

***Gone to Meddlin'* - Sermon Based on Matthew 5:21-37**
by David Hindman on Sunday, February 13, 2011

Early in life did you ever get into a fight with another child and have an adult step in and tell you to say you're sorry. And with teeth clenched you muttered, "I'm sorry!" And the adult said "Say it like you mean it!" And you put on a sweet smile and said, "I'm sorry." But even though you said the words you weren't really sorry. You did what you were told but your heart just wasn't in it. What was said was not what you felt.

Today is Scout Sunday. I was a Boy Scout. I stood with fellow scouts, raised my hand and recited the 12 points of the scout law: a scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, brave, clean and reverent, and all the rest. Most of the time I rattled them off without a lot of thought. I obeyed the law if it was easy or suited me. I was friendly and kind to people I liked, but I could make fun of others who were different. I was loyal until popular kids began to put someone down, and then it was survival of the fittest. Up against peer pressure, I wasn't very brave. I knew the law by heart but it did not rule my heart.

For three weeks we've been listening to Jesus' teachings in Matthew's so-called Sermon on the Mount. We began with the Beatitudes, Jesus' description of the marks of a truly happy life. Last week we heard Jesus say he hadn't come to do away with the Jewish law or Torah, but to live out its

full meaning and purpose. And today we listened to some examples of what Jesus means. He teaches us to pay attention to our actions *and* to what happens inside us as we live our lives. That's when Jesus stops preaching and starts meddling.

Most of us would agree with the Old Testament law and teachings Jesus quotes. Murder is wrong. Adultery's a bad thing. Divorce happens. Oaths are necessary because sometimes truth telling is crucially important. But then Jesus takes us someplace we may not want to go. Jesus gets at the heart of things and what's in our hearts. And we don't always want to own what's hidden there – anger, lust, dishonesty. We put on a good face. But we know our dark side and how easily hurtful words and cruel put-downs can come out of us. We guys wouldn't be caught dead in a “gentlemen's club” but we can entertain thoughts and fantasies that make the show at The Paper Moon seem tame. We who are divorced squirm when Jesus says there's no good reason for one. And Jesus expects us to tell the truth all the time. But an we really do that with friends or in business or politics or foreign policy? Jesus looks in my heart and sees what I don't want others to know and I barely admit to myself. He's gone to meddling.

And that makes us uncomfortable. We want to be known as good decent folks. But by Jesus' standard, none of us is squeaky clean. If God's will is

not to give in to anger or selfish needs and desires, or never to divorce or always to tell the truth, we all fall short. None of us is the good scout we pretend to be. Suddenly the message that all sin and fall short of God's glory is more than a Bible verse - it's an indictment. And I don't like Jesus outing me and making me own up to who I really am.

This doesn't feel like good news. Once more religion puts a burden on me greater than I can bear. I hear these words of Jesus and feel weighed down by another reminder that I'm not who I say I am or want to be. But this really is good news. I promise. Here's some good news: God already knows all about us, even the dark side we want to hide. And God still loves us. What a gift and a blessed relief. We don't need to hide ourselves from God. God knows us better than we know ourselves, so we can face ourselves honestly. God loves us and invites us home to a new life and a new heart. God covers us with mercy and grace and says, "You are accepted" and offers to help us become more than we are. What a relief, and what good news!

And God is not yet finished with us. Everything Jesus says here is true. We know that. We can kill people with guns and knives. And our lingering grudges and contemptuous attitudes and cruel words can be equally deadly. Last summer at All God's Children Camp, one of our

members saw a little boy no more than 7 years old, his head down on a table. When she asked him what was wrong, all he could say was “I am nothing.” Someone is killing him slowly but surely. Jesus calls us to step away from words and attitudes that can destroy someone. And God’s Spirit is great enough to help us do that. If God can create universes and raise the dead, God can change our hearts and habits! So when we’re tempted in our hearts to do such things, God can help us tame our tongues and step back from bullying or saying killing things. And when we miss the mark, God gives us forgiving strength to move forward again.

I used to think Jesus’ words about hacking off a hand or plucking out an eye were downright terrifying. They are Middle Eastern hyperbole and exaggeration. Jesus isn’t being literal. But he is saying life is serious business. Don’t let anything get in the way of becoming the person you know God wants you to be. Even if you keep falling and failing, keep asking for God’s help. Keep getting up to move toward God ruling your life – heart, soul and body.

Here’s the good news – Jesus’ words here are not to be taken literally. They’re not a new law impossible to keep. Jesus is sketching out what life ruled by love looks like at its best: we care for and honor each other, body and spirit. We treat each other with the dignity and respect we’d show to

Christ. We don't use another person for our own selfish pleasure and personal satisfaction – not even on a website or through a rented movie. And we live truthfully so no one ever doubts our word. Our constant honesty and integrity make taking an oath totally unnecessary. And we honor marriage as God's good gift and a way to show God's never-failing love in the committed love of two people made one.

I confess regretfully that I'm divorced. It doesn't gladden God's heart that I failed in my first marriage. The husband I was didn't honor God or my first wife. But God is rich in mercy. Everyday I thank God for the gift of Teri. By God's grace I pray and strive to become the man and husband God wants me to be and Teri deserves.

Reformation leader Martin Luther said the temptation to commit sin is like a bird flying overhead. "I can't keep a bird from flying over my head. But with God's help I can keep it from nesting in my hair and making a home there." I worked once with a friend putting together a used gas grill. It was getting the best of us. We wrestled with it for 45 minutes and after awhile I said I was impressed that he still hadn't cussed. His reply has stayed with me. "Years ago I decided cursing wasn't good for me and I've just gotten out of the habit." I think of another friend who has several accountability partners. He calls on them whenever he's deciding if it's OK

for him to watch a particular movie. Movies themselves aren't bad. But he knows some movies spark lust in him. So he'd rather stay away from the fire so he can be the person inside and out he claims to be – a follower of Jesus. Here's Good News: God's strength is available to those who care for others, for they are showing the spirit of Jesus inside *and* out. That promise is for us, too, as we seek to live Christ's way. Thanks be to God.