

Structure For: Jesus' Road of Righteousness-Matthew 5:25-26

6th Sunday @ Epiphany
Sunday, February 16th, 2020

Text: Matthew 25:25-26

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.

Exegetical Statement (the text's context)

Prior to this reading Jesus told His disciples that their righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees and Scribes who believed themselves to be in right standing with God because of their perfect obedience to the Law. Jesus therefore gives a discourse on what God intended in His giving to man the 5th Commandment (You shall not murder), the 6th Command (You shall not commit adultery), and the 8th Commandment (You shall not bear false witness by making oaths you do not intend to keep). In the first two Jesus emphasizes that the intentions of our heart are just as important as our actions. We are just as guilty even if we engage in angry thoughts and words against another by allowing ourselves to be driven to anger instead of seeking to be forgiven as we have been forgiven. We are just as guilty when we let our mind engage in fantasies concerning one who is not our spouse. And those who divorce for any reason other than sexual promiscuity are guilty of adultery on their own part. Those who seek the dissolution of what God has joined together before His altar are also guilty of forcing their former spouse into sin as they seek a new partner. Our character as Christians should be enough for our word to stand on rather than bring in the extra weight of God or His creation. In all these things as we examine our failure to live up to God's expectations regarding the commandments, we need to see that failure as very serious. When we marginalize, trivialize, and make excuses for our failure to live up to His perfect rule of law we threaten to set the trap of falling into unbelief as our hearts turn from repentance to self-justification

Focus Statement:

Jesus began this sermon with the Beatitudes where He tells His disciples that all who have been broken in Spirit by the Law have the kingdom in their hearts through the Gospel. When we confess our inability to do these commandments Christ's death and resurrection assures us not of our condemnation but of the gifts of forgiveness of sins, salvation, and eternal life that He won for us by keeping them perfectly and removing our record of failures

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

We can become cavalier in our estimation of our obedience to God's commands forgetting that our thoughts and intentions are as grievous as what we say and do. Christ gives us what He expects His disciples to live as members of His kingdom as 3rd use of the Law while providing 2nd use fuel to break hardened hearts before they are entrapped in unbelief

What the hearer should do as a result:

Through the empowerment of our Baptisms continual washing and the Spirit's presence cleansing and making right our imperfect good works we seek to grow in our expression of love to Jesus by trying to do what He commands every day.

Subject Sentence: Through repentance live in Jesus' righteousness

There's something I need to tell many of you well intentioned people. Those of you who, in our conversation, desire to share with me where some landmark or business or restaurant is and do so by verbally giving me directions. Unless I've been that way numerous times, I have no idea where you're pointing me to. Let's say for instance that you were giving me directions to Courtland Center and the Sloan Museum (which I actually do know where it is, but let's pretend I don't). And you needed to route me on surface streets because I-69 is closed due to an accident and the other more direct routes are out due to construction. So you tell me to take Van Slyke to Atherton. Turn right on Atherton and head east, and then turn left on Fenton where the Rite Aid store is that your son used to work at. Head north on Fenton until you get to West 12th Street where the Liquor Corner 2 store is. Turn right on 12th street and stay on it until it ends at Lapeer Rd where the Jehovah Witness Kingdom Hall is. Then you proceed to give me other detailed directions all coming from the map you have in your head of this area where you grew up and know like the back of your hand. The problem is I don't have that map spread out in my head. And if I'm not writing these directions down, and sometimes even if I am, it gets to be all too much and I experience system overload. You might as well tell me to take 12th Street to Whooha Road and turn left onto Placebo Avenue where the Engine Plant used to be, and take that up to Anacanafranastan Boulevard, then make 2 rights and three lefts, and your there. Well, you might be there, but not me. But I nod my head politely as I remember that, while I don't have your map in my head, I do have Google Maps on my phone that will guide me right there. Without your map in my head I can't picture where it is your sending me without help from outside my head.

