

You Have Heard It Said

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Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, anoint us with your Holy Spirit,
as we hear your Word this day.

Fill us with your truth
that we may walk in the ways of God
and all to your glory and praise.

Amen.

Background

In our gospel reading, Jesus is revealing and teaching deeper meanings and implications of God's law for our living. He wants not only the outside of the bowl of our lives washed, but also the inside of the bowl of our lives to be clean. Ultimately Jesus is challenging us and helping us to fulfill the Great Commandment:

*To love the Lord God with our all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and
to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.*

Following Christ's teaching and path, we find ourselves freed from our selfishness. We'll be lifting others up. We're choosing life.

Jesus also talks about “H-E-double toothpicks” in our passage. Yes—hell. Not once, not twice, but three times! The word “hell” in the original language actually takes us to a place not below the earth, but on the earth in the Holy Land—the Valley of Hinnom or “Gehenna.” This is a place where pagan worship took place in the Old Testament—where children were sacrificed.

By New Testament times, the Valley of Hinnom was a cursed place, where trash was burned outside of Jerusalem. Fire was always burning there. It always had a thick layer of smoke. It was a filthy, smelly place where useless things were destroyed. It came to be understood metaphorically as the place of God’s judgment against evil.

So when Jesus talks about hell, he’s emphasizing how serious and vital his message was. It needed to be followed with the utmost attention. Sin must be avoided and disposed of like stinky garbage.

Let’s hear now the Word of the Lord from ...

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSVue)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[a] you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult^[b] a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell^[c] of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court^[d] with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

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,^[e] 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.^[f] ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin,^[g] 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.^[h]

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

**The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.**

SERMON – "You Have Heard It Said"

In his book *"The Happiness Hypothesis,"* social psychologist Jonathan Haidt likens the human brain to an Elephant and its Rider. The Elephant is the emotional side of our brain, and The Rider is the rational side of our brain. Perched atop the elephant, the Rational Rider holds the reins and appears to be in control of the Emotional Elephant. But the rider's position is precarious because the six-ton elephant has a slight advantage of strength over the rider.

We've all experienced times where our inner Elephant got the best of our inner Rider. Where we let our impulses lead us to do what we *knew* wasn't in our best or long-term interests:

 eating that extra piece of cake, having that last drink we should have said no to, letting that angry, hurtful word slip out of our mouths never to be retrieved.

We thought it would lead us to happiness, but we were let down. We let others down.

Jesus is the Elephant Whisperer. Christ lovingly takes the reins of our lives and leads us along a way of life that's not easier, but is more joyful, fulfilling, and compassionate to others and to ourselves. Jesus is showing us what's really important:

 How to love God, others, and ourselves from the heart.

Jesus' first guidance for us is this: Do not murder or have murderous thoughts. Be a person of emotional integrity. As the Body of Christ, be a church of collective emotional integrity.

There is an English proverb that says, "A person is a fool who cannot be angry, but they will not remain angry if they are wise." We need anger in our lives. Anger motivates us to act, to stand up against abuse. To have the courage to address difficult things. Nothing would ever get done if there were no anger. Repressed anger leads to either depression or blowing our tops like Mt. St. Helens. Aristotle nailed it when he said we need to learn to express anger wisely: for the right reasons, at the right time, in the right place, for the right length of time, and at the right person or party. But we know what happens when anger remains unchecked.

We all pay it forward at great cost:

- The boss yells at the executive.
- The executive yells at the employee.
- The employee yells at the kids.
- The kids yell at the cat.

So Jesus knows we need boundaries to properly vent, contain, and express our anger in a godly manner. First and obviously: Don't kill. But let's go deeper into the unregulated anger that leads to violent crimes. Go to the root cause. Don't let your anger fester and stew. Don't allow bitterness, resentment, unforgiveness, grudges or vengeance poison you. It will not only kill your relationships. It will kill you.

The words we use in our homes, in political discourse, on social media are important and spiritual—use them with care. Jesus reminds us—don't mock or slander people. That's character assassination, killing their dignity.

There's a rabbinic tale of the Rabbi Simon ben Eleazer. After a day of studying and research, he was feeling good about his intelligence, insight, and scholarship. A passer-by greeted the Rabbi along the way—a person not of great consequence in the community. The Rabbi initially ignored him, then snidely remarked, "You *raca*—you buffoon. How ugly you are. Are all the men of your town as ugly as you are?" "That I do not know," said the man. "Why don't you go and tell the Maker who created me how ugly is the creature he has made."

Jesus provides a better way for us. Be one to reconcile. Build others up with your words rather than tearing them down. Be a person who mends fences.

This being Super Bowl Sunday, I've got to use a football story about a better example to follow.



NFL coach Steve Wilks was recently passed over for a head coaching job. Many were surprised he wasn't hired. He took over as the interim coach for the ailing Carolina Panthers when they were 1-4 and led the team to a 7-10 finish. The players liked how he led and coaches around the league were impressed.

And yet he was passed over for the job for a white head coach who had been fired just months before after leading the Colts to a 3-5-1 record. Whether race was or wasn't a factor, it was a major disappointment. But listen to the maturity of Wilks' comments:

"The sun rose this morning and by the grace of God so did I," he explained.

"I'm disappointed but not defeated. Many people aren't built for this but I know what it means to persevere and see it through."

Disappointed but not defeated.

Not despairing.

Not destroyed nor hateful.

Jesus challenges us to reflect on our relationships—have you offended anyone? Make things right, as much as is in your power.

To “come to terms quickly” can also be understood as “to be disposed kindly toward.” In fact, reconciliation takes precedence over worship. Leave your gift at the altar, says Jesus. First be reconciled with your brother or sister, then offer your gift. We can’t be right with God until we are right with one another.

Jesus’ second guidance is this: Don’t commit adultery AND don’t entertain lustful thoughts. Be a person of sexual integrity.

Anger hurts the other by hatred. Lust hurts others by desire. But they both are motivated by selfish gain. By using the other.

As humans we innately long for connection and relationship. Whether it be through marriage, or friendship, family, or faith in God. No man or woman is an island. Cheating devastates everyone involved because it tears apart two lives brought together. Some of us have been cheated on. Others of us have cheated. Probably all of us have been impacted by this either directly or indirectly in our families.

In the Scriptures the heart speaks of a person’s thought, intention, and moral life—the center of who they are. Jesus is trying to save us and those around us from a heart ripped apart: Be sexually faithful to your spouse. Jesus also was trying to protect women who were often left desolate by divorce. Jesus goes deeper. Don’t have emotional affairs, avoid pornography, casual sex, or out of control fantasies. Don’t entertain lust and don’t act on it in inappropriate ways.

Notice Jesus’ striking overstatements on what to do about this. He’s purposely exaggerating about poking out your eye or cutting off your arm. What He’s really saying is take the needed action to not entertain or act upon your lusts. Self-denial and resisting your impulses is good for you and good for the community. Do whatever you need to do to overcome the temptation. Don’t put yourself in compromising positions. Think ahead how to respond appropriately.

We shouldn’t give up too easily on our marriage covenants. However, there are situations where divorce is necessary. When there’s physical, emotional, sexual, or verbal abuse. If there is repeated infidelity. And those sorrowful times when we make really bad decisions about who we marry or when we just grow apart. In those times we throw ourselves on God’s grace and forgiveness and seek to be faithful and loving in this moment and in the future and to learn and grow from our past mistakes, rather than recycling them in new relationships or becoming bitter people.

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Third and finally, don't lie or be deceptive. But also, don't make ANY oaths. Let your yes be yes and your no, no. Let everything you say be trustworthy.

You shouldn't have to swear on a stack of Bibles to have someone believe you. Be a person of integrity in your speech. Relationships and societies run on trust. Troubles happen in our marriages, relationships, and business dealings when we conceal the truth. We get caught in the tangled web of our lies. But in being people of honesty, we build trust in our relationships. In the strength of Christ, let's back up our words with actions.

Sometimes the loving thing to say is yes. Other times the loving thing is to say is no. Do both with grace, integrity, and consistency. Be quick to make things right with a person when you can't follow through with what you initially promised. Don't just avoid lies, let your normal words be truthful and reliable on their own.

Above all, let Christ, who is mighty in word and deed, think and speak and live through you. And let Him also forgive you when you fall short of your aspirations—and you forgive others when they do the same.

Amen

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<https://www.lcms.org/about/beliefs/who-is-jesus>

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