

Two more days until Valentine's Day! It's a wonderful day for giving cards, gifts, and tokens of affection to the ones you love. Valentine's Day is about matters of the heart. Whether it's a cute little card and a candy treat given in kindness to a school friend, flowers sent by a secret admirer, or a very nice, sincere gift given to a beloved spouse, (who in my case Amy has been a true blessing from God), Valentine's Day is definitely about matters of the heart.

Our Gospel lesson today shows us that our relationship with God is also very much a matter of the heart—not the romantic valentine heart, but the spiritual heart that makes you His or not His. In our text today, Jesus is responding to people who felt a right relationship with God was a matter of following the rules, proper etiquette, or having good behavior-outward things. He teaches us instead that true righteousness is in the heart.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was speaking to people living in a culture that based its view of righteousness on outward appearances. In a way that's really not much different from our culture today. For example,

today if you stand for the correct social causes, give to the right charity, are kind to animals, then you're generally seen as a "good" person. It's all about outward appearances. Back in Jesus' day it was much the same. If you put on a good show, followed all the rules that the Pharisees and teachers of the law added on to God's holy law, people saw you as a righteous person. The problem was that by adding to God's law, the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees had actually reduced the law to a list of do's and don'ts that people could keep.

But Jesus says righteousness must go beyond that. In fact, in the verse right before our Gospel lesson, Jesus says, "I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v 20). Instead, Jesus says that the **heart** is the place where the Commandments are kept. In other words, the things we do **outwardly** are proof of what's going on **inside**. It's a matter of the heart.

And so in our text, Jesus goes through a sampling of just some of the Ten Commandments to prove this very point. He starts with the fifth; the

Pharisees had reduced this commandment to the obvious law they could keep quite nicely: 'Don't take someone's life and you've kept this requirement.'

To that Jesus replied, "**I** say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire" (v.22).

Now, most of us have never murdered anyone, but how perfectly do we **love**? That's what Jesus is getting at. This is what He's asking us, "Do you become selfishly angry? Do you insult people we don't like? Do you hold grudges against those whom you feel have done you wrong?" These are just as sinful as murder. It's a matter of the heart. If we sin in our heart, it's as bad as sinning outwardly so other people can see it, too.

Next, Jesus brings up the sixth commandment (v 27). Jewish society in Jesus' day was actually very lax on the sanctity of marriage. If you were a man and didn't want to be married to your wife anymore, it was very easy to get out of the situation. You could write your soon-to-be ex-wife a

certificate of divorce and it was done. Sort of like an **anti**-Valentine card, if you will, and then that was that! You've followed the accepted rules of society. You were now free to remarry, just like that. But, Jesus says God has a much different view of divorce and any breaking of the sixth commandment. The command, "You shall not commit adultery" isn't simply a matter of outward acts of extramarital relations; it's a matter of the heart (vv 28, 31-32).

It's not just affairs, but affairs of the *heart* that are sinful—wandering eyes, divorce just because we're not getting along or we've become bored. These are just as sinful as open acts of adultery, because they're examples of not loving our spouses from the heart.

Next, Jesus gives just one way people break the eighth commandment, and it has to do with taking oaths. The Pharisees had developed an elaborate code determining that some oaths you really had to keep, while others you could let slide. Their purpose was to allow deceit—a solemn outward appearance while lying in the heart.

But Jesus shows God's will for His people: Any lie is sinful, whether it's the pretense of taking a solemn oath or not. Even something as serious as taking an oath can't make a deceiving heart pure.

Again, the point Jesus is making is that we have to be more righteous than just an *outward* keeping of the Law. True righteousness must be in the heart. It can't be about putting on a show, whether it's a show for God or a show for other people. God knows our heart. When our heart is pure, it will never produce selfish anger, insults, grudges, lust, divorce, or lies.

So, how well have you done with all this so far? (Pause) If we're honest: Terrible! We *can't* act in ways that are pure because our hearts are not pure! But that doesn't seem fair! I'm sure all of us here *want* to be good people. And to be sure, most of us can keep from killing people or having affairs, but the truth is, no one can control all those little sins that pop out of the heart.

The heart always slips. Every human heart generates selfish thoughts. The heart lets our tempers snap or words slip out. And, what's more, our eyes are open and then temptation jumps right in! There's no

way we can really be responsible for that, though, right? We're only human after all.

Yes, we're only human, but that doesn't mean we're not *responsible*. Jesus says we *are* responsible! He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (29–30).

Now, Jesus isn't saying we should literally poke our eye out or maim ourselves. He's using hyperbole, exaggeration, to make a point. He's saying, "Stop making excuses!" It's not your eyes or your hands that make you sin. It's the *heart*. It's the heart that causes sin. In order to be righteous, the heart has to be repaired.

Even the smallest sin proves our hearts aren't pure, and Jesus demands a pure heart. And that's exactly why we'll soon sing in our offertory based on Psalm 51, "Create in me a clean heart, O God and

renew a right spirit within me.” Thanks be to God, Christ does give us clean, pure hearts! The blood of Jesus purifies every heart. The physical heart is a very valuable organ—provided there’s blood in the body for it to pump. The blood of Christ flowing through the spiritual heart makes it righteous. That blood was shed on the cross and it purifies every heart. 1 John 1:7 says it, “The blood of Jesus, (God’s) Son, purifies us from all sin.” It’s the same blood we receive in the Lord’s Supper along with Christ’s body for the forgiveness of our sins.

Christ’s blood is what gives us the righteousness that exceeds that of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. Sins—big outward ones and small ones in the heart—are all washed away. Jesus’ blood has paid for every murder and every harsh word, every affair and divorce and every look that was a little too long, every perjury, and every promise we broke. Even though our hearts are corrupt, God declares them righteous. Your sins are forgiven!

Christ’s blood gets our hearts pumping. It makes us spiritually alive when we were dead. It gives us eternal life and then, Christ sends the

Holy Spirit to transform our hearts. When we believe in Christ, a radical change occurs: the Holy Spirit creates a new heart, a new spirit within us. The new heart really is righteous and pure, even though it's living right alongside what remains of our old sinful one.

The Holy Spirit also lives in us, so that our hearts are constantly staying in touch with Him. That same Spirit enables our hearts to produce pure actions.

Yes, the sinful nature continues to sin. The old heart is still apt to stray, but the new heart does love my neighbor, honors my spouse, treats others with honesty and integrity. The new heart desires to do what is right and helpful to others. This righteousness comes from the heart. Everything the new heart produces is from faith in Christ. This is the one pure motivation. That motivation makes the simplest act of kindness more righteous than anything the Pharisees and scribes did.

You see, our righteousness before God is always a matter of the heart. And by His blood and His Spirit, Christ has resolved that matter—in our hearts. He has made them pure and pleasing to God. Amen!

