

### ***Telling It Straight***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Once upon a time – and not *that* long ago – news reporters reported *the news*. They tried to be objective, presenting the facts and letting their audience interpret them. Not anymore. These days when you read, hear, or watch the same story from two different news outlets, you get two radically opposing interpretations of what happened, why it happened, and how it affects you. It used to be that editorials in which editors expressed their opinions and political preferences were confined to the editorial page or to programs that were clearly identified as partisan in nature. Now every story gets what they call “spin”. Each one gets told in such a way that it supports the agenda of the side telling it. And if there’s no way they can do that because the stubborn facts are too damaging, it’s a story that side doesn’t tell. You’ll only hear *that* story from the other side. The bottom line is that for folks like you and me who want to know what’s going on in the world, it’s awfully hard to know for sure. We’d like someone out there to tell it to us straight. Like Detective Joe Friday, we want “Just the facts, Ma’am.” Catering to this desire, one pundit out there calls his show the “No spin zone”; but it’s hard not to get dizzy watching it. It’s spinning just as fast as the others, it’s just spinning in an opposite direction to most.

But spinning facts to distort the truth is not a new thing. It started way back in the Garden when Satan said, “*Die?* Did God say *you’d die* if you ate that fruit? Naaah! Let me tell you how it *really* is.” Spinning God’s Word one way or another has been his game ever since. And it can be very subtle, as we see in today’s Gospel, which is a continuing installment of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Here he is addressing four specific aspects of God’s Law. And you’d think, “What could be more clear? God says do this, don’t do that. It’s black and white, isn’t it?” No, not hardly. For Jews at the time of Christ it was a lot more complicated than that. They had the Law of Moses handed down at Sinai, sure; but on top of that they had the writings and traditions of the elders, which was a long compilation of opposing rabbinical opinions about what each law meant and how it was to be applied. The net effect was to make the law rather murky. Instead of black and white, you had shades of gray with all kinds of built in loopholes, alibis, and excuses. And that in turn took the bite out of the law. Among the many opinions of the rabbis, you could find the one that best suited you and your particular situation and convince yourself – with scholarly support – that you were indeed keeping the law even if you weren’t.

In last week’s Gospel we heard Jesus say that he didn’t come to change or abolish the law, but to fulfill it. And in order to do that and help his hearers understand what that means, he had to cut through all that rabbinical quibbling and set the standard of God’s Law back up where it belongs – the way God intended when he gave it in the first place. So, what we keep hearing in this section is Jesus repeating the phrase, “You have heard such and so from your teachers; *but I tell you ...*” It’s like the ultimate no spin zone. Here we have Jesus telling it straight.

But before we dive into it, let’s remember who he’s talking to. While the Law of God applies to all people, and all will be judged according to its exacting standards, Jesus is here specifically addressing his disciples, those who believe his Word and trust in him. These are they to whom the Beatitudes with which he began the Sermon apply, the same folks he called the salt and light of the world. In our context, he’s speaking to members of his Church: to us. We don’t expect those outside the Church who are without faith in Christ to live according to these standards. We rather anticipate that they won’t. But we must. It’s part of how we act as the salt and light of the world. People should be able to look at us and the way we relate to one

another as the children of God and see the contrast – a contrast that should be as clear as night and day.

He begins with the Fifth Commandment: “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.” It’s easy for us to see and acknowledge the grave evil of physically taking someone’s life, but Jesus goes beyond that to the true heart of the Law, which is to love your neighbor as yourself. Failure to do that in any way: to withhold your mercy and forgiveness from someone who has wronged you, to hold a grudge against them, to wish them ill or to rejoice in their misfortune – all of these stem from the same loveless source and are in the eyes of God equivalent to murder. This is true also, Jesus says, of the ways we seek to wound others with our words, hurling verbal hand grenades that can continue to sting and burn long after the initial blast. Such unkind words, he says, put us in danger of hellfire.

Jesus warns too of the hypocrisy of standing before the Lord in worship seeking his forgiveness while at the same time harboring in your heart anger and judgment against a fellow believer. When doing so you ought to hear the Lord ask, “You want *what* from me? Forgiveness for your many sins? Then why won’t you forgive and be reconciled to so and so for their comparatively minor offense against you?” The sons and daughters of God are called to be peacemakers, and thus we seek to be reconciled to any brother or sister with whom we have a grievance or who has a bone to pick with us. And if you don’t or if you’re not willing, then it’s the Lord himself who accuses you. He’s the Judge who will put you in the prison from which there is no escape and all eternity is not enough time to pay the debt you owe.

Having told it straight regarding the Fifth Commandment, Jesus moves on to the Sixth: “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.” Again, Jesus goes beyond the physical act to where it originates: in the heart and mind. What the Law requires is absolute chastity: all acts and even thoughts of sexual intimacy being confined to marriage – the lawful union of a husband and a wife – the only estate designed by God for that purpose. Any other thought, expression, or sexual act falls outside the bounds of the Lord’s intent and therefore is equivalent to the sin of adultery, which it should be noted, was serious enough to be considered a capital offense in the Law of Moses.

