# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

**“You Have Heard . . . But I Say”**

**Matthew 5:21-48**

**March 26, 2023**

The story is told of a woman driving on a busy road being tailgated by a stressed-out man. Suddenly the light turns yellow just in front of her. She does the right thing and slows down, even though she could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection. The tailgating man is enraged. He lays on his horn, screaming at her in frustration for he would have followed her through the intersection. As he is still in mid-rant, he hears a tap on his window and looks up into the face of a police officer. The officer asks for his license and registration and returns to his patrol car. After a few minutes the officer returns and hands back the license and registration saying, “I checked you out on my computer and found that you are the owner of this car. When I pulled up behind you, you were blowing your horn, flipping off the woman in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at her. I noticed the ‘What Would Jesus Do’ bumper sticker and the silver Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally I assumed you had stolen the car.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching us how we can let our light shine in the world, even with all our hang-ups and faults. He shows us how we can move from being mere “bumper sticker” Christians on the outside, to truly loving God and loving our neighbor with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, even when our neighbor is in the car in front of us.

Last Sunday we talked about verse 20 of the 5th chapter of Matthew where Jesus told his disciples that their righteousness must be better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisee. This would have struck Jesus’ listeners as an amazing statement, for it was commonly accepted that no one obeyed God better than did these religious leaders. The teachers of religious law were the professionals who worked out the various rules that all devout Jews were expected to follow, and the Pharisees were a select group of laymen committed to the perfect keeping of those rules. They majored in *doing* what the law demanded. Jesus, however, is teaching that his followers need to major in *being*. Only then can true *doing* according to God’s will take place.

In verses 21 through 48, Jesus takes us through six everyday situations in which the inner being of a person is contrasted with merely doing what the outward rule demands. Jesus identifies the contrast by using the words, “You have heard . . .” indicating simple outward obedience to a rule, with “But I say . . .” showing the inner kind of person God calls us to be. I invite you to turn there with me as I read these verses for us

“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 have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’ But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery. You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’ But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God’s throne. And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is his footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Just say a simple, ‘Yes, I will,’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one. You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow. You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Several years ago I was having a conversation about these verses with a member of our church when he commented, “I wish Jesus hadn’t said all that. It’s so hard to live.” This *is* hard to live. Jesus is taking some of the most difficult areas of our inter-personal relationships and telling us that we have a lot of work to do. But, Jesus did say it, and we need to ask ourselves what we are going to do with it.

When you’re unhappy with someone, you’re certainly not supposed to murder them. But, Jesus says, neither are you to harbor anger against them. While anger is not necessarily a sin, it is right next door. Don’t live there, or you will begin to do and say things that are clearly against God’s will for you.

When you find yourself sexually attracted to someone who is not your spouse, you’re not to go to bed with them. But, Jesus says, neither should you fantasize about going to bed with them. They have been created in God’s image for God’s purposes, not for your lustful imagination.

When you’re struggling in your relationship with your spouse, God has given permission for a divorce. But, Jesus says, never doubt that God opposes divorce, for it has never been God’s intent for the man and woman to end their marriage.

When you want to be trusted, it has been suggested that you should add a vow to make yourself more believable. “I swear I didn’t do it” adds a vow to “I didn’t do it.” But, Jesus says, if you want people to trust you, become a trustworthy person whose “Yes” and “No” are believed simply because of who you are.

When you are being mistreated, you have heard that it is right for you to inflict the same mistreatment on the offender. If they poke you in the eye, then you poke them in the eye. But, Jesus says, instead of taking revenge and retaliating, become a person who routinely repays good for evil. Practice the grace and love of God who has not mistreated you, not even when you were mistreating him.

When you have an enemy, you believe the acceptable behavior is to hate him. But, Jesus says, the person whose inner light is growing in God and whose outer light is shining in the world for God will love their enemy and pray for them. They will desire God’s best for that person, for that is what a true child of God does.

Our nephew and his wife recently announced the birth of their first child, Danielle. One of the amazing things about babies is that they regularly do things that they have never been able to do before. God has put them together in such a way that they are constantly trying new things, working on them until they figure out how to do them, and then they move on: from lying on their back, to learning how to roll over; from rocking back and forth, to crawling; from crawling to standing to walking. You and I are spiritually recreated by God to grow into doing things we were never able to do before. With his help, for with him all things are possible, we can live Jesus’ way. We *can* become more like him.