

What's been on the minds - & day planners - of so many this past week? (That is, until the epic ice storm and school/work cancellations interrupted our planning.) Valentine's Day, of course! Relationships! (Now if you still forgot to do something and used the snow emergency as an excuse, you can see me for counseling afterwards.) We don't need to be so exclusive as to only think of relationships between husband and wife, or between a young man and young woman who are "in love." Think of the bonds of parents to their children, children to their parents, and so on within families.

Jesus talked about relationships in Matthew chapter 5. Yes, on this Sunday that closes out "Valentine's weekend," we get some straightforward guidance for how love really expresses itself – in God's book. Some of it deals with the relationship between husband and wife. But this love topic covers a much wider range than just that –notice how Jesus' sermon touches on every relationship between people.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, our Savior's words take us into such an important part of our lives, covering so much ground about our relationships. Bless us through this Word. Use it to strengthen, teach, rebuke, correct, train and equip us. Let it be so. Amen.

One of the leading headlines this past week blared: "Valentine's Day Ruined!" What would happen to retailers – like floral shops – if an icy coating didn't thaw in time for shoppers to get out and pick up their valentine gifts? Worse than that: what would happen to relationships if there were no gifts given on Valentine's Day?

While the retailers may have suffered, I wonder if this "inconvenient" ice storm was God's Valentine gift to families? Due to the weather, maybe some spouses – some families – spent some time together, which otherwise wouldn't have happened. I said "spent." Think of that. Time is something "spent," much like our other resources. Which shows more heart to you: when a person spends time with you, or when they buy something for you? Listen to this statistic from a California State University website: the average amount of time per week that parents in America engage in meaningful conversation with their child? 3.5 minutes! That's per week! <http://www.csun.edu/~vceed002/health/docs/tv&health.html>

Ok, now we've traveled into an area where you and I may carry some substantial regrets - maybe some lingering or reappearing guilt. That study might not reflect you, but I'm sure all of us have had "cringe" moments as we look at our individual record on relationships, especially with those who matter most to us~ parents, children, husbands, wives, friends.

This text certainly drives the self-righteous person to despair. But: listen! It also can help children of God in our daily battle against our sinful nature. For instance: pinning my hopes on being "pretty good" is exposed as phony. My pride is left utterly deflated. That's good! For any hope in mere outer obedience, so popular, is shattered at the sound of Jesus' voice here in Matthew ch.5.

God's Word directs us right to Christ. Check out this verse – in the paragraph before our section today. Jesus said, "I have come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets" (5:17). He alone could be the perfect son, brother, friend. Yet He willingly took the blame for our selfishness, our guilt and our shame. He fulfilled every prophecy where God promised to take our punishment for sin from us. In exchange He placed his perfect life on our record. Through faith in him, we have eternal life - open to us through his empty tomb. There is no greater love.

Now He calls us – blood-bought, raised-to-life children – to love as He loved. . . He gives us strength & instruction for living out His love in this world. Need some direction to love the precious souls God has placed around you in your life?

This section has so much to offer us! 1) concrete ways to serve God as we show love to people we encounter; 2) concrete encouragement which we can use to squelch the sinful urgings from our flesh. All the while, we never take our eyes off of His love [motion up]... He picks us up & cleans us up when we fall, He gives us strength to move forward with purpose. Let's do just that!

Let's first look at v.21-22. "You have heard... but I tell you" means: there is an assumption being made amongst God's people, about God's law. It was being twisted into something that was pretty easy to keep. You see, people by nature don't want to see their total depravity before God, so they try to claim they can keep God's law just fine. And so people try to place distinctions between sins. For instance, the common thought was that only murder was breaking the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. WORLD'S VIEW: "I have the right to be angry! And: What's the big deal if I call someone a fool? They may well deserve it!"

God's View: Jesus showed how foolishly this commandment was being handled. He explains... Murder, anger, and even name-calling/bad-mouthing ~ they're all sin. Period.

You see, our Lord cares about more than just people's physical well-being. The old rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" - it's just not true. People are left hurting from the mental, emotional wounds inflicted by words and by anger!

But who has not been guilty of anger? Even the smallest among us have been guilty of name-calling and anger. And with that clear, we are drawn back to see: We need our Savior. Thank God for Jesus!

Jesus goes on in vs.23-24 to show us how to move forward when we've sinned against others. He depicts a scene, and he puts his audience into it. Picture yourself. You are moving to express your relationship with God. You are worshipping the Lord when you have a moment of clarity: you realize, then, you have wronged someone, you have hurt them. Jesus leaves the sin unnamed: maybe anger gripping your heart, or hurtful words fired with all their shrapnel into someone else. The important thing: you know you have sinned against them.

