

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 16, 2020
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 5:21-37 ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

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

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

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

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. (NIV)

Jesus Gets Your Attention

1. No one pays attention anymore

You can’t help losing patience no matter how hard you try. You know that some people just don’t drive as well as the majority of the other motorists on the road. Maybe their eyes have worsened over the years so they can’t see the signs and the traffic as well as they used to. Maybe they have a car full of screaming kids that divide their attention between refereeing and driving. But when you finally manage to pass the car that has been driving erratically and notice they are trying to send text messages on their phone while driving with their knees, you lose all sympathy. Every shred of patience evaporates. Why can’t they just pay attention to what they’re doing right now and send that earth-shatteringly important message when they pull into the driveway?

You can’t help it when you get a little disturbed in the check out line. You have enough to do in your day, enough projects to work on, enough people who need your attention. Making a quick trip to the store shouldn’t cause you stress, or worse, incite anger. But when the person ringing up your items is looking over their shoulder, scanning your purchases absent-mindedly with one hand, carrying on a conversation, completely oblivious to the question you are trying to ask, you just can’t help it. Doesn’t the customer come first? Doesn’t doing your job mean giving the client your full attention and chatting with your friends when you have some free time?

You can’t help it if you are a little bit more disappointed when you get home. You talk about your day, how upset you are by people who aren’t paying attention and are greeted with mechanical yeps and uh-huhs.

You had asked for the garbage to be taken out, the dishes to be washed, and clean laundry to be put away in drawers and closets. They had agreed to your wishes. “Yep, no problem,” was what they said. But when you return home, everything sits just the same as when you left. You can’t help it. Their lack of attention has gotten your attention in a bad way.

2. Jesus doesn’t get your full attention

Maybe now you have a clue about how Jesus feels. You and I know how it feels to promise God your best, to live according to His Word, to fully obey His commands. “Yep, no problem,” is what you think even if you don’t say those exact words.

It should be pretty easy to live according to God’s standards. Even elementary school children can memorize the Ten Commandments. But Jesus complicates your cliff-notes version of morality. You don’t have to shoot someone in cold blood or stab them in a passionate argument to be a murderer. Jesus says a murderer is anyone **“who is angry with his brother,”** anyone calls anyone else a derogatory name out of frustration (Matthew 5:22). You don’t have to be a senator seducing someone through an online-dating service while your wife and family are at home to be an adulterer. You don’t have to be a rock-star who leverages his celebrity status to sleep with any woman whenever he wants to make a shambles of the Sixth Commandment. Jesus says: **“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”** (Matthew 5:28) Just allowing the sight of a beautiful, scantily-clad person to linger a second too long, just allowing your mind to slip from an appreciation of beauty to a desire for sexual gratification, just letting your brain do what comes naturally means shattering God’s law.

You know how upset you get when your family fails you, when the store clerks don’t do their job, when drivers try to do everything except actually drive. And you’re right. They should be doing their jobs. They should be living up to their promises. They should be held accountable. But if that’s how upset you get when those people let you down, what would be an appropriate reaction from God when His own people pay Him lip service, when His own child directly defies Him. You know you’ve got His attention now.

3. With the full force of the Law, Jesus gets your attention

It’s a little uncomfortable to have God’s attention this way, isn’t it? You’d prefer to stick with the encouraging, inspirational mottos that remind you God is with you and watching over you to protect you and guide you. It’s not a very pleasant thought to know God sees everything you do and disapproves of even your impure thoughts and holds you accountable for your unclean words.

So you just try not to think about it. How can it be wrong to have a lustful thought in your head when it comes so naturally, involuntarily? How can God disapprove of divorce without marital unfaithfulness or desertion when it’s perfectly legal and practiced so commonly? How can Jesus condemn careless promises and unnecessary oaths when everyone does it? How can God hold you accountable for demeaning and angry words, for thoughts of hatred and anger when they are perfectly normal reactions to corrupted people doing insensitive things?

