Sunday, February 18, 1990
YES OR NO
Matthew 5:27-37

For the past several Sundays, the sermons have been based on that part of the Gospel of Matthew commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, which is comprised of chapters 5, 6, and 7 in the Book of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is the most concise and far-reaching collection of the teachings of Jesus found in one place. I want to encourage you in your homes to read those three chapters over and over again and to ponder their meaning. And I repeat my offer that anyone who memorizes the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, 6, and 7, will be my guest for dinner at the restaurant of your choice in Lincoln.

Anyone approaching the Sermon on the Mount is wise to remember a saying from Mark Twain, who was more honest about his troubles than most of us are about ours. He had heard people complain that the Bible is hard to understand. But he said he was bothered more by the parts of the Bible that he could understand than by the parts he could not understand.

This statement fits the Sermon on the Mount. Sometimes, as I study it, I find myself bothered by the first problem. I do not understand, and I wish I might know with certainty exactly what Jesus meant. But more often, the words are so clear that I can have little doubt about their meaning. And I think that will be your experience. The real challenge comes because we know what a change the teachings and example of Jesus call for in our lives, and we hesitate to make that change. We feel uneasy when we face a description of ourselves as God would have us be. And I think that's because the teachings and example of Jesus turn our usual values upside down.

That part of the Sermon on the Mount which we are dealing with today is a direct continuation of what we considered last Sunday. Thus, to better understand it, we need first to remind ourselves of the context in which it is situated.

The Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew, chapter 5, with the statements of Jesus called the "Beatitudes." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the pure in heart, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you."

As I mentioned in the first sermon in this series, it is significant that the Beatitudes appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount — before a single instruction is given, before there has been time for obedience or disobedience. By appearing at the beginning, the Beatitudes remind us that God's grace, God's favor, God's blessings precede all our endeavors. God's grace and God's mercy form the context for all behavior and relationships.

Thus, the moral and ethical instructions which follow in the Sermon on the Mount are not to be seen as ways of earning God's favor, but as guidelines for our living because we already have God's favor, because we know God loves us.

Let me say that again in different words for emphasis. These ethical and moral guidelines are being given to those of us who are trying to follow Jesus, to those who have already accepted the love of God which has come to us in Jesus. They are not rules to obey in order to become

followers of Christ, but a new way of living because we are already followers of Jesus. And when we fail, and fail we will, we know that God forgives us, and we try again. And in the process of experiencing God's mercy, we change. This is the context in which to hear these words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's also part of the context of these teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that he did not advocate doing away with the Old Testament laws that guide our relationships with each other and with God, but going beyond them. He said, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them."

And then he gave several examples to illustrate his main point. The scripture reading for last week included the example of the 6th Commandment: "You shall not kill." Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to the people of old, 'You shall not kill, and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment,' but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother or sister shall be liable to judgment." Do you see how Jesus takes the commandment further?

Jesus moves from the external to the internal — from murder to hatred. Laws can prescribe punishment for murder. But no government can outlaw hatred, anger, and animosity. To control these calls for an inward change of heart. We need God's power working within us to do that.

The scripture reading today from the Sermon on the Mount begins with another example of going beyond the commandments, of fulfilling them, of following the spirit of the law. And here, Jesus uses the 7th Commandment as an illustration: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Again, Jesus moves from the physical act of adultery to the mental thought of lust. He moves from the overt act, which a court of law might pass judgment on, to the inner disposition. We are not only to treat persons of the opposite sex differently, but we are to think of them differently. We are to see others as more than mere sexual objects. Jesus calls for an inner change as well as an outward change in all of these illustrations.

Now we can understand more clearly what he said earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: "Your righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees." He also said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; 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; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."

Jesus is saying here, by way of another illustration — if only it were that easy — if it were your hands that caused you to sin, then you could simply cut them off and throw them away. But it's not your hands that cause you to sin or your eyes; it's your inward lust or your covetousness. And if that is the problem, then the literal loss of your hand or eye will do no good. An unhealthy inner person is worse than the loss of a hand or one's eyesight.

Then there's the matter of marriage and divorce, which Jesus used as yet another illustration of his main point. A divorce was very easy for a man to obtain in that day — much too easy. And the rabbis and lawyers were always busy debating the legal technicalities. Again, Jesus wanted to emphasize the importance of commitment and the sanctity of marriage. The wife was not to be considered as the property of the husband.

Remember, all of these are illustrations of the main point that followers of the way of Jesus are to go beyond the mere letter of the law to an inward change.

The last illustration which Jesus used in this section of the Sermon on the Mount sums up very neatly the point he was making.

“You have heard that it was said to the people of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all; let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Jesus lived in a world of complicated swearing and the taking of oaths. If someone swore by the temple, it didn’t count, but if that individual swore by the gold of the temple, it was binding. If you swore by the altar, it was nothing, but if you swore by the gift on the altar, it had to be fulfilled. Jesus brushed aside all these little rules and said, “Do not swear at all; simply say ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ Anything else is unnecessary. Either you are trustworthy, or you are not trustworthy. Either you are a person who keeps the commitments you make, or you are someone who does not.”

