

*“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’<sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.*

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

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

*<sup>27</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’<sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, 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.<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, 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.*

*<sup>31</sup> “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’<sup>32</sup> But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.*

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

### **True Obedience Comes from the Heart**

Someone once told me a story about his daughter. When she was a little girl, the lights and display on their VCR fascinated her. One day, her father found her playing with it. He told her to leave it alone. A few minutes later, he looked up and she had quietly gone back and started playing with the buttons again. So he told her to stop playing with the VCR or she would get a spanking. A few minutes later he looked up again and saw that once more, she had snuck over and begun to push those buttons. So he stood up and came toward her to deal with the situation. When she saw him, she knew what was coming next. You know what she did? She started pushing the buttons as fast as she could to get as many in as she could before she got spanked. I retell this story because it says something about the human heart. This morning Jesus talks about obeying God’s laws. If you want someone to obey a rule without your constant oversight, that person has to buy into the rule.

**True obedience comes from the heart.**

#### **I.**

The words of Jesus we have before us are part of the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus was not talking about how to be good so you can get to heaven. Rather, he was talking to people who trust in him and who therefore should want to follow him. That includes us, right? But in a sinful world, sometimes following Jesus is confusing. So Jesus gives us real guidance this morning. **True obedience comes from the heart. A Christian heart fights against sinful desires.**

Our heart is ground zero for the fight to live a Christian life. That seems like it should be obvious, but sometimes it’s not. So Jesus used the Old Testament laws to make it clear. He started with the Fifth Commandment, “You shall not murder.” That seems pretty straight forward, right? As long as I don’t pull out a forty-five and blast that person in the check out line that’s making us all wait, I’m good, right? Jesus makes clear that there’s more involved in this command. He tells us that anyone who is angry with his brother will be liable for judgment, anyone who says, “Raca!” – which was a Jewish term of contempt – will have to go to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court. And anyone who calls his brother a fool is in danger of going to hell.

What's all that about? Jesus was not saying that under Jewish law, losing your temper will get you into trouble. That just wouldn't be true. Rather, he was saying that under God's law, it will. He was using a somewhat poetic approach to say that insults and anger are sinful. Now, there is such a thing as righteous anger. Your children deliberately disobey you and that makes you angry. It should. It's sin. But what you do with that anger matters. Insulting words are sin, even if you have good reason to be angry. And let's face it – how often isn't our anger more about pride than it is about people disobeying God? Even when they have sinned, how often isn't our focus on them doing it to me? How many unrepeatable words do we shout or mutter when we're driving because we don't want to slow down for half a minute? How often do we yell because we're tired of being put on hold or not getting an answer? All that breaks the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment because this commandment is about doing everything in our power to help and befriend our neighbor. It's about loving him and not worrying about ourselves. So often, our anger is all about us. Pride always equals sin.

Then Jesus moves on to the 6<sup>th</sup> Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery." He says, "**I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**" In a country where you can barely watch TV with your children for fear of what they're going to see, where you can't drive down the street without seeing billboards of women who are almost naked, where every teenager has instant access to the most explicit pornography, most people seem to figure that looking is OK, as long as I don't touch. But Jesus says that lust is the same as adultery.

To God, all desires to sin are sin. That includes every sinful desire we have. Wanting to sin sooner or later will make us sin, but even if we never act on the desire, we're guilty as soon as we want to sin. If God is going to judge what we think and feel and want, we all have a problem, don't we? I assume that most of us are faithful to our spouses. We've never cheated and we never will. But if thinking about it makes us guilty, well, then it's harder to claim that we're innocent, isn't it? I assume that none of us has ever committed murder. But if selfish anger, and insults and angry words even when I have a right to be angry, are sin, then the verdict would have to be guilty for all of us, wouldn't it?

Jesus is quite clear that the punishment for sinful thoughts and feelings and words is the same as the punishment for sinful actions: it's hell. No human being can resist sinful thoughts and feelings, sinful desires and words – or even the actions. No human being, except for Jesus. He was the one human being who was born with no sin in his heart, so he never once had a sinful desire – not even when the devil tempted him. Jesus never lost his temper – not even when he was driving the money changers out of the temple with a whip. Jesus never lusted. He never broke God's law in any way. And in God's mind and heart, the perfect heart of Jesus replaces our sinful hearts. The perfect life that flowed from that heart replaces our sinful lives. To God, it's as if Jesus lived our life.

To God, Jesus died our death. He went to the cross and suffered the hell that we all deserve for our sinful thoughts and feelings, our sinful words and deeds. He stood in the place of every human being that will ever live and died there for us. When he did that, he paid for us. When he rose from the dead, he told us that. He made himself the receipt that proves our debts are paid for. His return to life is a promise that we will escape from hell and even from death itself.

