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Sermon 20 SEPT 2020

JSW 7: Jesus Says WHAT About Sin?

- Matthew 5:17 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- 27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.
- AUDIO: (announcer) It's time to gather your friends and family, get out your Bibles and your sermon notes, and open your hearts and minds, because this is another Sunday sermon in a series called "and then, Jesus says what?"

- Good morning, good morning, and welcome to the LargsNaz online service. We are so glad that you have joined us today, from wherever and whenever you're joining us, you are welcome here—if you're part of our church family we hope that you are making an effort to gather with others as you are able and as the guidelines allow. If you're new here, we are glad you have joined us, and we hope that you'll take some time to listen to some previous services, and get familiar with what's there, and that you'll continue to join us each week.
- I believe that today, as always, God has something profound and life-changing to say to each of us if we have ears to hear.
- Today is the SEVENTH Sunday in our sermon series called "and then Jesus says WHAT"-- the penultimate Sunday--next week we'll close out this series and next Sunday at 6pm on ZOOM, we'll have a Second Helping Bible Study that will review all that we've heard over the past two months.
- If you've been following the series, you know that for the last several weeks we have been considering some of the things that Jesus says in the gospels-- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John-- things that Jesus says that can be a bit confusing, or easy to misinterpret--statements that might make us say "and then Jesus says WHAT?"
- And as we have been considering the answers to that question--we've been demonstrating ways that we might respond when we come upon a passage in the Bible--particularly one that comes directly from the mouth of Jesus--that might not be easy to understand, things that are challenging—even difficult.

- And we have looked at passages from all four gospels over the past six weeks-- we started in Matthew's gospel, where in chapter 10 Jesus said "I have not come to bring peace but a sword"--then in week 2 we moved to Luke's gospel, and in chapter 14 we heard that Jesus said that in order to be his followers, people needed to hate their parents and their families and even their lives--that they were to take up the cross and follow him.
- In week three we moved out of the Synoptic gospels to the Gospel of John, and in chapter 12 of John's gospel we heard Jesus tell Judas that the poor would always be with them when Judas criticised Mary for what he saw as wasteful behaviour.
- Then in week 4 we turned to the one gospel that we hadn't looked at yet--the gospel of Mark, and in chapter 4 we heard the parable of the Sower and we heard Jesus tell his disciples and others who were with them that he spoke in parables IN ORDER THAT seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand or repent and find forgiveness.
- So by Week 5 we had asked "Jesus says WHAT" about peace, parents, the poor and parables, and then Pastor Tasha shook things up by looking at chapter 7 of Mark's gospel and asking "Jesus says what about the Syrophenician woman?" Pastor Tasha helped us explore Jesus' somewhat confusing response to this Gentile woman when she asks him to heal her daughter.
- And then last week we returned to Matthew's gospel, and looking at chapter 11 we asked "Jesus says what about stress?" and we considered how it could be that Jesus could describe following him by saying on the one hand "take up your cross" and on the other hand saying "my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

- And today we're going to stay in Matthew's gospel, but we're going to back up to chapter 5, and we're going to ask the question "Jesus says WHAT. . .about SIN?"
- But before we get into the Scripture I want to tell you about something I read in the NEWS a few days ago.
- Now, every once in a while I'll watch the news on TV, but I often, pretty much every day, check out the news sites online--I like to keep up with the COVID situation--whether cases are rising or falling, how close we are to a vaccine, what the new recommendations are--I like to follow the weather here and in the US--most of the time the weather in the States is a lot more, well, let's say "exciting" than it is here--they have forest fires and hurricanes and such--but anyway just a few days ago I came across a news story--and the first time I saw it, I thought "that can't be real," but then I saw it reported by several media outlets--both the BBC and Sky News carried it--
- and what they reported was that a young Slovenian woman, she's only 22 years old, her name is Julija Adlesic--they reported that she had just recently been sentenced to 2 years in prison for insurance fraud. And she had a boyfriend who was involved in the scheme, too, and he was sentenced to three years, and his father was also found guilty of helping out with this fraud.
- And what she had done, apparently with their help, was to take out multiple insurance policies over the past year or so--the kind of insurance that pays you if you become permanently disabled in some way--and she had accumulated enough insurance that if she lost her left hand she stood to be paid 1 million euros--about £925,000, or about 1.2 million dollars.

