Matthew 5:21-37 2/12/17

Perhaps you have had a child that just will not sit still and is always on the go. He does not want to take a nap. As soon as you put him down for a nap, he jumps up to play. Finally you tell him in your sternest voice that in no uncertain terms his feet were not to touch the floor of his room until you told him it was all right. It seemed like he listened and you did not hear anything more from him.

But then you go into the backyard to do some work, you look and see his smiling face in the bedroom window! You rush in to administer swift discipline for his disobedience, but without any guile he says: I did what you told me - my feet never once touched the floor. And indeed, he was telling the truth. He had made his way around the room by climbing on dressers, beds and chairs.

Your son had successfully minimized your command. He reduced his obedience to the smallest possible interpretation of what you intended. He felt secure in his innocence because he'd obeyed the strict letter of your command, even though he failed to keep its intent. He did exactly what you told him, not grasping the fullness of meaning and scope of what you said.

That is precisely the sin Jesus discusses in our sermon text. The commands of God are simple and straightforward. So many people think that their obedience to his commands can be reduced to the smallest possible interpretation of the words in that command. They want to think of themselves as secure in their innocence because they'd obeyed the strict letter of your command, even though he failed to keep its intent. He did exactly what you told him, not grasping the fullness of meaning and scope of what you said.

This morning, let’s allow Jesus to explain God’s intent more fully in three of the commandments. We see both our awesome failure to obey them as well as the opportunities they present us to show our love and obedience to the Lord!

Jesus says: You’ve heard that it was said to the people long ago, Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. Now, this is a commandment we are well-acquainted with and whole-heartedly agree with. Because our time on this earth is the gift of God, no one has the right, no Christian has the desire, to murder another human being. Murder is taking human life without the Lord’s clear and certain sanction. There are times like in times of war, in self-defense or as a rep of government, that we may well kill.

But we may never murder, that is, kill without the Lord’s permission. We may be tempted to think that is all there is to this commandment. We may feel pretty good about ourselves. We may figure this is one commandment we have kept! But the Lord’s prohibition against taking human life is intended to show the importance of human life in every respect. Damaging human life in any way is damning sin.

Jesus says: I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, Raca, is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, You fool! will be in danger of the fire of hell. Anger toward a fellow human being is a sin which, like murder, makes you worthy of judgment. Verbally abusing another person is a charge for which a religious court could find you guilty and liable for punishment.

Even a somewhat light-hearted insult is sin, if you do it with intent to hurt the other person. The Lord not only protects life, but the quality of life. It is God’s intent that we live
in peace with one another - saying and doing those things that build others up. When a dispute arises, we are to freely admit our guilt, if we are in the wrong, and settle the matter quickly and to the satisfaction of the injured party.

Lest we minimize this sin or its effects, Jesus tells us that if we have broken this commandment, we are to make amends with the person we have wronged before we come to worship, for such a sin puts a barrier between us and God. The sin is that bad!

Jesus continues: You have heard that it was said, Do not commit adultery. This seems like another easy commandment to keep. But what does the Lord mean when he refers to adultery? We know how we define it. Adultery is the act of physical unfaithfulness to our spouse. By that standard we are pretty comfortable in saying we have done what the Lord commands. But how does he define it?

I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. The truth of the matter is that adultery takes place in the married and unmarried, young and old. Adultery, Jesus says, begins with lust in your heart for someone – anyone - to whom you are not married. In marriage, of course, sexual thoughts and actions are encouraged – they are a part of the marriage blessing.

But outside of marriage, such thoughts are always sinful, as much as the actions such thoughts often produce. Sexual relations between the unmarried - no matter how much they may love each other is always sin. Homosexual relations are sin, no matter what government may rule. Pornography in print and off the internet is designed to create lust for someone who is not your spouse. It is sin.

Lest we minimize this sin by saying no one gets hurt by it or it does not affect our relationships, or it is acceptable to many, Jesus says this: 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. Jesus is not encouraging self-mutilation, but he is emphasizing the serious nature of this sin.

It is not something the Lord winks at, as our society does. It is sin which may damn like any other. Like all other sins, we must take the greatest precautions against it. We must guard ourselves against even the tiniest foothold this sin may seek!

In this context, Jesus also comments on divorce. The Lord hates divorce and intends that marriages last a lifetime. Divorce is not the option or the opportunity our sinful world has made of it. Only in extreme cases, when one partner has gutted the necessary intimacy and commitment out of marriage, does the Lord allow the injured part to seek an formal end to a marriage already destroyed by their spouse. Anything less than that is sin just as surely as murder.

Finally: 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. We know it is always wise to use God’s name very carefully. Only an foolish person would knowingly involve the Lord in deceit or ask the Lord to immediately punish him if he is not telling the truth.

That is not to say there are not times the Lord expects, even commands, us to swear by his name in circumstances that are important! But we must also heed Jesus’ warning not to use the name of God frivolously or carelessly. We dare not use it as a crutch to help other people believe what we say because we have the reputation of being untrustworthy.

The Christian is under obligation to be so honest in all his dealings sos that his word - his Yes and his No - is accepted as truth, without invoking the name of God. And yes,
the casual OMG or I swear to God! is a needless use of his name!

As we know, minimizing the Law of God is easy and desirable, even for the Christian. If we can deflate God’s intent in a command to only the most blatant transgression, then we can feel good about ourselves. We may even consider ourselves worthy of God’s favor. On the other hand, a full understanding of the Law and God’s intentions for obedience to those commands, leaves us feeling very guilty and completely unworthy in his sight!

It is hard to carry out this honest and detailed understanding of God’s will! But we are to do it perfectly. The problem is we cannot. We have to admit that we have failed miserably. We have broken God’s will. A full understanding of God’s will produces in us a full acknowledge of sin and that leads to repentance.

This repentance will, in turn, produce in us a deep and abiding appreciation of our Lord Jesus Christ and everything he has done for us. What we cannot do, Jesus did. He kept all of these commandments in his thoughts, words and actions. He did that for us. The sins that he died for are so many. Forgiveness is possible only by such a great sacrifice. It’s then that we begin to see his love in all its glory. We live in that love, and in that love we’re kept close to him, now and forever. Do not minimize his commands or his love! Amen.

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