**True Righteousness Inside and Out**

Based on [Matthew 5:21-37](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt5.21-37)

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Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Jesus instructs his disciples in a very practical way in the Sermon on the Mount. In today’s excerpt, he interprets the law of God for his disciples, in particular the fifth, sixth, and second commandments. Jesus teaches the distinction between external righteousness and true righteousness from the heart. He also teaches that the failure to pursue true righteousness has eternal consequences. Jesus says, “**Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and Sadducees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**.”

Before we consider true righteousness, it is important to remember how we enter the kingdom of heaven. It is not our pursuit of righteousness that gets us in God’s grace. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. **And through baptism and faith, we enter the kingdom of God. This is God’s work, not ours.** By nature we are spiritually blind, spiritually dead, and spiritual enemies of God. “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy” (Titus 3:4-7).

We are Justified by God’s grace through faith. And in his sermon on the mount, Jesus is teaching those who are justified by grace through faith. He is not talking to unbelievers. He is not talking to Muslims or Pharisees, or to Pagans. He is talking to you. Because only those who believe that they are sinners deserving of death apart from God’s grace, can actually do works of true righteousness, because they belong to Christ, and have been given His Spirit.

Jesus teaches his disciples, his church, the difference between civil/merely external righteousness and true righteousness. Regarding the fifth commandment: “You have heard that it was said of old, “**You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment…”** Simply put: sinful anger against your brother is as damnable a sin as murdering him. It’s not as consequential in this life. Actually taking another’s life affects many more lives and people and damages society and relationships much more than smoldering anger in ones heart. Nevertheless, before God our Father in heaven, the spring is poisoned at its source. The real problem is not the action of murder, it is the hatred of one’s brother and one’s enemy that finds its ultimate expression in murder.

All human beings have a will, and some degree of willpower to restrain themselves from the full expression of their sin—even without the help of the Holy Spirit. I will presume to say that all people have, countless times, murdered others in their hearts through anger. Yet, very rarely does this culminate in actual murder. For the Christian, there is repentance and forgiveness in Christ, through which the Holy Spirit curbs our sin and directs us to do better. But even unbelievers have some degree of willpower-of self-restraint-to stop outward sin, and maintain external righteousness. Were this not the case, everyone would be in prison for murder or mankind would have destroyed itself long ago.

All grown men have the ability to restrain their actions, and some can do so almost perfectly. But that is only an outward righteousness, civil righteousness, the righteousness of the Pharisees. It is not true righteousness, and it is worthless before God. True righteousness comes from the heart. So the true interpretation of the Fifth Commandment is more than just refraining from murdering your brother. Jesus goes on to say that remaining angry with your brother and refusing to reconcile, is equal to murder and a damnable sin. That leads us to another aspect of this teaching. Just what is internal righteousness.

Someone might say, “*I’m not like the Pharisees, I have internal righteousness, from the heart*.” Someone might say, *Yes, I have cheated on my spouse. Yes I broke my vow and left him or her to pursue happiness with another. Yes I have murdered or physically assaulted my neighbor, but hey, I have true righteousness because I know I’m a good person on the inside. I know my heart is in the right place. Sure I’m not perfect, but who are you to judge my heart. You don’t know how loving, and caring of a person I am on the inside. If you judge me based on external righteousness, you’re just like the Pharisees*.”

But Jesus doesn’t say to his disciples that their righteousness must be the opposite of the Pharisees—internal only. He says it must *exceed* theirs. That means that true righteousness and external righteousness are not opposite. True righteousness begins in the heart, but it doesn’t stay there. Just as a good tree will produce good fruit, so too faith in the heart will produce faithful works, that can be seen, recognized and judged.

The example Jesus gives here is reconciliation…an inward thing of the heart? Yes, but not only. He gives his disciples outward instructions about how to go about it. Anger is the product of sin, and that includes being sinned against. Victims of rape, or abuse, or slander, or theft, they can be angry, and understandably so. Or even less obvious sins and offenses can create barriers between people that never just go away. This is why Jesus elsewhere, in Matthew chapter 18 says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens, you have gained your brother.”

Some nurture their hatred of their offenders; indulge themselves in their victimhood, but true followers of Jesus Christ want, above all, to be reconciled to their brother. So Jesus says, if someone sins against you, don’t sit on it. Your anger will grow, and it will fester until you hate them so much, you will curse them and call God’s wrath upon them. And this is among the greatest of sins; to desire that another human being--whom Christ shed his blood and died for—to die in their sins and deny the grace of God. This is the ultimate murder. So Jesus says, if your brother sins, go tell him. If he is truly my disciple he will acknowledge it and repent, you will be reconciled and both of you will have peace.

But if you don’t seek reconciliation, even if you were not the offender, but the victim, it could lead you down the path of damnation, because in neglecting your brother’s sin you murder him. God speaks a sobering reality in Ezekiel 3:18: **“If I say to the wicked, ‘You shall surely die,’ and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.”** The ball is thus in their court. You can’t make them repent, but you can and should warn them, and if they repent forgive them readily and freely. If not, at least you have not murdered them in your heart. You have warned them, sought their reconciliation and delivered your soul.

Jesus also says today, that if someone has something against you—if the ball is in your court, as it were—don’t sit on your laurels and hope they’ll get over it. Don’t say as some do: “**We’re all sinners and there’s fault everywhere, so let’s agree to just forget about our differences**.” “Let’s just agree we’re all sinners who have sinned and move on.” That is not reconciliation, it is abandonment and murder. It is allowing anger to fester and grow, it is allowing sin to be ignored rather than forgiven.

Jesus says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away, it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” But your eyes don’t cause you to sin, your arms or legs don’t cause you to sin. By nature, God had made you in his image and you can choose where to turn your eyes and where to move your limbs. But changing the direction or your eyes or your arms does not make you righteous without a change in the direction of your heart and your mind. Changing your external actions is worth nothing to God without true repentance.

What causes you to sin is your sinful nature, the old Adam, the fleshly desires of your heart that you were born with..cut them off. Jesus took all sins to the cross, cut them off threw them away. And in your baptism he applied the very same to you. He cut off your sin and threw it away. It’s still there lingering, but it has no claim over you unless you let it. **Cut off from sin you were united with him in a death like his, and you will be united with him in a resurrection like his.** And until that day, you are called to walk in the newness of life, not in anger, bitterness, or resentment, but in a clean conscience before God and men. This begins in the heart but it doesn’t stop there, it shows up in your life. This begins in your reconciliation with God; and is carried out daily in reconciliation with your brother.

Now there is a very serious concern that you may leave this life unreconciled with your brother. It is possible. Does that mean you are lost. When you stand before the judgment throne of God unreconciled with your brother what is He going to say to you. Well, the thing to consider is this: why are you not reconciled? Was it because you stewed in your anger and lef him to die in his sin. Was it because he was upset and you didn’t want to face him. Of did you reach out, did you seek reconciliation. That’s what love does; it does not desire the death of a sinner. So too, there may be situations where we cannot be reconciled, let it not be your fault. Reach out to your brother, love him, come to him, let him come to you. As Christ says to all Christians and to all people, come to Me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. The peace of Christ, which passes all of our understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in His reconciliation, first with His Father, and within the Church.