- And the investigation into what happened found that some time ago her boyfriend did some searching online--he was looking up information on Google about how artificial hands work, and then just a few days after that Julija and her boyfriend and his dad took a circular saw and one of them cut Julija's left hand clean off just above the wrist.
- Then they took off for the hospital and when they got there they said that Julija had been trimming branches off of a tree and had accidentally cut her hand off. And they said that in the panic of the situation they had forgotten to bring her hand with them--they said that because her disability had to be permanent to collect all that money. Unfortunately the police recovered her hand and it was re-attached, and the trio were charged with fraud and convicted just a few days ago.
- Now I don't know what kind of dire straits Julija and her boyfriend and his Dad found themselves in that made £925,000 look like a reasonable exchange for cutting off her hand--but if I were 20 years old I would like to think that there would be no amount of money that would even begin to make me consider having my hand cut off with a circular saw and spending the next 60 or 70 years without it. It would be unthinkable. Inconceivable. Unimaginable. The idea of cutting YOUR OWN hand off intentionally--that makes no sense.
- And yet, that is exactly what Jesus suggests in Chapter 9 of Mark's gospel and in the scripture we heard today, in verse 30 of Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says: if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it

away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

- And this is not all--in the verse just before this--verse 29, Jesus says the same about your right eye--if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.
- Now there is no disputing the language here, Jesus is saying, quite clearly, if your eye or your hand cause you to sin--get rid of them. Better to lose part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into Hell. The word used there is Gehenna, and we could do an entire Bible study on what that means, but let's save that for another day and go with the common understanding of "hell." We all know what "hell" is.
- I'm reminded of a church sign I saw once in North Carolina--it was outside the "Grace" Baptist Church in Blowing Rock, and it said "if you don't think there is a hell, come hear our pastor preach." I'm not sure if the churchmember who was in charge of that sign knew exactly what they were saying, but it was funny enough for me to take a picture of (that picture's in your sermon notes).
- But hell is not our topic today--our topic is SIN. Our topic is "Jesus says WHAT about sin"-- and as we look at Jesus' words here in verse 29 and 30, we have to ask, IS Jesus here seriously, and literally, recommending amputation and enucleation--chopping off your hand or pulling out your eye--as effective methods of preventing sin? Because it sounds like he is.
- In order to begin to understand what Jesus is saying here, let's back up a bit and consider the context. We are in Chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, so this is quite

early in Jesus' ministry. Matthew has told us the story of Jesus' genealogy and birth and his childhood in chapters 1 and 2, and in Chapter 3 Matthew tells us about John the Baptist, and Jesus' baptism, and then in Chapter 4 Jesus is tempted in the wilderness and begins his ministry--he calls his first disciples, four fishermen called Simon Peter, and Andrew and James and John, and Jesus goes throughout Galilee proclaiming the gospel and healing the sick and casting out demons--and great crowds begin to follow him.

- And that is where Chapter 5 picks up--at the beginning of Chapter 5, Jesus goes up on a mountain, and with his disciples with him, he begins to teach.
- If you haven't figured it out already, this is the beginning of Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount," and it runs from the beginning of Chapter 5 to the end of Chapter 7 of Matthew's gospel, and at the end of it, Matthew tells us that the crowds were astounded at Jesus' teaching, because he taught as one having authority, and NOT as their scribes.
- Since our scripture today is in Chapter 5, let's familiarise ourselves with what Jesus is saying here in the first of 3 chapters that make up the Sermon on the Mount. Now, there are four parts to chapter 5.
- First, Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, that familiar but still eyebrow-raising list of those who are "blessed"--the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted and hated.
- He then--second part-- tells the crowd that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world--and that they should let others see their good works that give glory to the Father.

- Third, and this is where things really start to get relevant for us this morning, starting at verse 17, through verse 20, Jesus sets up what he is about to say about the Law--about the Torah, about the commandments that folks have heard equated with righteousness, probably for their entire lives.
- And Jesus tells the crowd who's listening that his teachings do not abolish the Law or the Prophets, the Hebrew scriptures and the Laws that God has provided--Jesus is letting them know that his teachings do not contradict or replace the Law and the Prophets, but FULFILL them, COMPLETE them--He says that not one IOTA, not one letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Jesus is saying that he is bringing the Law and the Prophets to fruition, that he is making clear what it is to follow the Law of God--and in verse 20 he makes a startling claim.
- He says, " For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"
- Imagine what the crowds must have thought--the scribes and the Pharisees are the PROFESSIONAL religious folks--they are the EXPERTS in the LAW--their whole lives are about knowing and following the Law to the LETTER, and Jesus is telling this crowd that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, they're going to have to be EVEN MORE righteous than the Scribes and the Pharisees.
- What a tall order! Now keep in mind that this is the first time that Jesus has mentioned the scribes and the Pharisees in Matthew's gospel--it's not until we get to chapter 23, as we heard last Sunday, that we really get the details of Jesus' opinion about these hypocritical burden-creators. John the Baptist, in chapter 3,

called the Pharisees and Saducees a "brood of vipers" and told them to bear fruit, but this is the first we hear about the scribes and Pharisees from Jesus--and what Jesus is about to do is to give this crowd six examples of rules or laws from the Torah that the scribes and Pharisees have undoubtedly told them that they are to follow--to the letter. Jesus prefaces each of these six rules with "you have heard that it was said," one thing and then adds, "BUT I say to you. . ." something else.

