

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²²But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be subject to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will have to answer to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of hell fire.

²³“So if you are about to offer your gift at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother. Then come and offer your gift.

²⁵“If someone accuses you, reach an agreement with him quickly, while you are with him on the way. Otherwise your accuser may bring you to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Amen I tell you: You will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ²⁸but I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰If your right hand causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer.

³³“Again you have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not break your oaths, but fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I tell you, do not swear at all: not by heaven, because it is God’s throne; ³⁵and not by earth, because it is his footstool; and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your own head, since you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Instead, let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no.’ Whatever goes beyond these is from the Evil One.

True Righteousness

I.

There you are in the ICU—the intensive care unit. In addition to the IV providing the medicines you need to keep you comfortable, or even to keep you alive, there are sensors to monitor all your vital signs. If anything is the slightest bit off, the nurses station can be alerted so they can take action. What if they were able to get readings that would tell them something was coming even before your blood pressure or your heart rate spiked?

Apparently, it’s coming. A recent news story spoke about how artificial intelligence is already being used in some hospitals to watch a patient’s every move. There are sensors all over the room, not just in wires or tubes hooked up to the patient. Cameras detect the slightest muscle twinge or eye twitch. By analyzing every move the patient makes, a computer is able to predict the increase of pain, or even the mental and emotional state of the patient long before the patient can even notice these things him- or her-self.

It was presented as an uplifting story with a vast potential to help patients. Care givers would be able to devote more time and attention to individuals and less time to diagnosing

what treatment was needed next.

My mind, however, immediately went to information that was presented at the World Economic Forum in Davos. A presenter was talking about the potential for artificial intelligence that is already available and able to monitor your brain activity, to analyze your past behavior and make predictions about what you might have already done or what you will do next. The data, the presenter said, might tell more about you than you, yourself know. Anyone with access to that data can know more about you than you know about yourself. Does that sound creepy?

What if I told you that is nothing new? It isn't something out of George Orwell's 1984 and it isn't some artificial intelligence. There is a real and actual intelligence that knows far more about you than you know about yourself. The writer to the Hebrews says: "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to the point of dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, even being able to judge the ideas and thoughts of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from him, but everything is uncovered and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we will give an account" (Hebrews 4:12-13, EHV). God knows more about you than you know about yourself. You can't hide your thoughts and feelings and attitudes from him.

II.

The Gospel readings of the last few weeks have been pieces of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. First Jesus listed a bunch of Beatitudes—some "blesseds"—some of which didn't sound very blessed at all. Jesus assured his disciples—including you and me—that we already have the blessings of heaven because we put our faith in him. Last week he called his disciples salt and light and taught us to live like the children of God that we are, so that others might see how believers behave and give glory to God.

Last week's gospel concluded this way: "Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20, EHV). It might be possible for a person to think that his or her righteousness is quite admirable. What does true righteousness look like?

Those of you who have been Lutheran from childhood have had to memorize the 10 Commandments from Luther's catechism. The Ten Commandments are found in the Bible in Exodus 20, but you don't find any words like "What does this mean?" as you will find in the Catechism, which is also printed in the new hymnal beginning on page 286.

Did you ever wonder where Luther got his "What does this mean?" statements? At least in part you can find some meanings to some of the commandments right here in what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Fifth Commandment says: "You shall not murder." What does this mean? Jesus indicates that it isn't just taking another person's life, but there are other things that violate what God commands. "I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be subject to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raca,' will have to answer to the Sanhedrin. But whoever says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of hell fire" (Matthew 5:22, EHV). Raca is an insult that is like calling someone an idiot. Jesus says that calling someone an idiot, or irrational anger, or labeling someone a fool puts you in danger of hell no less than committing an actual murder. Which of us can say that we are without fault when it comes to this commandment? None.

