

A Heart for God

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 22, 2018.

“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. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. “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. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Matthew 5:21–30).

Jesus’ teaching was so strikingly different from the scribes and Pharisees that He had to clarify: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Then, as if to use the scribes and Pharisees as a case study, Jesus challenged His listeners, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20).

The scribes and Pharisees were the teachers, upholders, and enforcers of the Mosaic Law and their interpretations of it. Their lives were a display of religiosity: In their missionary work, they would travel across land and sea to make a single proselyte (Matt. 23:15). In their worship practices, they held the spoken word to a precise standard (Matt. 23:16-22). In their tithing, they were faithful all the way down to the mint, dill, and cumin in their herb gardens (Matt. 23:23). In their cleanliness, they were spotless (Matt. 23:25). In upholding their heritage and traditions, they were honoring and respectful (Matt. 23:29-30). In their authority, Jesus acknowledged, “The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you...” (Matt. 23:2-3). But, Jesus added these stinging words: “but [do] not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice” (Matt. 23:3).

What did Jesus mean by “they preach, but do not practice”? Using the metaphor of washing dishes, Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, “You clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matt. 23:25). Were these harsh words necessary for the moral champions of their society? The problem, however, wasn’t their religious zeal; it was their hearts.

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This is not only an assessment of scribes and Pharisees. You can tithe to the church regularly and covet your neighbor's wealth. You can serve faithfully in the church and live a lie at home. You can give to the poor and cheat on your taxes. You can love your parents and disdain authority. You can attend worship every Sunday and never rest in Christ. You can speak kindly and curse God in your heart. You can stand for justice and worship the gods of culture. You can profess faith in Christ and not possess true faith. And, as Jesus explains in our passage today, you may not murder but have a heart of anger. You may not commit adultery but have a heart of lust.

A Heart of Anger

In agreement with God's Moral Law, the scribes and Pharisees taught the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder." According to the Mosaic Law, anyone alleged of murder was required to appear before a court. A guilty verdict resulted in execution. Capital punishment for murder dates back to the Noahic covenant in which God directed Noah and his progeny back to the creation account: "for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. 'Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image'" (Gen. 9:5-6). This was reinforced in the Mosaic Law emphasizing the value of human life and the harshest punishment for taking it. But is murder merely an outward action, an animal response to a physical stimuli? Or, does the murderer's heart play a part?

Behind every sin there is a sinful heart motive. While the scribes and Pharisees taught the Law remedied the sin of murder, Jesus reveals the Law's deeper meaning. Jesus reveals this truth with two examples: anger *in* your heart and anger expressed *from* your heart. It is doubtful that you or I have or ever will commit murder, but how many of us have seethed with vilifying anger? How many of us have been so angry at someone that we have, as Sinclair Ferguson says, murdered without knives? Even the loveliest among us have likely committed a murder of the heart.

We may justify in our hearts that what no man sees or hears is safely contained inside us, but God knows the heart. Outwardly, you may act in perfect peace but inwardly you are seething with rage. And this has a compounding effect, doesn't it? Yet, it is the Lord's kindness that leads us to repentance. Forgive in your heart and ask the Lord for forgiveness. Anger is not worthy of harboring.

It is doubtful that you or I have or ever will commit murder, but how many of us have murderous tongues? How many of us have said words in anger that "cut like a knife"? You may say in self-defense, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," but it's not true, is it? Words hurt and cut us to the core. We may never raise a murderous weapon in anger, but plenty of us have bludgeoned another with irretrievable words.

We stand accused but not without practical gospel-centered instruction. Christians are not perfect, only forgiven. It is perhaps not a matter of if but when you and I will speak in

anger to one another. Put two sinners inside a church long enough and it is bound to happen. What should we do when we have sinned against another with our tongue? What should we do when we have spoken words of hatred to another soul made in the image of God?

Jesus instructs us to engage in personal reconciliation: “be reconciled to your brother.” Let us not embrace the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees. You may try to cloak your sin in religious activity, but your sin is there. You may mask your sin in a myriad of good works, but you can’t outwork your sin. But, let us remember Samuel’s words to King Saul, “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). We are to be reconciled to one another, because it preaches of our reconciliation in Christ. We who have reconciled to God through Christ (2 Cor. 5:18) are called by Christ to be reconciled with our brother.

So, if you come to worship and remember that your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled and then come and worship. Why? Because worship too is not merely an outward expression but is from the heart. If your brother has something against you, don’t let it fester. Unaddressed sin boils into strife and contention. Why? Because living in community as a church requires love from the heart. Mere outward conformity produces a lifeless and heartless church, but love for one another is evidence of a healthy and life-giving church.

So, let us not be naïve but on guard, for the prophet Jeremiah reminds us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Examine your heart.

A Heart of Lust

The scribes and Pharisees rightly taught Israel the seventh commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” but is adultery an outward sin only? What is the role of the heart? The sin of adultery cannot be divorced from the sin of lust. Anger is to murder what lust is to adultery. And so we find a multitude of sexual sins lurking in the corners of the heart. While we may separate the outward penalty of the two, we cannot separate the sin from the heart.

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” so the saying goes. So powerful is lust in the heart that it spreads like gangrene through the body. Jesus said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell” (Matt. 5:29–30). Did Jesus mean literally tear out your eye and cut off your hand? Let me explain what happens when you try to deal with a legal sin with legalism: If you tear out your eye and cut off your hand but do not address the lust in your heart, you will be a one-eyed, one-handed luster!

Using pedagogical hyperbole, Jesus is driving home a point of application: Lust is as serious as adultery, like anger is to murder. Don’t ignore it. Don’t harbor it. Kill it!

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Puritan John Owen said, “Do you mortify? Do you make it your daily work? Be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Ultimately, murder is a sin of the heart, as is anger. Likewise, adultery is a sin of the heart, as is lust. For this reason, the only answer to a heart of hatred and a heart of lust is a heart for God.

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The heart indeed is deceitful and desperately wicked, which is why God promised, through the prophet Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). And Paul preached, “For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (Rom. 10:10). By God’s sovereign grace through faith in Christ, we are given a new heart, and the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell in us.

While not perfect, we are forgiven, and “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). While Christians are eternally justified in the righteousness of Christ, in this life we are in need of continual cleansing. In fellowship with God, we pray with David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Ask God for forgiveness and enjoy the cleansing of His purifying Spirit.

With a heart for God, do not hate your brother but be reconciled. We who are forgiven should seek forgiveness. With a heart for God, do not lust but flee it, pursuing “righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22). For in Christ we have been saved from hearts of hate and lust and given hearts for God.

FATHER DIVINE, Thy piercing eye
Shoots thro' the darkest night;
In deep retirement Thou art nigh,
With heart-discerning sight.

There shall that piercing eye survey
Our duteous homage paid,
With ev'ry morning's dawning ray,
And ev'ry ev'ning's shade.

O may Thy own celestial fire
The incense still inflame;
While our warm vows to Thee aspire,
Thro' our Redeemer's name.

(adapted from Philip Doddridge's hymn *Secret Prayer*)