

A NEW HEART CREATED IN US
Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Epiphany, 2020
Matthew 5:21-37

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the Gospel from before, Matthew 5:21-37: ²¹ **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago: ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be subject to the judgment.’** ²² **However, I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment. Anyone who says to his brother, ‘You numbskull!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin. However, anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be subject to hellfire.**

²³ **“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar! First go away and be reconciled with your brother; and then come and offer your gift!** ²⁵ **Agree quickly with the one who wants to sue you, while you are still with him on the road, lest your accuser should hand you over to the judge, and the judge should hand you over to the officer, and you should be thrown into prison!** ²⁶ **Truly, I tell you, you will certainly not get out of there until you have paid the last cent.**

²⁷ **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery!’** ²⁸ **However, I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** ²⁹ **If your right eye causes you to stumble, take it out and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should be thrown into hell.** ³⁰ **If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should go into hell.**

³¹ **“It was said: ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce!’** ³² **However, I tell you that everyone who divorces his wife for any reason except sexual unfaithfulness causes her to be an adulteress, and whoever marries a woman so divorced commits adultery.**

³³ **“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago: ‘You shall not swear falsely, but you shall perform your oaths to the Lord!’** ³⁴ **However, I tell you not to swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ and not by the earth, for it is His footstool; and not by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.** ³⁶ **Do not swear by your head either! For you cannot make one hair white or black.** ³⁷ **Rather, let your language be, ‘Yes, yes;’ ‘No, no!’ Anything more than these comes from the Evil One.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

You may have noticed that over the past few weeks, and today, our Gospel reading has been coming from Matthew 5. We often refer to Matthew chapter 5, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, as the Beatitudes, from a Latin word meaning ‘blessedness.’

There is no doubt that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is the most famous sermon ever preached, but it is perhaps also the most misunderstood since many Christians like to base their religion on these few words. However, these words are not a summary of the whole Christian faith. As a matter of fact, it is safe to say that a person who claims to find his whole religion in this sermon is not even a Christian, and no one who hears or reads this sermon by itself, apart from the rest of Scripture, will come to an understanding of the Christian faith.

In order to understand this sermon, we must keep in mind the audience to whom it was preached and the purpose Jesus had in mind. The audience was primarily Jesus’ disciples, although the large crowds who had been following Jesus were evidently in the background listening in. But the purpose of the sermon was to give the *believers* a better understanding of the God-pleasing Christian life. No doubt, people without faith would be listening in, but Christ’s words would be a mystery to them unless the Holy Spirit worked faith in their hearts.¹

The part of Jesus’ sermon that we have today sees Jesus quoting from the Ten Commandments, in particular, the Fifth and the Sixth. Originally, the Ten Commandments were given to the Israelites when God spoke to them from Mount Sinai. If they were mentioned in no other place, then we could say that the Ten Commandments were given for the nation of Israel in that time and place. But since Jesus is now speaking of them, He is teaching His church of all times how she is to regard these Commandments.

Again, if we were to think that Jesus may back off a little with regard to these Commandments, think again. Jesus not only asks us to keep the Commandments as they were given to Israel, but He even raises the bar by several orders of magnitude. He begins by quoting the Fifth Commandment: **‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be subject to the judgment.’** Murder is the taking of human life without just cause or due process, but then Jesus raises the bar by saying, **“However, I tell you that**

¹ 1 Corinthians 2:14

anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment. Anyone who says to his brother, ‘You numbskull!’ will be subject to the Sanhedrin. However, anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be subject to hellfire.” The saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” Jesus says the opposite. If you even insult someone, it is equal to murder.

He then mentions adultery. ²⁷ **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery!’”** Adultery is any kind of sexual activity outside of marriage. But then Jesus raises the bar to include even our thoughts. He says, **“However, I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”** Think of pornography and even television shows, and all those magazines that grace the shelves in newsagents or service stations these days. They all appeal to the lust of the flesh. But not only that - what about thoughts like: *“I wish I would have married him or her instead of the spouse I have today.”* Jesus raises the bar to include all this kind of thinking.

