

Sermon – February 12, 2023  
“With all of your heart”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 5:21-37

*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 our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people allowing our continued transformation into Christ's image and leading us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen*

Good morning! Welcome to the last Sunday of Epiphany. Next week we reach the peak of our climb up the mountain with Jesus and will catch a glimpse of Jesus' glory, a glory that he desires us to see in heaven. Thanks to everyone who prayed for the Good News Club. Please continue to pray over the children and volunteers as we seek to join with Jesus in his work at the elementary school. Let us give thanks for the blessed time of prayer during the healing prayer service last week. During Lent I am going to plan to come to Fairfields on Thursday evenings at 6:00 pm for a time of prayer. I invite you to come. This will be a very simple service with scripture reading and prayer. Come and join me and let's come into this house of God seeking to make it a place of prayer.

Last week I began to receive communications of fresh outpouring of Holy Spirit on the college campus of Asbury University in Wilmore, Kentucky. Several times over the years of that school's existence, Holy Spirit has brought revival to the campus, and it seems from the growing

reports that once again Holy Spirit is moving there. Take time to pray that students, professors, and people in the community will be swept up into an awakening, and that revival will break out not just at Asbury but will sweep through the campuses of America and beyond. Pray that Holy Spirit will stir our hearts and bring awakening to our hearts, homes, church, and community as well.

As we move into this morning's reading from Matthew, we move into the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. We have arrived at the authoritative radical teaching of Jesus Christ. If we open our Bibles and look at this text and go back one verse, we will find Jesus' last statement: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."<sup>i</sup> As we listen to Jesus teach, we need to keep this idea in our minds that it takes something more than strict keeping of the Law to gain entrance to heaven. Jesus now begins to teach what that "more" is for those who desire to be in the kingdom of God. I also should point out that as Jesus teaches in this part of the sermon, he will reference aspects of the Old Testament scripture as well as specific commandments, but he will follow those references with the words, "But I say to you" and then follow that expression with what he teaches. Jesus' use of the pronoun "I" makes clear that he is the source of the teaching and that he teaches with authority. The Pharisees and Sadducees have the Law-keeping approach to righteousness in hand, but Jesus has just told them they are not in the kingdom of God. He begins to tell them and us why Law keeping doesn't meet God's intent found in the Law, and he provides a complete revelation of the intent of the Law and how those who are to be part of the kingdom of God are to live in light of those laws. Jesus does not abolish the Law, he fulfills it, and he teaches us how to live that we also might be a people who are part of the kingdom of God. Matthew is sharing Jesus' authoritative teaching that amazes the crowds. Jesus does not teach as the religious leaders of Israel taught, who taught what was found in the Law. Jesus, by contrast, teaches as one who has authority to speak to God's original intent for the Law.

Let's begin to look at what Jesus does as he teaches. Notice the words Jesus begins with as he teaches: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" Jesus is speaking to crowds who have heard these words before. They have heard them in the synagogues and all of the places that the teachers and the rabbis in Israel teach. Those of ancient times are those who received the Law in the wilderness from God through Moses. Jesus is quoting from the Ten Commandments and this,

as many will recall, is the sixth commandment: “Thou shall not murder.” Notice how Jesus moves the bar from not breaking the law to not having anger in our hearts. Jesus is changing obedience to God’s commands from no external actions to no internal or heart condition of anger, the root cause of our actions. What is occurring within our hearts is reflected outward in our actions. If we do not have anger with our brother or sister, we will not have issues with murder. Jesus’ teaching does not abolish the commandment but makes clear that the kingdom of God criteria is one’s heart condition. Jesus doesn’t just address the extreme action of murdering our brother and sister in his teaching, but also addresses insults, teaching that even a small word spoken as an insult will cause us to be brought before a council for judgment. Jesus also teaches that if we use more insulting or serious words—here the example is translated as “fool,” but is the idea of “more” in Hebrew which connects to our English word “moron,” an idea that was a great offense in the first century—then the punishment for this insult is eternal life in the hell of fire. In all cases of Jesus’s teaching, what is being punished is not the outward action, but the angry heart within us that leads us to have anything other than love towards our brother or sister. If we don’t have anger in our hearts, there will be no outward actions of anger for another.

