

Epiphany 6  
St. Matthew 5:21-37  
February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017  
St. George's Bolton  
Fr. Chris

## *The Ethics & Morals of Jesus*

*"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 the hell of fire. 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.*

Murder. Adultery. Divorce. Swearing Oaths. These all seem like fairly clear rules, however, human beings seem to reason ways around them. Doing things against the will of God betrays our relationship. No one likes being betrayed, especially by someone who is close to you.

We recognize these topics that Jesus is talking about. They cause serious divisions between us. Jesus is looking for us to be honest with ourselves and not try and duck our responsibility for our sins and faults by feigning holiness and righteousness. No one can stand righteous before the holy one. All have sinned, and all are fallen. All of us need help overcoming this fallenness. Jesus came to bridge the gap between the perfect and the imperfect, the profane and the

Holy One. Jesus came to forgive. Of course, he can't forgive you if you aren't aware that you need to be forgiven!

Now I don't like to think of myself as profane or as imperfect, thank you. On the other hand, most of us really don't think we are perfect and holier than thou. My sense is that to be human is to travel about life with a healthy amount of self-doubt and a heaping helping of guilt.

Some might say, *so what!* So what if you make mistakes and do bad things. No big deal. We surmise that there are big sins and little sins, as the Catholic Church used to put it, Venial and Mortal Sins. Venial were less serious, while mortal sins implied a breach with God, that if not forgiven, could condemn a soul to hell after death. Jesus seems to be implying today that there are just sins, and all sin needs the same treatment: repentance and forgiveness.

Sin is no big deal? Many find it a very big deal, and not merely our victims. We can carry the burden of sin through life, both the small and egregious transgressions.

We can try and rationalize our sins away, or blame others for the cause of our failings. I didn't have good parents. They didn't let me stay up and night to watch the *Flintstones* or the *Jetsons!* *Horrors!* They wouldn't let me eat sweets! They left me alone by myself too much! You've heard all the excuses before. It's my wife's fault I cheated on her because she was such a horrible person. I didn't mind taking some stuff home from work for myself, because they treat me so badly and never do anything nice for us, so I deserve it. My victims are only getting what they deserve!

So what, pray tell, do I *deserve?*

I deserve to live as God wants me to live, according to the rules and teachings God has set down for me. I deserve to treat others as I wish to be treated. I deserve justice and fairness. I do not deserve to be forgiven, however, it is God's free gift to me.

I love the words of this passage about getting my gift to the altar, and once there, remembering I have something unresolved with someone else. *"Leave the gift behind, and first be reconciled, before you return and approach God."* This is a much higher standard of moral behavior than merely following externally observable rules. It is what is inside my heart and on my conscience, unseen to others, that matters!

Our hypocrisy is not as big a secret as we might think it is. In another place in the scriptures, Jesus says, *"there is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed."* [Luke 8:17] This applies to both the good and the bad which dwell in our hearts. So our task is to wash away the bad, clean it, expel it, resolve it, repent of it, be reconciled to those whom we have sinned and trespassed against.

The Lord's Prayer ought to be interrupted when we utter that line, *"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Really? Did we really forgive those who have trespassed against us? Or do we still harbor ill will and anger against them? And when it comes to our sins and trespasses, have we done all we can to resolve the harm we have done, and then turn with penitent hearts to seek forgiveness from those whom we have victimized? Have we begged God for God's forgiveness? Have we asked God for help doing this? Our praying of the Lord's prayer ought to stop right there if our conscience is not clear, and before the rest

of those words fall from our lips, we ought to make haste to clear our consciences, not with rationalization and blame of others, but by taking full responsibility for what we have done and seeking to make that restitution and repentance. That is the spirit in which Jesus cautions us to leave our gift at the altar before completing the act of *offering* God a gift of thanksgiving. Finish the hard work on your heart, and then come and make your offering.

There is no arguing that one sin is greater than another. Jesus is clear that God's idea of right and wrong, moral and immoral go way beyond our own ideas on the subject. While no one would disagree that murder is evil and bad, Jesus raises the prospect of anger and name calling of a brother and a sister, are just as bad, if not the root cause of the former. Therefore, we should not think of ourselves as spotless because we have not murdered someone. We all possess the capacity to do so. The evil behavior that leads up to murder is also as bad and needs our attention and repentance.

When it comes to adultery, the words are equally as provocative. No one argues that adultery is wrong, but what about looking at another person lustfully when you are in a relationship? God knows our hearts and what goes on in our minds. God understands the ramifications of the wandering eye, because the heart is not far behind. There is no hiding our deepest thoughts and longings from God. And God knows when we have betrayed our relationships, even when we protest, what harm could I have done? The harm is to yourself. The harm comes from your choices.

Taking oaths is easy. Keeping them is another matter. It is a serious thing to break a promise: like the promises of marriage; like the promises of Baptism; like the promises we make to God

and before God. Breaking our oaths not only hurts those we have made them to, they betray our promises to God. And that is very *serious!* Better to say yes or no if you can't keep your promises.

The author of Deuteronomy admonishes us to choose life. Sirach offers wisdom for us also: *[also appointed for reading today]*

- *If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given. For great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and sees everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every human action. He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.*

So the choice is before you, fire or water, death or life. And in wisdom, life is connected with keeping God's commandments. There is no room for rationalizing that you have the freedom and permission to sin. We choose the fire. We choose on our own the way that leads to death. Wickedness is our own choice and responsibility and there is no one else to blame it on but me.

As the author of Sirach says, God sees everything and God knows every human action and choice. He desires us to choose life with him. He desires us to follow the commandments given us. He sees straight through any excuse we would mount, and hypocrisy we would pretend.

So today, vow to choose life. Choose to follow the simple ways of God. Cast off your burdens on Jesus. Accept the free gift of forgiveness and live a life that is blessed! AMEN