

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’²² 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.

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 and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “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.²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’³² 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.

³³ “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.’³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:21-37)

Just OK is Not OK

Have you seen that AT&T commercial, “Just OK is not OK”? A patient asks his nurse about a doctor and she says, “He’s OK.” Then that doctor comes into the room saying, “Guess who just got reinstated?” Clearly that’s not the doctor you want to have. AT&T claims that you should have the same standards for your cell phone service. I think in our consumer culture, we’re used to demanding good service. Most of us can tell stories of getting frustrated because someone didn’t live up to our expectations. But how quick are we to apply that standard to ourselves? Jesus didn’t say it that way, but in our gospel lesson for today, he’s making that point: **just OK is not OK**. Now, you might not see that at first. It’s easy to get lost in all the details Jesus brings up. He talks about murder and adultery and divorce and swearing oaths. I could preach five or six different sermons on what he said today. But what holds it all together? Jesus is attacking all the ways that we dismiss God’s law and make excuses for our sin. And in spite of the fact that Jesus said all this a very different time and place from the one we live in, he hits amazingly close to home for us. I think that we can sum up Jesus’ point about God’s law by stealing that slogan from AT&T: **just OK is not OK**.

The people who heard Jesus say these things would’ve been shocked by what he said. It’s hard for us to see that because we’ve heard these words so many times. But if we step back for a minute and think about the excuses that we make for ourselves, if we think about how we deal with the law and with guilt, we begin to see just how powerful Jesus’ words really are. One issue that Jesus addresses is thinking that we’re OK because technically we haven’t really broken the law. We make ourselves into unlicensed spiritual attorneys and we parse words and stand on technicalities. Jesus actually deals with that issue twice, first with the Fifth Commandment, you shall not murder. We’ve got to be OK on this one, right? We’ve never actually pulled out our concealed weapon and blown anybody away, no matter how much they deserved it. The other time Jesus brings it up is in connection with divorce. The Old Testament law required that when a man divorced his wife, he had to give her a certificate of divorce. So lots of people figured they were OK as long as they followed the letter of that law and handed her that piece of parchment.

But in both cases, they were missing the point. God commanded certificates of divorce to protect woman from just being thrown aside because their husbands wanted a newer model. It didn't make divorce OK. Likewise, God was concerned with a lot more than just whether we kill each other. Jesus points out that getting angry and losing our temper, insulting and calling each names are just as much sins against the Fifth Commandment. It's not just about murder. His words apply today in so many cases. We say something insulting and we make the excuse, "Well, I was just speaking the truth" or my favorite, "I'm just saying." We hurt people's feelings and we find a way to turn it back on them. And I can't tell you how many people I've spoken to who have all kinds of excuses for divorcing their previous husband or wife. While God does allow divorce when a spouse has been unfaithful or has simply left, most of the time in our society, people tell me, "We just weren't happy." "All we did was fight." "It was nobody's fault. We just weren't good together."

All those excuses illustrate the way that we disarm God's law: we don't claim to be perfect. We claim to be human. We admit that we have some fault in the whole thing – but then we turn it around and really make it outside our control. When it comes to what he have contributed to the situation, so often we say that we made mistakes. Notice, we don't say, "I sinned and offended God." We don't say, "I disobeyed what God clearly commands." We say, "I made a mistake. And now I have to move on." Do you see what we do? We find a way to live with ourselves. We neutralize God's Word and the guilt it causes us to feel and we find a way to think about something else. We're OK with just being OK at obeying God's law.

Jesus tells us that just isn't good enough. You see that when he talks about offending others and then going to church. He says that if you're about to make an offering to the Lord and you remember that your brother has something against you, you should leave your offering there at the temple and go be reconciled with your brother. That is much more important. But how often don't we come to church and act all religious and pious in here – even writing a big check, and then we're jerks in the other parts of our lives? Jesus points out that if we've hurt our brother or sister in some way, we need to seek their forgiveness before God's judgment falls on us. He talks about the judge handing us over to the officer and the officer throwing us in prison and then being stuck there until we've paid the last penny. He's not talking debtor's prison. He's talking about hell. God's justice doesn't care if we can live with what we've done. God asks if we have indeed sinned. And if so, the penalty is due.

But we keep making excuses. Jesus goes back to the letter of the law with adultery. He points out that you can break the Sixth Commandment, even if you've never been unfaithful to your spouse. Lust is adultery in our hearts. And in our society where sex sells and modesty is something that gets mocked as "frumpiness," how many of us can claim that we've never committed that sin? Jesus talks about oaths – which the Ten Commandments allow. But he tells us to avoid them, not because a sincere oath is a sin, but because they're so easy to abuse. In Jesus' day, people again used all kinds of technicalities to get around technically misusing God's name – kind of like we do today when we say "gosh" instead "God." His point is that people invoke God's name because other people don't trust them. Why do you constantly need to say, "as God is my witness" or "I swear to God"? Aren't you afraid people won't believe you? Jesus says, "**Let your yes be yes and your no by no.**" In other words, simply be an honest person whose words mean what they say and you won't have to bring God in to shore up your credibility.

