

“Buts’ About It”

Deut. 30:15-19a; Matt. 5:21-22a, 27-28, 31-37

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As you listened to the reading of the challenging, perhaps **disturbing** words of Jesus Christ in today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel, when we got to our familiar response at the end of that reading... *“This is the Word of the Lord. THANKS BE TO GOD”*... did you maybe find it a bit hard to say ‘thanks, God?’ For Jesus deals with some topics that might just make us a little ‘uncomfortable’: Murder. Anger. Lust. Adultery. Divorce. I’ve got to admit, I myself struggled with whether or not to select this particular passage from Matthew. Unfortunately, I think it is human nature for us to avoid talking about subjects that drag us out of our ‘comfort zone.’

And yet, isn’t it these very topics that are, unfortunately, a very real part of the ‘fabric’ of our everyday lives? Anger. Lust. Infidelity. Divorce. All of these are far too great a part of our daily journey of life. Pick up the front page of the newspaper and I guarantee that many of the articles will involve at least one of these. ‘BUT’ it would be much easier to ignore these factors and just keep on turning to the sports pages or the comics...

‘BUT’ therein lies part of the problem. It IS far too easy for us to bury our heads in the sand when it comes to these fundamental symptoms of our fallen human natures. For these are problems that have plagued mankind since the dawn of creation. And if WE, as the church of Jesus Christ, do not address these issues that threaten our society to its very CORE, then who WILL?

The fact-of-the-matter is we can come up with any number of reasons to justify our actions... or, IN-actions. ‘BUT’ the truth is that if we are to be the ‘salt of the earth’ that Jesus has claimed us to be, we must ‘inject’ ourselves into the ‘meat’ of the issues that face our everyday lives. We must bring the true ‘light of the world’ Jesus into the darkness of the sin and brokenness that is before our very eyes. We must embrace the truth of that saying *believed* to have been penned by 18th C. Irish statesman Edmund Burke... that *“The only way for evil to triumph is for good men (and women) to do nothing.”* Instead of ‘doing nothing,’ let us live by words *known* to be Paul’s: **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** (*Romans 12:21*) No excuses. No loopholes in the law for us to sneak through; no ‘50 shades of gray’ area for us to minimize the wrongs that we SEE or DO. No ‘buts about it.’

Jesus was speaking to a people whose very religious leadership was seeking to 'make a way in the Law' to wiggle through. Interpreting God's commandments in order to justify their sometimes questionable behavior. Cannot we too twist the Scriptures to suit our own needs? Pick just the right verse or translation to validate our position? And so, for the next few minutes let us consider how Jesus would take on those who dwelt on the 'letter of the law'... to the detriment of the 'spirit of the Law.' For those who would argue that they were NOT breaking God's particular commands, living a life faithful to the Scriptures, Jesus would respond that there were, in truth, some **"'Buts' about it."**

Our Lord begins by saying, ***"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'*** ²² ***BUT I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..."*** (Matthew 5:21)

Here Jesus is addressing those who might give themselves a passing grade on their treatment of others as long as they didn't physically hurt them. Along the lines of that old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." You know, that *lie from the pit of hell*. I think we ALL would admit just how deeply our words can injure another. To borrow from a hit song in the 70's by Roberta Flack, what is said to us can sometimes be 'killing me softly'... or, NOT so softly...

But what is more 'remarkable' about Jesus' 're-buttal' of how injurious words can be is what follows: ***"when you are offering your gift at the altar... FIRST be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."*** (Matthew 5:23-24) At that most holy time of offering, when a faithful believer is approaching the very presence of God to make an offering of him/herself, FIRST that giver must go and make amends with one whom he/she has injured. This would be closely related to a verse in the next chapter, where Jesus warns of how if we don't forgive others, our Heavenly Father cannot forgive us. "Forgiveness" is at the very CORE of the Christian Gospel. Which goes hand-in-hand with "repentance." For how can we be forgiven unless we first repent? Repent to God, and to one another. In Jesus' command, how can we offer ourselves as a fitting sacrifice before God if we are tainted by broken, painful relationships? I would challenge you to think about with whom YOU need to be reconciled. A relationship that needs the healing balm of repentance for hurts inflicted. As we humble

ourselves before the God, and the people, whom we have hurt, we work toward that plea of David, ***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”*** (Psalm 51:10)

Jesus then goes on to quote the 7th Commandment: ***“You shall not commit adultery; BUT I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart.”*** (Matthew 5:27-28) We must admit to the great danger of looking at another with ‘lust in one’s heart.’ Remember the great stir that President Jimmy Carter caused when he dared to say in an interview with Playboy magazine in 1979, *“I’ve looked on a lot of women with lust. I’ve committed adultery in my heart many times.”* (It ranked as one of Time Magazine’s all-time top 10 unfortunate political one-liners (behind Nixon’s “I am not a crook”).

