

But.....  
Matthew 5:17-32

The message this morning is the third part of a series on the Sermon on the Mount. In week one, we saw that the cross is key to the kingdom of heaven. It is not our work, our trying to be like Jesus that reconciles us to God and grants us a share of the kingdom but the work of Christ on the cross that He has already done for us. Last week we learned that the kingdom of heaven is the church, those who follow Jesus' command to be salt and light in a tasteless and dark world. Our objective as followers of Jesus is to live our lives in such a way that God is glorified and illumined so that others might come to know Him.

God is His grace and wisdom has given each of us the ability to make those choices and decisions that will ultimately govern our lives and our opportunities to be blessed - both here and now and there and later. The kingdom of heaven begins here on earth, and kingdom living is discerning the things in life we can change or at least control and leave the rest up to God.

Today we will see those principles intersect in a very practical way as we look at some basic guidelines Jesus lays out for kingdom living. As we take a brief look at them today my prayer is that we will take them to heart and choose to love the kingdom life and be blessed. We will begin with the words of Jesus in Mathew 5:17-18: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

That phrase "Law and Prophets" is a reference to the Scriptures in their entirety, which in Jesus' day would have been our Old Testament. Today they would also include the New Testament. Jesus did not come to abolish the Scriptures, but to fulfill them. Those who claim the teachings of the Old Testament are not relevant to the modern church are sorely mistaken. The Scriptures in their entirety will remain relevant until creation as we know it ceases to exist. Does that mean we should stone adulterers and murderers to death? Jesus helps us to find the Biblical answer to that question in the following verses.

To use a modern day saying the Scriptures are not a rambling politician's word salad that makes little sense. Every word in the Scriptures, from the smallest to the largest, including the words contained in that passage that we just read and heard, was written under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Biblical scholars and translators have done their very best to capture their original intent and meaning from the early manuscripts, which helps to explain why we have many different translations and versions of the Scriptures.

Differences in translations aside, some words do carry more weight than others. Even if you were carefully listening or following along your ears may have missed one of the smallest yet most important words Jesus spoke to the crowd on the side of the mountain that day. That word is "but", and when we come across that little conjunction in the Scriptures, it should cause us to pause for a moment to reflect upon its significance. It is like seeing a yellow traffic sign on the highway or red flashing lights on a vehicle ahead of us. It tells us to slow down because something that demands our attention lies ahead. In this case, Jesus is sharing some kingdom information that we dare not overlook.

When it comes to us making the right choices for kingdom living, what Jesus has said is far more important than what we may have heard. Let me explain what I mean by that. I can say with near certainty that every one of us has heard that murder is wrong. The legal definition of murder is to intentionally take the life of another human being in an unlawful way with malice and forethought. But why is it wrong? Is it simply because in the Bible God says in commandment # 6 that we shall not do it? That is part of it, but the primary reason murder is wrong is that God created human beings in His image. Each of us reflect God's goodness, some more than others, and we are not free to destroy what God has created without just cause. Murder is always wrong, no matter what the circumstance. That is what we have heard and been taught. But.....what does Jesus **say** about it?

The answer begins in Mathew 5:17 where He says I have not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Jesus did not come to earth to blur the meaning of what God has decreed to be right and wrong. Quite to the contrary, Jesus came to help us understand why the truth of the Scriptures is so important and necessary for kingdom living. The rest of the answer is found in 5:21-22. You have heard that murder is wrong, **but** I say words you speak in anger to a brother or sister (which in this context implies another church member), make you just as guilty as one who murders. Jesus does not set that ancient truth aside that says murder is wrong, but He expands upon it.

If we are angry with someone without just cause and use hurtful or abusive language towards that person Jesus says that we are no better than someone who commits murder. Not only are we no better, but we are also just as guilty. How can that be you say? What about free speech? We've never heard of a law against calling someone a fool. Good luck getting someone arrested for that, no matter how many times we call 911. Isn't calling someone a fool way different than murdering them? The world would say yes.

But....people living for the kingdom would have to agree with Jesus and say no. The reason is that the motive is the same with both. The intent is to cause harm. Calling someone a fool likely won't land us in prison and murdering someone likely will, yet in the end the extent of the harm is not what matters. What does matter is what Jesus said, because it seems that there are worse things than jail-namely being liable to the hell of fire. The word Jesus used for hell referred to the Hinnom Valley, a burning garbage dump just outside the city, a fitting example of hell.

If we are living in the kingdom, we will remember what Jesus said, not what we have heard. That means we will make every effort to avoid hurting others, especially another brother or sister in Christ, whether it be with our words or our fists. Murder is still wrong, but the good news is that God offers grace and forgiveness. Forgiveness is there for the asking because of the cross of Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures by His atoning work on the cross, and that is why murderers and adulterers are no longer stoned to death.

We ask God and the other person for forgiveness, not because we face the fires of hell if we don't but because we believe a blessing comes when we do. **We can't be right with God unless we are right with each other.** Enough about murder and violent language. What have you heard about lust, adultery, and divorce? It is no mere coincidence that Jesus links them together. Verse 28 is a reminder of what President Carter once said in an interview with a certain men's magazine. "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times." Though confession is good for the soul it didn't work out so well for the President because many of the people who heard his startling confession were not prepared to consider the words of Jesus in 5:28. *But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

They were still content in believing what they had always heard- look **but** do not touch. That might be good advice for a young child in an expensive store, but it certainly doesn't apply to men and women who have made a promise before God to love and remain faithful to their spouse. When it comes to cheating, Jesus said that looking with the eye is no different than touching with some other part of our body. The motives are the same. And curiously enough, once again He used the dreaded "H" word to warn of the consequences. If we are living in the kingdom, we will remember what Jesus said, not what we have heard. Adultery is wrong, **but** the good news is that God offers grace and forgiveness. Forgiveness is there for the asking because of the cross of Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures by His atoning work on the cross, and that is why murderers and adulterers are no longer stoned to death.

Divorce is a topic that few preachers will tackle and rather than get myself into more trouble I will simply add context to the words of Jesus. It is somewhat ironic that those of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century disagree with the definition of a legal marriage and those in Jesus' day disagreed with the definition a legal divorce. On one side were those who followed Rabbi Shammai, who said divorce was permitted only in cases of sexual immorality.

The opposing group was led by Rabbi Hillel, who taught that divorce was permissible in all circumstances. The latter group attempted to justify their position by claiming that Moses said divorce was OK when there was a legal reason for it. The problem was that their list of legal reasons was a thousand cubits long and growing, it even included the wife burning the toast at breakfast. Some of what they had heard about divorce was wrong. Jesus cleared up their confusion. Marriage and divorce are decisions that require much prayer and discernment. Divorce is wrong, but forgiveness is there for the asking because of the cross of Christ. Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures by His atoning work on the cross.

Because we are living in the kingdom, we will remember what Jesus said, not what we have heard. Because we are living in the kingdom, our words will be truthful and our motives pure. Because we are living in the kingdom, we will live the Wesleyan way and do good, do no harm, and stay in love with God. Because we are living in the kingdom, we will remember that God's offer of grace and forgiveness has no bounds. Because we are living in the kingdom, we are forgiving and forgiven people, with no buts involved. Praise God! Amen.