Jesus does this sort of thing a lot. By the time He gets through with the Ten Commandments, we must admit that we break them all every day. In fact, we have gotten so used to breaking them that we often break them without even noticing it. Martin Luther got this right when he teaches what sins to confess. In the Small Catechism, he asks, *“What sins should we confess?”* and then answers, *“Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even of those that we do not know, as we do in the Lord’s Prayer.”*

Then, if we are tempted to think that sins are not all that serious, Jesus tells us to amputate all the body parts that cause us to sin. ²⁹ **“If your right eye causes you to stumble, take it out and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should be thrown into hell. ³⁰ If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should go into hell.”** We know it is pretty serious stuff when Jesus starts talking about hell.

Jesus’ comments on this matter are often regarded as figurative language. Does He really mean to say that we should gouge out an eye or chop off a hand? Yes, He means exactly that! If it really is the fault of an eye or a hand that we commit sin that condemns us to hell, wouldn’t we really want to rid ourselves of that offending part of the body rather than having the whole body cast into hell? We would not hesitate to have a cancerous member of our body removed before the cancer destroys our whole body. People do that all the time. So also, removing a treacherous member of our body would be a small enough price to pay to save our souls from the eternal torments of hell. It would be a reasonable thing to do.

The point Jesus wanted to make, however, was that such maiming of one’s body would not be the real solution. If your right eye and hand cause you to sin and you get rid of them, would not the left eye and hand still cause you the same problem? If a person amputated his limbs and gouged out his eyes and stopped up his ears, would he then be able to keep himself pure? Is it not more likely that his heart would then constantly dwell upon acts that had become physically impossible for him? And that’s the point.

The true cause of sin *is not* the eye or the hand. Jesus once said that *“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander”* (Matthew 15:19). The Holy Spirit inspired Moses to write: *“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually”* (Genesis 6:5). It is not the hands or the eyes that need amputating. The seat of our sin is in our hearts. We need to get rid of our sinful hearts.

So how do we do that?

We can’t, but the Lord comes looking for them. God wants our filthy sinful hearts so that He can destroy them. God is not interested in receiving our hearts as a gift – as some kind of action on our part. No, He takes our hearts and puts them to death. As the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to say, *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?”* (Romans 6:3) and: *“We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin”* (Romans 6:6), and: *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* (Galatians 5:24). When Jesus went to the cross, He took our filthy, toxic, sinful hearts with Him. With His death, He put those hearts to death.

What about the big empty space left behind? We can’t live without hearts. How does God address this problem?

You may not know it, but we sing the answer to that question almost every Sunday: *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Your presence; and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation; and uphold me with a willing spirit.”* This is a prayer that asks God to create a clean heart to replace that old, sinful heart that Jesus took to the cross.

This also happens in Holy Baptism. Even as the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write about the removal of the old heart, He also inspired Paul to tell of the new. Paul said, *“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). And, *“If we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His”* (Romans 6:5). And, *“If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him”* (Romans 6:8). When the Holy Spirit plants faith in us, He does a heart transplant. He removes our filthy hearts of sin and replaces them with the clean and holy heart of Jesus Christ Himself.

Although we have the holy heart of Christ within us, we still live in a sinful world. Temptations still attack us from all directions, and we often suffer defeat. That is when our new hearts convict us of sin and drive us back to the cross. There we once again confess our sins and receive forgiveness for them. In this way, God keeps our new heart clean until He takes us away from this world of sin to live with Him forever where our hearts will never be sinful again.

