

Epiphany 6—A
Matthew 5:21-37
Affairs of the Heart

What's more important—our actions or our hearts? It's a tricky question. Tuesday is Valentine's Day. Maybe you've poured your heart and your thoughts into what to do for that special someone—but times are tough and the budget is tight, so you spend all day making him or her a romantic meal—that your valentine is allergic to. It's the thought that counts—but the actions still matter.

Or maybe the budget isn't so tight, but your schedule is. So you give a bundle of cash to your secretary to pick out and wrap the present for you. And it's exactly what your valentine wants, but when they open the present, they realize this is the first time you're seeing it, too. Someone else picked it out. The present is great, but it's the thought that counts, and you blew it.

What's more important—our actions or our hearts? That can be tricky to balance in our relationships. So how does it work in our relationship with God? What is it that God really wants out of you: the actions—doing the right things the right ways, or the heart—doing whatever you do for the right reason? As you look at your life, are you the you that you want to be? Are you the you that God wants you to be?

In Jesus' day, the teachers were pretty sure they had that one nailed. It was about the actions. They knew the 10 Commandments. They knew what they were to do and not do: don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't take the Lord's name in vain—all the commandments Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai long ago. And they thought as long as their actions measured up, that's what God wanted.

I think today the temptation is to go the other direction. It's not about the actions—it's about the heart. God doesn't care if I sleep with someone before I'm married—as long as I love them. It doesn't matter if we get divorced, as long as we're convinced it's the right thing for the kids. A little white lie isn't harmful—as long as I'm telling it for a good reason. And God understands if I speak words to tear into someone—after all, just look at how much they hurt me. God doesn't worry about my actions we think, it's about my heart.

If you struggle with that, then Jesus is speaking to you in this third section of his Sermon on the Mount. He's not preaching to the Pharisees who were looking to destroy him, or to the crowds who just wanted to see his miracles. He was talking to people like you: believers. People who knew that their salvation was a gift of God's grace, and people who wanted to live lives that honored their Savior. And that's what you and I want too—to know at the end of the day that we're living lives that please our Father in heaven. So how do you do it—is it about your heart or your actions?

Jesus uses the Fifth Commandment as an example: *“Do not murder”* (21). The religious leaders taught that if you wrongfully kill someone, you're in trouble. And not only that, you'll also have to answer for it if you say, Raca—an Aramaic word for “fool.” Jesus didn't dispute what they were teaching; his concern was what they weren't teaching. The Fifth Commandment doesn't only prohibit killing; it prohibits hating. It doesn't only prohibit “Raca;” it prohibits any words that are intended to harm someone. The people were being taught, as long as you don't kill or say “Raca” everything's fine. So people were doing everything but: hating, verbally abusing, and then going to church as if nothing were wrong: God, here's my offering—while at the same moment somebody else was crying in a corner on account of their abuse. No! Jesus says. That's not the obedience God requires! Hating your neighbor and worshiping God are mutually incompatible, so don't pretend the two can go together. *“Leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and*

offer your gift” (24). And this doesn’t only apply to the way you treat your friends, but also to the way you treat your enemies—even your adversary who is taking you to court. Don’t let your anger fester. Whatever the issue is between you, take care of it right away before it snowballs out of your control. When Jesus teaches the obedience that God requires, he shows that murder is more than taking a life or saying certain words. It addresses what’s in my heart, even how I control my temper, even how I treat my enemies.

You and I fall short. But Jesus declared: “*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*” (Matthew 5:17). He has fulfilled the Law for you. He has kept it perfectly. His righteousness completely meets the law’s true requirements. His righteousness counts as your record in God’s courtroom as you stand there in faith that clings to Jesus alone. That’s the new heart Jesus has given to you. Your new heart cherishes Jesus’ righteousness. For God freely credits it to you as genuine and true.