That good news changes us. It's the power of God to put faith in our hearts. When God reaches into our hearts with that good news of Jesus living and dying and rising to take all our guilt away, he gives us a new heart. That new heart is free from sin. It wants to live for Jesus. That's your Christian heart. Sadly, the old heart is still there. It still loves only itself. But the new heart is there fighting against it. Your Christian life is a life of waging war against the sinner you were born with. So Jesus says these things to us today to remind us to wage that war. He calls us to commit ourselves to fighting our sinful desires. You can't keep them from coming – we're sinners. Luther said you can't keep the birds from flying over your head. But you can keep them from nesting in your hair. You can fight against sinful thoughts and desires. You can recognize the things that lead you away from God and turn from them when they come. That's what a Christian heart does.

## II.

If we were perfect in our faith, we wouldn't need the things that Jesus says to us today. We'd know what God wants and we'd live that way. When we get to heaven, we will live that way. But right now, we live here, with our sinful hearts right next to our Christian hearts. That confuses us, because both of those hearts are us. We are sinners and we are saints at the same time. So we need guidance. That's what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. **True obedience comes from the heart. A Christian heart obeys the spirit of the law.**

The Jews had a very mechanical view of the law. They counted every command they could find in the five books of Moses and they came up with 613. Then they tried to obey them exactly as they were written. But they failed to see that even when God gave laws like, “Do not murder,” he always wanted them to penetrate to the heart. Jesus pointed out that God cares about our neighbor’s whole body and life, so insults are just as much sin as murder is. He goes on to talk about conflict among Christians. He says that if you’re bringing your offering to church, but you remember that you have a conflict with a fellow believer, be reconciled with that believer first and then bring your offering. Jesus speaks of making peace with your adversaries in court. He isn’t really talking about lawsuits. He’s talking about being angry with each other. The ultimate punishment he warns about is hell. The spirit of the law is love. If we are divided and angry with each other, how can we possibly bring a gift of love to God? But when we reconcile, when we forgive and are forgiven, then we are obeying the spirit of the commandment.

When he talks about lust, he says that if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Both times he explains that it’s better to enter eternal life maimed than to go to hell with your body intact. Don’t worry. Jesus did not mean that you should actually gauge out your own eye or cut off your own hand if you can’t keep from sinning. His point is rather what we do with those parts of our body. He’s telling to flee from temptation. So if we cannot turn on our computer or our television without engaging in lust, then we should avoid those activities. We should cut off what we do with those eyes. Again, this applies across the board. What temptations do you always fall into? You need to avoid that situation. Sometimes, that is going to be hard. There will be a cost. But it’s better to suffer difficulties here than to suffer in hell forever.

Jesus also touches on divorce. God hates divorce. The only valid reason that Jesus lists for divorce is adultery. The Bible adds desertion, under which there are a few special situations, but that’s it. Marriage is for life. That’s the spirit of the command.

Jesus talks about taking oaths. Now, you could misunderstand what he’s saying here to mean that we should never swear an oath, but that wouldn’t agree with what we see in the rest of the Bible. An oath asks God to witness the truth and punish the lie. The Jews of Jesus’ day tried all sorts of things to get around that. They swore by heaven or by Jerusalem or even by themselves to avoid saying “God.” They thought that swearing by those things left them a wiggle room with the truth. Jesus condemns their whole attitude by saying, let your yes be yes and no be no. Oaths today are usually frivolous – “I swear to God” or “Oh my God!” or any one of a thousand other things we say without thinking about whose name we’re really using. The spirit of God’s command is simple, truthful speech. That honors God. If that’s the way your speech is, you don’t need oaths to convince people that you’re telling the truth.

We could go through all Ten Commandments and identify the spirit of every law. The answer would always be the same: love. Love means upholding the truth of what God says is right and wrong. Love means sacrificing for the good of the people around me. Why then is there always such a temptation for us to reduce the law to mechanical things – to a simple question of what I did or did not do? Because it’s hard to put other people first. But it’s easy to make a list of external laws that I can check off and feel good about. The spirit of the law is dedicating our lives to God. And not one of us comes close to that standard. That’s why our Savior came and lived the life he did. He truly understood the spirit of the law. He always knew the right thing to do in every situation. He never hesitated to do the thing that would cost him to help others. Jesus loved because we fail to love. He died because that’s what our failure deserves. He rose to tell us that we are absolutely forgiven and free.

In that freedom comes our new life of love. In Christ comes the power to dedicate our lives to him. The more we listen to him, the more we understand the spirit of God’s law. The more we hear of his forgiveness and love, the more power God gives us to put our new understanding into practice. We won’t be perfect here. But that’s why we depend on Christ to get us to heaven. Every day, we put off yesterday’s sins and failures, rejoicing in our forgiveness, and we rededicate ourselves to living for him today. That is what Jesus calls us to do. Amen.