doesn't it? In other words, the assumption here is, that we will, at times, fall short in these ways. But, in Christ, we are able to rectify things, and to confess our sins to one another, so that, we can be restored, both, to God and others, even when we fall short in these ways. But, that said, all the more, this should compel us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling; to be reconciled; to guard our hearts and tongues, and to have proper dealings with others and with God, when we fall short. And so, our Lord doesn't leave us in a hopeless situation, but He does compel us to act accordingly, recognizing that God is concerned about what is going on in our hearts, and that, our relationships with one another (horizontally), does affect our relationship with God (vertically). That is why God commands us, both, to love Him entirely, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. You can't separate these two commands. If you don't love your neighbor, then you don't really love God. Indeed, one of the ways of testing our

love for God, is to examine our love for one another. “Peter, do you love Me?” “Feed My lambs.”

Finally, in verses 25-26, our Lord uses a parabolic illustration to further compel us to recognize the absolute importance of working through the process of reconciliation that He has just put forth, in verses 23-24. He adds, “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny” (vs. 25-26).

Here then, our Lord presents His disciples with a temporal illustration (an illustration that they could relate to, in this life), but unto the end of carrying them into an eternal reality (which we see, especially, in His last statement). If you have wronged someone; if you have committed some form of crime against someone, it would be better to go and seek to rectify the situation with the victim (your adversary—the one who can bring up charges against you), and to do it quickly, before they go to the law and bring legal charges against you, which can lead to your imprisonment. And so, what is the Lord seeking to convey here? He is seeking to emphasize the “urgency” of the matter, when dealing with the matter of reconciliation. In other words, He doesn’t want us to see this matter as a “back burner” responsibility, or something that can be low on our list of priorities. No, He says, “Deal with the matter quickly. Go and rectify things, before it’s too late, and beyond the pale of reconciliation. Don’t prolong it. Don’t put it off. Put it at the very top of your list of priorities. Indeed, His previous statements, concerning putting God on hold when offering a gift, should have conveyed this, but now, He adds a sobering, condemning aspect to the equation. By every implication, He is stating that this is serious business!

And then, His last statement really ought to hit home, because it elevates what He has been saying by way of temporal illustration, to the place of eternal significance. Notice again, He uses those words, which when used in other places, always refers to the coming judgment, in God’s courtroom, and before God’s throne, where eternal destinies are at stake! “Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.” What is the point here? People will be accountable for their offenses against one another, for their

murderous thoughts and hearts and careless words, and if left unchecked and undealt with in this life, they will be brought up at the final judgment. And never-dying souls will be cast into hell, forever, for such offenses...till every last cent is accounted for. The point is that, something that can be dealt with now, in the present, ought to be dealt with now, in the present, quickly. Because, at the final judgment, that opportunity will be forever lost, and it will be eternally paid for then. Indeed, forgiveness is a wonderful reality, and those who receive it, avoid an eternal weight of sorrow and suffering later.

And so, all in all, brethren, our Lord speaks against the teachings of the religious leaders, because they have placed a limitation on the true intent of God's Law, which deals not only with outward actions, but with the motives, and the intents of the heart. Hatred in the heart and hateful words are worthy of eternal condemnation, in the sight of God, and both, must be dealt with in the present. We confess our bitter and hateful thoughts to God, and seek His grace and forgiveness in Christ. And we confess our offenses (spoken and active) toward others, seeking their forgiveness as well. In these ways, while working to put such sins to death, the Law of God is not set aside by the Gospel, but rather, it is fulfilled in us. Again, this is written to the believer, first, even though, it applies to all people, as well.

II. Concluding Applications

1) Brethren, let these words sober us, and lead us to prayerfully consider how we relate to others, and especially to the brethren. God cares (deeply) about how we relate to one another, and again, how we relate to one another, really speaks of how we relate to God. Consider all of the "love and one another" commands of Scripture. Consider the parable of the Good Samaritan, and who our neighbor is. Consider our Lord's command to forgive one another "seventy times seven." Consider the fact that God is concerned about every careless word that we speak. Consider the constant calls for unity in the body. Consider this very text that we have just gone over...and ask yourself, "Are you harboring any bitterness toward someone else? Or, are you aware of someone else whom you have offended, with whom, you have not been reconciled?

What about gossip? Doesn't this speak strongly against the sin of gossip; of speaking about others in offensive ways, when they are not present, which can murder their reputation?

Consider how many times we have, in anger, called someone an idiot, a moron, a jerk, a fool, and any other number of terms which have denigrated their character? Consider the wicked nature of jealousy and envy in the heart, and unjustified anger toward others. Do you see how God sees these things? Do you see how important of a matter these things are to God, and how concerned God is with us doing everything on our part to promote peace, unity and encouragement? Do you see the importance of what the Apostle Paul states, when he calls us to not let any corrupt word proceed out of our mouths, but what is good for necessary edification, so that we might be a useful means of grace in the lives of others? We ought to watch our words, brethren. We ought to pray about our thoughts. This must be a priority on the list of responsibilities for any true Christian.

And is this not in keeping with the beatitudes that we have gone over? Is this not compatible with being poor in spirit, pure in heart, merciful, a peacemaker...etc? Now again, we are not talking about being justified before God here, because we've already destroyed that ship long ago. We can't be justified by the keeping of the Law, ever. But, it does mean that, in our Christian walk, we ought to be concerned about these kinds of matters, and especially with how we relate to one another. Indeed, it's an evidence of our being truly justified in Christ. This is life in the Kingdom of Heaven! And so, let us examine our own hearts this morning. And let us be honest before God and our own consciences. Let us ask the honest questions that need to be asked? "Am I harboring bitterness or hatred toward someone? Am I in conflict with a brother, and have I been unwilling to work it out so far? Are there any relational problems, with which, I am involved in? And if so, have I truly done all on my part, to rectify things? These are questions which ought to especially concern the people of God. And when our Lord states, toward the later portion of this sermon, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...I will say to some, 'Depart from Me, you worker of iniquity;'" when our Lord speaks of those who do not do the will of the Father, this is one of the matters that He certainly has in mind.

And again, is it not utterly befitting of a child of God, who has, himself, been reconciled to God, by the blood of His Son, to do all that is within us, to ensure that we are reconciled to,

and at peace with, all others? “How can one say that he loves God, whom he does not see, while not loving his brother, whom he does see?” Do you see the contradiction here?

2) Note the difference between speaking of foolish actions and actually calling someone a fool. There is a place, with the use of Scripture, to address foolish words and actions, even as we are called to do in the Scriptures, and especially, in the Proverbs. But, there is a very clear difference between telling someone that they are “acting foolish,” and actually labelling them “a fool.”

Now, you might say, has not our Lord, at times, labeled people, “fools?” Yes. And He has that right, as the Creator of all things, having the perfect knowledge and rule over His creation. But, we don’t have that right. The Lord is our God, our Creator, and perfectly righteous in every sense. He maintains certain rights that do not belong to us. And this is one of them.

3) If you are unsaved, behold the standard of God, who looks not only at your actions (which, in themselves, would truly condemn you), but also at your thoughts. God is holding you accountable for your thoughts, motives, intentions, and for the words that come out of your mouths. Where then does that leave you, my friends? Were you to stand before God’s judgment seat, right now, only on the basis of your words even, where would that leave you eternally? Society may have softened the significance of our words, but God hasn’t. Even calling someone an idiot or a fool or a moron is worthy of eternal condemnation!

[The Gospel! — the only place of forgiveness for ALL sins!]

Amen!!!

Benediction: Jude 1:24-2