

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,^[a] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister^{[b][c]} will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’^[d] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’^[e]²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, 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.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, 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.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’^[f]³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (Matthew 5:21-37)

Sermon Theme: Serious Sin, Serious Grace

Driving to school one day mom blows through the stop sign without skipping a beat. It was a simple case of not paying attention. After her sons in third and fifth grade gasp in horror and shame her for what she did, she assures us, “I’ll make sure to stop twice at the next one.”

That’s how we see the law. It’s something that we need to do. And when we break it, we need to do something else according to that law to fix it. And we like that because we can look back at it and see, “I did *that*.” It’s similar to how we like looking back at the now-clean kitchen that had been a mess. There’s a feeling of satisfaction looking out over the freshly mown grass. We

see the law as a to-do list of things you should and shouldn't do. And when you do it, there's a feeling of accomplishment and now I can head off on to something else.

This is how we also want to treat God's Law. We want to see it as my "to-do" list so that God can be happy with me. We like to see it as something I can accomplish before moving on to the next task. We want to treat God's Law like this because, to a certain point, it makes my sinful nature very happy. It's happy because looking at God's Law like this is self-satisfying and personally reassuring—I did *that*, but I make sure to not do *this*. It avoids the hard parts and rests in the seemingly easier-to-do. It's convenient. And when not blowing-up my pride, it's thankful that you are not like someone else.

That's how the Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus' day see God's Law too. So when they heard it said, "Do not murder...Do not commit adultery...If you want a divorce, you to have this certificate...Do not break your oath," they hear: here's your task, do it, and you are done.

You hear it other ways. Another mass shooting takes place and innocent lives are lost. You read a story about a five-year old beaten by parents and another parent who abandons their child. You've heard it said, "I could never hurt someone like that." Cross that task off the list.

Another sex scandal hits the Roman Catholic Church. You find out the spouse of your friend is cheating. Scantily-clad people on Primetime TV. Pornographic material easily and readily available on your mobile device. You've heard it said, "Look, don't touch. God, I thank you that I've never physically cheated on my spouse." Cross another task off the list.

We all know someone who has done it. Divorce is so prevalent. Families are torn apart. Single moms trying to raise the kids. Single dads trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing. Then I look at my family and wonder, how does it happen? You've heard it said, "They no longer love each other. It was too hard. It was better for everyone for it to happen."

You hear another promise made. You are sure that means another promise broken. How many have stood in front of the church and swore they would make regular use of the Word and Sacraments? How many couples stood before God and their loved ones promising to stay faithful to the point of death? How many lives are a mess even with all their vows and promises to change? You've heard it said, "At least I'm faithful to my vows!" Cross that task off too.

But then we hear this one who speaks with the authority of God. He doesn't throw out God's Law. There's nothing wrong with that Law. It's good. It's right. It's true. The problem is we tend to hear what we want to hear.

So this one tells you it's not just the action. No, he says anyone who is angry with his brother or sister is subject to judgment. It's not just physical harm but it means losing my temper when someone is taking too long. That means when my patience boils over when they don't do what I want them to, again. It includes when I'm holding onto this grudge thinking they deserve my anger because someone hurt my easily-injured pride. But this anger doesn't just make you

subject to a court. No, it earns you a place in the fires of hell. “I just lost my temper,” never was a valid excuse. No, you are accountable for your emotions too.

Where did we get the idea that “Look, don’t touch” was acceptable? Jesus is quite clear. Even looking at someone who is not your spouse with the intent to desire them sexually means you commit adultery in your heart. It’s not just the physical actions. It’s the thought that is sinful. It’s the intention. So Jesus says it’s better to lose limbs and body parts than be led into sin. But when those shows come on are you plucking out your eye or even just reaching for the remote to change the channel? Are you willing to chop off your hand before it opens the next questionable site? Don’t be fooled, God knows the secret sins and desires of the heart.

Oh how we want to believe our sins only will affect me. Somehow that makes me feel better. Somehow it makes the action less wrong when I think I’m not hurting anyone else. But when we sin, it hurts our relationships. It can lead others to sin. It can give the impression that someone else has done something wrong. It makes it more and more difficult for someone to take all our words and actions in the kindest possible way. It shouldn’t be so shocking we make vows and oaths, say anything to convince someone that what we are saying is true. For all the truth we do speak, so much we twist to fit our personal agendas. It’s sprinkled with half-truths. It’s said sarcastically or under our breath so you keep people guessing. So when you say, “yes,” it sounds more like, “no,” but no one is quite sure.