It's a similar problem that we have as we listen to our Gospel Lesson. Jesus is laying out a map of how we should travel through the world as His disciples. In the verse directly preceding our reading He tells them (**Matthew 5:20**) **"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."** Unless the map in your head is as detailed as mine you will never find your way to the destination. Of course the directions sound easy at first. We have the major roads of: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, Divorce is bad, and it's wrong to take oaths." But the more specific Jesus gets about this road righteousness the more confused we can become.

For example, when He talks about murder in **Matthew 5:21** **"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'** "most of us can respond, "Gotcha Jesus. I'm still on the righteous road. I haven't turned down Murder Avenue." But He continues in **Matthew 5:22** **"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."** Now we have to do some contemplation. If we're honest we realize that we have been angry at those around us, even those with whom we share a relationship with. We've lost our patience. We were tired, we were under pressure with all that was going on, and they were nagging! They were speaking too fast, or too slow, or in another room so I had to stop what I'm doing and come quiz them like a teacher quizzes a 3rd Grader. I asked a question and they bit my head off! So I called them a name. I did it after I had gone back into the other room, so I think that doesn't count. In the Greek Text the insult that is referred to that makes one liable to the council is basically like calling

someone a “numbskull”. Only Jesus doesn’t leave any leeway for it being said away from the person’s presence. In fact by speaking behind someone’s back you are still sinning. And even if you “said” nothing, just by thinking it you are as guilty as if you actually had said it. According to Jesus you are as guilty of sin as if you had picked up a knife, walked in, and slashed their throat. Now your thoughts and name calling won’t get you life in prison like slashing their throat will. But you are just as liable to the fires of hell for the anger in your head as the if you had slashed their throat. That doesn’t seem quite fair to us, but Jesus as the divine Son of God is in the perfect place to explain God’s intentions regarding each of the commandments.

He moves on to **Matthew 5:27** "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'**" No problem there Jesus. I’ve always come home to my spouse and have never shared a bed with anyone else my whole life. But then He continues on with **Matthew 5:28** "**But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**" Now all of a sudden, we aren’t so sure we have this one covered. But after all, how are we supposed to guard what is happening in our head. Especially now a days when men and women walk around half exposed, when what used to be the business of married couples in the privacy of their own bedrooms is enacted in movies and on Prime-Time TV shows, and even in the commercials. They include this stuff just to get my motor running. I don’t mean to get caught up in it but all of a sudden there it is without warning. Here comes some man or woman scantily dressed in the store and I don’t have time to look away before my brain takes a wrong turn. Then there are those displays of same sex relationships. Well, those do the opposite of getting my motor running, they make me angry. And there I go violating the 5th Commandment again.

And this lusting is not just a matter of sexual promiscuity. The 10th Commandments talk about us coveting our neighbor's property which includes those things we desire and long for which don't belong to us and are not a part of God's will, plan, and provision for our lives. Even if we don't try to take them by hook or crook but just think about them being ours, we are sinning in our minds. I might try to reason by saying "Well, I didn't think about it that long." Or "I saw her/him coming and after the first glance I turned away." It's kind of like the 5 second rule when you drop something on the floor. Except Jesus doesn't give us a pass on a 5 second or even 1 second sinful thought rule. When it passes across our brain, we are guilty.

And it's the same kind of thing when Jesus touches on Divorce, breaking oaths and promises, retaliating against those who have wronged us, and failing to love our enemies. The righteous road that the Disciple of Christ is supposed to remain on means we not only avoid sin in our actions but in our words and our thoughts, all of which are on display for our Heavenly Father to see. And when we try to play the blame game: it's not my fault, it's their fault, Jesus refuses to cut us any slack.

You may be saying: "But now Pastor! These things are there to convict the unbelievers of their sin. We who have faith in Jesus Christ and have been forgiven of all these sins can just skip over this chapter of Matthew because we live in grace. And that is very true. You are forgiven. You do live in God's grace. But then again, think on who Jesus is speaking to. This chapter began with the Sermon on the Mount that was preached to His believing disciples that were gathered around Him. Those who are "Poor in Spirit and have the kingdom of God now". Jesus is purposefully telling them these things for two reasons.

