

Sept 23rd 2012: Sermon on Mount #5 "The Heart Behind The Law":
Matt 5:21-48

As we turn once again to the sermon on the mount this morning I want us all to stop and think about God's heart for the believer. To ask ourselves what it is that God's heart wants for me as I live for Him on this earth?

Of course we recognize that He wants us to be happy, contented and effective in our ministries for Him. We are told that in His Word. But what is it that He craves for you more than anything else?

The answer to such a question, I believe, is found in what Jesus said in His sermon on the mount in Matthew 5:48

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The future tense is used here, with Jesus suggesting that we are to work at becoming perfect, and I believe that He wants us to see this as the major thing our heavenly Father truly wants for us. And what He presents in the sermon on the mount is the opportunity that we have right now as His followers, to work towards this perfection by the power of God's Spirit.

You see the Greek word perfect allows for movement from a lesser to a greater level of being perfect. We won't fully attain that greater level until we stand in glory, but we can make baby steps towards this perfection right now by how we act daily in our relationship with other people.

By saying that God craves that we should be perfect as He is perfect is not to suggest that He doesn't love us as we are now in our fallen state. God could never love us more than He does right at this minute. Indeed Paul says in Romans 5:8(CEV)

⁸ But God showed how much he loved us by having Christ die for us, even though we were sinful.

Yet God in His wisdom knows that the more we can overcome the sin that so easily trips us up; the more we can live according to the law He has given; the closer we can move towards perfection in our relationship with other human beings, then the happier and more content we will be and the closer to Him we will feel.

God wants for you and me, a guilt free, happy, peaceful and truly fulfilling life, that is full of goodness. That's one of the reasons He gave His people the ten commandments in the first place. Sometimes I think we get the

wrong idea about the ten commandments and see them as restrictions that God put upon mankind to prevent them being too happy. God gave them as the way by which they could have the best life possible and really prosper, and after He had given them God said to Moses in Deuteronomy 5:29

Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!

The problem that had developed by the time of Jesus, however, was that the ten commandments had been so over interpreted by the Pharisees, that they had become just a set of closely defined rules with the emphasis on the penalty for breaking them, rather than the prosperity gained in keeping them.

These religious leaders had also so narrowed the focus of each law, that a person could easily keep the letter of the law and yet break the spirit of the law.

So Jesus talks about 5 specific areas of the law where they were actually doing this, beginning each one with the formula, "You have heard that it was said", and then presenting the real heart of God behind that commandment by the words, "But I tell you".

The first such instance is found in v21-22

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

The commandment is, You shall not murder, and the heart of God here is that we should value our fellow human beings and should not seek to destroy their lives or who they are. To demean a person by the way we treat them is to treat harshly one made in God's image.

The Jews believed that as long as they did not murder someone they were keeping this commandment but Jesus declared as God, that God's heart wanted much more than that from us.

His heart desire is that we value others in the way we think about them as well as the way we act towards them, and if we find that we have treated them in a way that has devalued them, then we need to clear that up before we worship the God who created them.

Now it is not my intention this morning to go deeply into all these verses but to simply draw out the integral desire of God behind each section. And in this first section God's desire is that we should value the life of another human to such a degree, that it not only affects any action we might take against them but even the way we think about them.

The ramifications of such are far reaching. Consider for instance the hungry, the oppressed, the enslaved people in our world. We do not want them dead neither do we think bad thoughts about them, but if we hardly consider them at all, and do not do the small things we can do to help ease their plight, then are they a little like the brother in v23 who has something against us? Are we growing towards perfection in the way we value the lives of all human beings?

The second area relates to the value that God puts on the relationship of marriage. Once again it begins with the phrase, "You have heard" in v27

"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

This section begins with the subject of adultery and then continues to talk about divorce, but once again I want to simply point out today what I see as God's underlying concern here.

Way back in Genesis the first thing that God did after creating man and woman in His own image was to bless them as a unit. And then in Genesis chapter 2 where we are given the details of how God created them, we also discover God instituting the union of marriage between the male and the female. There is no doubt that from the very beginning this special relationship which becomes the foundation for a family, was God's heart desire for us.

Consequently adultery and even thoughts of adultery; lusting after others, pornography and all other sexual sin, attacks the sanctity of marriage. And preserving the sanctity of marriage is God's concern here.

It is as though Jesus is warning us here about devaluing an institution that God has made holy and that the aim of the commandments was not only to preserve the sanctity of marriage, but to show us how important it is to God. That we should work at making our marriages if we have been so blessed, a spiritual as well as a physical union, for that is God's desire for us.

God has set down the pattern. He allows forgiveness and a new beginning when sin destroys a marriage but He doesn't allow us to treat marriage, whether it be ours or another's, lightly or with disdain. That's sinful before God. Neither does God allow us to change that pattern of marriage which is for a male to be united with a female.

So:-Are we growing towards perfection in the way we sanctify marriage in our hearts.

The third section begins at v33 and is about truth.

"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. But I tell you, Do not swear at all:

The issue here was a separation that the Pharisees made concerning promises made using an oath, and especially an oath that mentioned the Lord, and other promises or statements a person made. If it were an oath then before God they had to stay true to it, but if it wasn't made with an oath then remaining true to their word was not so vital.

By such a ruling they were suggesting that sometimes it didn't matter if you broke your word. Sometimes being truthful in all your conversation wasn't absolutely necessary. Jesus' response was for us to honour truth in all our conversations. That doesn't give us a license to say the most horrible things about or to people on the basis that we are only speaking the truth. Love and truth must exist side by side. But we need to understand that the heart of God is that we seek after truthfulness in all we say and promise. I found it interesting to note how v37, where Jesus says:-

Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

is paraphrased by Pettersen in the Message:-

Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

So are we growing towards Perfection in the way we aim to be true in all we say and promise.

The fourth section is about the way we deal with those who hurt us. v38

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

This commandment was originally given as a guideline for communities to follow in matters of justice, but it had become acceptable as a general rule for retaliation when someone hurt you. In many cases people used it to validate their decision to do wrong in return rather than seek to forgive and reconcile.

We can see from the character of God that His desire is to favour mercy above revenge. Renewal of a relationship rather than punitive action. It's that same character that God desires to see in those who wish to be like Him. The willingness to turn the other cheek is in reality our willingness to be there again for the one who has hurt us and yet needs our love. Trampled upon us but needs our friendship.

Are we growing towards perfection in the way we act towards those who have hurt us?

The final section gets to the very heart of God for it is about loving one's enemies. -v43-45

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

The Jews were very good and separating friends from enemies. God's desire is that we make friends out of our enemies, if at all possible, by the way we love them. That's what God has done for us.

If that is truly God's desire for us then it is an area where we all need to grow for it relates to the way we think of others as much as the way we treat them. The way we pray for others and reach out towards them.

During the recent riots led by Muslim extremists in Australia I was intrigued by this cartoon that appeared in the West Australian. The Australian Solution...that would be nice. The Christian ideal....that is what I think Jesus would say.

Growing towards perfection is all these things:-

Valuing the lives of other human beings

Preserving the sanctity of marriage.

Aiming for truth in our words and promises

Acting with love, forgiveness and kindness towards those who hurt us

Loving and praying for our enemies

And it is such things, says Jesus, that set you my followers, apart from others, and well on the way to becoming perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.