

“But I Say”

February 12, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37

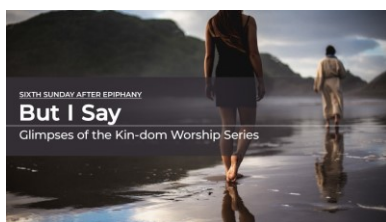
²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never 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 say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members 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 of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 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 one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

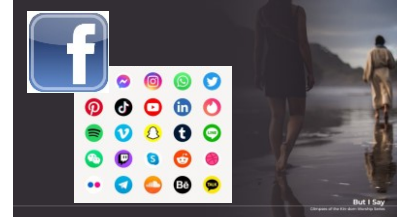


Today we conclude our three-week study of the Sermon on the Mount. We began with the Beatitudes, where Jesus set before us his vision for living as a part of the kingdom of

God. Last week we looked at the call to be salt and light for the world. This week we turn to verses 21-37, where we find Jesus saying again and again, “*But I say...*” In the text this week, Jesus is raising the standard of behavior; he is elevating expectations. In a way, Jesus is making it “harder” to be a follower of Christ, to be a Christian.

In these words, Jesus is really asking us to not just follow the rules, but to consider how our choices and our behaviors impact not only the community of faith but also how we impact the wider community around us. Here, in this text, Jesus is inviting us to consider how we influence the world around us. In a way, therefore, this is a continuation of the idea of being salt and light. And connecting back to two weeks ago, this is, of course, an extension of the message of the Beatitudes as well. As we prepare to delve into these challenging and difficult “*But I say...*” statements, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Let us begin with a simple question. Where do many people go for community today? For many the answer would be Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat. I'm a bit old so my answer would be Facebook. Each of these platforms connect us to one another. For me, and maybe for you, the day I feel most connected is my birthday. Ding, ding, ding... goes my phone. I think this has become the method for acknowledging birthdays in the 21st century. The challenge of Facebook on our birthday is quite simple: do you respond to everyone's post, or do you just throw out a general "thank you" the next day? This of course draws out the latecomers. And what do you do with those? Group or individual? Or do you fall someplace in between – just "liking" each happy birthday post? There is no absolute correct answer.



At this point maybe I should tell the members of SPR that they all left their lights on in the cars. I like to respond to each little post. Some are just a "thank you" and others are a bit more. I tend to respond in kind. A "Happy birthday!" usually gets a "Thx!" and a more personalized birthday wish gets a more personalized response. Truth be told, I do enjoy responding. There are a couple hundred to respond to on the 12th. And if I'm really being honest, though, I get to a point where it is not so fun. The dozen or so on the 13th begin to test me. The handful the 14th are where I can start to really struggle.

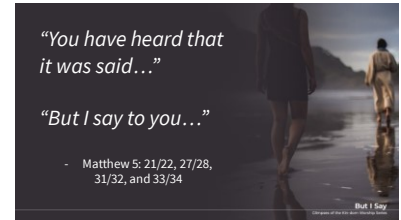
Now, I'm not the greatest Facebook person around. It has been great to reconnect and sort of keep up with old friends from high school and college. But some folks, some of you here today, are excellent at keeping up on Facebook. Those who are great with Facebook post a lot, and they comment on lots and lots of other people's posts. These folks are great sources of information too.

Time and time again I hear news from folks at church and ask, “How did you find that out?” The normal response: “I saw it on Facebook.” In many ways, Facebook is a pretty amazing tool.

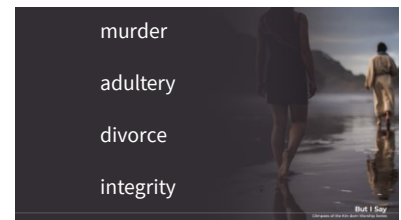
Yes, I post my blog each day to Facebook, and I wish happy birthday to those who pop up via a reminder email that I get. I use our church Facebook pages and we use our PVCC page to keep people informed and to connect. And I scroll a little bit most days – usually at night when I am winding down. I might spend an hour on a “good” day. Most days it is maybe 15 or 30 minutes. I miss way more than I see. You see quite the range on Facebook – from the “what I had for breakfast” posts to the “join the revolution” posts. I don’t know all the rules either, but I do know that you can get in trouble on Facebook. The same tool can build up and it can tear down. It can be used to create community and it can be used to create division. Because of this, social media has greatly impacted our society. Are these platforms more of a positive or more of a negative? To me, it really depends on the day and the posts, snaps, and chats that I read.