But Jesus doesn’t ever ask what you think about His standards. Jesus doesn’t ask you to take a survey of which commandments your friends and neighbors approve of. Before He digs deep into God’s law, He says: **“But I tell you.”** (Matthew 5:22,28,32,34) Jesus silences every popular poll about morality and ethics. Jesus leaves you speechless when trying to talk your way out of your crime or compromising to plea-bargain for a lesser sentence. Jesus isn’t giving a new command or offering His spin on old traditions. Jesus is properly unfolding the original law with all of it’s uncomfortable implications and sharp edges. Jesus wants you to understand that even a careless promise comes from Satan himself. (Matthew 5:37) Even if you follow the law of the land to explore a convenient escape clause to your marriage, it puts you in the same room with the perverse rock star and sleazy senator. Even an uncharitable word means you

“will be in danger of the fire of hell.” (Matthew 5:22) Even a lingering, lascivious glance puts you at risk for **“your whole body to go into hell.”** (Matthew 5:30) Even if the world offers you a democratically decided standard for marriage or sexuality or anger or swearing, Jesus wants your attention to show you there is no wiggling out of His consequences for your thoughts and words and actions.

4. Jesus gets your attention as your Savior

But that’s why Jesus wants your attention. He wants you to know that there is no escape hatch, no room for negotiating for you or me or for anyone else in the world. No matter what has been said, Jesus wants you to know you can’t find a way to please God, you can’t walk down the path to perfection, you can’t even get close enough or make enough of an effort for God to accept you for who you are. That’s precisely why Jesus wants your attention.

Because Jesus wants you to see His perfection. He wants you to see the slip-ups you can’t help but fall victim to, He has never done. He wants you to see the way He has always, completely, faithfully completed every demand of God’s law. Jesus doesn’t want your attention so you lose all hope, just any hope in yourself for your own salvation. Jesus wants your attention on His obedience not so He can club you over the head into submitting to do the same thing. He wants your attention so you can see how He submitted to obedience for you, on your behalf. He wants your attention so you see clearly His sacrifice. On His cross He wants you to see your Savior, your obedience, your perfection.

5. Jesus gets your attention throughout life

Jesus wants your attention because He understands how easily you get distracted. And he knows you are helpless to give Him your full attention on your own. Plucking out eyes and hacking off limbs won’t even solve the problem if you still have an unclean heart. That’s why what you most desperately need, Jesus delivers. He gives you a new heart through faith. Jesus wants your attention so you know that your adultery, causing someone else to be victimized by your adultery, has been taken to His cross. Those sins have been left there. Jesus wants your attention to show you He has set you free from selfishness and sins of self-gratification when He gave you a new heart by faith.

Jesus wants your attention so He can remind you of the waters of Baptism by which He washed you and cleansed you to make you His own child. He wants your attention to go back to your Baptism every time you allow a hateful or unkind word slip from your mouth. As a child for whom Jesus spilled His blood, Jesus calls you to forgive as He has forgiven you to **“settle matters quickly”** and **“be reconciled to your brother,”** to repair what has been damaged by your anger or thoughtlessness or carelessness. (Matthew 5:25,24) Jesus wants your attention whether you let a frivolous oath slip out or a lustful thought refuses to dislodge itself from your brain. Jesus calls your attention to His body and His blood given and shed for you and offered in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Jesus wants your attention when you just can’t seem to help falling into the same traps, falling victim to the same struggles. Jesus wants your attention on His Word, on the power of the Holy Spirit working in your new heart to strengthen you for your constant battles.

Jesus wants your attention. Jesus wants you to experience joy every day in remembering who you are and what he has done for you. Jesus wants you to rise each day with the peace of his forgiveness and a plan to guard your heart.

To Jesus you aren’t just a family member He expects will let Him down, a store clerk who will not take their job seriously, or a driver who will endanger others by their carelessness on the freeway. To Jesus you are someone who already shares in the victory He accomplished through His holy life and sacrificial death. Even as you struggle through trials and temptations in life, Jesus wants your attention throughout every moment of every day of your life to remind you of the glory in store for you through His glorious resurrection. Amen.