Jesus’ teaching extends to relationships that have been broken because of our hardness of heart. His example given in the Sermon on the Mount is one of a man who has gone to the altar in Jerusalem to offer a gift. The trip from Galilee to Jerusalem would be about a 70-mile journey. Jesus says that if we have made this trip and are at the altar and realize that our hearts are not right with our brother or sister, we are to leave our gift, make the journey home, and reconcile the relationship that our heart has broken, and only then return to complete the offering of our gift. The travel time Jesus’ example points to makes clear the importance that Jesus places on us living in harmony with each other.

Years ago, I worked with a young man who had spent time with the Amish. He shared that in their congregation’s life if there was a disagreement between two people, everything in the Amish community stopped until the two were reconciled. They held this idea of relationship as a community in high value and committed to not move forward in the life of their community until broken relationships were reconciled. Their approach made a great impression on me. The idea that a group of people would not move forward with the essential and time critical work of their lives until a broken relationship in their church had been mended was alien to me. I cannot begin to guess how many broken relationships there are in our congregations and how

little emphasis we place on restoring peace and harmony among those who worship together. Yet, Jesus teaches us that to not reconcile is to be excluded from the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus' teaching about our hearts and anger is difficult. It moves the bar for getting into heaven far above the strict Law keeping of the Pharisees and Sadducees. It seems to be an impossible standard to achieve. Have we ever gotten angry at someone who pulled out in front of us in traffic? Have we ever gotten frustrated and angry with the person on the phone whom we have called for help but will not respond as we think they should? Have we gotten angry with another member in our church for something we think they have done that has offended us? As I understand Jesus' teaching, if we have harbored anger in our hearts, then the kingdom of God is not a place we are headed.

Let me touch on other aspects of Jesus' radical teaching. Jesus moves next to another commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." Here Jesus' "but I say to you" is that "... everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."<sup>ii</sup> Jesus again moves the breaking of the commandment from the action of adultery to even the inward desire of our hearts towards another. The bar goes up high once again, moving above the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees of not breaking the commandment to our heart's state that God knows and sees as the source of adultery with our inward thoughts. God's standard is absolute purity towards others within our heart, purity that removes the breaking of this commandment. Jesus' teaching of removing our right eye, the favored eye, or cutting off our right hand, the strong hand, is not teaching what we are to do to prevent outward actions that break this commandment, but are examples of how seriously God takes our inward heart thoughts that are the source of the breaking of this commandment.

Jesus moves on to teach about divorce. Let me underline Jesus' teaching on divorce by making clear that Jesus' focus is not on divorced people, whom Jesus loves, but is again moving us to the root of God's intent in marriage. Here Jesus does not quote a commandment or specific law as there is none in the Law that speaks to divorce. The reference Jesus uses is to the law that told a man to give to his wife whom he was divorcing a certificate of divorce. The certificate allowed her to show that she had been divorced and was not a harlot or adulteress. The Pharisees and scribes had developed guidance for divorce based on the giving of a certificate. At this point in Israel's history, there were two schools of thought on divorce. One school held that divorce was limited to cases of unfaithfulness, and the other held that a certificate could be given for

anything the wife did that displeased the husband. We think that divorce has become common in our day, but in this time, certificates of divorce were given for the burning of a meal. Jesus' teaching is a sharp contrast to the practices of the day, calling people to God's original intent for unbroken, lifelong marriage. Again, Jesus in his teaching moves the bar for those desiring the kingdom of heaven far above the current understanding developed under the keeping of the Law.