To engage in any type of social media, it is important to know the rules. In fact, in life in general, it is important to know the rules. In many settings and in most new situations we first take time to figure out what the rules are – whether on the playground, in the classroom, at the office, on the playing field, or at church. This was very true in Jesus’ day too. I think this is why Jesus took the time in the Sermon on the Mount to unpack some of the rules that the Jews were striving to live by. Jesus knew that he was living in a rules-based society. We continue to live this way today.

Turn with me to Matthew 5, beginning in verse 21, as we work through these rules that Jesus addresses. Again and again, we read, *“You have heard that it was said...”* followed closely by, *“But I say to you...”* Jesus makes this statement four times in today’s passage, each time addressing a different “rule” or “law” as the Jews would say.



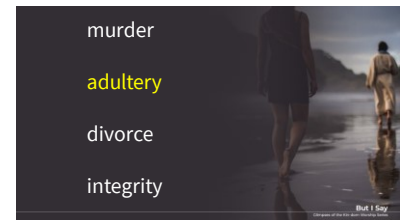
In the 17 verses that we have before us today, Jesus addresses murder, adultery, divorce, and integrity. This is a pretty heavy list. Jesus is swinging for the fences. He did not take it easy with the examples he chose as he sought to call his followers and the religious leaders in attendance on the hillside to a higher standard of living concerning their faith. There is an intensity to Jesus in these verses. Its almost as if he were speaking to those folks in the crowd who really, really are into rules. Maybe for some in the crowd that day, maybe for some of us here today, the inclination is to think that we should let some of this slide, that we should live and let live. But that is the way of the world, isn't it? Jesus does not call us to be like the world. He calls us to be in the world, yes, but to be salt and light for the world.



These words of Jesus certainly hit nerves that day when he spoke them from the hillside. Some of these words probably strike some nerves here today. That's OK. I believe that at times Jesus should challenge us. At times our faith journey should be a bit uphill. At times our faith should require some hard work, some introspection and reflection.

In these words from Jesus we hear a call to a high standard. Jesus is not just adding to the existing rules. I believe that Jesus is trying to get us to realize something about ourselves and our relationships. He is asking us to look someplace within that is a little uncomfortable. On the surface level, Jesus is asking us to pay better attention, to treat our relationships with care because they are precious, and to see community as a gift from God. As is so often true about what Jesus said and did, these words today speak to community and to relationship. In that light, Jesus is saying not to take anyone for granted, not to run the risk of hurting someone, not to treat anyone as less than a child of God. Like the Beatitudes, these are not rules to Jesus so much as they are ways to create a community that resembles and reflects his vision for the kingdom of God.

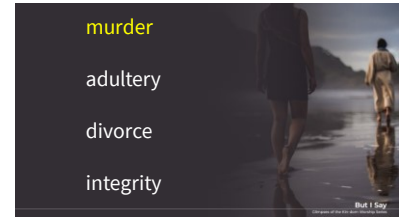
To illustrate, let us turn our attention to verse 27, where Jesus says, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’”* I begin here because this one is personal.



This is a time of vulnerability. I share this with the hope that we can see deeper into the heart of what Jesus is talking about in these verses. Many years ago, at a men’s retreat I learned about something called “the second glance.” It is that second look at a woman. It is sexual in nature. At that retreat a sin in my life was exposed. I heard and felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit. These words of Jesus rang in my ears: *“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”* What Jesus meant here in verse 28 came crashing down upon me. The second glance affected my heart. It would hurt the woman’s heart if she could hear my thoughts. It would hurt Kristin if she heard those thoughts.

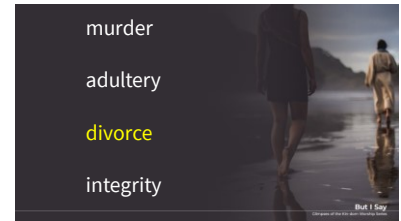
In that moment, I knew that for me to live as a follower of Jesus Christ, I needed to control my thoughts, my lust, my heart.