It isn’t for us in our day; but the *eternal* consequences remain just as severe. This is why Jesus warns that if your eye or hand is causing you to sin, it’s better for you to remove them from your body than to keep them and end up with them in hell. It’s his way of highlighting just how damaging and dangerous sexual sins are – even those that only take place in the mind. And in our sex drenched culture, it’s awfully hard not to be exposed to temptation. But we do have some control over it. We can guard our eyes from seeing some things. We can guard our hands from clicking on the images or pressing the remote. But ultimately, of course, it’s not our eyes or hands that cause us to sin. Again, the problem is with the sinful heart. We need a new one of those. And the Lord provides it whenever and as often as we confess our sins against the Sixth Commandment and receive his forgiveness for Christ’s sake. By his Spirit he enables us to live chastely as he requires.

Still on the Sixth Commandment, Jesus turns to the question of divorce. The rabbis had a field day with this issue because the Law of Moses did allow for divorce in certain narrow circumstances. But what they had done is to open that little gap to allow for divorce in almost any case. After all, they reasoned, if God permits divorce, it must be a good and godly thing to

do. Not so, says Jesus. God's intent for marriage is for it to be a total commitment and a lifelong union that ends only in the death of one of the partners. The one exception by which divorce was permitted – but not by any stretch of the imagination required – is if one of the partners who had sworn lifelong fidelity, “This body of mine now belongs exclusively to you” goes back on that sacred promise, betrays their partner, and gives their body to someone else. In that case, and only in that case, a divorce could be granted to the partner who was betrayed. Why? Because the foundation of trust upon which a marriage stands has been irreparably damaged. Cheat on your partner, and you rob from them the security and peace of mind God wants them to have in marriage. Trust thus lost is virtually impossible to restore. It can be done, however, not with human means but with divine help. In Christ and his forgiveness, even this most serious breach of promise can be repaired.

But this is the standard for we who are in Christ. We are to honor the sacred estate of marriage, keep our holy vows, and encourage one another to be faithful to their partners. This is increasingly difficult because the culture that surrounds us despises marriage. It puts it off. It encourages sex outside of marriage. And it treats marriages with less respect than half the garbage our homes put out. At least some of that's recyclable. Not marriages. We just throw them away without a second thought. The most common reason given for divorce is “We just don't love each other anymore”. As a pastor I've had people tell me, “I feel certain that God wants me to divorce this person and marry that one.” I can guarantee they weren't actually hearing from God on the matter. No, they were listening to the devil, to the world, and to their own sinful flesh.

Perhaps the biggest lie is that divorce doesn't hurt anyone. The Lord knows better. He knows that divorce hurts everyone involved. That's why he hates it. He would have us hate it too, and for us to do everything in our power to prevent it. And yes, due to hard and rebellious hearts it isn't always possible to prevent it. When that happens, we recognize it for the tragedy that it is. But as a rule, as God's people, we should be modeling to the world his design for marriage and showing its vast superiority to what world calls good.

And now, finally, coming off of his telling it straight regarding this, life's most sacred promise, Jesus takes up the matter of taking oaths in general. “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven ... or by earth ... or by Jerusalem ...” You see, the rabbis had done their dirty work here too. They had come up with a complicated system of *degrees* of oath taking, the relative weight and binding power of the oath depending upon what was called upon to bear witness. An oath taken “by heaven” was considered to be stronger than an oath taken “by the earth”, and so on. The thought was that it was less serious a matter to break an oath taken by something lower on the scale. So, if you swore by your own head, it was no big deal if you broke your promise.

What this introduces, of course, is various shades of truthfulness and reliability. Jesus' point is that among God's people there should never be any question of integrity. If I say I'm going to do something, you should count on it being done. If I have to add some kind of oath formula to prove my intent to keep my word, I'm basically saying you can't trust me otherwise. This is why Jesus says, “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

Now, please understand that Jesus is not here forbidding the taking of oaths. The Lord himself takes oaths in the Scripture. Even at his own trial, Jesus testified under oath. There's a time and place for such things. Marriage is a good example. Testifying in court is another. But

again, the point is that among the faithful, in our dealings with each other such oaths should be completely unnecessary. We should be known as people whose word is our bond.

In next week's Gospel as the Sermon on the Mount continues, we will hear Jesus tell it to us straight regarding more aspects of God's Law. Then, as today, we'll see how miserably far short we fall of the standard that God requires of us. This is necessary because our natural tendency is to do like the rabbis of old who spun the Law of God this way and that so that they could convince themselves that they were keeping it. It's a form of self-justification. Lower the bar far enough and I can meet the standard.

Jesus' point is that you can't. He puts the standard back up to its unreachably high point and tells it to us straight so that we will despair of our own efforts to do what the Law requires and to seek our salvation in him who fulfilled the Law of God for us and who paid the penalty of our sins by his death on the cross. It's by faith in him that God imputes to us his righteousness which far exceeds that of the scribes, Pharisees, and rabbis of old. And trusting in Jesus he makes us the children of God: children who like Jesus seek to do the will of the Father. And we do. Daily confessing our faults and living in his forgiving grace, by the power of his Spirit he causes us to be the salt and light of the world – imperfectly, yes – but ever striving toward the goal: the goal that he will one day cause us to reach when he raises us from death and grants us life in his kingdom. And we can be sure of it because he always tells it straight. All praise and thanks to him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***