

POINTS TO PONDER

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You are not to murder;' and 'whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to gehenna with fire."

— *Matthew 5.21-22*

"Jesus continues his sermon on the mount with a series of 'You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...' examples of what right relationship with God and others looks like in practice. The law has become codified, and people are missing the spirit in which it was intended. They have come to focus on specific actions, and not the attitudes that spawn those actions. For those who think they are righteous because they don't murder others, Jesus brings home the point that having anger that wishes others evil is but another representation of the same attitude that leads to murder. Indeed, we can 'murder' peoples' spirits with our words, attitudes, and behaviors just as surely as we can murder them physically with weapons. Disrespecting others or treating them unfairly, insulting them, or calling them names are all murderous attitudes that afflicts both the wounded and the wounder. Indeed, Jesus' point, in part, is that the wounder may actually suffer more than the wounded, for it is their murderous spirit that is itself a judgment against them. It corrupts them from the inside, out."

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/13/2020*

"In this sermon, Jesus frequently quotes scripture only to revise and reinterpret it. He disagrees with those who have gone before him, claiming that they have not gone far enough in their interpretations of scripture, as well as the traditions that they have created. He was not a traditionalist, or one who thought the old ways were best. He came to transform the laws and traditions into a vision that he believes God sought all along for humanity. How do you think Jesus would be received today if he told us that those we have thought spoke truthfully did not speak truthfully enough? Would he be received well for changing things up and contradicting the things we thought were true?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/8/2023*

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

— *Matthew 5.22-26*

"Jesus makes clear that the goal he wants us to pursue is reconciliation with others. Relationships matter; despite how, too often, we dispose of them and discard people who don't fit into our idea of whom they should be. Murder is the climax of irreconciliation – making it impossible forevermore. But anger, loathing, and animosity (whether held inside, or acted upon) also keeps us distanced from one another. Reconciliation requires that we put away the anger and negativity. Reconciliation is evidence of our spiritual maturity; whereas perpetual anger, or elimination of enemies (whether by murder or ostracization), is evidence of our spiritual immaturity. The community Christ wants us to build is to lift each other up, not tear each other down...to accept people just as they are with their foibles attached, rather than abandon them because they dare to be themselves rather than who we want them to be. Reconciliation thus requires loving people unconditionally, not only so long as they conform to what we expect from them. This is the whole spiritual point of Jesus' sermon. Are we listening?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/13/2020*

"While he gives both a religious and a legal example of how to be in relationship with one another, his aim is to promote reconciliation. Not at any cost, mind you. He would not have us to reconcile ourselves to those who obstinately refuse to be committed to God's ways. But the assumption here is that we are the

ones who've been in the wrong, and we need to work to reestablish peace in our relationships with those we've wronged. Our gifts to God are not going to help matters with regard to our bad behavior towards those we've harmed. Likewise, if we show no accountability for legal improprieties we've committed, how can we expect to be forgiven? We need to show we are changed in our ways so that those we've injured can be reconciled to us."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/8/2023*

"You have heard that it was said, 'You are not to commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a person with lust has already committed adultery with them in one's heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into gehenna."

— *Matthew 5.27-30*

"Hmm, does this mean we are to start bringing knives, axes, and saws to church to get rid of those body parts responsible for a person having sinned? :) It would be hard to argue that Jesus literally means what he says here. We all use hyperbole at times to make a point, and it seems that this is what Jesus is doing here. Still, his real point is that it is not simply the act we do, but the motives within our heart that determine the morality of our conduct. The gruesomeness of his point is to call our attention to the primacy of how our inner desires are what are really responsible for our eyes and hands following through with the bad behavior that our minds have concocted. We need to get our spirit, motives, attitudes, and desires in accordance with God's ways more than we need eyes or hands. It is a powerful point to remind us that we need to prioritize developing our character even more than sustaining our bodies."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/8/2023*

"The words are harsh, and don't sound like the compassionate Jesus we imagine in our minds. Tearing out or cutting off body parts to avoid a place of corruption and destruction? Really?! I suspect that Jesus is once again not being literal, but is using hyperbole to get our attention about something crucially important to our spiritual health. I also suspect the 'lust' he is speaking of is not simply amorous desire, a natural part of being human, but a more perverted and defiling relationship we have with another human being that disrespects their humanity, as well as their partner's – as when he talks about divorce.