The last teaching of Jesus that we will look at this morning is focused on the practice of adding an oath to statements to underline the truthfulness of their statement. People might swear by heaven that what they are saying is true in order to convince another person of the truthfulness of their statement. Jesus' "But I say to you" statement related to swearing oaths is that we are not to do this but are only to have truthfulness in our hearts. Our responses are to be simple statements of the truth and not adding anything else. Our hearts are to be founded on and secure in truth, and when they are, we will always respond in truth. Again, Jesus moves this bar seemingly up out of our reach. If we have given a response that is not true to protect our circumstances or deflect the pain of truth in a difficult situation, we are barred from the kingdom of God. Jesus' parable given to support this idea is that we cannot even change the color of one of the hairs on our head, changing a single white hair to black. Jesus' statement does not address dyeing of our hair; even if we color our hair, its true nature or color is not changed. If we cannot do such a little thing, how can we do great things that we swear to? Jesus teaches that we are to have hearts of truth.

Now for many of us listening to Jesus' teaching this morning, the idea of being in heaven may now seem to be a "bridge too far." How can we live our lives in this manner? Can anyone live at this level? The teaching of the Pharisees looks easy compared to what Jesus is teaching, yet Jesus teaches they are not in the kingdom of God. Yet, Jesus teaches God's intent for the Law. Jesus fulfills the Law. Jesus' teaching amplifies that the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven is different from the righteousness that the Pharisees or Sadducees seek to achieve by learning and carefully keeping the Law. They thought they could get into heaven by Law keeping. We have a very real tendency as Christians to slip into a similar approach to living the Christian life. We think we are to do something to get into the kingdom of God. We think God only likes us when we do good, and when we fail, God is looking for an opportunity to punish us. We hear Jesus' teaching and we wonder, "How is it possible for anyone to get into the kingdom of God?" We cannot keep these standards outlined by Jesus. We need help to get into

the kingdom of God. Jesus is that help. He brings us into the kingdom when we believe in him through his shed blood and death on the cross. It is the steadfast love of God that gets us into the kingdom of God. God doesn't love us any less when we don't meet the standards of the kingdom. We know this because while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us. Jesus' teaching of God's original intent for the Law points to God's expectation of perfection. Jesus ends this section of teaching in verse 48 with the words, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>iii</sup> We ask ourselves. "How can we be perfect?" and "Who can keep these standards that Jesus teaches?" Remember Jesus is fully human and is filled with Holy Spirit. Jesus keeps these standards he teaches, and it is into his image we are to grow. We are, as John Wesley said, to go on to perfection. Jesus faced all of the temptations and trials that we will face, yet he lived his life to these standards he teaches. Through the cross, Jesus removes our sin, washing us clean with his blood, and then sends Holy Spirit to empower us to live as he lived so that we also may be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. When we fail to live in this manner, we repent of our sin, ask for forgiveness, and receive the grace God gives us. Amazing grace. Grace that heals us and restores us to citizenship in the kingdom of God. We are to grow into Jesus' image. We are to always move toward this standard of perfection. We can't get there on our own, but we can get there through Jesus' gift of salvation and with Holy Spirit helping us. We become citizens of the kingdom of God through the forgiveness, grace, and mercy that God's steadfast love extends to us when we fail and confess our failures.

We have touched on the teaching of Jesus and there is more of this radical teaching of Jesus to come. He does not abolish the Law but fulfills it, drawing us back to God's original intent for the Law. We are to be those whose hearts do not get angry with our brother or sister, don't harbor lust for another man's wife, are faithful to our spouse, never harbor a thought that belittles another, and only have truth within. We are to be those who, like our Father who is perfect, are also to be perfect. We are to be those who are focused on God and are quick to confess our failures and then go forward towards perfection, living in the light of the amazing grace of God. Jesus is not only our teacher who tells us about God's original intent, but Jesus lives a perfect life, and then brings us as we believe in him into the kingdom of God and empowers us to live there. Jesus doesn't leave us alone but is present with us always, helping us to go on to the perfection of a citizen of God.

*Pray with me: Jesus, we hear you teaching and are humbled by the standard of the kingdom of God. Lord, change our hearts that we might grow into our true selves as citizens in this new kingdom. We confess that we have not lived and cannot live as God asks us to live. Help us, change us, and lead us that we might become perfect as the Father is perfect. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> NRSV Matthew 5:20

<sup>ii</sup> NRSV Matthew 5:28

<sup>iii</sup> NRSV Matthews 5:48