

Sermon – February 16, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – Matthew 5:21-37

To the Glory of God - Soli Deo Gloria

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these Words, make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry. Amen

Good Morning! I hope that everyone has recovered from our Valentine's Day celebrations. I would like to thank everyone who worked so hard to bring that evening's event about. It was well done and a wonderful time of fellowship.

Mark your calendars for March 12th at 10:30 a.m. for the start of a new topic in the Bible Study at Fairfields UMC. Judy Mooers will be leading us through a survey study of the Old Testament titled the Epic of Eden: A Christian Entry into the Old Testament. I think this will be a wonderful opportunity to strengthen our understanding of the Scriptures that the writers of the New Testament quote so much. I encourage you all to plan to attend. We generally meet from 10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m., but find often find our discussions of the Scriptures and how they impact our lives lasting until noon. Pray about joining us on this journey through the Old Testament. If you are interested, please contact Judy Mooers and let her know so that she can order you a copy of the text. Then bring your Bible and come and join us as we allow God's word to astonish and enrich us.

Lent begins on February 26th and the Northumberland Charge will mark its start with a 7:00 p.m. Ash Wednesday evening service at Fairfields. Lent is a season in the church when we are to focus on our sinful state and the saving actions God provides for sinners through Jesus Christ, His only Son. Christians often fast during this season to help them prepare for Easter and to reflect on the state of their soul. This year for the season of Lent, I am asking us as a congregation to enter into a season of prayer. In the back of the church / or by the doors, you will find a prayer commitment pledge sheet. Please take one of these sheets, read through it, and identify on it where you are led by the Holy Spirit to pray during the weeks of Lent. For example, if you are led to pray for then check that item, add any detail, such as how long you

will pray, and then sign and date the pledge. You will notice that the sheet has a duplicate of the items on the other side of the fold. The idea is for us to mark our pledge on both sides of the sheet, tear the sheet in half, put one half on your refrigerator or some place you will see it every day to remind you what you pledged to pray about throughout Lent, and bring the signed copy back and put it into the offering plate. We are not collecting these to hold you accountable for what you have pledged, but to work with you to enable you to pray. For example, if you pledge to come to the sanctuary and pray for, say, 30 minutes each week, we will work to open the sanctuary and make it available for prayer. If you are going to pray for missions with others, then we will also tell you when that group will meet to pray. Hopefully, you get the idea. If you can't find anything on the list of suggestions that you are led to commit to pray about, you will find one item at the bottom that allows you to make your own prayer commitment for Lent. Please, take a copy if you are interested in praying during Lent, identify the items you will agree to pledge to pray about, and then mark the sheet, tear it in half, and return half. I will let you know what we as a church have agreed to pray for as we journey through Lent. If you have questions let me know.

We are continuing our focus on Jesus' sermon on the mount. Think about this scene in Galilee on a hill somewhere in the countryside. Jesus sat down on the mount and taught. He did not have a cell phone, he did not let the crowds know he was there by a website, he did not have Facebook or twitter or any electronic mechanisms. He did not have a computer to help assemble his points, he had no projector or screens to display the text of his points on, he did not have Microsoft, or Apple, or Google. There was no broadband, Wi-Fi, or cell towers, yet what he teaches is timeless wisdom. He gives us teaching that applies to people, teaching that is as applicable for us today as it was for those in the first century. Jesus just sits and talks to his disciples. Jesus uses words, ancient words that carry timeless ideas of what it means to be part of the kingdom of heaven: words that applied to his disciples in the first century, words that apply to us today in 2020, and words that will apply to Jesus' disciples in all times and all places until Jesus returns in power.

Look at the topics he addresses in his teaching. How prevalent in our world are murder, adultery, broken marriages, fraudulent actions, vengeance, and hatred. Are these topics relevant today? In the Year 2020? How can it be that Jesus, having no technology, sitting on a hill in Galilee, could teach on topics that are as relevant today as they were the day he taught them?