And yet this SS teacher from Plains GA was merely recognizing what most all men (and women) should and must admit: that our eyes are the primary portal through which sin and temptation enter our lives. In the words of James the Apostle, ***“Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”*** (James 1:14-15)

It is those eyes that used to be drawn to magazines and movies that now access countless temptations on much smaller screens... with much greater consequences. But whether those images are living, breathing ones, or ones on electronic screens, we must always be on our guard not to be dragged away by desires that lead us to sin. (And putting it in an even larger context, how many times do we ‘lust’ after that which causes us to be unfaithful to the relationship that matters the most... with our LORD!)

The next one, which can be clearly related to lust and adultery, might also be the one that could cause us the most conflict in living as Jesus wishes us to: ***“You have heard it said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ BUT, I say to you, anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*** (Matthew 5:32)

So is Jesus saying that the ONLY reason that a husband and wife should be divorced is for marital unfaithfulness? It would sure look that way, since he basically repeats this same statement much later in Chapter 19. Is He basically telling us that it doesn’t matter WHAT a man (or woman, for that matter) does to their spouse, as long as they don’t ‘step out’ on their

relationship, it's OK?! Well, in that same Ch. 19, when questioned as to why Moses allowed for 'certificates of divorce,' Jesus would say that divorce was permissible **"because your hearts were hardened."** (Matthew 19:8)

The other primary reference to the issue of divorce was in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Now, with regards to the institution of marriage, Paul was clearly 'NOT a fan.' He says pretty bluntly, **"It is good for them (singles) to stay unmarried, as I am."** (BUT) **"if they cannot control themselves, it is better to marry."** (1 Corinthians 7:8-9) And if they are married, **"A wife must not separate from her husband... and a husband must not divorce his wife."** (1 Cor. 7:10-11) BUT, He goes on to say, **"if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances."** (1 Cor. 7:15) Which is pretty compatible with Paul's words in his follow up letter to the church in Corinth: **"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."** (2 Cor. 6:14)

So, what's the takeaway from all this? Well, first and foremost, the truth of another verse, Malachi 2:16a: **"I hate divorce," says the Lord God.**" God created man and woman to become **"one flesh"** as husband and wife. That, even though the line from the movie *"Jerry MacGuire"* is considered one of the corniest of all time, God really did intend for husband and wife to 'complete' one another. **"Bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh,"** in the words of Genesis. 'Til death do us part.'

That being said, I do NOT believe that God intends for a woman (or man) to remain in an abusive relationship. Our bodies are a temple of God, and they are not to be 'desecrated'... by us, or anyone else. In fact, right after God said how He hated divorce, God also said **"...and I hate a man covering himself with violence like a garment."** (Malachi 2:16b) Violent behavior has no place in a marriage. One might argue that to abuse a spouse... be it physical, verbal, emotional... is, in effect, being 'unfaithful' to the marriage.

But it is also true that not everyone takes that marriage responsibility seriously. Too many get married for the wrong reasons, without appreciating the commitment that they are making. We have far too many marriages that break up because of being 'unequally yoked.' Not only in their faith, but in their understanding of the time and effort required to make a relationship... ANY relationship... work. Be that relationship one between husband and wife,

parent and child, mankind and God. I read a quote in a commentary on Jesus' words in Matthew that really jumped out at me: **Deepest intimacy is impossible when the partners are not united in faith.** Without faith in God... without faith in each other... our relationships can never reach their deepest intimacy... their fullest potential.

Whether it's unresolved conflict and anger... unrepentant lust and desire... or unhealthy relationships in marriage... it all comes back to the way we violate the most important relationship we have: with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. That every day we are given choices that affects our relationships, both human and Divine. That if, in the words of Scripture, we 'love the Lord our God, walk in his ways and observe his commandments, we shall live, and the Lord will bless us.' But if 'our hearts turn away, we do not hear, and are led astray, we will perish.' God is saying to us, in Moses' words, ***"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life..."*** (Deuteronomy 30:19a) May we in word and deed make choices that lead to LIFE...a life faithful and true to one another and to God... **No 'buts' about it... .**