The same is true for these other rules. In verse 21 we read, *“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’”* At first, we think, ‘Well, I’ll never murder anyone.’ Next! Until we get to the *“But I say to you...”* part. Jesus tells us that if we get angry with or insult a brother or sister, if we have a dispute with another person, and just let it slide, then we are just as guilty as if we murdered them. To Jesus, anger or an unkind word or an unsettled dispute was a first step towards the bigger sin of murder.

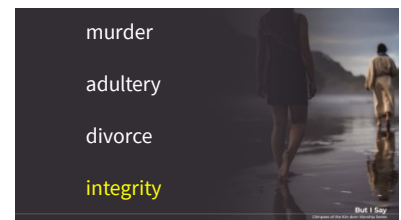


Just like that second glance that I used to take, the words we speak and the things we do or the things we left undone – they matter, they impact our relationships, they affect our community, they affect our heart and our faith. To emphasize how important these *“But I say...”* statements were to Jesus, let’s pause to look at the words he used to tell us how much our words and actions and thoughts matter. If our eye causes us to wander into lustful thoughts, Jesus says, *“tear it out and throw it away.”* If it is our hand that causes us to sin, Jesus says, *“Cut it off and throw it away,”* in both cases stating that it is better to *“to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.”* In verses 23-26, Jesus gives the same preventative-type advice. Before we go to God or the judge, right all wrongs in our relationships. Seek to mend fences and to right wrongs on our own – that is better for our relationships. When we are forced to do the right thing, it doesn’t seem to hold the same weight.

In verse 31 Jesus addresses the topic of divorce. Here he is tackling the religious community's recent tendency to expand Moses' teachings on divorce. At this time, depending on the rabbi one chose to follow, burning dinner was acceptable grounds for divorce. This example would be one of many misapplications of Mosaic law that were present in Jesus' time. It must be noted that Jesus was also addressing the gender imbalance. Ever and always, Jesus was a champion of the oppressed and marginalized. In Jewish culture, women were second class when compared to men. Women had very few rights. To be cut loose, to suddenly be unmarriageable, to be condemned to a life of poverty, for burning supper – no, Jesus says. Yes, there are grounds for divorce. Adultery can take many forms. His admonition to tear out an eye if it causes one to sin is ample evidence that Jesus sees adultery as much more than sex outside of marriage. While elevating the place of women, Jesus is also calling the people of God back towards the more traditional understanding of divorce as found in Mosaic law.



Lastly Jesus addresses our integrity. After the familiar "*You have heard it said*" statement, Jesus says, "*You shall not swear falsely.*" In this section, Jesus is summarizing at least six separate Old Testament teachings on using oaths. Again he is also addressing how the religious leaders of his day have applied their own spin to these laws. The ruling group, the Pharisees, had come up with degrees of commitment for oaths. Oaths that mentioned God were more binding than oaths that did not invoke God's name. These recent teachings are what Jesus addresses when he reminds them that God is in heaven, throughout the earth, and in Jerusalem.



Wrapping it all up and boiling it down Jesus says in verse 37, “*Let your word ‘Yes be Yes’ or your ‘No, No.’*” In plain language, practice integrity in all that you say. Swearing by this or that, by God or by anything else, diminishes our commitments to community and to one another.



Our connections, and therefore our words and our actions, they matter. Everything that we say and do and think affects our relationships. And relationships are at the core of

community. Like Facebook, the community of faith is about the little details of daily living, and it is about big things like transformation and redemption and restoration. It is here that we find connection.

We are woven together as the body of Christ. Here we are a community of respect and of joy. Here we are a community of hope and affirmation. We are a Spirit-filled, Christ-breathed, God-loved community of faith. Thanks be to God for this community, for each other, together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Where is Jesus most challenging you today? Is it around his teaching on murder, adultery, divorce, or integrity? What is the Spirit telling you?
- 2) *Pray*. Social media can be a great temptation that can lessen our witness to the world. Is this a struggle for you? If so, pray for some holy guidance.
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 6:27-36. What does this passage add to Jesus’ call to live in and to honor the blessed community? Who does he want us to include?