

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

by Steve Zeisler

Because our pattern at PBC is to cover a passage of Scripture from beginning to end, the preacher will sometimes find himself with a topic that seems a bit obscure and hard to relate to our modern western society. Once I tried to explain the family tree of the Herods---which Herod killed the other Herod, who was married to whose sister---and found myself in a morass of confusion and obscurity. The nuances of differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees can seem unrelated to the day-to-day needs of modern Christians.

But in this passage the topics are murder and lust. There will be no difficulty connecting these to the contemporary world. I had determined that I was not going to mention the O.J. Simpson murder case currently in the news. But it seems almost impossible not to mention it, given the subject matter before us. What has struck me about Simpson's preliminary hearing in Los Angeles is the nature of our court system. This week we've seen forensic evidence brought forward and heard arguments about how many hairs from a head are required to constitute evidence. Such concerns are very far from the authoritative declarations we'll hear from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Our court system is probably the best in the world, maybe even the best in history. But it requires the presumption of innocence until the person who has been charged with a crime is proved guilty. No one is required to prove his innocence. If the prosecution cannot prove guilt, those accused are set free. I would not change anything in that system and the presumptions that underlie it.

Jesus' Examinations

But we are dealing in the passage before us with a much different question. When Jesus our Lord speaks to us about our lives, lays down categories of his concern, upholds the Law that has been in place since the founding of the world, and applies it to lives; then there are no presumptions. The question is what is true, not what can be proved.

In this section of Matthew 5 there is a pattern of six instances when the Lord says, "You have heard it was said that the ancients were told..." or "You have heard from of old..." a certain set of things, "...but I say to you..." He casts himself as a completely different sort of voice---different from a commentator, legal expert, human judge or court, rabbi, Bible teacher, or any other voice. He says, "I am telling you on my own authority, as the Author of the Law, as the Creator of everything, what concerns me." We are not dealing with presumptions now, or with what can be measured externally. We are dealing with things as they are. "I say to you"---this pattern that we'll see six times---is a profound one in which the Lord is claiming a radical kind of authority, the right to examine us and correct us. We're going to look at two of the six instances in this message, concerning murder and lust. These are Jesus' comments on the sixth and seventh of the Ten Commandments. Matthew 5:21-30:

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

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

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

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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."

God Cares About Our Motives

The human heart tends to make the clear and powerful statements of Scripture-in these cases the sixth and seventh commandments, "Do not murder" and "Do not commit adultery"-into a defense for ourselves. We take the firm word of God and then we say, What does it mean when it says, "Do not commit murder"? We might ask that question of O.J. Simpson: Has he murdered his former wife and the waiter at the restaurant she frequented? The evidence comes in: Can he be placed at the scene? When did the dog bark? When did he get on the airplane? Efforts are made to discover if he actually took their lives. But the question still isn't answered. Suppose he did: Did he have a temporary loss of sanity, and therefore was not responsible for what he did? And suppose he was sane: Was it self-defense? Self-defense is not murder. On and on the questions are asked to try to discover if this, in fact, was murder.

We would defend ourselves before God the same way, claiming to be innocent of any wrongdoing, to discover extenuating circumstances and explanations and reasons and cover-ups. Among Jesus' contemporaries, manipulations were made that allowed them to avoid asking hard questions about themselves. But Jesus declared, from his perspective as Lord of the universe, that the ability to avoid confronting wrongdoing was deadly for them. It is deadly for us as well, and it is an affront to God.

When we look at our behavior and who we are, we say of ourselves, "I'm not really that bad. I haven't killed anybody yet. I haven't done any violence to anyone." Or if we did, "It was justified." And if it wasn't justified, "Everyone is doing it." Time and time again we find ways to let ourselves off the hook. Or we say to ourselves, "I can control it. I've got a little bit of a problem, but it won't get out of hand. I can always stop before it's too late." We seek commentary and teaching that allow us do what everyone else has done, and that is to avoid having to conclude anything terrible about ourselves. So Jesus begins, "You have heard that people have said...."