The Six Commandment says: "You shall not commit adultery." Jesus gives his "What does this mean?" "I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28, EHV). He adds to that some

information about divorce: “I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer” (Matthew 5:32, EHV). Divorce is not to be entered into lightly. Elsewhere the Bible gives one additional acceptable reason for divorce: desertion. No-fault divorce is an invention of culture, not something acceptable to God.

The Eighth Commandment says: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.” Jesus talks about oaths, and says: “I tell you, do not swear at all: not by heaven, because it is God’s throne; ³⁵and not by earth, because it is his footstool... ³⁶And do not swear by your own head, since you cannot make one hair white or black” (Matthew 5:34-36, EHV). Lying is sinful, whether you have taken an oath to do it or not. “Instead, let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no.’ Whatever goes beyond these is from the Evil One” (Matthew 5:37, EHV). Just be honest, Jesus says.

How many of the commandments Jesus singled out hit close to home for you? It will be a little different for each person. The point Jesus is making is clear, however. Remember the last verse from last week’s gospel? “Indeed I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20, EHV).

The code of the Pharisees and experts in the law was pretty intricate. Some of the things they came up with went beyond what God commands. Yet, the fact remained, their rigid attention to their rules was not good enough for God. Yours isn’t, either. Since God can read the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, he knows every minor infraction of his commandments you have ever committed; even the ones you didn’t even notice. He knows you better than you know yourself.

III.

Today’s First Reading recorded King David’s sin of adultery with Bathsheba. The reading ended with the ominous words: “But what David had done was evil in the eyes of the LORD” (2 Samuel 11:27, EHV).

David knew it. His conscience plagued him for some time. Eventually, God sent the prophet Nathan to confront him with his sin. David confessed and was forgiven. King David speaks of it in Psalm 51: “Be gracious to me, God, according to your mercy. Erase my acts of rebellion according to the greatness of your compassion. ²Scrub me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin” (Psalm 51:1-2, EHV). He goes on a few verses later with some very familiar words: “Create in me a pure heart, O God. Renew an unwavering spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:10-11, EHV).

There is only one way to surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees. There is only one way to enter heaven. There is only one way to have a pure heart. *God* must create it within you.

Jesus spoke about the Fifth Commandment. He paid with his blood shed on the cross for every murder ever committed. But he also paid for every fit of anger and for every harsh word.

Those sins of adultery that violate the Six Commandment Jesus paid for, too. Every affair and every divorce. Every look that lingered a little too long in the wrong places, every click of the mouse that aroused lust.

Those sins of lies to or about one’s neighbor that violate the Eighth Commandment Jesus also paid in full. Every perjury and every promise we broke was paid for by the blood

he shed.

Every single violation of every other commandment you and I have perpetrated has already been paid for by Jesus. This is how it is possible for your guilt to be scrubbed clean, as David prayed in Psalm 51. Jesus is the reason God can purify you from your sin. Jesus is the reason God can answer David's prayer—and yours and mine—and create in us pure hearts.

IV.

David continues Psalm 51: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Sustain me with a willing spirit" (Psalm 51:12, EHV).

That's our reaction to what our Savior Jesus has done. Jesus has restored our joy. The agony over all those sins is no longer what controls us. We know that when God looks at us, he doesn't see the filth of our sins, he sees Jesus' perfection. True righteousness comes from Jesus. Because of Jesus, God sees us as righteous and holy.

Paul says in today's Second Reading: "Just as you received instruction from us about how you are to walk so as to please God (as indeed you are doing), we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that you do so even more" (1 Thessalonians 4:1, EHV). You are already living as a child of God. You are already what Jesus called you in last week's part of the Sermon on the Mount—you are salt and light. Keep flavoring the world with the way you live for God. Brighten up the darkness of the world with the reflected light of Jesus in your life.

God knows more about you than you know about yourself. God knows how pure and holy the New Self that lives within you really is. God knows the true righteousness you have from Jesus. May God grant you the strength to keep pushing out the Old Self with its evil deeds and desires so that New Self within you shines ever more brightly for the world to see. Amen.