As our new hearts cherish Jesus’ righteousness, we also cherish righteousness in our lives. You’ve been washed. You’ve been sanctified. You’ve been justified. So rid yourself of the anger that stains. Remember what Jesus said last week? “*You are the salt of the earth ... You are light of the world*” (Matthew 5:13-14). What a way to be salt and light by getting rid of the anger and living in righteousness and peace. For you know that no matter what the personal harm is you’ve suffered that has made you so angry, your heavenly Father works it for good. In fact, the bounty of his blessing far outweighs all the hurt and curses others can heap upon you. Look at the cross and see the good the Lord worked for you there despite the harm and hurt his enemies aimed to cause. With your new heart, clothed in Christ’s righteousness, cherish the genuine righteousness that God works in your life. He enables you to lay aside your anger so that your righteousness is not just on the outside like the Pharisees, but it’s genuine, as deep as your own heart, purified from sinful anger.

It’s the same with the Sixth Commandment: “*Do not commit adultery*” (27). It doesn’t just address what you do with your body, but goes all the way down to what you think in your heart. Someone might think: “There’s nothing wrong with looking,” but Jesus says there is. God doesn’t take adultery lightly—even the adultery that you commit only with your eyes and act on only in your heart. It would be better to go through life without an eye than to go to hell for the sins you commit with that eye. It would be better for you to cut off your hand, Jesus says, than to go to hell for the sins you commit with that hand. We don’t hesitate to amputate a limb that’s infected with gangrene to keep a body alive. How much more so if it could keep us from hell. But it’s not really only a matter of the eyes or the hands is it? It’s a matter of the heart. That’s where the lust and passions and the sinful desires come from.

And Jesus has even more to say about Sixth Commandment: It doesn’t just address your thoughts and actions with people who you aren’t married to. It also calls for faithfulness to the person you are married to: Divorce. It turns out things weren’t so different in Jesus’ day: Divorce was considered fine as long as you did it properly. It’s okay for a man to abandon his wife as long as he gives her the paperwork. Not so different today: as long as it’s amicable, as long as it doesn’t hurt the kids, as long as you’ve both really tried to make it work. And nobody seems to notice or care that the root of the problem isn’t how people are getting divorced. It’s that they are getting divorced. When Jesus teaches the obedience that God requires, he shows that adultery doesn’t always take two people. It addresses what’s in my head, even how I use my eyes, even how I treat my spouse.

You are salt and you are light as you uphold God’s plan for marriage and sex. Your new heart, clothed with Jesus’ righteousness, longs for a life pure from sinful lust. It cherishes a life of genuine righteousness. Living in this sinful world, we cannot avoid all temptations to lustful passions. Yet, even

as the birds of temptation fly around our heads, we don't have to let them make nests in our hair. And there is much we can avoid and flee from, just as Joseph did when Potiphar's wife tempted him. Think about that as you make your entertainment choices whether that's a movie to watch, a party to go to, a website to surf, music to listen to, or jokes to laugh at. It might feel like you are missing out on the fun everyone else is having, but if it keeps you from sin, it's well worth it. Remember how even losing an eye or a hand, if it actually could keep us from sin, would have been well worth it? How much more so missing out on some false pleasure or superficial fun?

Think about that as you listen to some passage of the passage the Holy Spirit gave the Apostle Paul to write: *"But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or course joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving"* (Ephesians 5:3-4). *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God"* (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5). And finally: *"Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body"* (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). In a dark, sex-filled world, what a way to let your light shine out so that others praise your Father in heaven! What a way to be salt to slow the decay of the sinful around us! That's the genuine righteousness our new heart cherishes.

Finally, Jesus talks about promises. The religious leaders taught that an oath was a special thing, a solemn promise that you're going to do what you say: So if you make an oath, keep it. That sounds good, but it had devolved into word games. As if, I swear by heaven, carries more weight than, I swear by earth. If I swear by my foot, that means nothing, but if I swear by my mother's grave, then there's no way out of it. And nobody knows whether someone is crossing their fingers or telling a lie. But nobody seems to notice or care that the problem isn't how they are phrasing their promises, but that they've lost any regard for the truth. Instead of needless swearing, Jesus says, tell the truth! Don't expect people to trust you because of the way you formulate your promise. Earn their trust by telling the truth and keeping your word. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.'

Here is where we need to listen to ourselves a little more closely. I don't know if it's engrained in people from little on up, but how often do you use God's name without even thinking about it? Rather than an excuse, that makes it worse that we so flippantly use the holy name of the Almighty, the only name that saves. We like to dismiss such talk as no big deal. It's so common. But what does Jesus say? *"Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond that comes from the evil one"* (37). You don't want to be the devil's spokesperson, do you?