Then we come to Jesus' authoritative, penetrating statement, "But I say to you...." He means, "Listen carefully. We are going to deal with the entire person. We are going to look not only at observable actions, but at the motives behind the actions. We are going to look at the heart of the person that is always displayed before God, about which we have no ability to fudge or pretend or manipulate." Jesus insists that God cares about our motives and our hearts.

A Commitment To Resentment Is Murder

Let's look at the three ways in which Jesus takes the statement, "Do not murder," and gives it more authority and more weight. First he says, "I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Even if there is no dead body anywhere in sight, if you have a commitment to resentment of another person stored in your heart, then you are guilty. The writer of Hebrews calls this a root of bitterness. This is not just a temporary flash of anger such as when someone cuts you off in traffic, and you yell at him and then forget about it shortly afterward. This is the kind of anger that is settled, that has wrapped itself around your soul, where the roots have gone deep into your very being. Whether you are consciously thinking about the person or not, the anger remains, bubbling under the surface. You hate them and what they stand for. You wish them ill whether you ever act on it or not. If you are angry with someone in that sense, you have murdered that person. You are subject to judgment, as guilty as if you had actually taken a life.

Then Jesus intensifies the commandment further: "Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca [an Aramaic word that means fool or blockhead],' is answerable before the Sanhedrin." The Sanhedrin was the highest court for the Jews, and Jesus is using it metaphorically here. He is saying that you could perhaps get yourself off if you had to argue your case before an ordinary court. If you're accused of something in the town in which you live, you might be able to talk your way out of it. But you will have to answer to the highest court conceivable, the Supreme Court, the wisest court, the most insightful court. The truest court is going to find you guilty for denigrating another person.

Words That Kill

Lastly, Jesus intensifies this commandment by saying you're not going to get off as if there were no punishment for verbal abuse or character assassination. He talks about the result: "But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." There are two points to be made here. One is that the anger or hatred itself, the desire that has taken root in any human heart to see another person hurt or destroyed, is by itself an affront to God, whether or not it ever leads to anything else. God loves every man and woman who walks the planet. His Son died for everyone. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...." God takes seriously our wishing for the destruction of someone he loves. We are guilty before God whether we act on it or not.

The second point Jesus makes is that eventually your anger is going to come out in your speech. You will begin to speak destructively. Even if you don't hit someone, or in some way physically abuse them, your anger will eventually be revealed by what you say. These statements, "Raca" and "You fool!", which both have roughly the same meaning, are much stronger than the way the term is translated for us. "Fool" is kind of a silly notion to us. But in the Old Testament (see Proverbs), a fool was a moral rebel, a dangerous and wicked person. Foolishness wasn't just silliness; it was active rebellion.

I was trying to think of contemporary equivalents. Consider the words "bitch" and "bastard." These words each have a very ordinary meaning; you could conceivably use them in a sentence with no anger behind it to mean a female dog or an illegitimate child. But most of the time they are used with much harsher tones to hurt and tear and violate. They are abusive terms. Verbal abuse is real abuse. If you destroy people's hopes by the language you use toward them, teach them to hate themselves because of your hatred of them, restrict their lives, and bring about a deepening darkness on them in which they are less well, less hope-filled, frightened, reduced, and cut-that is a very grave matter.

Our Lord is saying that the anger that exists in our hearts is our guilt. And it is going to lead to hurtful speech, which is also something that God takes very seriously. We say, "It can't be proved; no one can say I did it for sure. There are no dead bodies. The angry speech takes place behind closed doors at our house, no one has ever heard it in public where someone can measure it. So I'm okay." Then Jesus says, "But I say to you...." Jesus looks at our hearts and says, "I see it all. There is something terrible in there. There is hatred of another, angry speech, verbal abuse, and wickedness." And God will hold us accountable; our hatred deserves to be thrust into hell itself.