Each and every one of us was born with a toxic heart. It was a heart that loved sin and hated God. Over time our continuous sinning only made our hearts blacker and more toxic. There was no way that we could give our hearts as a gift to God. Instead, God took our filthy, sinful hearts and destroyed them at the cross. Now through Holy Baptism, He gives us His heart - by the power of that heart we fear, love and trust in Him above all things - we turn to Him in time of trouble - and when temptations overwhelm us, His heart draws us to Him in confession in the sure and certain knowledge that God loves us for Christ's sake and will forgive us. Because Christ has given us His heart, we will live with Him in heaven and rejoice before His throne forever. This is the new heart that God has created in us. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

EPIPHANY VI

O God our Father, You are our rock and our fortress, our joy and our salvation, our light and our life, our sun and our shield. You are always ready to hear those who come before You. Therefore hear us as we come before You with our prayers and praise.

We thank You that You have called us by Your Spirit to believe in Your Son Jesus Christ, made us citizens of His eternal kingdom, given us righteousness as our dress, and equipped us with power, love, and self-control. Continue to give us these blessings, and fill us with the fruits of faith. Make us living letters that speak of Jesus Christ, that people around us may read of Your mercy and saving power in human lives.

We praise You for Your grace in calling us to work in Your vineyard. Bless our work, witness, and giving, in Your name. Use us to bring many people to Your glory. Make us glad to obey Your great commission, ready to accept every service, eager to perform every duty well, and strong to do every task faithfully. Make us patient and willing even when service in Your kingdom is long and difficult. Give us the joy of seeing others come to worship You, and give us the grace to welcome them warmly as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Keep us all safe in Your loving care, and lead us to the heavenly land of promise. Grant that we may run our daily race by the presence and power of Your Spirit. Give us self-control over everything that could endanger our faith and disqualify us for the prize. Grant that we may seize every opportunity to live the new life. Prevent us from boasting in our own wisdom, wealth, or power. Enable us to glory only in knowing You as our Father. May our only treasure be to possess Your wisdom and power in the life, death, and resurrection of Your Son.

Be with us, dear Father, in all that we do. Strengthen and direct us in our daily work. Protect us in our leisure. Shelter us in our homes. Guide us as we travel. Teach us in our problems. Shield us in our afflictions. Comfort us in our sorrows. Hear us as we pray, and lift up our spirits to You as we worship.

We thank You for hearing our prayers to send rain that has now extinguished many, if not all of the bushfires that were still burning in the southern states. Australia truly is a nation of extremes, so now we pray that You would watch over those whose property has been affected by flooding rain. Give to them the encouragement and help they need to recover.

May this recent rain be the beginning of the end of the drought, and bless our farmers with good seasons ahead.

Accept these sacrifices of humble prayer and joyous praise that we offer before You, for the sake of Jesus Christ. And to You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, be all glory and praise, for ever and ever. Amen.

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and calamity. ¹⁶ For I am commanding you today to love the LORD, your God, to walk in His Ways and to keep His Commandments, His Statutes and His Decisions, that you may live and become numerous, and that the LORD, your God, may bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ However, if your heart turns away, and you do not listen but are led astray, worship other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I have been telling you today that you people will certainly be ruined. You will not live for long in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to enter and to possess. ¹⁹ I call on heaven and earth as witnesses against you today. I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, you shall choose life, that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ that you may love the LORD, your God, that you may listen to what He says and cling to Him! For He is your life and your length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD has promised with an oath to give to your forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

¹ Fellow-Christians, I could not speak to you as spiritual people but as worldly people, as infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, because you could not receive it yet. Indeed, even now you cannot receive it. ³ For you are still influenced by your sinful natures. For, when there are jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not influenced by your sinful natures and living by human standards? ⁴ When one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not being like ordinary human beings? ⁵ What is Apollos? Or what is Paul? They are ministers through whom you have become believers, and each one has had what the Lord has assigned him. ⁶ I have planted, Apollos has watered, but God has caused the growth. ⁷ Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but God, who causes the growth. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters are one, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labour. ⁹ For we are God’s fellow-workers. You are God’s field. You are God’s building.

Matthew 5:21-37

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