We all have desires for things that may not be the best thing for us or others, and typically we don't think it is evil to have them if they are not acted upon. But if our desires are actually for the dehumanization of others for our own benefit, then that would make sense that this could be harmful to us even if we didn't act on them. To think about, much less treat, another person as a means and not an end in themselves, as a gratifier of our desires rather than as a person of inherent worth and dignity independent of our desires, is to not only assail their spiritual welfare, but is to corrupt within ourselves our own character.

Wishing others to be less than us is always evil – always, whether we act on it or not. It molds our minds and contorts our character. The threat it has to our spirit is far worse than losing a body part; for if we lose a body part, we can still remain the same person in character. But if we allow ourselves to dehumanize others, even if just in our own minds, we corrupt our inner being. We ourselves, in hating, despising, objectifying, or having antipathy towards any other person end up hurting not only them, but ourselves."

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/13/2020*

"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'
But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

— *Matthew 5.31-32*

"Jesus lived in a sexist world in which men could divorce their wives without much cause; but wives could not do the same. And those who grew tired of their wives would employ this double-standard whenever

they didn't want to put forth the effort to maintain the relationship. Jesus saw this as not only dishonoring one's wife, but the very idea of marriage itself as a covenantal relationship one has with one's partner and with God.

Divorce, he believed, is only to be allowed when the marriage covenant itself has been violated irreconcilably with one's mate. Physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, sexual, or relational abuse would be such violations; as would a change of character in which one no longer lived by sacred values necessary for making the relationship loving, peaceful, and just. Otherwise, we are to seek the wisdom and values of God until we can find a way to stay together and honor our vows.

Our own society does not see the sanctity of this sacred covenant, as is evidenced by divorce rates over 50% -- and often for reasons that would not warrant being called a severe violation of the marital covenant. Remembering the sanctity of our vows can help us to seek solutions and work together to get a marriage off-track back on the right track.

If you are married, how have your vows strengthened you when you questioned whether your relationship was working well? If you are divorced, would you see the reasons for that as irreconcilable violations of the marital covenant? What can we learn about ourselves in our ability to maintain a covenant, and how can we improve ourselves to honor what we pledge?"

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/8/2023*

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You are to not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to God." ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is God's footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

— *Matthew 5.33-37*

"Jesus is not addressing cursing in this passage, but rather oath-making or vowing that we will do something. Part of the reason for this is that we don't control our lives and what we will or won't do in the future. We don't even know that we will live another second, so swearing that we will do something when we don't even have the power to keep ourselves alive, let alone make our hair black or white, is hubris. Simply saying 'Yes' or 'No' with regard to our intentions is enough. Trying to convince others that we can deliver on our promises is a form of manipulation. Humility requires that we act in accordance with our character, and live by an attitude of reverence for others in not promising to them more than what we are capable of promising. Our character, not our words, are how we are to be known. Let others be convinced by our actions, not by simply our words and promises."

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/13/2020*

"Not bearing false witness is, of course, a commandment that prohibits us from speaking untruths about others; whether in court, or in public opinion. But the more likely meaning Jesus is applying here is in regard to making a vow and not keeping it. Swearing by an oath is something people often do for manipulative purposes, embellishing their sincerity in order to affect another's decision-making. This underhanded tactic is a ruse in which one only says they are making an oath when they have no intention of keeping it. To swear by heaven, God, earth, or anything else is to make the despicable action all the worse, for it then dishonors the one whose name is being used in order to make one's promise seem more honorable. This is what it means to take God's name in vain; another action we are commanded not to do. People who spend great effort at convincing you that they are telling the truth to get you to do something are most usually those who make sworn statements. Those who simply tell the truth and await your response are more likely those who can be trusted."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 2/8/2023*