

Holier than That

Matthew 5:20-37 (NIV)

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And 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 or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; 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 together on the way, or your adversary 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 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall 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 stumble, 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 stumble, 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 sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. ³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ ³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath 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 All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Jesus’ sermon on the mount continues with him saying, “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Simply, you have to be holier than that, than the most religious and pious people you know.

He explains, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” (verses 21-22a) “You shall not murder” seems like a command that we are capable of completing, even without too much difficulty. But then Jesus challenges us to be holier than that by having us look past the external act of murder - that premeditated, malicious ending of someone’s life - and instead he directs us to our attitude, our heart. If we are angry with someone, if in our anger we insult someone, make fun of them, then we have just as good as murdered that person. None of us are innocent of that. We are murderers in our hearts for being angry with others and Jesus says that we are to face the same judgment as a murderer, that we are in danger of the fires of hell!

“Be holier than that,” Jesus tells all of us. Do not stew on your anger. Give up your hate. If you wronged someone or have been wronged by someone, settle matters immediately. Don’t let it linger or we should expect God the judge to repay us for every angry thought we have had and every angry word we have ever spoken. We need new hearts, holy ones cleansed from anger.

Jesus continues, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (verses 27-28) God’s Sixth Commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” is a commandment that we break more easily than the murder one. Sex is a good gift from God, but he designed and reserved it for one man and one woman who are married, to protect that good gift for all people. Yet, sex outside of marriage when you are married, and sex among people who are unmarried, this is common and it’s also the adultery that God is commanding against. To have sex outside of marriage hurts you, your current or future spouse, and anyone who may want to make the lifelong commitment of marriage to you or your spouse.

“But I’m a virgin or I was a virgin when I got married.” Great! God be praised! But what about what goes on in your mind? Jesus says that if you or I have ever looked at another person lustfully, we have committed adultery in our hearts. We have broken this commandment from God and are subject to his judgment just as much as the person who had a physical affair.

“Be holier than that,” Jesus says to us again. If it is your body causing you to sin sexually, if it is your eyes or your hands that causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. Cut it off like you would a piece of cancer from the body. It’s better to get rid of it than allow it to lead you into sin over and over again and drag you down to hell.

But it’s not the body part that is causing you to sin, is it? It’s the eyes and the hands that you use to further sin because you are following the lustful desires of your heart, because of what is inside. We need a new heart. We need a heart holier than the one we have. We need a heart that honors God’s institution of marriage and reserves sex only for marriage. God says have a holier marriage, a relationship that we constantly work on, a relationship that we don’t call it quits on when we are unhappy or when we are frustrated. Be holier than that in every regard of marriage relationships.

Much like the verbal commitment made in marriage, Jesus moves on to talk about oaths, which is really dealing with God's Second Commandment, "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God." If you use God's name in declaring something as truth or declaring something you will do, you are obligated to do so or you will be misusing and abusing God's name. To get around breaking this commandment, people swore by heaven or by the earth or by Jerusalem or by the Great King or even by their own head. It was something lesser. So, you could break your word, your oath, and not be misusing God's name.

"Be holier than that." Jesus says, "I tell you, do not swear an oath at all... All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." (verses 34a, 37) Say what you mean and mean what you say. If we use our words to hoodwink people, to deceive them, to leave ourselves a loophole that we can exploit so as to not keep our word, we are acting like the devil. He is a liar and the father of lies. When we use our words this way, we are showing an unholy heart and are again in danger of being locked away like the devil in hell.

We live in a society that judges very much based on outward appearance. Most people are concerned with what they see, not the attitude behind it. Jesus calls us to be holier than that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, to have righteousness that surpasses the most devout and pious religious people you know – both in outward actions and internally, in your heart. But the more we look at our hearts, the more we painfully realize that we are not holier than that. I know my anger and my hate for others. I know my mind and my lustful, adulterous thoughts. I know that I sometimes use my words to try to hoodwink and deceive people, leaving loopholes to exploit. Other people may not see these things, but God does. I cannot coast my way to heaven by looking good to others. No, I have to be holier than that. Otherwise, the fires of hell is my destination.

What Jesus wants us to realize but hasn't explicitly said in this section of the sermon on the mount is that there is only one way to be holier than what we are: it is with his holiness.

It is so easy to look at Jesus and take him only as a model of holiness to emulate. But, honestly, with what he said here today to us, we have to be holier than we are capable of by our own efforts. That holiness comes only from the one who actually lived complete holiness. Jesus did not harbor anger in his heart against his fellow believers. Yes, he certainly hated sin – and rightfully so. But he did not think the angry thoughts that led to the angry words of "Raca" and "Fool!" Even better than mediating with an adversary on the way to the judge, Jesus went to the judge and took on himself the sentence of the one who wronged him. He carried our sentence that we deserved for all our angry and hateful thoughts and words on his shoulders. And he gifted to us his perfect life, a life without being angry and insulting people, a new heart devoid of anger. He gifted us his pure heart as he honored God's gift of marriage whenever he looked at a woman and never entertained lustful thoughts. He did this for us because our eyes do wander and our minds do entertain lustful fantasies. He gifted us his always truthful words as he never swore by heaven or by earth or by Jerusalem or by the Great King or even by his own head. He simply spoke the truth every single time, saying what he meant and meaning what he said. His "yes" was yes and his "no" was no. Jesus was holier than that.

God the Holy Spirit gifts this holiness to us. We saw it with our own eyes today with little Matthew's baptism. There with simple water and his Word, God the Holy Spirit washed all of Matthew's sins away – past, present, and future – and then clothed him with every holy act Jesus ever did. Matthew is holier than the holy acts Jesus commanded on the sermon on the mount. Because of your baptism, you too are holier than that because you are clothed with the same holy acts of Jesus. Because of God's gift to us, our righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, of the most pious, religious people in the world.

Since you are holier than that, live that holiness. Take one of the holy acts that Jesus commands us here today in this section of Matthew and apply it to your life. You have Christ's righteousness. You are already holy. So, what will you work on? Will you work on curbing your anger and your tongue, refusing to insult people? Will you make a point of settling matters and differences with people quickly? Will you train your eyes to look away and keep your mind from lustful, adulterous fantasies whether it be a person on the street or images on a computer screen? Will you work on your marriage relationship, honor your spouse, be faithful to them? Will you work on always saying what you mean and meaning what you say, letting your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no?

Since God has made you holier than that with Jesus' holiness, you can do these things. That's why the elders and I will be sending out a challenge to all our communicant members at Light of the Valley called "The Great Multitude Challenge." It's a challenge for all of us to live the holy life God has called us to live by making it a priority to have as many people worshiping God together here in this place as possible. We are making this challenge for us all to be continually renewed in Jesus' holiness gifted to us and to rejoice that because of that gift we are bound for heaven to join the great multitude of believers from every nation, tribe, language, and people!

God said, "Be holier than that." Because of Jesus, you are. It wasn't by your efforts, but by God's. So, live it. Live Christ's holiness in your life with your actions, with your words, with your attitudes, with your very thoughts. You are holier than that. Amen.