Now for those who are not new to church, this morning's sermon will not be the first sermon you have heard on Jesus' sermon on the mount. John Wesley, as an example, in his collection of 52 standard sermons, devotes 13 of them to Jesus' sermon on the mount. Some of you may remember some sermons that you have heard over the years about the sermon on the mount. I can remember my first encounter with Jesus' teaching on the sermon on the mount. It was not part of a sermon I heard in church, but came one day as I was walking home from playing with other kids in our neighborhood and made a comment about how one of the kids I had some disagreement with was a fool. Now don't judge me, I probably did not know what the word meant, but was upset with some egregious act of another child and had heard others use that expression. What makes that moment memorable for me is that my mother overheard my comment, and she took immediate action to correct the error of my ways and to help me clean up my mouth. Her actions turned a passing comment about another person that I would have forgotten into a lifetime memory of trying not calling my brother or sister a fool. Well, at least not where my mother could overhear. I am not sure I had ever heard of Jesus' teaching on the sermon on the mount, but my mother had and she thought it was important that she make my comment into a teachable moment.

Before we look at this morning's Scripture from the sermon on the mount, we need to back up in this sermon just a bit to where Jesus tells his disciples he has not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. What we begin to learn in today's Scripture is part of how Jesus begins to fulfil the law.

We also need to understand that the Pharisees are the keepers of the law as well as those who teach and monitor other's actions related to the law in Israel. They are on a mission to keep the law given by Moses in an attempt to receive the blessings God promised to those who do so. This is their attempt to keep the letter of the law by carefully keeping from the actions they found forbidden in the law. They are also quick to tell others when they fall short of keeping the law and are often following Jesus to see what he is doing and to attempt to correct his understanding of law keeping. It is into this situation that Jesus speaks to his disciples who are too familiar with the Pharisee approach to living the law. Jesus has also told his disciples that for them to enter the kingdom of heaven, their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees. This is a high bar for Jesus' disciples, but Jesus is about to teach what fulfilment of the law means. This

teaching will change his disciples' understanding of the law. It is also a teaching that changes our understanding of law keeping or righteousness.

I want to alert us to Jesus' words as he teaches about these topics. Notice that he does not say to those listening, "It is written," but "You have heard." These words are then followed by Jesus's teaching introduced by his words, "But I say to you." Jesus' word choice does not address what Moses received from God as the law and Moses' understanding of the law, but the Pharisees' understanding and teaching of the law. We can hear Jesus' careful word selection as Jesus teaching his disciples not to hear what they have been told by others what the law says, but to instead hear his teaching, to hear how he has come to fulfil the law.

Jesus begins his teaching by telling his disciples, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Jesus has just taught that if we are angry with our brother or sister, we are liable to the same judgment as those who have premeditated the killing of another human. The Pharisees will hold that they have not murdered, so they are keeping this commandment. Jesus tells us that it is not just our outward physical actions that matter, but what is in our hearts. This law about murder is not just about the killing of another, but about even being angry with a brother or sister. God knows our hearts and the state of our hearts' focus. If our hearts are not angry with our brother or sister, then the outward physical action spoken against in the commandment never follows. This is the righteousness that Jesus teaches. Jesus raises the bar on this commandment to not just physical action, but also heart action. He continues teaching and says, "And if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council;" The council here is the group of rulers that decide punishment for offenses under the law in Israel. Jesus is making the point that if, as a result of what is in our hearts, we even speak an insult of our brother or sister, we will be held accountable by God. The "insult" here is the Aramaic word "Raca," which means "empty-headed." This is an insult that we have a version for today, and it is a comment we make about those whose actions seem to lack good sense. It seems a mild comment by comparison to other words we could use. Jesus' point is that God sees our hearts towards our brother and sister and judges us based on our heart condition. Those in the kingdom of heaven are those whose hearts are right before God toward their brothers and sisters, those who also bear the image of God.

Jesus then tells his disciples, “If you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” The “hell off fire,” is a reference to “Gehanna,” most likely the place outside of Jerusalem where children were once sacrificed to the god Molech, which caused Josiah to defile the place during his reign (2 Kings 23:10). It had become the garbage dump in Jesus’ day where refuse was burned. It was a place of continuous burning. This is a reference anyone who knew Israel’s history and had been to Jerusalem would understand. It is not a place where anyone would want to be found. It is a place that points to eternal misery. It seems like a strong response for such a mild insult, for a heart condition with a small action.