- And so this next section of Chapter 5 is called the "antitheses"--and that label might make you think that Jesus is going to offer a contradictory teaching to each rule that he talks about--for instance, you might think that he's going to say "you have heard it said 'do not murder'" but I say to you that sometimes murder is ok--I mean, if you've got a good reason for it--but NO--you might THINK that Jesus would present the OPPOSITE of each of these rules--that he negates them or supercedes them--but remember that Jesus says he has not come to ABOLISH the law but to fulfill it--and so what we find in each of the antitheses is Jesus taking a rule and AMPLIFYING it, completing it--actually making it stronger and more far-reaching, getting down to its SPIRIT and not just the LETTER of the LAW.
- Let me show you what I mean: These are the six antitheses: (follow along in your Bible if you can)
- First, in verse 21 Jesus says "you've heard it said 'you shall not murder' but I say if you're angry with someone, or if you call them a fool, you'll be liable to the hell of fire--so before you give an offering to God, make sure your relationships with your brothers and sisters are reconciled

- I'm going to skip over the second one--we'll come back to it--but the third one begins in verse 31--you've heard it said that if you want a divorce, give your wife a certificate of divorce--but I say to you, don't treat your relationship so cavalierly--don't get divorced at all except for infidelity.
- Next, fourth one in verse 33, "you have heard it said 'don't swear falsely'" but I say don't swear at all, just tell the truth and let all your words have the weight of an oath
- Then the fifth one in verse 38, you've heard it said "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" but I say don't seek revenge or payback--give even more than you are asked
- And finally in verse 43, "you've heard it said 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'" but I say to you "love your enemies"--don't just love those who love you--love those who hate you--
- And here, while Jesus has already called the crowd to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees, that's a HIGH bar, but here at the end of Chapter 5, he tells them they should also do more than the tax collectors and the Gentiles--that's a LOW bar. Jesus is here putting the Scribes and Pharisees in the same group with tax collectors and Gentiles - - in the group of those who do not adequately follow the Law--those who are not righteous enough.
- So, when we look at these "antitheses" we see that Jesus offers an amplification, an expansion, a completion, of each original rule to a point where it almost sounds impossible to follow. And maybe it is impossible to live up to the

standards that Jesus describes here. At least in our own power--by our own efforts.

- But let's back up to that second "antithesis" that we skipped over--beginning with verse 27.
- 27 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.
- When we look at what Jesus says here in verses 27-30, and when we think about these words in the context of what else Jesus is saying in chapter 5, I want to suggest 3 points, three observations, three truths, about SIN, that I believe God would have us consider together this morning.
- The first is this. **Sin is serious.**
- Now, there have been Biblical interpreters who looked at Jesus' words here in verses 29 and 30--and I'm not talking about unknown Biblical interpreters, I'm talking about some of the BIG names--who looked at Jesus' words and said, "well or course he's not being literal here, he's being metaphorical--Jesus doesn't really expect anyone to cut off their hand or pull out their eye"--Augustine said Jesus is not referring to a person's actual "eye" but those things that are "ardently loved" LIKE our eyes--William Tyndale said something similar--that

Jesus is not being literal, but referring to those occasions that might cause us to sin--like dancing, and feasting--and finally John Calvin said that Jesus was being hyperbolic here, that what Jesus was doing was encouraging us to "prune back" anything that might stop us from offering obedient service to God.

