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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 12, 2017

Text: Matthew 5:21–37

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil” (Deut. 30:15). The Bible teaches that there are two ways in which a person can live his or her life. One is the way of life and goodness. In days gone by, people spoke about someone being a pious person or maybe even a virtuous person; that their piety and virtue were rich and deep in the things of God. The virtuous, pious person was one who desired to live and to do good, to live in the knowledge and fear of God.

Conversely, the Bible also teaches that a person can live his or her life in the way of death and evil. We used to speak about someone being vicious or even blasphemous because they lived an evil and wicked life.

We don't hear that kind of language anymore. Maybe it's time to start speaking the truth about things all the more clearly. This, in fact, is what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel reading from Matthew 5. Four times we hear Jesus say, “You have heard that it was said of old... Or, you have heard it said...” Each time Jesus provides a corrective by saying, “But I say to you ...” Our Lord Jesus, the sinner-saving Lord of grace and glory, instructs us on the truth about 4 different topics. He instructs us on the way of life and good, how to live as virtuous, pious children of God.

Those 4 topics are:

- 1) murder and hatred (5th commandment, vs. 21–26),
- 2) adultery (6th & 10th commandments, vs. 27–30),
- 3) marriage and divorce (6th commandment, vs. 31–32)
- 4) taking oaths and speaking the truth (2nd & 8th commandments, vs. 33–37).

We begin with the first topic (murder and hatred, the 5th commandment) in vs. 21–22. Jesus says,

You have hear that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ 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.

Most people believe that murder is taking human life. That's certainly true. But Jesus teaches that murder is more than killing; it also includes our thoughts, emotions, and intentions of the heart. Harboring anger and hatred and malice against a person makes you a murderer before God.

This is so important for Jesus that He says reconciliation must happen before worshipping God! Look at vs.23–24,

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

In other words, before coming to Church to pray, sing, give offerings, or receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Holy Supper, do what you can to be reconciled to anyone who is at odds with you. Jesus would have us be pious in heart and action before both God and man.

The second topic is adultery (the 6th & 10th commandments, vs. 27–30). Most people believe that adultery is committed only if a married person has sexual relations with someone that is not their husband or wife. That's certainly true. But Jesus teaches that adultery is more than illicit sexual activity. It also includes the heart, mind, emotions, and imagination.

Listen to Jesus in vs. 28, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Harboring lust in your heart makes you a covetous adulterer before God even if the actual action never occurred. Before God, our thoughts, emotions, and intentions are just as real as actual deeds. Their consequences are severe. Jesus, speaking in hyperbole, says,

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

It is true that Jesus isn't advocating that we maim ourselves physically. But it's also true that we are not to maim ourselves spiritually either. Dear saints of God, you must know that our world has sexualized every form of human relationship and activity. And yet, this is the way of death and evil. Jesus would have us be sexually virtuous and pure in thought and deed.

The third topic is marriage and divorce (the 6th commandment, vs. 31–32). Most people believe that divorce is just a matter of ending a marriage in a legal way. But Jesus says that divorce always violates God's good and gracious will for marriage. Divorce as such, is equivalent to adultery because it destroys marriage and the one flesh union of one man with one woman. The family is harmed. Listen to Jesus in vs. 32, "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Jesus' teaching here is not comprehensive and does not address every situation. But our Lord's authoritative teaching is that divorce is a sin resulting in adultery, which breaks the sanctity of marriage and family. If you have entered into the estate of marriage, Jesus would have you live in that estate in a godly and pious way for the sake of the many lives that are affected thereby.

The fourth topic is the taking of oaths and speaking the truth (2nd & 8th commandments, vs. 33–37). Most people believe that you can't hold people to their word unless there's an actual oath or legally binding contract. But Jesus teaches us something much more powerful in vs. 37, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' and 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." What you say carries weight and significance whether they are spoken in an oath or not. Before God, lying or deceiving in thoughts, words, and actions is as damnable as the breaking of a formal oath. The Lord Jesus would have us be pious and godly men and women who speak and keep the truth in all situations and circumstances.

Through the inspired Scriptures, we are presented with 4 teachings from God's Law. They are challenging and convicting. Who of us has not felt the sting of God's Law today? Before God, our thoughts, intentions, and emotions are as real as our actions! They can be pious or they can be blasphemous; good or evil.

We must recall what Jesus teaches us in this Sermon on the Mount about the life of blessedness. His people are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn over their sins and failures, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful and pure in heart, who seek peace, and are willing to suffer for the righteousness of

Jesus (Matt. 5:3–12). This life of blessedness is one that is given to us in Christ Jesus by His grace and mercy. Did not Jesus say in Matthew 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” He fills up the Law, including the commandments He teaches about today, with His perfect righteousness and obedience.

You, dear saints of God, are righteous and holy in God’s sight because you are born again in Christ Jesus. In baptism, you died with Christ so that you might live in His righteous, resurrection life. Your sins have been absolved, forgiven. And in their place, the righteousness of Jesus is given in its complete perfection. In Jesus, not only has your anger, lust, lies, and whatever other sin you may have committed, been washed away and cleansed. But our Lord’s perfection has been bountifully bestowed to your heart, mind, and body.

Your good works of piety and virtue are not the grounding and hope of your good standing before God the Father Almighty. That rests in the love of Jesus alone. But having been so claimed and blessed in Jesus through the forgiveness of sins, our Lord Jesus sets you free to live a life that is pleasing to Him.

You are pious and virtuous in and through Jesus Christ. That is His blessed gift given to you. Now that Jesus has so claimed you as His own dear children, go forth and live as His children in through, word, and deed. Hunger and thirst for piety and goodness so that “you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days...” (Deut. 30:19–20).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.