

SLIDE 1

Fidelity

Deuteronomy 5:17-21; Mt 5:27-37

March 12, 2023

West Valley Presbyterian Church

1. Last week, we studied Jesus' extension of the commandment "You shall not murder." Jesus really goes to the root of what causes us to murder in the first place. He told us not to harbor anger and contempt, lest they lead to rage, which tears up the social fabric and sometimes does lead to murder. Instead, he said, we are to reconcile with anyone who has something against us. So how did it go this past week? I hope that we've all made some efforts to reconcile - though I know that can be really hard.

2. This week, we will study Jesus' extension of two commandments: "You shall not commit adultery", and, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." Both of those commandments have to do with fidelity: faithfulness in thought, faithfulness in action, faithfulness in speech.

3. And I encourage you to buckle up! Jesus' teaching in this passage is difficult; and, we can't just disregard it.

SLIDES 2-8

Deuteronomy 5:16-21

"You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Matthew 5:27-37

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of

the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

SLIDE 5

4. First, let's clarify a few things, so we won't go off on rabbit trails:

A. vv 29-30, Jesus is not speaking literally here. It's too bad we can't hear his tone of voice when he said that about the eye and the hand! His hearers, who did hear his tone of voice, understood that he was using exaggeration for effect. The men did NOT go putting out their eyes or chopping off their hands, because they knew that Jesus wasn't speaking literally. And because the people who did hear Jesus understood it as he intended, that same understanding has been passed down through generations of Christians.

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B. The other potential rabbit trail is v. 31, where Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Back then, men were free to discard women; but women were not free to discard men. And apparently there was a lot of wife-discarding going on. So Moses decreed that if a man is displeased with his wife, he has to give her a certificate of divorce, indicating that she is not at fault – which at least gave her a little bit of legal protection. But Jesus isn't primarily intending to amend the divorce laws, so we won't go down that rabbit trail either. He is primarily emphasizing God's intention for marriage back at the beginning of creation. Which we will get to in a minute.

5. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus emphasized God's faithfulness. God is the one who rules. God is the one who comforts. God is the one who redeems the earth. God is the one who satisfies our desire for righteousness. God is the one who shows mercy. God is the one who makes peace. God is the one who dwells within us to make us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Now, in this section, Jesus tells us what our faithfulness should look like.

SLIDE 4

6. First, fidelity of thought. Not only don't commit adultery, but don't even think about it. "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Literally, it's, "staring at a woman in order to lust after her."

A. Jesus isn't saying that a man can't look appreciatively at a woman. That's admiration. Lust is different in that it seeks mastery over another person, similar to what anger does.

B. He's also not saying that it's the women's job to make sure men don't lust after them. He's not saying that women have to wear chadors and hijabs and burqas so that men can't see them and be incited to lust.

C. What he is saying is that lust is potentially a marriage-breaker. It's not a joke. The one who lusts has "already committed adultery with her in his heart." Physical fidelity to one's spouse is not enough. Yes, it's a commandment; yes, physical fidelity is necessary; AND, your thoughts have to also be faithful. If they aren't – if you are yearning after someone else – that damages your marriage even if you don't act on it. Your spouse can generally tell if you're emotionally unfaithful even if you say nothing about it, and even if are physically faithful.

D. And that's why Jesus uses exaggeration for effect, telling us to pull out an eye or chop off a hand. What he's saying is that lust damages you because it damages other people around you.

Your lust damages your spouse, your marriage, and the object of your lust. All of which affects you as well as them. So don't yield to it.

E. Or, to state Jesus' teaching in positive terms: Love your spouse with your thoughts as well as with your actions. Fidelity of thought bears the fruit of fidelity of action.

SLIDE 6

7. So next, Jesus talks about fidelity of action, specifically in the context of marriage as it was practiced in the Judaism of Jesus' day.

A. One rabbinic school of thought back then, Hillel, taught that a man can divorce his wife for any reason, even if he didn't like her cooking, so long as he gives her a certificate of divorce.

B. The other rabbinic school of thought, Shammai, taught that a man can only divorce his wife if she has an affair with another man, which would mean that the marriage is already broken. Jesus sided with Shammai to a point.

