

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Jesus continues His famous Sermon on the Mount in today’s Gospel, and, let me admit it: it’s enough to make this preacher of the Gospel break out in a sweat. Our own Dr. Scaer writes, “The complexities involved in the Matthean version [of Jesus’ sermon] would give any interpreter good reason for avoiding them” (David Scaer, *Sermon on the Mount*, 107). To be sure, I could have preached on one of the other texts, but I think we should listen to the Lord Himself on the Lord’s Day and seek to learn from Him, after all, Jesus says, “*Take my yoke upon you,*” and that means learning from Him (Matt. 11:29).

And what are we to learn? Not that Jesus is some harsh and unyielding taskmaster, but that Jesus is “*gentle and lowly in heart,*” that we find our rest in Him, that His “*yoke is easy and [His] burden is light*” (Matt. 11:29-30). As St. Paul said, “*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*” (Gal. 5:1).

Nevertheless, Jesus’ words do seem harsh. There is definitely a lot of law in these Gospel passages: “*You have heard that it was said to those 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; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.*” Or again, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Jesus also talks about divorce and about taking oaths, and He says, “Don’t do it!”

Still, Jesus should not be seen as a new Lawgiver in this text, giving us new and expanded laws. As the evangelist John taught, “*the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (Jn 1:17). Again, “*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (Jn 3:17).

So what is Jesus doing in this sermon? He is acting as a physician of souls, for remember, Jesus said, “*“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”* (Matt. 9:12-13). And the first job of a physician is diagnosis. Jesus is here telling His sin-sick hearers that the diagnosis is far worse than they thought.

He’s telling US that — that our problem with sin is far worse than we think. It is not just external sins, the things that we do that we shouldn’t ... the things we don’t do that we should. We call these sins of commission and sins of omission. Jesus is saying that our problem is deeper than these; it’s beneath the skin. It’s internal.

Jesus begins with the manifest sin of murder, which, from the days of Cain and Abel, everyone agrees is wrong. Murder is a heinous sin. The Lord accused Cain saying “*What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground*” (Gen. 4:10). But we know before Cain rose up to kill his brother, sin was already crouching at Cain’s door (Gen. 4:7). Anger welled up inside of him, and that burst forth in murder.

So for us today when a murder is committed, we want to know: “Why? What motivated that person to murder?” Murder is more than killing; it’s killing with intent, with premeditation. Although the Hebrew word in the commandment (רצח) is elsewhere used for manslaughter, here it really means murder, and the Greek word used in the New Testament to translate the commandment (φονεύω) really is talking about murder, an unjust and violent killing of another.

But the point is, murder is prompted by something, something internal, something on the inside — like with Cain — by anger or malice. And Jesus says, THAT, all by itself, is sin, and for that, you are “*liable to judgment.*” Likewise, the insults from your tongue, your name-calling, are the outpouring of something inside. They are sin, and they make you “*liable to judgment.*”

Or again, Jesus sets before us the manifest sin of adultery, of being willfully unfaithful to your spouse bodily. You know the tragic adulterous affair of King David that resulted in the death of a husband and soldier and of a child. David himself was married to Saul’s daughter, Michal, but he saw another man’s wife, Bathsheba, and lay with her. Double sin ... he committed adultery and caused her to commit adultery. But even before the physical encounter, sin was already crouching at David’s door. A desire welled up inside of him; he had seen a beautiful woman and lusted after her. Even before He did the external deed, there was the internal. He coveted Bathsheba, the wife of another man, contrary to the commandment.

It’s not different for us today, is it? Long before the physical adultery comes the flirting, and the teasing, and the innuendos; there are the “innocent” lunches or late night meetings that breed the sinful desire in the hearts of men and women.

That’s where it begins. I’ve been saying on the inside, but Jesus says it’s in the heart: the man “*has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” Before the flood “*every intention of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5), and after it “*the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth*” (Gen. 8:21).

This is who we are by nature: people with prideful hearts, faithless hearts, straying hearts, perverse hearts, arrogant hearts, deceitful hearts, hasty hearts, foolish hearts, anxious hearts, deluded hearts, stubborn hearts. When it comes to

divorce, Jesus says, it’s *“Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives”* (Matt. 19:8). This is our problem! It’s inside of us. Jesus says, *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person”* (Matt. 15:19-20).

Knowing all this, surely our hearts condemn us. Yet we know that *“God is greater than our heart”* (1 John 3:20). God is love, and God loves us, and that love was manifest in the sending of His Son into our flesh — more than that, by sending His own Son unto cross and death as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4:8-10).

Though our hearts condemn us, God does not; He justifies us in His Son and sanctifies us by His Spirit. He forgives our sins, both the sins that are manifest and external and the sins that are latent and internal. He takes our old sinful hearts described moments ago, and He exchanges them with broken and contrite hearts (Ps. 51:17). He creates in us clean hearts and renews a right spirit within us (Ps. 51:14). *“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you,”* the Lord promised through the prophet Ezekiel. *“And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ez. 36:26).

And that heart becomes generous, and willing, and joyful and glad. It’s a heart of integrity and uprightness that loves the Lord’s Word and statutes and seeks to walk by them. This new heart chooses *“life and good”* over *“death and evil.”* By faith, this heart is blameless, yet we know we still have flesh. Therefore, this heart is a penitent and humble heart that acknowledges fleshly failure, but a heart that is courageous in the knowledge of forgiveness and salvation, a heart that is steadfast in its reliance on Christ and His grace.

Dear saints of God, this is our heart now. We have *“hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and ... bodies washed with [the] pure water”* of Holy Baptism. That’s why you’re here. The service of the Word is a gathering of the Baptized, signaled from the beginning with the words that recall your own baptism: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But, you’re here also that you might come with this clean heart to the service of the Sacrament, that with a *“true heart in full assurance of faith”* (Heb. 10:22) you might come humbly to the Lord’s altar for more forgiveness, life, and salvation. Come to Jesus all you who labor and are heavy laden; come, having been reconciled to God once more with sins confessed and sins forgiven and encouraged in your faith; come, in the ministry of reconciliation; come, seeking reconciliation one with another with hearts strengthened in your faith in God and in your love toward one another. Jesus says, “Come.”

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.