No, God’s Law isn’t just a to-do list. It shows us who we are. It shows someone who no amount of best intentions and self-reflection can change the sinful heart. Jesus sharpens the Law’s teeth so it bites our sinful nature. It hurts to hear the problem is far deeper than hands or eyes. It’s not enough to fix the few areas where you struggle. You and I are those projects that the deeper you dig the more problems, worse headaches, more damage you find. This isn’t a sickness that you will eventually get over. All we do, by nature, is rotten in God’s sight. We are slaves to sin, drawn to and wrapped up in its desires. We are dead in sin liable to judgement with the sentence of forever in the fiery pits of hell.

Jesus knows all this. The one preaching this sermon in Matthew looks out and sees people who are not doing the very things he is telling them to do. He sees people who should know better. But Jesus doesn’t lose his patience. Instead he loves them so he clarifies the truth. Jesus sees people whose minds wander and thoughts are drawn to sin. At the same time, without a sinful thought, Jesus sees men and women made in God’s image, the crown of God’s creation. And he loves them. Oh, Jesus feels the temptation to fly off the handle. He feels the frustration for how thoroughly things have been messed up and ruined with their broken promises. But he loves them. He loves you. He love me. He doesn’t tell you to do anything beyond. He doesn’t tell you to do anything extraordinary. This is simply what God expects.

But Jesus also knows how we fall short of those expectations. He knows that we cannot live this way on our own. So he comes to stand in your place. He’s there to live and to struggle. He

comes to fight the devil and resist sin all the way to a cross on which he has no business dying. But he does because his perfect life in emotion, thought, every word, is the demand of God's good and perfect Law.

But that's still not enough. Someone has to balance the accounts in God's record book. Someone has to pay this bill of sins that keeps on racking up a higher debt. Even if God just ignores all the sins, it does not take them away. Your sins would still be tied to you. Those sins would still condemn you. So Jesus says to his Father, "It's all mine. I did them all. Every lost temper, wayward thought, broken promise, every hurtful word, sinful action, secret sins and blatant wrongs, I did them all. So, God, do your worst."

And the Father does. We hear him do it when Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The Father abandons his Son. He has to. God is serious about sin and Jesus became the embodiment of that sin that he hates so much. So God doesn't hold anything back as he punishes Jesus on the cross. Jesus endures the pain and torment of hell. He sheds his innocent blood because that is the only acceptable payment. Life to buy back life.

But it's exactly what God demands. The Law is fulfilled. The debt is paid in full. The receipt is drawn up and your proof is an empty tomb. Because Jesus lives we know forgiveness is won. Heaven is opened. No more demands. No more expectations. It is finished.

But Jesus still isn't done. He wants this to be yours. So he washes you of your sin in Baptism to give you a clear conscience before God. With the sign of the cross on your head and heart, God's name put on you, you are a redeemed child of God and heaven is already yours. There is nothing in all creation, hell, devil, or demons that can take that from you. He wants to keep this as yours so through pastors Jesus preaches God's promises into and onto your hearts. And he's still not done. Jesus invites you to his special meal of the Lord's Supper, "My body and blood, given and poured out, they are for you. Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace."

And so, why does Jesus give us this sermon? Because as he said earlier, "You are salt...you are light." This is how we want to live. You are freed from that debt of sin. You are freed from the terrors of hell. Now all that's left is to live this new life that Jesus gives and shows us here in Matthew. Be quick to resolve our differences because God has called us to live in peace. We are quick to forgive and let go of those grudges because Jesus is quick to forgive us and holds nothing against you. Jesus isn't calling us to lop of limbs or pluck out eyes. The temptations aren't just going to disappear. But we continue to fight against and resist. Cut out those things that will lead us into temptation and sin. We want to live such good lives that people do not have any reason to question your motives, search for hidden agendas. Instead we want to be authentic sharing Jesus' love and genuine in our care.

This isn't so that God can be happy with you. In Jesus, God already is. This doesn't mean that there won't be any struggle. We were baptized into this struggle. As long as we live on this earth we will continue to fight against that sinful nature. But the struggle is good. And Christ

works through His Word and Sacraments where the Spirit strengthens and preserves you in the one true faith. So we want to come and be with God's people in church so that we hear the preaching of his Word. We come to receive Jesus' body and blood for forgiveness in the Lord's Supper. We come to can encourage each other that as serious as God is about sin, thanks be to God he is serious about his grace and love. Amen.