

Date: February 16, 2020

Scripture: 5:21-37

Title: LIVING WITH THE HEART AND MIND OF GOD

I read the biggest secret to being a great celebrity impersonator is attitude plus appearance. That's also the formula for looking really religious, too! That was true in Jesus' day, and that's true today. Attitude plus appearance. Both are easy to fake.

Our Bible passage today is part of a larger teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus has just kicked off his public ministry. He has gathered his first disciples. The end of Matthew 4 reads, "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people."

Large crowds have begun following him. So Jesus sits down to teach. In order to understand today's Bible passage, we have to understand what came before it. It's always important in interpreting scripture, to know the context of the situation.

Sometimes when we read the Bible, it feels like we're walking into the middle of a conversation. We can't understand certain passages unless we understand their context, the first part of the conversation. We don't want to base our understanding of God on a Bible verse taken out of context. Throughout history, too much evil, too much hurt, has been done in the name of God by those who took a passage out of context and claimed that it represented God's will. Taking a Bible verse out of context doesn't lead to a true understanding of God. It certainly doesn't lead to spiritual maturity. For today's Bible passage, it's especially important to understand the first part of the conversation.

As we have already seen, Jesus starts off his public teaching with his favorite subject, the kingdom of heaven. He teaches us that our righteous acts don't earn our way into God's kingdom. Instead, he says that those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for God's sake are blessed in God's kingdom. This would have been some revolutionary, mind-blowing stuff for Jesus' audience.

But then he seems to go in the opposite direction. He tells the crowds that he didn't come to abolish the laws of the Jewish religion, but to fulfill every single word.

And then Jesus really confuses everyone in the crowd by saying, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5: 20)

I'm sure the people wondered, "How is that even possible?" The Pharisees and teachers of the law could barely keep the law. How could anyone else ever surpass their level of righteousness?

Now Jesus has everybody's attention. He's challenging everything they think they know about their religion. And so the scene is set for today's lesson. He begins, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' (which means empty headed) is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

Whoa, it's difficult to feel self-righteousness when even your thoughts are under scrutiny. Jesus is saying it's a sin to harbor an angry thought. He adds that if you even look at a woman lustfully you have already committed adultery with her in your heart. That's extreme. What hope is there for anyone?

Everyone listening to Jesus that day suddenly became aware of the depth of their sins. Now they realized they were all guilty in the sight of God. They were feeling good about themselves because they had never murdered, or stolen, or committed adultery. But Jesus says that sin goes far deeper than overt action. It involves the inner attitude that leads up to that action.

You see, Jesus is saying that sin doesn't start where we think it does. Sin doesn't start with an action. Sin starts with a decision, the decision that our life is our own and that God has no business interfering with our desires. If you think sin begins and ends with your outward actions, you're fooling yourself. People don't necessarily wake up one day and decides to commit murder. The act of murder starts with contempt or hatred or envy or anger or resentment or pride. It thrives in the heart that doesn't take God seriously. The only way to deal with the so-called "sins of the flesh," is to so fill ourselves with the presence of God, that giving in to our sinful thoughts becomes unthinkable.

On the night of August 21, 1986, the villagers of Nyos, Cameroon heard what sounded like a rumbling noise coming from the lower valley near Lake Nyos. The next morning, almost every person in the village, around 1,800 people, were dead. Even cattle that grazed near Lake Nyos were dead. And the tranquil blue lake had turned a strange shade of red. Imagine if you woke up tomorrow morning to discover that almost every citizen in Sunnyvale and surrounding area had mysteriously died. The grief and confusion would be overwhelming.

Scientists from around the world came to Nyos to research this tragic mystery. They finally came to the conclusion that a build-up of carbon dioxide gas on the bottom of the lake bed had caused the tragedy. Carbon dioxide is released from the melting and cooling of rocks. Lakes that are near volcanoes are prone to have carbon dioxide under the water. But most lakes release the carbon dioxide at a slow and steady rate. Not Lake Nyos. The deadly gas built up on the bottom of the lake bed over many years, until suddenly it exploded like a can of carbonated soda that has been shaken up. The gases formed a toxic cloud when it reached the surface, instantly killing 1,800 villagers.

Some of you may be thinking right now, “Whoa, Pastor! That turned dark really quickly.” But the power of sin, the power of hate and anger and lust and pride and greed and selfishness are deadly. They’re the toxic gas that builds up at the bottom of our hearts and minds and then explodes into tragic action. The same anger that causes us to stop speaking to a neighbor is the seed of domestic violence and school shootings and genocide. The same greed that causes us to hoard our money for luxuries and ignore the needs of the world, is the seed of organized crime networks and slave labor operations. We carry the same seed of sin within us. So, what separates you or me from the warlord or the mass murderer? Jesus is saying how thin is the line between the thought and the act? So, examine your own heart, you may be impersonating a follower of Jesus. If your heart and mind are not ruled by the spirit of God, then we are still in moral and spiritual danger.

Jesus says that sin doesn’t start where you think it does. **But he is also saying sin doesn’t end where you think it does either.** Look at verses 23-25: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.”

Let that sink in. You think your sin is only between you and God? We all bear the image of God. If we’re in conflict with each other, then we’re in conflict with God. The gift Jesus is referring to is the sacrificial animal laid on the altar and killed to atone for a person’s sins. But Jesus is saying, “Forget about the sacrifice! Go deal with the sin. Humble yourself, confess, repent, reach out, be reconciled.”

Worship is being in the presence of a holy God, and the greatest sacrifice we can bring to a holy God is a pure heart. Some of us sitting in these pews each week wonder

why we don't experience the joy and peace that flows from heartfelt worship. Could it be that we need to be reconciled with a brother or sister? Is there a conversation we've been putting off? Reconciliation matters more than religion. That's the clear meaning of Jesus' teaching. We want to believe that worship means coming to church for one hour each week and sacrifice means teaching the third-grade Sunday school class. But, Jesus is saying that reconciliation and unity are spiritual acts of sacrifice and worship. They require more than just showing up. They require humility and confessing our sins to one another and repentance and forgiveness and grace. All the things that Jesus came to teach us.

Jesus has already shaken up the crowd by telling them that sin doesn't begin where they think it does; neither does it end where they think it does. **The final point he is making here, is that the starting and ending point of righteousness is, living with the heart and mind of God within our souls.** We need to be so full of God's spirit that there's no room for such things as angry thoughts, or lustful thoughts, or greed.

Author Max Lucado experienced some heart problems a few years ago, so his doctor recommended what is known as a catheter ablation procedure. As he was being wheeled into the surgery prep room, Lucado began joking around with the surgeon.

Lucado said, "You're burning the interior of my heart, right?"

The doctor said, "Correct."

Lucado continued, "You intend to kill the misbehaving cells, yes?"

The surgeon nodded, "That is my plan."

Lucado asked, "As long as you are in there, could you take your little blow-torch to some of my greed, selfishness, superiority, and guilt?"

The surgeon smiled and said, "Sorry, that's out of my pay grade."

We are a self-centered people. Purifying our hearts and cleansing them from sin is above our pay grade too. We need God's Spirit within for that. We need to spend more time with God, more time in worship, in prayer, in repentance, in obedience, in acts of service. And as our love for God grows, then we will begin to think with the mind of God and respond with the heart of God. That's the starting and ending point of all that God means for us to be. So let us all strive to be all God means for us to be by Trusting, Believing, and having an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.