The first has to do with the 3rd use of the Law. Jesus is explaining to those disciples who have been saved by faith in Him and are seeking to follow Him the road of righteousness that they should be walking. The means for them to express their love in all aspects of their lives. You could argue that; “Well, yes that is true. But Jesus knows we can’t do these things perfectly and so cuts me slack on them. There’s no reason to get hung up on these impossibilities that no righteous person besides Jesus could ever do. But then we come across **Matthew 5:29-30** 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.”** Jesus tells us that it would be better to enter eternal life missing an eye or a hand that served to commit the sins that began in our head than to spend an eternity in a whole body with no missing limbs suffering forever in the eternal lake of fire. This is aimed at believers, the only ones who will ever see eternal life. Believers who, by discounting the seriousness of sin may find that on the Last Day they have given up their faith.

But the Law always had its 2nd use: showing us our sin. We followers of Jesus can fall into the trap of seeing our sin as no big deal. It’s covered by Jesus’ blood so there’s no sweating things. That is wrong. When we see our life as so covered by Jesus that we don’t need to agonize over sin we are headed off the path of righteousness and down the wide avenue of self-righteousness. When we think that the Law has no 3rd use in guiding and molding our life of love and service to Jesus because I’ve already spoken the Confession and received the Absolution then I’m on the way to having a Savior who is really not the Lord of my life.

Jesus says in **Matthew 5:25-26** **“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.”** In our lives God’s Law functions as our accuser as it shows us our sin. When we hold to the opinion that the Law has nothing to show us in its function as a mirror and a guide then we may find at the end that instead of walking through the gates of eternity we will be sent to the eternal prison where no amount of money, or time, or sorrow will ever pay for our release.

But in our despair over our inability to live out a righteous and obedient life; when our head is hanging low and tears are forming, He lifts our eyes up off the pavement and in the Gospel calls us to stare into His strong yet loving eyes. We see the power of His sacrifice on the cross for us with a strength and clarity that otherwise would be lacking. We see and believe that it truly did cover each and every one of our sins. He died to forgive not just our actions of disobedience but our words of anger and our thoughts of lust. As we realize the depth of our need for forgiveness and then the completeness of His work of salvation for me, for you, His love comes pouring into your heart anew. We experience once again that gratefulness that He could do what we could not. We revel in the joy of knowing that we have been made right with God. More than that we rejoice in the gift of our Baptism that keeps His love, peace, joy, and forgiveness ever flowing into our hearts and lives.

The words Jesus preaches in our reading today still seem as hard and biting as always. But as we walk down the road of righteousness by faith, we realize we are never on it alone. Christ is with us through the Word and Sacrament. His Spirit remains in us through

Baptism. As we try to live out His call to love Him in obedience in thought, word, and deed, we are shown that we cannot do it with the perfection the Law demands. But the Gospel shows us Jesus we are righteous because through our faith we are declared to be that which we can never be on our own . We trust that by the Holy Spirit's prompting and completing the works we are unable to do on our own we remain in right standing with our God. Not because of what we do. But because of what He has done and is doing in us. We fail. But we are forgiven. And so we try again, knowing that forgiveness and righteousness continues to flow into us through our Baptism.

It would be so much easier if I had an accurate road map of the Flint area complete in my brain. But as I go places, and by trial and error, I'm slowly developing that. It would be so much easier if we all had God's will imprinted in our heads and had the ability to agree and live it out in our hearts. Unfortunately Adam and Eve lost that in the Fall and our map has been corrupted by our sin. But just as I have Google Maps to fill in the knowledge lacking you and I have God's Word. We have the 3rd use of the Law that directs us to what it means to live as Jesus' disciples. That Law always convicts us of all the ways we don't keep it. But Jesus has downloaded His map of righteousness into our heart in Baptism. He shows us the way to live as His beloved children. He warns us when we make a wrong turn, and guides us back by His love and forgiveness, which are the power to keep going. And as we live in repentant faith, not ignoring, but repenting of our sins, Jesus map of righteousness grows a little more detailed and complete in our hearts and minds. He keeps us looking forward to our final destination which is the Last Day when we are made whole: body and soul, and truly become inside and out the righteous perfect children of God. May His Spirit graciously keep you on that road to eternal life. Amen

