

Foundations: OUR ACTIONS
Matthew 5:27-48 (AFBC 2/26/17)

Last Sunday, before we shared the Lord's Supper together, we focused on the internal nature of Jesus' teachings—our thoughts, feelings, motivations—in other words, "Our Hearts."

Jesus makes it clear in His Sermon on the Mount that what we have going on inside of us—the stuff that causes us to do what we do—is important to Him. He's concerned about our hearts.

In our text for today, though, Jesus asks His followers a question: "What are you *doing* more than others?" It's a reminder that Jesus is also concerned about "Our Actions"—which is the theme for our sermon today.

Before we look at our text, we need to do a quick review. Jesus begins His sermon with the Beatitudes—eight keys to a happy, blessed, contented life. Most of what Jesus says in the Beatitudes relates to our hearts, our inner spiritual beings.

But then Jesus challenges us with this: **"You are the salt of the earth" (v. 13), "You are the light of the world" (v. 14).**

He tells us that as His followers, we have to be good for something in this world; and whatever that something is will be visible—or at least taste-able! In other words, our relationship with Him will be noticed. Otherwise, we're good for nothing!

In the next passage, Jesus affirmed the Old Testament Scriptures, but warned us that our righteousness must exceed that of the religious experts—the Scribes and Pharisees-- if we're ever to see God's Kingdom.

Those experts had taken God's handful of great principles for living—the Commandments--and produced 800 pages of rules and regulations. People could spend all their time trying to learn and follow the rules, and as a result, not be good for anything. Jesus said this had to change.

So, He gives six examples of what life is to be like in His Kingdom: no anger, no lust, no divorce, no false speech, no retaliation, and no limitations on our love for others. We're even to love our enemies.

That's the kind of life it would take to fulfill the law, but listen: none of us has achieved THAT...so we all desperately need to humbly remember that we've been died for--forgiven and accepted ONLY by the grace of God in Christ. (Sharing the Lord's Supper together last week was a reminder of this truth.)

And if we dare to point an accusing finger at someone else, it could well be that we simply don't get what Jesus is telling us here. Take divorce—one of the most obvious examples of this.

The Pharisees had devised a plan where it was quite easy for a man to walk away from his marriage—just hand the little wife a slip of paper severing all ties, sending her packing, setting her free—which in that day was disastrous for the woman. There were no women's rights—just property rights—the husband's!

Jesus let them know that their hearts were all wrong when they did this. A wedding doesn't make a marriage—love and commitment do.

The wedding is simply the public acknowledgement of what two devoted people have already committed to each other.

In the same way, divorce is not what destroys a marriage. That's just the public announcement that it's over—the legal severing of ties.

Something on the inside of that husband or wife or both was too wrong for this marriage to work. That's where the sin is—and that problem will still be there whether or not the two of them ever get lawyers, draw up papers, and call it quits.

Do you follow that? It's not the act itself (e.g., divorce)—it's the heart. And, friends, we all have heart problems of one kind or another. All of us do—that's the point!

Just in case any of us doubt this, I invite you to hear the words of Jesus in our text for today. Here we find the last of the six issues Jesus addresses in His sermon in order to explain to us what righteousness means in His Kingdom.

Look, please, at **Matthew 5:43-48:**

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

You know what they must have been thinking—I mean, if they were really listening to Jesus. Sometimes He had to ask people if they had their ears on, remember? ("He who has ears to hear...")

Like us, they didn't always listen; but if they were listening, they might well have been thinking the same thing we're thinking: **"nobody's perfect."**

That's especially true if we buy into what Jesus is saying here about being perfect LIKE our heavenly Father is perfect. Really!?!

And yet, Jesus tells us "imperfect people"—feeble followers who can't seem to get our hearts right even with His help—He tells US that we are to act like His salt and light in this world.

He says we are to do more than those who don't know Him and aren't at least attempting to follow Him. He tells us, in effect, that 'what we do' is also important. So it's not just about our hearts. It's our actions that show others that we belong to Him.

A young man was walking along the beach when he noticed a church youth group playing volleyball. He asked if he could join them. They said, "Sure."

As he was getting ready, he removed his shirt, revealing several religious tattoos: a cross, a Bible, and the letters "WWJD." But as they played the game, the young man was rude to the others.

When he missed a shot, he got angry and unleashed a long string of profanities. He spoke crudely to the young ladies in the group.

It soon became obvious that his religion was literally only skin deep. What was on the outside of this young man counted for nothing at all because it didn't ring true with what was on the inside.

Jesus is concerned with both—the inside AND the outside—our HEARTS and our ACTIONS. They both matter to Him. He looks for a consistency between the two—which is the only way for us to follow Him.

But who would Jesus be more concerned about in this case—the tattooed young man with the foul mouth, or the youth group who welcomed him into their circle? Both, I believe.

Jesus hurts for that young man who has Christian symbols on his skin but does not have Christ in his heart. He's every bit as concerned, though, that those in the youth group who know Jesus in their hearts will make this relationship obvious through their actions and reactions toward this stranger. Right?