- I am certainly in no position to argue hermeneutics with these heavy hitters from church history, but it does seem to me that there is a seriousness to Jesus' words here that can be lost when we over-metaphorize our interpretation. I think that when Jesus says "it's better to cut your hand off than to go to Hell," he's not kidding around--he's being serious-- he means "it's better to cut your hand off than go to Hell," because sin is serious.
- Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "if your right eye causes you to sin, just look away-- just avert your gaze." No--Jesus says pull your eye out and throw it away. This is extreme. This is radical. Why? Because sin is serious. Jesus doesn't say "if your right hand causes you to sin," give it a slap on the wrist, and tell it to be more careful--no, he says "cut it off and throw it away." Because sin is serious. Sin breaks the relationship we have with God and with others and will find us distanced, CUT OFF from the source of life and peace and harmony. This is why Jesus uses the language of Hell here--sin will result in the loss of one's whole self, and so Jesus uses a graphic image, a gruesome suggestion to get his message across.
- And I want you to notice where Jesus places the responsibility for preventing sin. He doesn't say "if YOU find your co-worker attractive, and YOU're thinking impure thoughts about her, then tell HER she needs to dress differently so she's

not distracting you," no, Jesus says your objectification of others is your responsibility--if you can't stop looking with lust, and if your looking is going to cause you to sin, then get rid of the eye that enables you to look. That is a serious solution to the serious problem of sin. But surely it's not the ONLY solution--as we'll see in just a minute.

- The second point I want us to consider about sin as we look at Matthew Chapter 5 this morning is this: **Sin is more than sinful "acts."**
- We have looked at these 6 antitheses--and many of them involve a specific "act" that the Law says to avoid--a negation, an act that you shouldn't DO-- and these acts are simple enough to avoid--do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not swear falsely, don't divorce without a certificate of divorce--but in each of the antitheses Jesus moves beyond simple avoidance of an ACT, and puts the focus on intention, and motivation, and the condition of the heart
- And so in verses 29 and 30 Jesus mentions a person's RIGHT hand and RIGHT eye--and that's because the right side--the right hand, for instance, is associated with intentional acts, with volition--it is the PROACTIVE side, while the left is the REACTIVE side--and so a soldier carries a sword in the right hand, and a shield in the other
- And so Jesus can say it's not enough simply to not kill someone, or to not have an affair with someone--if the condition of your heart and your motivation and your volition is directed toward that sinful act, you're just as guilty

- And so Jesus tells us that a person can avoid specific sinful acts and STILL be guilty, still be sinful, still be unrighteous--because simply avoiding certain acts is not the same as being righteous--
- A person can SAY, "look how holy I am--I don't smoke, or drink, or murder, or commit adultery," and to them I would say congratulations, the potted plant in my living room could say the same thing, but that doesn't make it righteous.
- Holiness is more than avoidance of certain acts, NOT DOING certain things, because sin is about more than certain acts.
- But do you know holiness is also about more than DOING certain things? The scribes and the Pharisees DID all sorts of things that were prescribed by the Law--offerings and sacrifices and rituals and deeds like praying and giving alms--and yet Jesus still called them hypocrites because their hearts were not right with God, and their relationships with their neighbours were not holy. The scribes and Pharisees show us that we can do the right thing for the wrong reason.
- Both sin and righteousness are about more than the things we do or don't do--they are conditions of the heart-- an orientation toward the world, or toward God--so that holiness is being oriented "God-ward" -- we talked about that in the sermon back on March 15.
- Finally, the last point about sin that I want to mention that we find here in Matthew chapter 5 is this. **Sin is not inevitable. Sin is not immutable. Sin is not permanent. Sin is not unavoidable.** If Jesus suggests that cutting off your

hand or pulling out your eye can prevent you from sinning and keep you out of Hell, then it must be so.

- But let's be honest here--amputation may be effective, but it is not a sustainable solution to the problem of sin, because eventually--- eventually you're going to run out of body parts. Right hand, right eye, left hand, left eye--what's next on the chopping block? Ultimately there will be nothing left to cut off if you have not dealt with the underlying problem.
- And what is the underlying problem? Jesus tells us in verse 28--but I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Where? In his heart.
- But a person can't very well cut their heart out and throw it away.
- Oh, no, but a person can say with the Psalmist "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."
- A person can say I am crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.
- And because a person can say these things, Jesus can say to us in verse 48 what he said to the crowds here in Matthew's gospel: Be PERFECT, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
- Perfect! As if the standards that Jesus set in these antitheses weren't impossible enough to attain, Jesus commands us to be PERFECT.
- How do we do that? By trying really hard? By giving it all we've got in our own power, by our own strength?

- No, by saying, "I surrender all"-- by saying in the words of the Apostle Paul, Lord I present my body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.
- Perfect--The Greek is *teleios*, Jesus only uses that word one other time in the gospels, and do you know what it means? It means "complete in all its parts." Nothing missing--nothing cut off-- nothing that needs to be cut off and thrown away
- Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus wouldn't have commanded it if it weren't possible.
- As we sing this song together, it is my prayer that this is your testimony this morning--if it's not, it can be--all to Jesus, I surrender, all to Him I freely give-- join us in singing if you would