# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“The Spirit of the Old Testament Law”**

**Matthew 5:21-26**

**September 15, 2019**

In our Bible text this morning, Jesus will challenge the assumptions that the Jews of the first century had about what it meant to be a good follower of God. Over their history they had allowed the law that they had received from God to be surrounded by more and more layers of specific rules about external actions, and their allegiance to God had been surpassed by allegiance to these rules. Jesus’ teaching was meant to show how to turn their loyalty back to God. This did not mean they were to abandon the law but to recognize how it was being fulfilled in Jesus himself, and how those who follow Jesus can live in such a way that the law is being fulfilled in them.

In Matthew chapter five, Jesus gives six practical examples of how to fulfill particular areas of God’s law. Each is marked by the phrases, “You have heard . . . But I say . . . ” Thus he claims for himself the right to interpret the Old Testament law and apply it to life. He is the one who explains what God meant when he gave his commandments. I invite you to turn with me to the first of the six teachings, which speaks of murder and anger, found in Matthew 5:21-26

You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.

“You must not murder” says the sixth of the Ten Commandments. “Well, I haven’t done that, so on this one I must be right with God.” But Jesus wants us to understand that behind the command is something deeper about God’s view of persons that we need to consider. The command to not murder is about more than an outward act. It is also about an inward disposition toward another. A person is more than a body. If someone were only a body, then the idea of murder would be confined to taking their physical life. But connected with the body is an eternal soul created in the image of God.

There are ways of attacking a person other than physically. Remember the saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We may have used that saying at some point in our life when someone was speaking cruel words to us, but we knew it wasn’t true. Words do hurt. They are powerful weapons for injury, for damaging the soul of another human being. That is where Jesus takes us in this teaching. The true nature of this command includes attacking through spoken words the very core of who someone is.

When I was in youth ministry I saw this happen constantly with teenagers who had become convinced by hurtful words of their parents, spoken in anger, that they were worth little. They felt unimportant to the people they cared about the most. Their image of themselves was easily influenced by the words of others, and one of the central purposes of a good youth ministry is to provide words of love, encouragement, and affirmation so that these children who are moving toward adulthood can see themselves as God sees them – persons who are valued and loved for who they are.

Behind Jesus’ teaching on anger is an understanding of God’s attitude toward us. Jesus’ explanation shows us that at its heart this command against murder is about esteeming those who are loved by God. And, since God loves each individual person he has created, unconditionally and completely, when you and I engage in the assassination of another person’s character through our words, when we go after the soul of that person, we are failing to esteem someone whom God highly esteems.

Now, there are passages in the gospels where Jesus himself gets angry, but each time it happens it is triggered by injustice and manipulation, particularly of the poor, the oppressed, and the disenfranchised. Probably the most well-known example of that is when he goes into the temple precincts, sees what is going on, becomes angry, and drives out the merchants. When he walks into the courtyard, what he witnesses is merchants exploiting poor people in the name of religion. They are selling doves to the poor to be used for their offering to God, and they are charging them outrageous prices, making a profit from the people’s devotion to God. Anger flows out of Jesus’ to the injustice that was being done to these people. But Jesus is never angry when he himself is attacked, slandered, and eventually hung on the cross. He offers no resistance. He doesn’t slander in return.

I believe the anger Jesus is describing here is when you and I become personally angry with another because they are not meeting our needs or doing what we want them to do. We feel like we have been personally attacked, and we react with a self-righteous anger that Jesus warns us about, for there are consequences. Just as those who take a physical life are subject to the judgment of God, so are those who treat with contempt the soul life of another. If we attack someone whom God holds dear, we do so at our peril.

The two illustrations that Jesus uses, one in the arena of religion and the other in the arena of the judiciary, both make the same point which is, be reconciled. Indeed, it is important to be reconciled as soon as possible, for your worship of God or your status before his court is affected by whether or not you are still speaking angrily of the person with whom you are in conflict.

How we treat one another is a measure of our relationship with God, for there is no following of Christ that does not honor and esteem what Christ does, and he laid down his life for us all. I am called by Christ as his follower to embrace his ethic of love. This isn’t easy. It’s complicated. Relationships are hard. Our own selfishness and pride certainly don’t help. But just because it is difficult doesn’t mean it is not right. The Spirit of God lives within us and his grace is enough to enable us to live as he has called us to.