

## The Depth of our Sin

### Matthew 5:21-37

All kinds of people are the targets of impersonators—even televangelists. A guy named Michael Klimkowski does a convincing job of impersonating megachurch pastor and best-selling author Joel Osteen. So much so that he once walked through the crowd at a big speaking event where Osteen was the headliner and shook hands and greeted visitors.

People were excited to see him! By the time he reached the stage, though, Osteen's security guards realized he wasn't the real thing, and they escorted him out of the stadium.

When asked what his secret was to impersonating Osteen, beyond the physical resemblance, Klimkowski said it was all about attitude. 'The Joel I play is kind of a schmoozer. I like to Hollywood him up. He's this wheeler-dealer type,'" he says.<sup>i</sup>

So the secret to being a great celebrity impersonator is how you look and how you act; appearance and attitude. Funny, but that's also the formula for looking really religious. Appearance and attitude. And both are easy to fake.

Our passage this morning is part of a larger teaching about the kingdom of heaven. We've been working through it for a few weeks now. And for today's Bible passage, we need to remember what we talked about over the past few weeks. So let's review because it's important to remember the first part of the conversation that got us here.

Two weeks ago we looked at the Beatitudes. We talked about Jesus teaching us that our righteous acts don't earn our way into God's kingdom. Instead, those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for God's sake are blessed in God's kingdom. This was some revolutionary, mind-blowing stuff for Jesus' audience.

Then last week he seems to go in the opposite direction telling the crowds that he didn't come to abolish the laws of the Jewish religion, but to fulfill every single word. And then, as if they're not confused enough, Jesus says, "**For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**" (Matthew 5: 20)

And so people hearing this would have wondered how that was possible since the Pharisees and teachers of the law could barely keep the law perfectly themselves. How could anyone else surpass their level of righteousness?

Now Jesus has everybody's attention having challenged everything they thought they knew about their religion. And so the scene is set for today's lesson. He begins, "**You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.**"

Jesus is saying it's a sin to even harbor an angry thought. He adds that if you even look at a woman lustfully you've already committed adultery in your heart. That's extreme. What hope is there for anyone?

Everyone listening to Jesus that day suddenly became aware of the depth of their sins. Most were feeling good about themselves because most had never murdered, or

stolen, or committed adultery. But now Jesus is saying that sin goes deeper than our actions, it involves the inner attitude that leads up to that action.

**Jesus is saying that sin doesn't start where we think it does.** Sin doesn't start with an action. Sin starts with a decision—that this life is our life and that God has no business interfering with what we want. Those who think sin begins and ends with outward actions are fooling themselves.

Look at it this way. The cruise doesn't start the day you board the ship. It starts the day you begin to think about going on a cruise. It continues when you research dates and ships and costs. It goes further when you apply for vacation days and set aside money; when you apply for a passport, when you pack, when you travel to the port...

In the same way no one wakes up and decides to commit murder that day. The act of murder starts with contempt or hatred or envy or anger or resentment or pride. Plans are made, details worked out, alibis developed. The act of murder thrives in a heart that harbors hatred until the day the act of murder is committed.

The same is true for revenge or gossip or adultery. The act itself is the culmination of a thought born long before and nurtured over time. And it flourishes in a soul devoid of God's presence. Only the presence of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit can stop sinful thoughts from becoming unthinkable acts.

Jesus says that sin doesn't start where you think it does. **But he is also saying sin doesn't end where you think it does either.** Look at verses 23-25: "Therefore, if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you're still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison."

Another to look at this passage is to say that, since we all bear the image of God, if we're in conflict with each other, then we're in conflict with God. The gift Jesus is referring to is the sacrificial animal laid on the altar and killed to atone for a person's sins. But Jesus is saying, "Forget about the sacrifice! Go deal with the sin. Humble yourself, confess, repent, reach out, be reconciled."

Worship is being in the presence of a holy God, and the greatest sacrifice we can bring to a holy God is a pure heart. People around the world sit in church pews each week and wonder why they don't experience the joy and peace that others around them do. Could it be that they need to be reconciled with a brother or sister? Is it possible that they need to have a conversation with someone sitting around them?

Reconciliation matters more than religion. That's the clear meaning of Jesus' teaching. We want to believe that worship means coming to church for one hour a week and sacrifice means teaching the third-grade Sunday school class.

But Jesus is saying that reconciliation and unity are spiritual acts of sacrifice and worship. That they require more than just showing up - they require humility and confessing our sins to one another and repentance and forgiveness and grace. All the things Jesus came to teach us.

Jesus has already shaken up the crowd by telling them that sin doesn't begin where they think it does; neither does it end where they think it does. **Lastly he says that the starting and ending point of righteousness is living with the heart and mind of**

**God within our souls.** We need to be so full of God's spirit that there is no room for such things as angry thoughts, or lustful thoughts, or greed.

Author Max Lucado experienced some heart problems a few years ago, so his doctor recommended what is known as a catheter ablation procedure. As he was being wheeled into the surgery prep room, Lucado began joking with the surgeon.

"You're burning the interior of my heart, right?" said Lucado

"Correct," said the doctor.

"You intend to kill the misbehaving cells, yes?" Lucado continued.

"That is my plan," the surgeon nodded.

"As long as you are in there," asked Lucado, probably with a twinkle in his eye, "could you take your little blowtorch to some of my greed, selfishness, superiority, and guilt?"

The surgeon smiled. "Sorry," he said, "that's out of my pay grade."<sup>ii</sup>

We are a self-centered people. Purifying our heart and cleansing it from sin is above our pay grade, too. We need God's Spirit within us for that. We need to spend more time with God, in worship, in prayer, in repentance, in obedience, in acts of service.

And as our love for God grows, we'll begin to think with the mind of God and respond with the heart of God. That's the starting and ending point of all that God means for us to be.

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<sup>i</sup> "Meet The World's Top Joel Osteen Impersonator" by Michael Hardy, Feb. 1, 2018, *Texas Monthly*,

<sup>ii</sup> Max Lucado, *Grace: More Than We Deserve Greater Than We Imagine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).