C. But notice, Jesus' concern was protecting the woman, who had no rights in the law at the time. He says that a man can't divorce his wife except for sexual immorality, BECAUSE it damages his wife. "Makes her the victim of adultery", he says. Which indeed she would be. If her husband divorces her, what is she going to do? She's in a terrible position. There were hardly any jobs outside the home that women were allowed to do. If she doesn't marry again, how would she survive? But if she does remarry, then both she and her new husband are committing adultery against her former husband. She is the victim here, and that's why Jesus says that the first husband's conduct makes her the victim of adultery.

D. And, Jesus also says in Ch 19 that in the beginning the Creator made male and female and joined them together, and the two become one flesh. God's original intention was for lifelong marriage. Because of sin, our hearts were hardened, which is why there are concessionary laws allowing divorce. But, says Jesus, the way it's supposed to be is that whatever God has joined together, no one should separate. Our actions should remain faithful to the promises we made.

SLIDE 7

8. Third, Jesus speaks of fidelity of words.

A. Have any of you ever served on a jury? Then you might have been expected to promise "Do you, and each of you, understand and agree that you will well and truly try the case now pending before this court, and a true verdict render according only to the evidence presented to you and to the instructions of the court?" According to Google, that is the standard juror oath for the state of California.

B. When you served, do you remember if God was mentioned in the oath? If you didn't mention God, that's actually not a problem, according to Jesus. We should be equally truthful no matter who we are talking to.

C. Jesus says, we shouldn't have two standards for speaking the truth: one standard if we're making a promise to God, and another if we're talking to our fellow humans. Having two standards like that, he says, comes from the evil one, because it means that at least some of the time we're being less than truthful. (And guess who is the father of lies?)

D. Jesus says, only 1 standard. What we say should be completely, 100% truthful, all the time, period. God does hear us perfectly well whether we intend to talk to him or not. Our words

should be faithful, just as our actions and our thoughts should be faithful. Fidelity, faithfulness, should be the foundation of our thoughts, our actions and our words.

9. So. How many of us can say that we have always been faithful in our thoughts, and we've never felt lust for someone other than our spouse? And how many of us can say that we have always been faithful in our actions, and have never once broken our promises? And how many of us can say that we've always been faithful in what we say, and we've never once fudged the truth a little?

10. That's the problem. We do love Jesus. We do try to follow him as best we can. And, "as best we can" isn't good enough. It doesn't meet God's standards of fidelity.

A. On the one hand, we know that we don't measure up.

B. Christians do get divorced and remarry, usually for good reasons. This is a fallen world, and sometimes marriages break and reconciliation efforts fail.

C. Christians do sometimes struggle with pornography which is so easily available.

D. Christians do sometimes abuse others.

E. Christians do sometimes fail to speak truthfully, especially if it seems like that might get them into trouble; and sometimes embezzle or cheat on taxes.

11. And. On the other hand, we know that God's standards are for our own good and for the good of the world. If we could live up to them, our lives would be happier. I've tried to teach my children to live faithfully, even if I don't always manage it myself. And I want my grandchildren also to be taught to think and act and speak faithfully. I don't want God's standards to be relaxed. I want us to be transformed so that we can live by them.

12. So what do we do? How can we live as faithfully as Jesus commands us to do? Well, here's one suggestion from Martin Luther, concerning fidelity of thought: "I can't keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off." Unfaithful thoughts might still flit by. But we can prevent them from making themselves at home. We can choose to fill our minds with those things that lead us away from temptation and toward greater fidelity.

13. And here's a reminder from CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*: "To have faith in Christ means, of course, trying to do all that He says. There would be no sense in saying you trusted a person if you would not take his advice. Thus if you have really handed yourself over to Him, it must follow that you are trying to obey Him. But trying in a new way, a less worried way. Not doing these things in order to be saved, but because He has begun to save you already. Not hoping to get to Heaven as a reward for your actions, but inevitably wanting to act in a certain way because a first faint gleam of Heaven is already inside you." In other words, we can't transform ourselves; but over time, Jesus transforms us if we allow it, and continue to take his advice.

14 And here's a reminder from Jesus himself: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." If we genuinely want to be better, if we want to be more like Jesus, we will, sooner or later. He will transform us, given half a chance! Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. His very name, Yeshua in Hebrew, literally means God Saves. Yes, in Jesus, God saves. Jesus saves us both by his tough commands, so that we know our need of grace; and also, he saves us by the grace he gives us if we ask. If we know we need to be forgiven, and we ask, he will forgive. If we know we need his blessing, and we ask, he will bless us. So let's take some time right now to thank God for the standards he gives us, and, for the grace he also gives us that we might grow more like Jesus. Let's pray.