“She was a woman of few words, but you knew immediately that you could trust her. If she said ‘Yes’ to something, you knew that it would be done.” This was the way a certain individual was described to me not long ago. We all like to meet and know people like that — those who are trustworthy, people we can count on.

Human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and word of others are critical necessities in the life of a healthy society. Without this basic reality, life itself becomes no longer trustworthy. If we can no longer believe what people tell us, then life falls apart. Falsehood, deceit, cover-ups, broken promises, and outright lies in the private and public arena shatter relationships and tear at the very fabric of society.

Jesus knew that it takes an inward change for us to become trustworthy and to be able to say simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No,’ and then to follow through.

In his latest book, Walter Wangerin, Jr. tells a story about his relationship with his second son, Matthew, which I think illustrates God’s grace and mercy, God’s love and suffering as seen in Jesus, and how that changes us.

Wangerin writes, “From the beginning, Matthew was an irrepressible child. Whims in him were deeds immediately. He didn’t think. He acted. He wanted comic books. He took them. And however I might account for it, I couldn’t permit it. Stealing is wrong. What could I do to change the soul of my son?”

Late one night, when Matthew was in the second grade, his dad discovered Matthew awake in his room, surrounded by comic books. “Matthew,” his dad asked, “Where did you get all of those comic books?” Matthew answered, “The library.” “You took them out?” his dad inquired. “I took them out,” Matthew answered. “You took them,” his dad said, dropping the “out.” “Yes,” Matthew admitted. “You are going to return them,” his dad said.

“I’m not completely dense,” wrote Wangerin. “I read books. I read children. My enterprising son had enriched himself with comic books he never intended to return. The operative word here is ‘steal.’ He’d stolen them. That scared me.”

Wangerin made his son return the comic books to the library and had the stern librarian talk to his son about the evils of thievery. Matthew promised the librarian and his dad never to steal again.

However, the following summer, Matthew discovered the drugstore in another city where they were living for the summer. When they returned to their regular home again in the fall, and one night when he was in Matthew's room, his dad found another drawer full of comic books. After questioning Matthew, he admitted that he had this time stolen the comic books from the drugstore near where they had lived during the past summer in that other city.

Wangerin decided to make the lesson against stealing more dramatic this time. He took Matthew and all his comic books into the living room, where there was a fireplace. After putting Matthew on the sofa facing the fireplace, the father built a large roaring fire, and then one by one, with slow inevitability, he consigned the comic books to the flames. And he preached to his son the law against stealing and what punishment would follow if it ever happened again. He quoted the 8th Commandment: "Thou shalt not steal."

A year later, Matthew stole comic books again. A third time. He hadn't changed. His father decided he had to punish him. "Go to my study. Wait for me. I'm going to spank you," said his dad. "So," said Wangerin, "I went into my study where Matthew sat small in the largest chair, his face both down and distant from me. The separation killed me. The child was mute in mystery."

"Then how could I reach his soul to change it? I too, sat. As clearly as I could, I repeated the law and the deed that broke the law. Did he understand? He nodded. But then, he had always nodded. Did he understand why I had to spank him? He nodded."

"So I called him to me, and he came. I had him belly-down across my knees. These are the things I intended: to spank no part of him but his bottom; to use my bare hand in order to feel exactly what he felt; to swat five times, no more, no less. Five. Then pity wouldn't stall me, and anger wouldn't make the punishment unreasonable. Five."

"He did not cry. Then I carried him back to his chair and set him down and told him that I would leave him alone for a while, but that I would be back. Alone, I thought, because if he should cry, he should do so in privacy, without the sense that I wanted to see his tears. Matthew, however, wasn't crying. I left the room. And then I burst into tears. I bowed down and covered my face and sobbed."

Matthew's mother came to see what the matter was, but said Wangerin, "I could only hug her and lean on her and not speak. I was so sorry, so frightened and sorry."

In a few minutes, the father was quiet. He washed his face and returned to his study again. He talked with his son and told him he loved him and that he would never not love him. Then he hugged his son.

Never, never again did the boy steal comic books or any other thing. Wangerin said he thought it was the spanking that caused the change in his son. He thought the law had done it.

The law can do many things. It can frighten a child till his eyes go wide. It can restrain him and blame him and shame him. But it cannot change him. So it was with Israel. So it is with all the people of God. Mercy alone transfigures the human heart.

Years after the spanking, Matthew and his mother were driving home from the shopping center. They were discussing things that had happened in the past. The topic of comic books came up. They talked about how he used to steal them and how long the practice continued. Matthew said, “But you know, Mom, I haven’t stolen comic books for a long, long time.”

His mother said, “I know.” After a moment of silence, Matthew said, “Do you know why I stopped the stealing?”

“Sure,” said his mother, “because Dad spanked you.”

“No, Mom,” said Matthew. He shook his head at his mother’s mistake. “No, but because Dad cried.”

Love can accomplish what the law cannot. That’s what Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount. That’s the context for everything he had to say. Amen.