

Matthew chapter 5:21 to 37 – 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer Amen.

Chapter 5 of Matthews gospel is the start of Jesus' sermon on the mount, and when Jesus saw that he was drawing a large crowd he climbed a hillside, and it was only his disciples, who were committed to him, that climbed up with him.

Jesus in our section of the sermon was clearly challenging his disciples, and us, who are his church, who consider ourselves free from the sin of murder, by forcing us to consider all our actions and feelings towards other people.

Let us remind ourselves what Jesus said, He said, “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgement”. **“But I say to you** that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to the judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister you will be liable to the council, and if you say you fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

In saying that Jesus modifies the most sacred writings in the world at that time, Moses' law given by God, about murder, and which was literally cast in stone; we cannot over exaggerate the effect that that must have had on his hearers.

Indeed at the conclusion of his sermon we are told that his disciples were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority.

But prior to Jesus' changes people would have considered it justified, and certainly lawful, to take any action against a fellow human being, providing it fell short of actual murder.

While we are thinking about the law we need to realise that before Moses there was no such thing as law, people acted as they saw fit, and wouldn't have stopped at murder, but God's law given by Moses was the beginning of civilisation as we know it.

But in modifying the law we must remember what Jesus said in verse 17, just before our reading, that he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfil it, or as some translations have it, “But to complete it”, so they had been forewarned that changes were about to happen.

The Jews in Jesus' day lived by the letter of the law, a bit like us when driving a car.

For example, we know that we mustn't go above 30 miles/hour in a 30 mile limit, so most of us try to keep the speed down to roughly 30 miles/hour

But that has nothing to do with the spirit of the law regarding driving, because the spirit of the law is to drive safely and to be considerate to other road users at all times, which is expressed in our highway code.

Jesus, in extending the commandment on murder to embrace all our actions and feelings towards other people was revolutionary, and was designed to impress on his disciples that there is a spiritual dimension to the law which may be just as important, if not more so, than the letter of the law.

In extending the basic law of, “You shall not murder”, Jesus has included many other areas of life such as, anger, and insult.

But the word insult has been translated from the Aramaic word *raca*, and *raca* is stronger than the word insult and includes such words as idiot, hate and contempt for someone.

Jesus is reminding them and us that we can murder people just as easily with words as we can with actions, because thoughtless and hateful words can also destroy reputations and in extreme cases can kill people.

If we now consider the spirit of the law, Jesus is saying that the spirit of the law is not that we shouldn't murder or even think about it, but that we should love other people as we love ourselves, which later on in his ministry at chapter 22 of Matthew's gospel he extended to include loving God as well, and is known as, “The greatest commandment”.

Before we pass on I just want to say a few words about sin, which of course in many ways is what we are talking about.

We are all sinners whether we are devout Christians or not, and if we want to stay in a relationship with God who cannot tolerate sin, then we must be repentant of sin.

So be assured that hearing the gospel message this morning doesn't condemn those who are truly repentant and that there is hope for all of us.

And being truly repentant isn't just being sorry for what we do or think, because being sorry is more about being found out rather than being penitent.

True repentance is more about our attitude to sin, where we are actively trying not to do it again, and where we are grief stricken by it rather than indifferent to it.

And of course it is in true repentance that we are released from the burden of the sin as well.

St John in his first letter at chapter 1 verse 8 wrote to all believers in Christ, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

So from that we can say that sin is undoubtedly a part of our lives whether we like it or not, and it is our life long task as Christians to fight against it.

Jesus in verses 29 to 30 emphasises the importance of fighting against sin by saying if your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and throw it away, it is better to lose one eye than for your whole body to be thrown in hell.

In saying that Jesus wasn't suggesting that we do that literally, Jesus is only demonstrating the absolute need for repentance.

But as already mentioned, sin is always with us, and it is through the grace of God and a true repentant heart that will lead to our salvation.

At verse 23 Jesus then gives us instructions, he says, “So when you are offering your gifts at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first to be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”

Jesus is saying that to have a close relationship with God you first have to be reconciled to your brothers and sisters and in this case brothers and sisters of course also means everyone.

It's a repeat of what I was saying about sin, which is that sin separates us from God, and now Jesus has extended that understanding of exclusion by sin to our relationships with our fellow human beings.

We've already mentioned John's first letter to fellow Christians and now at chapter 4 verse 20 is another truth, “Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen”.

So to be in a true relationship with God requires us to be reconciled to other people and that means long standing grudges as well.

If there's someone we've fallen out with a long time ago and who we haven't spoken to since then Jesus requires that we mend that relationship before thinking about a true relationship with God.

I appreciate that that may be very difficult, or that you may think that it wasn't your fault in the first place, and it's for them to make the first move.

If that is the case then I recommend that you start praying for that person, and no matter whose fault it is start praying for your own stubbornness and for courage to put the situation right, if we don't it will always be a stumbling block, and living with unforgiveness only ruins our lives.

At verse 27 Jesus turns to adultery, and here, like murder, he extends, and includes looking at any woman lustfully, because Jesus says that at that point we have already committed adultery in our hearts; and here, as before, it is not only the act which is condemned but also our attitude from which it comes.

We need to be aware that whilst we may measure a man by outward appearances, God examines motives and looks into our hearts in all areas of our lives.

True repentance for adultery like repentance for all sins should include an objective to avoid situations which tempt us to sin.

At verse 31 Jesus turns to the question of divorce, and from what I have read it is probable that divorce in Jesus' day was more prevalent then, than it is today, mainly because there was virtually no restrictions for a man to get divorced in Jesus' day.

Talking about divorce is of course a very sensitive subject because it involves so many aspects of our emotions.

Fortunately today there are many organisations, including the church, who can help couples who have difficulties with their marital relationships, but before things go beyond the point of no return we can all pray for reconciliation, which is what we should all do, for all our relationship difficulties .

Turning lastly to oaths, Jesus said let your yes be yes and your no no. Jesus said that because as Christians we should not have to swear an oath in order to tell the truth, because as Christians, our words should always be trustworthy and true.

As we sit let us pray:

Help us to repay no one evil for evil, but to be merciful even as you Lord God in heaven are merciful, and help us Lord to be reconciled to you through our relationships with other people;
so that we may continually follow in your way in all that we say and do; and more and more be conformed to your image and likeness.

We ask this through your Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen