

**Sermon for 2-16-20**  
**Gospel: Matthew 5:21-37**  
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How is your heart? I wonder, right now, how is your heart?

I'm not asking about your blood pressure, or cholesterol level. Those things are important, but they're outside my expertise. I'm asking about the wholeness of your heart, the energy of your heart, the power of your love.

This week's Gospel reading is a continuation of last week's reading, from Christ's famous Sermon on the Mount. Last Sunday, we heard Jesus say that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it; and today, he gives us glimpses of that fulfillment.

The fulfillment that Jesus describes, the fulfillment he asks us to pursue, is perfect integrity. Living with integrity is not easy for us today, and it wasn't easy two thousand years ago – but if we claim Jesus Christ as Lord, we must make him the Lord of our hearts and minds, and not just the Lord of our prayers and rituals. For Christians, living with integrity means that Jesus must be our Lord up there (at the altar) and out there (in the world) and right here (in our hearts).

Sounds agreeable enough, right?

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus gives us four examples, all following the same shape. He describes obedience to God's law -- and he doesn't dismiss it, or denigrate it -- but then he describes what it might look like to obey the law, its letter and its spirit, perfectly, with all of our being.

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First paragraph – don't kill anyone. As long as you don't kill anyone, you've obeyed that particular law. But if you want to obey the law with integrity, with your body, mind, and soul in perfect harmony, you can't hold grudges, you can't nurture resentment, you can't call names, you can't insult and demean other people -- nothing that undermines the dignity of another person (even a little bit). You have to make amends and pursue reconciliation.

Second paragraph – don't commit adultery. As long as you don't cheat on your spouse, you've obeyed that law. But if you want to obey the law with integrity, you cannot lust after a person other than your spouse, you can't even think about it. You have to purify your mind, heart, and

soul (not just your body). And you can't view other human beings as mere objects, useful for your own satisfaction.

Third paragraph – he's only talking to the men, here. This one can be a bit confusing, but remember that Jesus is preaching in a context where women are considered property of the men in their lives. The law says that a man cannot divorce his wife without giving her a legal certificate. Any woman whose husband leaves her “high and dry” without that certificate would be seen as damaged goods. But even with that certificate, most divorced women faced a future of either extreme poverty, a life of begging on the street, or prostitution. Those were the only options. So this law is about protecting the dignity of women in a context that routinely denies their basic humanity. And Jesus says to all the men around him: do not do this, do not make selfish choices that deny the worth and humanity of the women in your life. Use your power for the good of those who have no power.

Fourth paragraph – don't swear falsely. As long as you don't lie when you've sworn to speak the truth, you've obeyed that law. But if you want to obey the law with integrity, you can't swear at all, by heaven or earth or anything else. You have to let your words be honest and straightforward, standing on their own merit. You have to say what you mean and mean what you say, always.

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Make no mistake, this fulfillment of the law is intense, it is radical, it is demanding. It's a bit intimidating, isn't it? Following the letter of the law is hard enough! Jesus asks us not only to behave rightly – to follow God's rules – but also to reorient and refocus our hearts and minds so that both our inner and outer lives proclaim Gospel values. This is difficult stuff – but Jesus knows it's difficult, and he asks us to do it anyway. He's asking us to pursue perfection! He, who was and is perfect, asks us, who are thoroughly flawed and imperfect, to be like him. How can Jesus ask us to pursue a goal he knows we'll never achieve?

One of my favorite Anglican thinkers, Evelyn Underhill, described this challenge beautifully in an essay she wrote for a radio broadcast in England in the early 1930s. She said: “It is far easier, though not very easy, to develop and preserve a spiritual outlook on life, than it is to make our everyday actions harmonise with that spiritual outlook. That means trying to see things, persons and choices **from the angle of eternity**; and dealing with them as part of the material in which the Spirit works.”<sup>[i]</sup>

My friends, this is a lot harder than it sounds, at least for me. That harmony between the tenets of my Christian faith and my everyday words and actions is difficult to maintain. Even though I believe that all persons are worthy of dignity and respect, it is hard for me to resist

judging and calling names and putting labels on those who offend me or get under my skin. I want to confront prejudice and greed and cruelty lovingly, and honorably – but sometimes I fail. I make unfaithful choices, and I say unfaithful things. I abandon Gospel values in favor of expediency, or comfort, or popular approval, or smugness and self-satisfaction; and when I do that, I know I have abandoned any claim I might have to living with integrity.

Thanks be to God for forgiveness and mercy.

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There's a feeling that comes with those unfaithful choices. I might notice my heart burning in my chest, my pulse pounding, or a wave of heat rushing through my body. Part guilt, part shame, part conviction; this is what happens to me when I choose, either through word or thought or action, to betray my Lord and Savior. It's the feeling that comes with getting swept up in the powerful waves of indecency and selfishness and cruelty that swirl around us all the time, and seem to get stronger and stronger with each new day....

Can we acknowledge our sins, both individual and collective? Can we repent of our unfaithfulness? Can we trust in God's mercy and forgiveness? Can we commit ourselves to newness of life, to living with that perfect integrity which Jesus demands? He asks us to reorient our hearts. He asks us to take part in the fulfillment of God's law by thinking and speaking and acting and living with integrity.

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A few years ago I came across an image that was being shared over and over again on social media: a drawing of an anatomically correct heart, complete with aorta and coronary arteries, and there's text laid over the image, which says "I'd rather have a bleeding heart than a dead one." When I first saw this, I chuckled. It appealed to me on a very basic level because I've been called a bleeding heart more times than I can count, and I've always thought it an unusual insult – there are plenty of good reasons for a heart to bleed, and we don't have to look very far to notice them.

But this image of the heart, with this text, stuck in my mind and I couldn't shake it. And while I was meditating on today's Gospel reading, I realized that this contrast – bleeding heart versus dead heart – is a false one, an oversimplification. We love reducing complex challenges, complex problems, to black-and-white binaries, don't we? Makes life seem so easy!

Jesus isn't asking for our hearts to bleed, exactly. Jesus is asking for obedient hearts, dedicated hearts, committed hearts, hearts that are strong enough to proclaim and pursue Gospel values

of love and peace and dignity and mercy without ceasing, hearts that are not afraid to confess their failures and reorient themselves again and again and again. Hearts that are willing to engage in the challenging work of living with perfect integrity.

So again I will ask: how is your heart? May we all have the courage and strength to confess our sins, repent of our failures, accept God's mercy, and commit ourselves to walking the hard path of perfect integrity together. Amen.

[1] Underhill, Evelyn. *The Spiritual Life*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1955. 80.