All through this reading, Jesus is attacking our natural tendency to make excuses for ourselves, to downplay our own sins. Clint Eastwood once said, "You're a hero in own mind." And how often isn't that true for us? It's always someone else's fault. Someone else is always worse than we are. Our mistakes don't compare to how bad all those other people are. Again and again, Jesus condemns that attitude. He condemns that fact that we're willing to lower God's standards for ourselves. We're willing to think almost anything just so that we can live with ourselves.

And God doesn't accept that. Jesus commanded us to pluck out our eyes if they're leading us into that sin. He told us to cut off our right hands, if they're causing us to sin. He said, "**It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.**" He was not literally commanding us to practice self-mutilation. But he was trying to make us see just how dangerous God's law is. If we break it and if we convince ourselves that we're OK or that we're only human, we're going to spend eternity in hell. It's that simple. If something in this life leads us into sin, we have to get rid of that temptation. No pain or loss in this life is too great to avoid hell.

And Jesus does not speak one word of gospel to us in this reading. He hammers away at the law – just like I’ve been doing – and he does it to us, the people who believe in him. Why? Because he knows how deceitful the human heart really is. He knows how easy it is for us to dismiss God’s law and pretend like the only issue that matters is whether I feel guilty and how unhealthy I think guilt is. Jesus wants us to realize that whether we think guilt is a negative emotion or not, when we stand before the Judge the only question that matters is guilt or innocence. If we are found guilty, we will go to hell, no matter how healthy we think our response to guilt was while we were alive. That will be true, even if we find a way to convince ourselves that we’re OK compared to all those other sinners out there.

But Jesus takes no pleasure in making us feel guilty. He doesn’t want to hurt us. That’s not why he refrained from preaching the gospel. Jesus didn’t preach the gospel that day because he was living the gospel. He hit the law so hard because he was about to win forgiveness and life. And the gospel means nothing if we don’t understand what it’s really for. It does not help us if we think that we’re OK and that’s good enough. The gospel is there to save sinners who are dying. You might think of it like a doctor who discovers that a young mother has cancer. I can’t imagine how hard it must be to sit down with a young mother whose children aren’t even in school yet and tell her that she has this terrible disease and she needs to put everything on hold and start chemo. She might refuse to believe it and fight back. She might desperately grasp for some other explanation. That doctor has to tell her that unless something changes, she’s not going to see those kids graduate from high school or get married. That has to be one of the most unpleasant jobs you could have. But that doctor has to do it if he’s going to save that young mother’s life.

Jesus has to make us see that just OK isn’t good enough. He has to make us see that God judges not just what we do but also why we do it. He has to make us see that God cares the attitude of our hearts. He will send us to hell for that attitude, even if we think we’ve never technically broken one of the Ten Commandments. But like that doctor, Jesus forces us to see all that because he wants to save us. He loves us. He walked this earth in our place. He was the one person who never had to make excuses for himself. He was the one person who never had to settle for just being OK. He was totally perfect. And the comfort in that for you and me is that he came here to do all that because he loves us. The Son of God subjected himself to living under God’s law as a real human being because he knew that we humans sin over and over again and he wanted to save us from that. He came to give us a perfect life, a life that God could count in our place, a life that would replace all the things that we try to make excuses for – and even replace the excuses themselves – with perfect obedience to God. He succeeded in doing that. His life counts for us.

Then he died and he paid for all the sins that we don’t want to think about. He died and he paid for all the excuses we’ve ever made. He died and paid for all the times that we technically kept the Ten Commandments, but missed out on being truthful people or people who loved other or who protected the lives and feelings of others. He died and paid for all the lust we’ve ever felt and all the times we whined and said we were only human and tried to dismiss God’s law. He died and paid for all the sins in our hearts that we never acted on, but wished we could. He died and paid for the sin that we can’t even see about ourselves and for our deceitful hearts that just keep tricking us. Jesus died and paid for it all.

So God forgave it all. That’s what Jesus rose to tell us. He did that for the whole world, so he did it for you and me. We don’t need to find a way to live with ourselves. We don’t need to convince ourselves that just OK is OK. Christianity is the most honest of all religions. It teaches to be honest with ourselves about who and what we are, because God is honest about how he feels about us and what he did for us. We are forgiven. We are loved. We are perfect in God’s sight. And Jesus lives in our hearts today and he works every day to lead us to live the way God calls us to. Don’t make excuses. Admit your sin. And trust in your Savior. He has forgiven you. Amen.