Look at what Jesus teaches next. He tells his disciples, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” We should remember that Jesus is sitting on a hilltop in Galilee. The only place where an offering is made in Israel is at the altar in the temple in Jerusalem some 80 miles away. Jesus is telling his disciples that if they have offended a brother or sister, if they are the source of anger or ill will from another because of their actions, and they realize that in Jerusalem before the altar, they are to immediately leave their offering and go and correct what they have done. They are responsible before God to reconcile and seek forgiveness for their actions. Jesus is saying it is not okay for us to offend a brother or sister. He is saying that when we become aware of such actions in our lives, even if it is in the temple giving our once-in-a-lifetime sacrifice to God, we are to stop and work diligently, walk for a week, find our brother or sister whom we have offended, and seek forgiveness. God is focused on our hearts, not on the sacrifice we are giving. Do you see the high bar Jesus teaches as fulfilling the law?

The same is true for Jesus’ teaching on settling our legal issues, in this case a dispute over debt. We are to come to terms before we go to court. The words used here mean we are to make friends with our accuser. We are to have a correct heart towards others and remove anything that might get in the way of a heart for others.

Jesus will continue on with his teaching and make this same point for all of the laws he fulfils. Look at the list in this morning’s Scripture. Adultery is not just a physical act, but is also having lust in our hearts. God sees our hearts and he knows our heart condition. We may be like the Pharisee and avoid an action, but it is upon our hearts that God’s laws are focused.

Jesus brings this same teaching to marriage. Marriage in the law is one man and one woman who make a covenant before God, a covenant that no one is to break. It is a matter of the heart and having a right heart for each other in our marriage.

Finally, this morning we see Jesus teaching us not to make vows before the Lord. We are not to bring God into our situations to verify our words to make fast our agreements. Our hearts are only to have truth in them. We are to be known as those whose only words are truth. There is to be no lie within us. We do not need to add God's name to our words because, as disciples of Jesus Christ, our hearts have been transformed, we are changed into one whose heart is pure and that which comes forth is only truth.

As a youth in West Virginia, I remember vividly seeing men make transactions that were bound with their word or handshake. You could take that agreement to the bank. They lived to honor their word. I don't see this so much today. Today we need a lawyer to make a binding agreement, to form a contract that can be kept or enforced.

Can you imagine what was going through the disciples' minds as Jesus taught on the mount? What goes through our minds today as we begin to hear Jesus teaching? His teaching makes the Pharisees' approach to keeping the law look feasible by comparison to keeping our hearts right before God. We have to wonder "How can we live this way?" We look at our lives and realize how far we are from the fulfilment of the law Jesus teaches. We look into our hearts and we wonder, how can we enter the kingdom of God if it takes these requirements for our hearts? Our courts are full of Christians seeking actions against Christians. The divorce rate is the same among Christians as it is among those in the world. The anger we have in our hearts comes out on Facebook posts, in emails, in words from our lips, and sometimes in our actions. Relationships between believers are broken; people in our pews carry the scars of a lifetime of hurts at the mouths and hands of fellow believers. How can we live as Jesus teaches? How can our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees? Remember that for all of our heart conditions, Jesus took on the flesh of a human, came to earth, walked with us, taught on hill tops, was beaten for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, carried a cross up Calvary's hill, and taught us what it means to fulfill the law. There he died that our heart conditions might be forgiven and we could be reconciled to God. Jesus came to fulfil the law, not abolish it. He came to transform our hearts, not by a set of laws we cannot keep, but by a belief in him and the gift of power to have our hearts transformed from the inside out. This is the steadfast love of God: Jesus Christ,

God in the flesh, dying that our hearts and wounds might be healed and that we might have a path into the kingdom of God by a heart that is transformed and an outward living that is a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees'. Praise be to God.

Pray with me: Father, thank you for sending your son Jesus to make a way for our hearts to be transformed from the inside out. Father, we admit that we do not yet live as you would have us live. Holy Spirit, come and transform us from the inside out into those whose hearts are conformed to hearts found in the kingdom of God. Amen.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Go forth into Jesus’ mission.