

What is a Christian (Part 3)  
A Sermon for February 12, 2017  
Matthew 5:21-37  
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

What is a Christian? We're in our third week, trying to answer that question using Jesus' teaching in "the Sermon on the Mount." When we began this series two weeks ago, I urged us to commit ourselves to take Jesus' words seriously. If you shared that sentiment with me, then this is probably the week where that commitment is most fully tested, because many of us probably see ourselves having stepped over one or several of the boundaries that Jesus names.

- Anger gets the same punishment as murder. And insults are just as bad.
- Lusting after someone is the same sin as adultery.
- Marriage is a binding covenant that not as easily broken in God's eyes as it is legally
- And swearing to make your point from the evil one.

How much more countercultural could you be? So what is Jesus doing and what might it mean to take what he has to say seriously, no matter what our past or current struggles have been?

First he is proving that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law, as he said a few verses previously. But secondly, when I read these sayings of Jesus, I feel like Jesus is taking all of his disciples, and plunging their heads into ice water. Everything he says is so difficult--primarily because it's so simple. Jesus is trying to wake his disciples up.

Let's look at these one at a time, but out of order.

It goes without saying that divorce is incredibly painful, complex, and particular. I want to take it first because it's less basic than the others. It almost flows out of Jesus' teaching on anger, lust, and swearing.

I think many divorced people would agree that divorce frequently happens because a marriage relationship has been infiltrated by harmful feelings and acts of anger, lust, and lies. Of course this is especially bad since marriage is a relationship that is supposed to emphasize kindness, faithfulness, and truth-telling. Would there not be fewer divorces if every married person followed Jesus' teaching about anger, lust, and swearing? "And that's all I have to say about that."

Lust is another teaching that tries our commitment to take Jesus' words seriously. Remember Jesus isn't talking about just being attracted to someone. He's talking about being attracted to someone that you're not covenanted with and then fantasizing about what you're going to do about it.

I'm sure there are some of you who remember the political season when then-Governor and devout Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter was interviewed by Playboy magazine. He apparently offered the following statement to Playboy, which just drips of cringe-worthy irony: *"I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do--and I have done it--and God forgives me for it."*

The comedians and political cartoonists, of course, went to town on that one. But what was the scandal? I doubt that it was his lack of foresight in admitting his own lust to a magazine that is funded by it. Certainly that's awkward, I don't think that was the scandal. I think the scandal was that someone-- a would-be president, no less-- would actually take the teaching of Jesus that seriously.

Listening to him, he seems to think that our *thoughts* matter. He seems to think that we should try to exercise control over them. Isn't that crazy?! How out of touch can you be?

But isn't this is exactly what Jesus is saying? Jesus is saying in the plainest terms that it's not just what you *do* that matters. He's saying that there is more to being a Christian than not crossing the line set up by God's instruction. God cares about the times when we cross the line-- our trespasses-- but what God really cares about is who we *are*, and what we value.

Jesus is forcing the situation that we touched on briefly last week: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom..." (Mt 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees interpreted the law in the most narrow sense possible, presumably so that they could obey it more easily. Jesus, on the other hand, interprets it in the broadest sense possible. According to Jesus, the Law isn't just trying to keep people from doing a few bad things. It's trying to *make* a certain type of person.

This same dynamic plays out when Jesus talks about anger and swearing. Anger is the thought of the heart that leads to murder, just as lust is the thought of the heart that leads to adultery.

But why do thoughts matter? Because they point to a deep reality of what's in your heart-- who you really are.

I've always thought that a good way to know what someone cares about is to look at their bookshelf. Others say that the best way to know what matters to someone is to look at their credit card statement. That's a sobering one that we probably need to take more seriously than we do. Jesus said in another place "where you treasure is, that's where your heart will be too." Another way to know what someone cares about is

how they spend their time. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was incredibly disciplined about keeping track of his time, to make sure he was using it all to the glory of God.

But more than our bookshelves, more than our bank accounts, and more than how we spend our time-- our thoughts are the real indicator of where our heart is. Of course, our thoughts are private. And that is part of why Jesus teaches us not to judge one another. We don't know what's in the other person's thoughts and so we can't see their intentions. But Jesus is clear in his teaching here that intentions matter deeply. Not murdering someone is very important. But it's also important that you don't want bad things to happen to them.

And so this is where I think we have to decide again if we're going to take Jesus seriously or not. Many people would take a step back and say, "well, you know, I'm really not very religious-- I don't take these things too far." C. S. Lewis, as usual, helps me to respond.

He says "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of *no* importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

We don't believe Jesus was a fool. We don't just believe he was a great teacher. We believe Jesus was God in the flesh. But how can we take Jesus seriously-- how can we possibly put his teaching into practice, when the standard seems so high?

I have three thoughts about putting this into practice.

First: Don't give up. Being angry at a brother or sister in Christ is not ok. Not doing all in your power to be reconciled isn't ok. Lust is not ok. So much so that Jesus uses hyperbole to suggest maiming yourself rather than falling into it and other sin. Being a person that depends on

swearing is not ok. These aren't things that we can give up on because they're hard.

These things don't just have consequences here and now-- although they do indeed have that. Jesus says these things have eternal consequences-- consequences about our relationship with God in eternal life. These things don't just hurt our relationship with other people, they hurt our relationship with God. So we can't give up on trying to root them out of our lives.

My second thought about putting this into practice: Remember the good news and preach it to yourself. God does not hate you because of your sins. God loves you in spite of them. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," Paul says. No matter what you've done. God loves you. Ok, but how does that help us put Jesus' teaching into practice? When we realize the truth of the gospel, we can love God back. It's one thing to sin against someone you never talk to and don't expect to hear from any time soon. It's much harder to sin willingly against someone you're close to and stay connected with constantly. And so we cultivate a loving relationship with God...

And here's my third thought, which I think is of the deepest importance. We desperately need God's help. And we don't just need God's help because we're condemned without it, and forgiven with it. But as people who *have been forgiven*, we need God's help to do the right thing. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Jesus says, "for they will be filled." Really plain talk right here from Jesus: if you want to do the right thing, God's going to help you do the right thing. If doing the right thing is as important to you as eating and drinking, you're not going to end up lacking.

We're not on our own here. We can't pull ourselves up by our bootstraps into living faithfully. It simply *has to be* God who does it. And God gives to those who ask.

We'll affirm the Apostle's Creed together in a few minutes. One thing we'll say together is "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is not a spooky name for wishful thinking. The Holy Spirit is the person of God who comes into the heart of a Christian to help. And everything we say in the creed after "I believe in the Holy Spirit," is something that the Holy Spirit brings into our lives.

We'll need to do a sermon series on the person of the Holy Spirit some time soon, but for now, I just want to remind us of what Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit. These are traits that come along with the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And they're the traits that give us the strength to be faithful. Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is love... joy..., peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Self-control alone would be enough to keep us from lust and swearing. Imagine what we could do with the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives!

So here's a crazy thought: let's ask God for that. Let's ask God for more of the power of the Holy Spirit. I want the Holy Spirit to be my hunger and thirst every day. Without the Holy Spirit, I am helpless. With the Holy Spirit... I am helped. Jesus says that our Father in heaven gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. And so I ask, all day, all the time. I pray, "Come, Holy Spirit."

Let's pray.

Come Holy Spirit. Awaken us to the truth of Jesus. Awaken us to the reality of your presence. Reveal to our hearts the depth of your

forgiveness, and the make us into people whose thoughts would convict us in a court of law of being Christ's faithful followers.