Rather let your light shine out by the way you speak. Your words are the window into your heart. The light of Jesus has shown into you. His light has shattered the darkness that once consumed you from the inside out. He has given you a new heart clothed with his righteousness, a new heart that shines. Show that new heart through the window of your words. Reflect the light of Jesus in your conversations. And when people know that you are a woman or man of your word, that your yes is yes and your no is no, how much more are they to take you at your word when you tell them about Jesus, your God and Savior? Our new hearts cherish the genuine righteousness that shines out through our words because then others are more ready to listen when you tell them about the righteousness that comes from Jesus Christ, the only righteousness that saves. For Jesus has fulfilled the Law for us sinners. He gives you a new heart.

Jesus teaches the kind of obedience God requires—we could summarize—when it comes to your temper, when it comes to your faithfulness, and when it comes to your word. But his point is bigger than those three examples. He’s exposing a sin that finds a home in the heart of every sinner, a sin that gives birth to millions and millions more. The sin of replacing God’s commandments with our own and then calling them God’s, perhaps without even realizing we’ve done it. We cleanse our conscience by means of imaginary loopholes instead of turning to Jesus. Well, I’ve never bowed down to a idol. I’ve never gone to prison. I’ve never had sex outside of marriage. Never killed anyone. Check, check, check, check. I’m good with God. I’ve kept his commandments. As long as I go to church on Sunday, give ten percent, use the right liturgy, sing the right hymns... check, check, check, check.

And then the verbal abuse I’ve unleashed on my spouse, the grudge I’ve nursed against my classmate, my adulterous eyes, my worship at the altar of materialism, all the times I’ve said, Well, I don’t mean to gossip, but just between you and me...—all such sins stop being sins in our own eyes. Deficiencies, maybe. Weaknesses I need to work on, sure. But not the kinds of sins that God addresses in the context of hell. Not the kind of things that deserve an eternity of unrelenting fire. With such an attitude we might still plow through the confession of sins: Altogether sinful from birth... in countless ways I have sinned, but we’re not really sure why we’re saying it. It becomes more of a recitation than a confession. And the words of forgiveness that follow sound just as empty—maybe we hardly even pay attention—because we feel like there’s not all that much to forgive.

That’s the sin that Jesus exposes and that he warns us about. He opens our eyes to the kind of obedience that God requires so that we don’t invent our own rules and...so that we realize what we need. Not a day, not an hour, not a minute goes by for which I do not need forgiveness. When Jesus teaches the kind of obedience that God requires, suddenly the confession of sins at the beginning of the service has relevance: altogether sinful...in countless ways have I sinned. Suddenly forgiveness becomes more urgent than oxygen, something we can grow tired of hearing no more than we can grow tired of breathing. God, our heavenly Father, has forgiven all of your sins: Could you ever tire of hearing that he’s taken away every single one—even the ones you did on purpose? By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever: Could it ever cease to amaze you that Jesus really was perfect, and after all that work of being perfect, he gave all of his innocence away—to you—and took away all of your guilt? You are his own dear child: Not an enemy, not a number, not on probation. You couldn’t be closer to his heart. And how does it end? May God give you strength to live according to his will.

And with that we come full circle to the words Jesus spoke last week: *You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.* The least likely people in the world. No, God, not me. I know I should be, but I’m not. Before you can get out such words, you hear: “May God give you strength to live according to his will.” You are salt. You are light. It comes with forgiveness. And God gives you strength to let it shine. He has forgiven your anger, and now gives you the strength and desire to forgive. He has forgiven your adultery, and now gives you the strength and desire to be faithful in your relationships and chaste with your eyes. He has forgiven your lies and broken promises, and now gives you the strength and desire to let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No,’ —to be someone that others can trust. He’s forgiven them all, and so he says to the least likely people in the world—he says it to you: You’re salt. You’re light. You’re exactly what the world needs. Let your light shine before men, so that when people see you, they see Jesus. So that when they listen to you, they hear Jesus. So that by knowing you, they might come to know Jesus. Amen.

Hymns: 221, 462