

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah  
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“110%”  
Matthew 5.21-37

A certain church hired a local painter to repaint the outside of its building. This particular painter, unbeknownst to the leaders of the church, had a reputation in town for less than exemplary work and an inclination to cut corners. Sure enough, when he began to work on the church the first thing he did was to thin his buckets of white paint to make them stretch further, and to save himself some money.

One day he heard the pastor of the church practicing his sermon for the coming Sunday; the topic of the sermon, as usual for this pastor, was “Sin.” Well, that conniving painter stopped his work and listened very carefully to what the preacher was saying as he practiced, and, Guess what! He was convicted of his sin and filled with remorse and desire to repent.

He ran into the sanctuary where the pastor was holding forth, fell on his knees, and confessed that he had been cheating the church. In true and tearful remorse, he asked the pastor what he could do to make things right with God and with the church. The pastor had carefully listened to the man’s confession, and after his question paused for a few minutes to think what appropriate reparation would be. After a few seconds he had a flash of insight. “Here’s what you must do,” he told the repentant painter. “Repaint! Repaint! And thin no more!”

Jesus deals with the topic of sin in these verses, a part of his Sermon on the Mount. This famous sermon is the first of five great speeches that Jesus makes in Matthew’s gospel. The five discourses are widely agreed to correspond to the Five Books of the Torah, the Jewish Law: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It is most interesting that Jesus addresses almost directly some of the provisions of the Ten Commandments in this part of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, there are six so-called antitheses that Jesus unfolds in these verses and the ones that follow.

There is a common formula that he uses in introducing each one of these antitheses, which you are sure to have noticed in today’s reading. In all of the four antitheses we encounter today, Jesus identifies them with the

saying, “You have heard that it was said...” and very shortly follows with, “But I say to you.” “You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.”

For example, the first one goes like this: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder.’ But I say to you that if you are even angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to the judgment, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.”

On the surface of things, this development looks very, very bad for you and me. Just when we thought we were free from the constraints of the ancient Jewish law, Jesus comes along and tells us that we are subject to an even higher law. We are told that we are by no means released from the restrictions of the Torah, but instead must live by an infinitely more difficult set of requirements, because even our motivations are now subject to judgment.

This is bad in part because we know that no one has ever been able to live perfectly according to the Torah. Now we must live by an infinitely more difficult set of rules. What’s up with that?!

Jesus has warned us that these distressing instructions are coming. In fact, that warning was issued in last week’s reading from Matthew, chapter 5 verses 17-20. There Jesus says this to the crowd assembled on the mountain:

‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup>For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup>Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup>For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

As noted above, on the surface of things this is very bad news for us ordinary, sinful human beings. Isn’t that what the grace of God is all about? Freeing us from the restrictions of the Law, so that we can instead live lives

of joy and freedom in Christ? Sure, we know we still have to be good people, but now we are required to be super-righteous?!!

Those of you who have played competitive sports of any kind have probably heard your coaches say, at one time or another, that you and your teammates need to give 110% in order to win. I suppose that makes some sense. We have all seen sports teams and individuals achieve beyond their ability when they put forth a superhuman effort. Apparently Jesus is telling us we have to put forth 110% effort to be righteous, or we will be subject to judgment and to the hell of fire.

How many of us have never been angry with a sister or brother? How many of us have never looked admiringly at a person of the opposite sex? What about the prevalence of divorce? How many of us have never told a little white lie, or stretched the truth a bit when it was to our advantage?

What does Jesus say about these things? We are liable to judgment and to the hell of fire. We are to pluck out our eyeballs and cut off our hands if they cause us to sin. To paraphrase, Batman's sidekick, Robin, "Holy impossible system of ethics!" Is there no hope for us?

The good news: yes, there is hope. Note what the sinner is allowed to do in the first of the six antitheses, the one dealing with anger. When we recognize that we are bearing a grudge against another, we are commanded to go immediately and make it right. There is always space for us to go and work for reconciliation.

But we aren't even that good most of the time. Thus, we finally fall on the grace Jesus brings, the pardon we receive through him, because, frankly, none of us can now or will ever be able to achieve the requirements of the new 110% ethical system that Jesus describes.

When we hear Jesus speak difficult things like this, it behooves us to remember that very often he is speaking from the perspective of the kingdom of heaven, a very different place from any kingdom on earth. In the kingdom of heaven, living by these new and intensified requirements of the law is really and truly possible. However, we exist in a kingdom of heaven that indeed is already present here on the earth, but not yet complete. So our ability to live by the 110% rules is also imperfect. But we look forward to the completion of the kingdom, when Jesus returns.

In the meantime, you and I really are commanded to live by this new and infinitely more restrictive set of requirements. Really. But just as real is the mercy we receive, thanks to the one who speaks these words, the one who took on himself the just punishment for all the ways we fail. The one who guarantees us pardon when we sin. And the proper response to that pardon is always repentance, turning around, setting off on a new road. And continuing to strive to restrain anger, bridle lust, and refrain from lying.

So, team, your Coach wants us to go out there today and give 110%. But if we fail, fear not: that same Coach is always quick to welcome us back into the dugout with open arms and unrestrained love. Live according to an impossible set of morals, but never forget that we are deeply loved, and we are forgiven when we fail. Endless thanks to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.