

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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By Alex Wimberly

Introduction

Jesus continues the Sermon on the Mount with a difficult lesson about taking our own sin seriously. With a disheartening rhetorical technique, he mentions an acceptable and accepted rule of thumb for righteous living ('You have heard that it was said...') only to supplant it ('But I say to you...') with a more rigorous requirement with little wiggle room.

Jesus makes it clear that we cannot lie low and assume that our sins aren't bad enough to get us into trouble. Instead, he reminds us that our very real sins do real damage – damage that may be repaired if we love enough not to settle for good enough.

Text

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you,

Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

Comment

Jesus does not give us a pass for being 'good enough.' At least not here. In this difficult portion of the Sermon on the Mount he dismisses the idea that so long as our sin doesn't rise to something particularly heinous, we don't have to worry about it. As Jesus tells it, the fires of hell are not reserved for the murderer or the adulterer, but threaten any who insult others in anger or who gaze at others with lust. Jesus doesn't relax expectations with his interpretation of the law, but shuts loopholes that would make divorce permissible and oaths admissible.

In doing so, Jesus recalibrates our moral compass. Our sense of right and wrong does not work like a map, with areas of particular danger well marked and out of bounds. 'Stay over here, and you'll be fine with the rest of us mild sinners.' No. Nor can we use a bell curve to calculate which transgressions are most grievous and therefore who among us are clearly damned. Instead, we are called judge ourselves by what we know is right. And are led to be honest about how our imperfections – as great or as slight, and as forgivable as they may be – can affect other people.

It's this work of relocating the question of sin away from 'I'm okay so long as I don't go too far' to 'I'm not okay and I have responsibility to others' that can provide a key to this passage. In each of Jesus' example, a relationship is broken. There is anger between a brother and a sister. There is one person's sexual objectification of another. There is the reminder that divorce and adultery affect multiple lives, not just the one looking to clear his conscience and move on.

Perhaps that is why Jesus has such clear instructions about tending urgently to our relationships. 'Leave your gift there before the altar and go.' Go where the possibility for reconciliation lies. We may not have the power to turn our hair black or white, and we are not in a position to swear confidence in our own righteousness. But we do have the power in our relationships to make things right.

Response

It may be important for some to wrestle with the more difficult implications of this passage. Sins have no scale? Having a cross word with a fool renders the same punishment as murder? That can't be.

But Jesus, at least, seems less interested in ranking sins than in urging reconciliation. Indeed, his threshold for what counts as a grave sin (swearing; anger) is so low and his insistence on the need for repair so great that it suggests he sees the work of reconciliation as our primary occupation. Thank God. Better to live a life in pursuit of achievable reconciliation than unattainable perfection.

At Corrymeela, we gave up on perfection a long time ago. But we continue to pursue reconciliation. One thing we have learned is that to resolve conflicts it is often useful to put aside the solution we want to impose and focus instead on being in better relationship with the other. When the relationship is healthier, when the other is better understood, whatever solution is possible will more likely present itself.

What conflicts exist in our life – and in the life of our community?

Instead of focusing on the question of who's right and who's wrong and whose sin is greater, can we ask how to be a better brother or sister, and where our fault (no matter how small) has damaged our relationship? It's clear that Jesus wants us to take our sin seriously, but it's even more clear that Jesus sees our relationships as paramount.

Prayer

Jesus, friend of sinners,
Your perfection reminds us that our faults are a given,
But our broken relationships are not.
Help us to worry less about who's right and wrong
And more about making things better.
For yours is the only perfect human life.
Ours are of repair and reconciliation,
And, therefore, of something divine.
Amen.