We Do Have A Choice

Too often our tendency in the church is to cover up anger and verbal violence. We want only the people most hurt to suffer the hurt, and for no one else to know about it. Or if we don't cover it up well, then we jump to the other extreme and say, "It's not my fault. I was raised in a dysfunctional home; my parents treated me badly and their parents treated them badly, I'm a victim, and there's nothing I can do about it. There's no way out."

Notice that Jesus insists that both of those options be rejected. He insists on honest examination: What is true in the heart, what is true behind closed doors? How much real violence is there in the intonation of apparently calm words? Is there anger, a longing to destroy? It is going to come out in the open; before God we are going

to answer for it. There is no covering up. And he does not let us wallow in victimization either. He says, "As you discover it, do something about it." And the clear assumption is that you *can* do something about it.

Look carefully at verse 23. If you are on your way to a prayer meeting, or to church, or to your fellowship group, or somewhere where God will be at the center of your experience, and you're planning to be very religious, then God says, "Yes, but you haven't spoken to your brother for five years, and the last speech you had was filled with venom." God brings to our minds these relationships that were destroyed because of anger and violent speech. Jesus does not then say, "Redouble your speed, get to the prayer meeting, pray with a louder voice, be as religious as you possibly can and try to make it go away!" He says, "Stop the religious endeavor, turn around. Go find the person with whom you have hard feelings, and make it right." He even says, interestingly enough, that you should go to the person who has something against you, who has cut you off, who is angry and hateful and blames you for everything. You take the initiative to go to him. Assume that you have played some part in it, and that you can say something in that setting to break the ice, perhaps acknowledging that you contributed to the problem and can help to make it right. There is no claim of being victimized here. The assumption is that if we are disciples of Christ we can act, that we have the power of the Spirit of God in us to by faith do something about the problem rather than feel completely daunted by it.

Jesus adds a second point in verse 25: If you're on your way to a court-whether it is a legal court, a "court" of public opinion, a circle of friends that you share with your opponent, or any kind of setting where some opinion will be rendered-don't assume that you're going to win. Don't assume that you're going to get others to see things your way, and to hate your enemy as much as you do. That is a very foolish assumption. Anger is a growing, terrible master. It grows beyond our ability to control it. You are much better off trying to settle with the person with whom you have an angry relationship, to speak to him directly, to break down the barriers, and to create love where there has been hatred, than you are to assume your viewpoint will be persuasive to others. If you lose, there is a great price to pay. All may find out that you are as guilty, or more so, than your opponent. You'll have to pay every penny, accept all the consequences.

We in the church need to stop lying, covering up, and pretending that there is no anger and violence in our lives, even though it may not be measured in bruises and blood. If there is anger and violence we must own up to it as a community. Then together we can help one another do something about it. Let's break down the barriers, get help, stop it, confess it, and receive one another. There are studies that say that family violence in conservative churches exists at the same high level as in the society at large. But because we want to be well thought of, we go to great extremes to cover it up, perhaps more so than people in other settings. I hope Jesus' words about God's seeing our hearts and the fact that he is going to call us to account for what is there, will spur us to receive forgiveness from him and then act to make things right.

Sexual Fantasy Is Adultery

The second issue before us concerns the seventh commandment, "Do not commit adultery." Here too Jesus' words fit the pattern. Jesus is intensifying the commandment again, examining hearts, not just actions. "The voice of commentators on this commandment is to say, 'Do not have sex with someone to whom you are not married.' But I say to you that anyone who looks on a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

The phrase "to look at someone lustfully" needs a little attention. Jesus is not speaking here of momentary thoughts of a sexual nature. He's not talking about observing an attractive person walking by and turning our heads to look. Nor is he talking about the temptation to think lustfully. These temptations come up all the time, fairly unbidden. What he is talking about is the decision to give the temptation its way in your mind, to fix on a person and fantasize about them, to imagine what it would be like to be in a physical relationship with them, to replay the movie over and over again, to create scenarios in which this lustful experience of having another person who is not your husband or wife and is perhaps the husband or wife of another, plays itself out in your mind. If you've done that, you've committed adultery already. (Jesus intends his message for both men and women, by the way; even though the words address only men.)

