

What's Going On on the inside?

Matthew 5:21-37

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based on a message by William Cwirla

Last week, we heard Jesus say that He had come not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. To fill it up. To complete it Himself. No one else ever has. No one else ever will. No one else ever can. And Jesus also said that anyone who lowers the bar; who downplays the importance of God's Law, anyone who relaxes the slightest commandment and thereby teaches others to do so, will be in big trouble; will be called "least" in the kingdom of God! For God's Law perfectly reflects Him in His holiness, in His love.

And so Jesus says, *"You've heard it said. But I say to you."* Never mind what the teachers of old say. Never mind how they interpret God's Law. I say. Talk about speaking with authority! Jesus never relaxed God's Law. To do so, would be to diminish God; who He is, and what He's like. To lower the bar and relax God's Law would be to worship a false god.

Instead of lowering the bar, what does Jesus do? He raises the bar. He raises it so high, that what? No one can ever meet it. For God's Law doesn't apply just to our outer actions, but to our inner motives. Notice, that in each commandment, what does Jesus do? He goes from the outward sin, to the inner sinfulness. From the mere symptom, to the underlying disease.

What's going on inside you? The problem isn't simply that we do bad things, but there's something about us that's bad. As Genesis 8:21 puts it, *"... for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth."* Every thought, every word, every deed, no matter how good it may appear, no matter how much it serves our neighbor, is tainted. Tainted with sin.

You've heard it said, *"do not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment."* And you're thinking to yourself what? "Well, at least I'm off the hook on that one. I haven't strangled, stabbed, or shot anyone. I'm generally kind to people, always help little old ladies cross the street, and would never harm anyone."

And then Jesus comes along with His *"But I say to you, that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."* So that little altercation you had in the parking lot or that flash of road rage at the guy who cut you off or that simmering anger you're nursing, will get you convicted of murder in God's court of law!

You've heard it said, *"Do not commit adultery,"* and immediately you think, what? "I've got that one covered. I'm faithful in my marriage, never stray." And then comes Jesus' *"But I say to you."* *"Everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart!"* Even a look. Whether live or online. Doesn't matter. You can live an entire life as the most faithful spouse. One stray look and it's over!

You can even gouge out that offending eye and cut off that offending hand if you wish, but the other eye will lead you down the same path and your left hand will sin as much as your right hand. And so, before you dismember yourself, consider this: *No one will be declared righteous by the Law, for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.* (Romans 3)

You've heard it said, "*Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.*" It's that easy. Just make sure all the paperwork is filled out and in order, and you're good to go! Again, Jesus' authoritative "*but I say to you*" cuts through the self-justifications and goes right to the heart. "*Everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*"

Matthew 5:32 is often translated in the *active* sense as, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery." However, she hasn't committed anything. Rather, her ex-husband has actively sinned against her. An alternate translation of the Greek text, conveying the women's *passive* role, reads, "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her **to be stigmatized as [regarded as] an adulteress.**" (Lenski)

Bottom line? There's no divorce that can be legitimized by simple paperwork, as if there's no wrongdoing involved. You don't get off the hook that easy!

You've heard it said, "*Do not swear falsely, but perform to the Lord what you have sworn.*" And you're thinking, "I do pretty well here. I tell the truth most of the time. When I make a pledge, I do my best to keep it. When I say, 'I swear to God' I mean it and I do it."

And along comes Jesus' "*but I say to you.*" *Don't swear at all – by heaven, by the earth, by the hairs of your head.* The very fact that you have to swear an oath at all, suggests the tendency to lie. You have to be put under oath and threatened to coerce the truth out of you. Our half-truths and untruths come out much more easily than the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

What's going on here? What's going on inside you? Sin isn't superficial. It's not just a matter of a bad word here, a bad thought there, and a bad action now and then. Sin is a deeply corrupted orientation of the heart. It's not simply murder, but anger and hatred. Not simply adultery, but lust in the heart. Not simply little white lies, but a darkness of untruth.

One person reminds us, "Attitudes and behaviors that come out of a self-centered, selfish, prideful, deceived, and/or rebellious heart often express themselves in big, bad ways such as infidelity, lying, addictions, abuse, or murder. The same heart can also produce more benign but chronically irritating behaviors such as nagging and criticism, forgetting important occasions, failing to put dirty laundry in the hamper, not listening well, or staying glued to the television when our spouse is attempting to have a conversation with us." (Leslie Vernick)

Deal with what's going on inside. Who's that have to do with? First, that's between you and God.

From the *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* - "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). What does this mean? This means that we should **fear and love God** [there's always a vertical dimension to the commandments] so that we do our neighbor no bodily harm nor cause any suffering, but help and befriend our neighbor in every bodily need ... treating him with love and kindness (Luke 10:25-37). You shall not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14). What does this mean? This means that we should **fear and love God** so that we lead a chaste and pure life, in word and deed, and that husband and wife love and respect each other.

Deal with what's going on inside. Who's that have to do with? First, that's between you and God. And then, you and your neighbor. It's about loving them, thinking of them, serving them, even if they're your enemy. Deal with what's going on inside. Think of what that would do for your marriage ... Think of what that would do for your family ... Think of what that would do for society

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And at the end of all of this, what does Jesus say to wrap it all up? *You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* No one left the sermon on the mount thinking, "Hey, I'm doing pretty well here; God must be pleased with me." (Mt 5:48)

The way to hear God's Law, is not to find ways that it *doesn't* apply to you, but to recognize how it *all* applies to you. *You* are the murderer. *You* are the adulterer. *You* are the guilty party in a divorce. *You* are the liar. In yourself, you have no righteousness, no holiness, no innocence, no claim to make before God. Neither do I.

But Jesus became sin for you. That in Him, you *might* be and *become* the righteousness of God! Jesus didn't just preach the Law. He did the Law. And He died under the Law. All, to rescue you from every commandment, every iota, every dot, that would condemn you.

Jesus spoke earlier of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as being blessed. Why? The blessed realize something. They realize their complete inability to make themselves right. And they long for what they don't have. Jesus didn't come to make sure we fulfilled the Law. Because of the root of sin that runs deep within us, that's impossible. Jesus came to fulfill the Law for us. To love God and our enemy in a way we never would. In a way we never could.

First, deal with what's going on inside, between you and God. And then, you and your neighbor. Then look at what's going on on the outside. Outside of yourself. Look to *Another*.

God uses His Law, a reflection of who He is, of His will, to show how deep the roots of sin go - that we might hunger and thirst for Jesus and His righteousness. As one person put it, "The call of the gospel is away from self and unto Jesus, because self is the problem and Jesus is the solution."
(Don Matzat)

At the cross, God didn't say "clean up your act, get better, and *then* I'll love you." But he *came* for us while we were still sinners. Who *came* for us while we were still mired in our sins and acting as if we are the good guys. Who *came* and offered up *His* hands, offered up His feet, offered up His eyes and all His body parts - though they did not sin - for all our body parts that do.

How often do anger and hatred and lust and pride and all sorts of sins erupt in our hearts. And so, the Christian life, as Luther says, is a life of *constant* repentance. Which is to say, a life of constant *reliance*. Reliance, not on what we do, but on the life-giving forgiveness and cleansing of God.

Earlier in Matthew 5, Jesus describes the inner character of His followers - how they are directed and shaped by Christ. How they begin to take on His character, His humility, His servant's heart and how they are blessed as they depend on God! And this faith, this trust, this dependence on God in the heart of His followers, flows out into the world.

"You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Your light is not you shining, but Jesus shining through you.