Now, it was common belief in Jesus' day that we should love those who love us, accept those who accept us, be kind toward those who return the favor. That was as wide as anyone's circle of love and kindness needed to be—so they thought.

And this is still what most people believe—and practice. It makes perfect sense. Do unto others as they do unto you—it's how most of us try to live, and it certainly seems good enough. Unless, of course, we're followers of Jesus Christ.

Jesus says that the size of our circle of love is not to be determined by our relationships with other people, whether they're good or bad at any given moment.

The size of our circle is determined by our relationship with Christ, which means if we belong to Him, our circle has to be big enough to include everyone!

“For God so loved the WORLD”... not just us and our kind. God so loved the world that He sent to this very diverse world His Son.

Loving those who love us and doing nice things for those we know will return the favor doesn't go far enough for Kingdom people.

That's not different enough from the what the rest of the world does to qualify as salt and light.

As Jesus puts it, **"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others?"** (vv. 46-47). How's that for setting a higher standard—what are we doing MORE than others?

Probably by now, Jesus' disciples and any others who were hearing His sermon were wondering just what they had gotten themselves into.

Jesus had told them to love their enemies, to bless those who curse them; and if they were convinced there was somebody out there who really hated them, they were to respond by doing something Christian!

Well, they'd never heard anything like this before. It was revolutionary—which is really what they were expecting from the Messiah—just not like this!

They had only been followers of Jesus for a short time, and now He's telling them that if they live for Him they will likely be cursed, hated, and persecuted.

So you would think this would make it okay for them to take up arms, right? That's what they thought, too--but no! In fact, Jesus tells them the opposite. He teaches them to respond to all this hurt by loving and blessing, doing good and praying.

Now, friends, THAT'S... DIFFERENT! And it just may be the only thing that will ever make a difference—the only way WE can make a difference for Christ and His Kingdom! Maybe we should try it—what do you think?

There were two brothers who lived on farms located right beside each other. That was actually unfortunate, though, because, well... familiar story: they didn't get along.

They'd been feuding for years. It began as something small, as such spats usually do; but neither of them was willing to let it go.

One day, a carpenter knocked on the older brother's door. "I'm looking for work," he said. "Do you have anything I can do?"

"Yes," he replied. "You see that farm over there? My brother lives there. Last week, he took a bulldozer and dug a deep gully between my house and his. He was sending me a message.

That gully makes me mad, and I don't want to look at it anymore; so get some lumber and build me a tall fence so I won't have to see it every time I look that way."

"I think I understand the situation, and I'll get right on it," the carpenter said. He gathered the materials and went to work.

The man could hear the sawing and hammering in the distance, and he couldn't wait to see what a difference this new fence would make. He really enjoyed thinking about just how much his brother was going to hate it.

So you can imagine his shock when, about sunset, he stepped outside, looked across the way...and saw—not a fence—but a bridge. It was a sturdy bridge, too, with handrails; and it stretched from one side of that gully to the other.

Then he saw something that shocked him even more. It was his brother, the gully digger, walking toward him across that bridge with outstretched arms.

Before the first brother could say anything, the other one said, "What a wonderful brother you are to build this bridge after all I've done to you." Soon, the two of them were embracing as brothers once more.

The brother who had hired the carpenter turned to thank him, only to see him leaving in the distance. He called out to him, asking him to stay awhile; but the carpenter declined, saying, "I have many more bridges to build."

We're here on this earth to build bridges, friends, not fences. Fence builders are a dime a dozen. They're everywhere we turn; and the temptation to join them can be overwhelming. Fences... are so easy.

Bridges, on the other hand, are much harder; and, sadly, bridge builders are rare—but they are highly skilled if you can find one. Because, you see, bridge builders have learned their trade from the Master Carpenter Himself, the One from Nazareth.

Jesus doesn't see fences like the rest of us see them. We see fences and think only of the barriers they form—and we often accept them and assume they're here to stay ("always been there; always will be").

Jesus sees a fence and thinks, "How convenient—there's probably enough lumber there to build a bridge." And that's what He does! We need to see fences like Jesus sees them.

Sin had built a fence between us and God. The keepers of the fence removed just a couple of boards to make a cross. They nailed the Nazarean Carpenter to that cross and crucified Him.

But although this was never their intention, His death caused the whole fence to fall—that too-tall-to-ever-climb-over-on-our-own wall between us and the Heavenly Father collapsed.

The Crucified Carpenter then took those boards and built a bridge, and millions of sinners have moved in the direction of that bridge only to find the Savior coming their way with outstretched arms—embracing them with love, forgiveness and life.

Friends, once we experience this, we never again want to be a fence builder. We're bridge builders now, helping people find their way over to God, AND their way over to brothers and sisters who've been hiding behind fences for way too long.

I know fence-building is the way of the world—everybody does it! But Jesus wants to know: "What are you doing more than others?" Our actions matter to Him!

Love your enemies. Pray for them. Bless them.
And be like Jesus: BUILD BRIDGES!