

Foundations: OUR HEARTS
Matthew 5:21-26
(AFBC 2/19/17--LORD'S SUPPER)

We continue to look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount this morning—these teachings that are so foundational to our faith—what we believe and how we live as followers of Jesus.

Last Sunday, we focused on Jesus' assurance that **He "did not come to destroy the law and the prophets, but to FULFILL them."** Jesus affirmed the trustworthiness of the Old Testament Scriptures, while also demonstrating that He is Lord over them.

I mentioned last week that we would learn more about this today. Actually, we'll spend two Sundays—this week and next-- hearing Jesus address six different issues by reminding us what the *Old Testament law* says—and then, telling us what *He* says.

We ended with this verse: **"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."**

Jesus says that; and then, for the next 28 verses of Matthew 5, He brings new meaning to the Old Testament law. He *fulfills* the law by revealing God's true intentions for us in relation to a wide range of issues that are addressed by these laws.

Today, we'll hear Jesus focusing on our hearts—what goes on inside of us. Next week, what we *do* gets put in the spotlight. Jesus says both are important—having hearts that are right with Him, combined with actions that grow out of the goodness of our hearts.

So with that, please follow along as I read **Matthew 5:21-26:**

***Murder* ²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.**

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Now, continue to follow along as I read just a couple of verses concerning each of the other issues Jesus mentions here:

***Adultery (vv.27-28)* "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

***Divorce (vv. 31-32)* "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.**

***Oaths (vv. 33-34)* "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all..."**

***Retaliation (vv. 38-39)* "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.**

***Love (vv. 43-44)* "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies..."**

I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on these words of Jesus and to also relate them to this passage from the prophet Micah as the choir sings it for us now.

ANTHEM: "What Shall I Bring to the Lord?" (Micah 6:8)

What a beautiful anthem! It's a powerful reminder of the prophet's statement that it's what's in our hearts that counts most—not any elaborate offerings or other acts that bring attention to ourselves, but **"...to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God."** (Micah 6:8)

Centuries later, Jesus tells us again that it's what's in our hearts that matters. Jesus addresses each issue in this Scripture by taking us below the surface *actions*, penetrating to the deeper thoughts, feelings, and motivations behind them. Jesus directs our attention to who we really are deep inside.

He begins (v.21): **"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'**

No problem there. That's one commandment, friends, that I've never been tempted to break. You feel the same way. You've never murdered anyone—and you never really expect to.

But then Jesus tells us *THAT* doesn't go far enough. There are deeper problems that must be dealt with. The law is fine, as far as it goes; but God is concerned about more than just the physical act of murder.

God cares about our thoughts and feelings--those things inside us that cause us to do what we do. So the specific issue is... ANGER.

"You have heard...'Do not murder,'" Jesus said, **"but I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."**

That should get our attention. Jesus demands that we deal with our anger. *Of course* we shouldn't MURDER anyone. But don't get the idea that your life is somehow pleasing to God simply because you HAVEN'T!

Anger is the real problem. Does this mean we should NEVER be angry? No. Sometimes anger is appropriate. Jesus demonstrated this on occasion—and so should we.

But He's much better than we are at knowing when and how to *be* angry. We find it very difficult to follow Paul's advice to **"Be**

angry, but do not sin” (Eph. 4:26). Our anger is usually selfishly motivated--triggered by things that just aren't worth it.

That's the kind of anger Jesus is talking about. It's the type that might cause us to call our brother "Racca" or "fool." It's the condition of our hearts when we use hateful language—angry thoughts, feelings, and motivations—that God says are problems.

Let me explain. Think of "RACCA" as a racial slur. It's an intentional put-down directed toward someone we believe to be inferior to ourselves—this could be racially, economically, mentally, or culturally. It's the attitude of the snob or the bigot.

It's rampant in our world, just as it was in Jesus' day; and it's sick to the core. It represents a total lack of understanding that every human being is created by God, made in His image, and worthy of our respect and concern.

Jesus reminds us that there's no place in God's Kingdom for anyone who thinks of others with such contempt!

