

But I say

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany) is Matthew 5:21-37. This text includes Jesus' teaching on: Anger, lust, divorce and the taking of oaths.

In last week's reading Jesus pointed to his keeping the Law perfectly and warns about watering down biblical teaching. As he launches into today's topics there are common phrases that he uses: "*You have heard that it was said But I say to you.*"

When he says "*you have heard it said,*" he meant what the disciples had heard from Jewish religious teachers such as the scribes and Pharisees. The Jewish religious leaders had been lowering biblical standards to accommodate the people's sinful ways.

When Jesus declares "*but I say to you,*" it is like he is saying: "But I myself am saying to you ..." This adds to the contrast between what Jesus' hearers have heard from others who interpreted the Torah and what Jesus himself now declares to them as the true meaning of God's Word. Jesus will be contrasting inadequate interpretations with God's true intention for the disciples of Jesus.

Jesus teaches that not only murder but also anger makes one liable to the hell of fire. He urges His disciples to energetically seek reconciliation with fellow believers who might be vexed with them. This stern preaching of the Law causes us to take stock of our own behavior and to confess that we often, through sinful anger, fall. Our only hope for salvation is to trust the reconciliation that Christ accomplished by His sacrificial death (cf. 2Co 5:19). Having been reconciled to God, we may be reconciled with one another.

In 5:29-30 Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation, for even a blind man can lust. The point is that we should deal as drastically with sin as necessary. It is getting the heart right as Matthew 15:19 teaches, "*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*"

Jesus condemns the easy divorce practices of His day that resulted in adulterous relationships. He teaches that the sacred union of marriage is lifelong.

Swearing of oaths was allowed. Jesus condemned swearing falsely and breaking an oath. The disciples of Jesus are not to use words lightly or take oaths as if such swearing may or may not possess binding force. To make a promise in the presence of God or of human authorities that God has established is no trifling matter. Speech matters. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. It is the devil himself who wants you to think differently about your words.

Sin originates in the heart. At our birth, we were already sinful. But through Holy Baptism and the Word, the Spirit has renewed our hearts and washed away all our sins (Titus 3:4-7). Although our hearts will never be completely free from sinful desire in this life, God's Spirit continues to lead us on the path of holiness.

Prayer: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Ps 51:10). Amen.
(TLSB)