

Sunday – July 17, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walter W. Westbrook
Sermon – **Sermon on the Mount III**
Anger, Adultery, Divorce

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Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37

At this point in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus presents us with what scholars call The Six Antitheses. These are the teachings that begin with, “You have heard that it was said...” That is the thesis. Then Jesus says, “But, I say to you...” This is the antithesis.

In other words, Jesus is referring back to the Law, the Torah, and then offering an improvement. Jesus is not abolishing the Law. He is radicalizing it. He is not just another rabbi or commentator or interpreter of the Law. None of them would ever have done what Jesus is doing here.

Jesus is offering something new. And, he is relocating the authority from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, to himself. He is claiming his authority as God the Son to deepen the meaning of the Law that God the Father had given the Hebrew people over the centuries.

All six of the Antitheses deal with the relationships between human beings. Nothing is said of religious rituals which express the human relationship with God. They are all about loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Anger - When Jesus is talking about anger, he is not making a distinction as to whether the anger is justified or not. He is making it clear that anger leads to judgment. Anger leads to murder, not every time, but murder is always committed in anger.

Jesus also refuses to draw distinctions between 1) anger that leads one to court, 2) using an insulting term, and 3) calling someone a fool. No matter what kind of anger we’re talking about, it leads us to hell.

Please notice that Jesus thinks anger is so important that he says we shouldn’t be in worship if we are angry with someone. How empty would churches be if we all took that seriously? I’m not sure Jesus is being literal here. Sometimes he exaggerates to make his point (plank in the eye). But, he is calling our attention to our own hearts. What fills our hearts? Is there any

anger? Is there a lot of anger? Jesus says we need to get over it. Period. Stop nursing it. Stop holding onto it. Stop acting like you're better than the person who made you angry. Go and reconcile with that person. That is much more important than worshiping. That is what God wants you to do. That is God's will.

Adultery - If anger is murder, lust is adultery. Again, Jesus has radicalized the Law, another one of the Ten Commandments, no less.

In Jesus' day in Palestine, an adulterous relationship would have to include a married woman. The man could be married or not. So, lusting after a married woman would be adultery.

This passage gives us another example of Jesus exaggerating to make his point. Do you really think he wants us to yank out an eyeball or chop off a hand? He is just expressing how important it is to avoid the temptation to sin, even in our hearts. Sin always starts in the heart. We really can't blame the eye or the hand. We are tempted in our deepest place, then act on it. Or not.

Divorce - So, lust is adultery, and divorce results in adultery. At that time, the man had the sole prerogative. Only the man could attain a divorce in the Jewish culture of the time. And, he didn't even have to take the wife to court. He simply had to announce that they were divorced in the presence of certified witnesses. According to the Law, Deuteronomy 24:1, the cause of divorce had to be "something objectionable." This could range from burning dinner to sexual infidelity. In other words, it was *very easy* for a man to get a divorce, and *impossible* for a woman to get a divorce, regardless of her husband's behavior in or out of the house. Jesus wants the men to take marriage more seriously. Wives are not like tissues, to be used then tossed away. A woman at that time had no identity aside from a man - either her husband or her father or her son.

So, Jesus puts the blame on the man, saying he turns his wife into an adulteress if he throws her out. And if she finds a man to marry, he will also be committing adultery if he marries her. The bottom line is, if a man divorces his wife for a frivolous reason, he is cutting her loose with no means to support herself, which is bad enough. But, if she marries, the original husband has created two adulterers. How sinful does that sound?

The question for us is, How does this apply to us today? Clearly, Jesus hated divorce. But, is he exaggerating again? Not to mention how the rules of divorce have changed dramatically over the last 2,000 years.

Are we not to take this literally, as our more conservative brothers and sisters in the faith often do? Of all the Antitheses, this one is most often interpreted literally. Even fundamentalists do not demand the removal of body parts when considering punishment for sins (at least not outside the Middle East, and those are somebody else's fundamentalists). They do not think that people go to hell for being angry or calling someone a fool. Yet, they hold onto this one, demanding that divorced people be condemned or even thrown out of the church.

This is the very popular method of Bible reading called Cherry Picking, and fundamentalists do not have a corner on that market. Demand that one verse be taken literally, then "interpret" another, less convenient verse. "Love your neighbor as yourself" and "Do not judge" are often interpreted away or simply ignored by the same people who say every word in the Bible is absolutely true, and comes directly from God. Don't argue with a cherry picker. You can't win.

Finally, we come to **oaths**. This antithesis expresses Jesus' horror at the willful misuse of language: lying or misleading or confusing the listener. An oath promises that we are telling the whole truth, and God is our witness, our guarantor. So, we had better be telling the truth.

The main reason we should not swear to be telling the truth is because we should *always* be telling the truth. Taking an oath says, "Okay, I'm telling the truth *right now*. Otherwise, mind your own business."

But, Jesus would demand that everything we say be truthful, wouldn't he? Unless, somehow that violated the Great Commandment. And, of course, that would be a case by case sort of thing.

So, there we have it. Anger is murder. Lust is adultery. Divorce leads to multiple adulteries. Oaths should be unnecessary, because Christians should be impeccably honest all the time. Jesus takes the OT laws and simply makes them harder to weasel our way out of. Jesus makes them something we must obey inside, not just outside.

Jesus knows that what we do comes from who we are and how we think and feel. Our insides determine our outsides, even if we are deliberately trying to appear to be something we really aren't. Jesus doesn't look down on us with a telescope. He is looking within us with a light only he has. We're not fooling him, even if we're fooling ourselves. All I can say is that it's a good thing he loves us. And nothing we can do will ever change that.