

**Sermon – Matthew 5: 21-37 – Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 12, 2023 –
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA – Rev. Timothy W. Sadler, Pastor**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus, Christ.

Did you notice the theme running through every example Jesus gives in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew? Often we read them like threats, as though we're supposed to live a certain way because if we don't...we'll experience God's retribution.

We use God's word as a hammer to keep ourselves and others in line, rather than seeing it as a word of restoration, a word that brings new life.

Everything Jesus says has something to do with how we're to live together in community, because the more we live according to the promises of God, the more we experience new life.

And anytime we manage to live in a way that honors God and one another, we catch a glimpse of what it will be like in Heaven: true love, true peace, true children of God.

By using these examples, Jesus emphasizes that what's in our hearts is possibly the most important thing of all, because what's in our hearts determines the type of people we are:

it determines our character. And our character influences how we relate to one another.

Basically, Jesus is telling us it's not okay to look at others with contempt. Looking at others with contempt means we fail to recognize the God who dwells in us is the same God...

who dwells in them. We may not agree with what they do or with their opinions; nevertheless, they have been created by God just like we have, and for this reason alone, they have value.

Jesus is saying how we feel about people and how we treat them is very serious stuff indeed. It's easy to avoid the physical act of murder; for most of us, it's no effort at all.

But what we say about people and to people can be just as brutal as the physical act of ending someone's life.

Jesus is talking about the kind of anger and attitude that leads to resentment and contempt, what we might call destructive anger. Every one of us will feel angry from time to time, but how...

we handle that anger is important. If our anger leads to attack another person's basic dignity and their value as a human being, then we aren't living as people who truly honor God.

What's true of destructive anger is also true of lust. If a person's character is to lust after others, then this person isn't seeing others as the spiritual beings they are. That person is seeing others...

as objects to be used. And anytime we use other people, in whatever capacity, we diminish ourselves and dishonor God.

That's probably why Jesus is so harsh about divorce in this passage. At the time Jesus lived, divorce was extremely easy for men to obtain, but not for women. And could leave his wife...

at the drop of a hat and often did, and in that culture, a woman without the protection of a man was very, very vulnerable.

So for Jesus, it wasn't a matter of divorce being morally wrong. It was more a matter of justice and concern for those considered least in that society. Jesus always placed himself on the side...

of those who had no one else to speak for them.

In this passage from Matthew, Jesus is teaching us something about how to care for one another when there are disagreements or when our desires threaten to overcome our better selves.

Jesus is trying to show us what love is and what love is not. Jesus paints a picture of what a loving community looks like when we live as the beloved people of God.

When living for God becomes no more than a matter of obeying rules and engaging in certain rituals and traditions, compassion usually goes by the wayside. It's very easy to live according to a set of rules without ever having our hearts transformed.

When we focus on behavior instead of love, we miss the whole point of what Jesus taught us.

Every word Jesus speaks is about inner transformation – a change of heart and mind. When Jesus said “follow me,” he wasn’t talking about mechanically obeying rules and routinely engaging in worship, while continuing to have destructive attitudes toward others.

Jesus was asking us to pay attention to our own attitudes and how these attitudes affect our treatment of one another. The reason Jesus emphasizes this is because everything in life and faith.,

has to do with relationships. It begins with our relationship to God. Then, from this one primary relationship, flows every other relationship we have.

Jesus isn’t laying down an impossible rule calling us to be best friends with everybody. That’s not realistic because our personalities are all too different.

But Jesus is calling us to treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ: to make a deliberate decision to treat every human being as though they are of value, because in God’s eyes, they are.

Jesus is calling us to actively work for the good of all people, whether we know them or not, or whether we like them or not.

Jesus wants to raise our awareness about what’s really important in life. When we leave this earth, the only thing that will remain with us in our relationship to God and to one another.

So in this passage, Jesus isn't giving us unreasonable expectations. What Jesus is doing is giving us a hopeful vision of a world free from hatred and destructive anger.

Jesus gives us a vision of the world to which he calls us, where everyone who exists is free to live in the light and love of God's amazing grace.

Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Lord of life,

You dwell in us with such love and grace, and ask us to allow your love and grace to flow thru us into the lives of others. We best show others who you are, when we live as people of compassion. Give us the courage to make choices that honor you in all people.

AMEN.