

IT STARTS WITH THE HEART
SIXTH SUN. AFTER EPIPHANY

MATT 5:21-37
FEB 12, 2017

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil."

Valentine's Day is this week, so this text is speaking to us

about murder, adultery, divorce and swearing -

or maybe it is really about having love in our hearts.

What woman wouldn't rather have a homemade note

from someone she knows truly cares about her

than a dozen roses from someone who says

"There, I hope that makes you happy"

or a big box of fancy chocolates from someone

who is always critical or demanding?

- Hmm, how many chocolates are in that box?
The point is, it is not just going through the motions
but what is in the heart that counts.
It goes both ways. Sometimes the flowers or gifts are used
to express a desire for forgiveness or reconciliation
but we are not as apt to appreciate what comes
from someone we don't really care about
as much as what comes from someone we truly love
and want a good relationship with.
So also, our reconciliation with God is based on
not so much our perfect behavior
as on his great love toward us.
So this text is speaking to us about the heart.

SIN GOES ALL THE WAY TO THE HEART
WE NEED TO GET RID OF A SINFUL HEART
WE MUST BE RECONCILED BEFORE GOD'S ALTAR

SIN GOES ALL THE WAY TO THE HEART

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Despite what God's word says, these sins are common.
Murder is a regular habit for terrorists and others
in war torn countries, drug trade & inner city gangs.
Why? They justify it in their minds as necessary and right.
Adultery & other sexual immorality is so common in our society
that entertainment media portrays it as expected behavior.
It also is justified as a right & an expression of freedom.
even though the ten commandments and Jesus here
list it in parallel with murder.
Divorce is common and easy today as it also was in that day
when any man had a right to divorce his wife if he felt like it
despite the devastating results for women & children
both emotionally and economically.
This too, Jesus puts in the same group with crimes.

Jesus includes several more items in this same list
which we will get to in next week's Gospel reading,
but here yet is swearing and strong language.
How common is this, whether is salting language
with God's name or vulgar sexual terms?
Many don't give it a second thought but again
Jesus lumps it together with murder and adultery.
But this is just his starting point. He goes on to say that
even those who have never committed murder or adultery
can't point fingers or claim to keep God's law any better
because God, who looks into the heart can see that
anger, hateful words, and lustful thoughts
are simply other forms of the same thing.
An apple tree that doesn't yet have blossoms or apples
is still an apple tree.
A baby snake is just as poisonous as one fully grown.
Nasty, unloving, self-centered thoughts or words
are even more common & more commonly excused
but excuses are same kind used by murderers & adulterers
and they come from same kind of heart,
and are the root that leads to the more obvious ones
and even when hidden in heart are genuinely harmful.
But who of us is not guilty of them, which is Jesus' point,
and how can we possibly not be?

WE NEED TO GET RID OF A SINFUL HEART

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

These are pretty extreme words, but are true.
Isn't it better to spend life without one hand
than to spend eternity in hell?
But before you get out your hatchet,
if sin goes all the way into our thoughts and words,
can cutting off a hand really stop us from sinning?
Can tearing out one eye or even both eyes
change the way we look at ourselves or others?
If it was our eye or our hand that actually caused us to sin,
then maybe so, but the cause goes deeper.

It is in the distorted desires of our hearts
and in the wrong reasoning of our minds.
How far do we need to keep cutting?
On one hand, even some less extreme amputations can help.
There may be places we go that lead us to go too far
that may need to be eliminated from our itinerary.
There may be things we watch & fill minds with that are dirt
in which sin grows & are better cut out of our schedule
There may be things we have stashed away or keep buying
that supply tools or ammunition the tempter uses on us
and are better thrown into the trash.
But ultimately we do need to be cut to the heart.
We do need to get rid of sinful hearts and minds
by opening our eyes and ears to what God says
about the real dangers of sin.
We need to repent sincerely and repeatedly,
This means letting loose of the sinful things in our life
that it may feel we can't live without
so that God can give us new hearts and minds.

WE MUST BE RECONCILED BEFORE GOD'S ALTAR

²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The prison in v. 25 talking about is debtor's prison.
What we owe others is not money but love and respect.
When we haven't done this, we need debts forgiven.
In v. 23, Jesus points out that our relationship with others
is connected to our relationship with God.
Our sins against them are sins against God.
We can't sincerely expect forgiveness from God
without desiring forgiveness from them.
But at the same time, how can we be reconciled with others
without first being changed by reconciliation with God?
Alienation from others is a symptom of alienation from God
Hatred & anger at others comes from anger at God
and a failure to respond to his love toward us.

We are all on the way to court before the Judge on the last day.
but already now God has provided a way
for us to come to terms with our accuser.

Jesus has come to us to pay for our sins to the last penny.
Rather than rightfully being angry at us for being true fools,
he lovingly tells us the truth about ourselves.
Even when we are unfaithful to God in thoughts & actions,
he does not divorce us but continues to love us
because he has sworn by himself to always care for us
and we can trust both his clear "no" in the law
and his clear "yes" in the gospel.

And so he has put into action what is in his heart.
He has allowed himself to be cut off for us,
hand and foot and from his whole life.

He separates us from our sins and takes them away.
This is how we can truly have our sinful heart & mind removed
and replaced by a pure heart and a clean mind,
which is continually washed clean & filled with his mercy.

So today we do indeed come to God's altar
with a desire to be reconciled to both God and our brother,
not because of a gift we bring in our hands
but because of the gift God places into our mouths,
the gift of Jesus body & blood, the gift of forgiveness,
which can then come back out of our mouths to others
who may have hurt us by thoughts, words or deeds,
rather than our justifying hurting them in return.

This happens when we take seriously Jesus' strong words
about sin, but take just as seriously his even stronger words
of the gospel which takes away our sins.

SIN GOES ALL THE WAY TO THE HEART
which has thoughts & desires as sinful as murder itself.

WE NEED TO GET RID OF A SINFUL HEART
which is the root cause of our sinful words & deeds.

For this to happen,
WE MUST BE RECONCILED BEFORE GOD'S ALTAR
by Jesus' payment for our sins before the final judgment
which is what enables us to love God and others
and to show this in our lives now and forever.