In Jesus' day, though, there was an even lower insult than "racca." It was "FOOL."

I know we use this word in jest, so please don't think because you once called someone "a fool," that you're doomed. Again, it's what's inside of us—our hearts--that Jesus is getting at, not the word itself.

In Jesus' day, to call someone a "fool" was to say that that person could not possibly have a relationship with God, or God with him. Remember the Psalmist's words: **"The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"** So this was the most severe put down of all.

Jesus doesn't see people this way—not anybody. There are no "raccas," and certainly no "fools," in His eyes. Now, Jesus was well aware that any of us can act foolishly at times; but He saw potential in even the most wayward of people--potential for them to become children of God. He told us to make this our attitude as well.

Jesus kept reminding us that His Kingdom would be filled with previously sick, sad, and sinful people... whose lives have now been transformed by His grace—precious people who've been changed

from the inside out--which is the only way any of us can be made right with God!

Friends, if we are harboring anger and ill will toward someone, we've forgotten what Jesus taught us. All that anger is simply our feeble attempt to feel superior to the person who wronged us.

But we're not! Not before God, we're not. We're just as much a sinner as the other person is, and Jesus insists that we get this.

He's so serious about it, he says if we're harboring any bitter feelings toward someone, we shouldn't even attempt to give an offering to God. First, go get things right between you and that other person—then present your gift at God's altar.

You can't force anyone to feel right toward you, but you must at least make the attempt and be certain that *you're* not the one with all the pent-up poison in your soul. God knows if you keep that inside of you, true to the nature of poison, it will destroy you.

What's in our hearts matters to God—and this is where Jesus wants to change us--where it matters most.

We may not think we want change. Some wag said the only person who likes change is a baby with a messy diaper. But we all need changing—and it may surprise us, friends, just how good the change makes us feel!

Jesus says when it comes to this matter of anger, we need changing. It's not enough to refrain from murder. And we could say the same about every issue He addresses here.

Jesus keeps on getting at what's in our hearts. Not the act—that would only be a new legalism—but Jesus is after the attitude inside of us. Listen to how He does it:

- 1) The old law says: "No murder." I say, "No anger."
- 2) The old law says: "No adultery." I say, "No lust."
- 3) The old law says: 'Divorce on condition.' I say, 'No divorce.'
- 4) The old law says: "No false swearing." ...'No swearing at all.'
- 5) The old law says: "An eye for eye.""No retaliation at all.'
- 6) The old law says: "Love your neighbor." ..."Love your enemy."

Here's the point: we may look at the Ten Commandments and be tempted to think, "I can do that. I can keep all those laws. I feel quite sure that I can be a really good person—on my own."

But when we look at these "new laws" that Jesus puts before us in the Sermon on the Mount, when we take seriously their demands, we're humbled; and we have to confess that we're failures. We can't do this on our own.

We get it that this is how we *should* live, but none of us can do it all the time. Jesus knows. In fact, I think this is exactly the point He's making. *We can't*, so we must trust in *the Lord who can*. We must put our faith in Him.

Jesus Christ died on the cross *for us* to make up for all those times when *we can't live for Him*—when our hearts may have changed some—but not enough.

He died that our sins might be forgiven—the anger, the lust, the broken relationships and commitments—whether or not there were any sacred vows involved—the lies, the attempts at retaliation, the failure to love God or our neighbor as we should, let alone failing to love our enemies.

Jesus came to change us--our whole perspective on living—to make us new creations in Him. But this is US—remember?

Change isn't easy—not even when it's Jesus making the changes. So... as long as we live, we will need to rely on His forgiving love... even as we remain open to His transforming grace.

It's a process, life-long in duration, involving forgiveness and change; and then still more forgiveness... and more change.

So Jesus says to us, "Come to my table. Eat the bread. Drink the wine. Remember you're died for. Remember you are forgiven.

And yes, dear Christian, understand also in your heart of hearts that, with My help, you can always do better. But until then, My grace will be sufficient for you. Child of God, you ARE forgiven!