Then, look what priority level our Lord places on the hurt party: "Go to him; be reconciled." Jesus shows how much God cares about the people our sins have hurt. And whether or not we can do something to repair relationships – as soon as we recognize what we've done wrong, God wants us to deal directly with the problem we have created, with the person we've hurt.

Too often we rationalize and make excuses. Jesus' instruction teaches us how important it is to recognize the true seriousness of our sins against others.

Did you notice what the individual was doing – in Jesus' description – when he first recognized what he had done? [Answer: worship.] At worship we encounter our God – we hear his truth – we are confronted with our wrongs - and we witness his grace & love. This is the "recipe" – if you'll allow that description – for bringing us to an understanding of our sin, confession of it to others, and the proper desire to correct whatever wrongs we can.

Vs.27-30 moves us to a new example, now dealing in the area of the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment. **WORLD'S VIEW:** "What's the big deal if I look at a woman - or a man - like that? It's only a little 'eye-candy'?" So goes the mindset of the world. Modern technology presents us with added dimensions to the world's distorted view: "What's wrong with acting out my fantasies on Grand Theft Auto, or on other online "games"/ sites? I'm not hurting anyone or sinning against anyone. It's literally just a computer simulation! "

Again, there were assumptions made in the past, as there are now. The accepted idea was that you're only sinning if you participate in sex before marriage or with someone else's spouse. **GOD'S VIEW** Jesus explains... You've already broken God's law by each look that lusted – the sin, in those cases, carried out in the heart.

Our Lord cares about the person's whole being: physical, emotional and spiritual. And that applies to you, to the people walking by you... to the people plastered on the pages... or pulled up on the screen of your electronic device. God wants you to think how such sin uses, exploits, and even tortures and enslaves people. God wants to keep us free of a warped/twisted view of his gift of sex ~ which He wants you to enjoy within the beautiful unity of marriage – the only place it belongs in His book.

Jesus handles a common excuse in vs.29. Can you imagine this being said: "But I can't help it – these eyes, which you gave me, God, cause me to lust!"? Jesus shows how foolish it is to blame the eyes. The heart is the true source of the sin. And so Jesus isn't advocating that we mutilate our bodies. Jesus' point is: See the danger! See the catastrophic potential! Sin threatens to enslave your heart and soul, and drag you down to hell. Jesus with his words is saying: "But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life." Jude 20-21

Think then of the practical, modern day lessons to be learned from vs.29-30. If you can't keep yourself from sinning with what you look at online, put software in place to cut you off from anywhere you shouldn't be surfing. Or cut your internet connection, if that's what it takes. Throw away your Grand Theft Auto game, with its prostitution, torture and murder. If more help or support is needed in some way, talk with me. I can get you connected with WLCFS: Christian Family Solutions. All because... eternal life with our gracious God is much too precious to throw away.

In Vs.31-32 Jesus once again presents us with where the World's View has gone wrong: "What's the big deal if two people get a divorce, it happens all the time?" Even thousands of years ago, a very casual approach to divorce had developed – marriage was ended easily.

But Jesus counters this with God's truth. Our Lord cares about people! He doesn't want anyone to go through all the pain, heartache, and destruction of divorce. Think through how many people are affected when a marriage is discarded by easy divorce. If a spouse decides to divorce with no scriptural reason, he (or she) is putting the spouse (and children, if there are any) through unnecessary suffering! Psychologists have noted, in cases, people experience greater grief than that of a loved one's death. Part of that painful impact is: If people don't know the facts, the wronged spouse can be viewed as guilty. The NIV's translation does not reflect the passive verb forms at the end of vs.32. Correct meaning: the one seeking such a divorce causes their spouse to be looked upon as an adulterer. And in a similar way: the one who marries the divorced person is mistakenly thought to be guilty of breaking the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment.

Dear friends, as we bring together all that our Savior has taught us today, we know the heartache we have caused in the lives of those around us. So first and most importantly, then, thank the Lord for the healing he brings! When you feel guilt, look to this news:

- Because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed. For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is His faithfulness! – Lam. 3:22-23
- This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another... We love, because he first loved us. – 1 Jn 4:10-11,19

That's our conclusion! Look how the Lord loves us. Never lose sight of that. He cares about the temporal and eternal wellbeing of every one of us. His love sets us on our path: to walk in love.