The Lord is recognizing here that there is a progression to sin. That's why his command is so strong. He says

that if your eye offends you pluck it out, and then throw it as far as you can from you. If your hand offends you, cut it off and be done with it. He's very clear that sexual sin, like all other sins, starts by what you take in with your eyes, what you see and continue to see, whether it's gazing at someone and continuing to see them in the most sexual terms, or looking at pornography.

If you're putting yourself in a situation that will create these kinds of thoughts, get out of the situation. Don't wait until your mind has already begun to intensify the fantasy and then try to stop it. Stop it at the beginning. Jesus is obviously speaking metaphorically; he doesn't intend for people to maim themselves. But he does intend for us to take serious action and to do so quickly and decisively; to act in a way that will cut off the pattern. Otherwise the pattern grows and the person who is committed to lust in their mind will eventually find themselves so weak that they actually act on their thoughts.

The wisdom of the world around us declares that sexual fantasies are a great good, claiming that it is completely healthy and useful to have a riotous fantasy life. But Jesus says that such thoughts are adultery. God sees the heart.

Alternatives To Lust

It is not inevitable that we give way to lust or adultery; we're not victims. And we don't need to lie and cover up and pretend the problem is not there. We can be honest about who we are, because God is going to be honest about who we are. But at the same time we have choices to make. If your eye offends you, cut it out. Do something about all that leads up to the problems. You *can* do something. Your Lord is strong, and he will answer the cry of your heart to be free of anything that tears at you constantly. If your hand offends you, cut it off. Stop acting in ways that cause the problems. You have the right and the authority to say no.

As a word of encouragement, I would add these verses from the Proverbs that talk about positive alternatives. Married couples can make the choice to reinforce the good gift of sex within marriage. Proverbs 5:15-20:

Drink water from your own cistern,
running water from your own well.

Should your springs overflow in the streets,
your streams of water in the public squares?

Let them be yours alone,
never to be shared with strangers.

May your fountain be blessed,
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

A loving doe, a graceful deer,
may her breasts satisfy you always,
may you ever be captivated [intoxicated] by her love.

Why be captivated, my son, by an adulteress?
Why embrace the bosom of another man's wife?

The wisdom of the world tells us to give way to sexual choices, and then to regret them and hate them because they are dangerous. But the wisdom of the word of God is that we do have choices, our activity is not inevitable, and God has given us an honorable gift in our sexuality. So we choose not to lust and experience the essential guilt of adultery by doing so, because we have a good choice as an alternative.

Let me summarize what is important in these two paragraphs. Most importantly, we must be honest about what is true of us. It doesn't matter if nobody else knows, or if only a limited circle know. It doesn't matter that people will think well of us if we just keep quiet. In a court of law, if a defendant cannot be proved to be

guilty, then that person is not guilty. But that's not the way to approach God. The way to approach God is to be truthful about who we are. He understands them anyway; we're not telling him something he doesn't know. He is faithful to forgive us our sins. He is committed to us and he loves us; he is a redeemer, a re-maker of broken humanity.

Secondly, we are not victims with no choices to make. In both of these paragraphs examining the two commandments, Jesus ends by saying, "Do something, get started, make a change." If you have a problem with anger, admit which people are the object of the anger and go to them one by one and start the process, at least from your end, of making things right. If you have lustful thoughts, take actions that will start setting you free from the environment in which these thoughts get planted in your mind.

It is great foolishness to assume that the church is freer from these problems than the world is. May we be the kind of community in which honesty is rewarded by encouragement, in which we really do help each other. It is too easy to cover up a source of real difficulty. I invite all of us together to admit to ourselves what God already knows is true of us. If we need help, either with anger or with lust, let's get the help---a community of beggars who will show other beggars where to find bread.

Catalog No. 4407
Matthew 5:21-30
Fifth Message
Steve Zeisler
July 3, 1994

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.