

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 12, 2016
St. Matthew 5:21-37
The Depth of Our Sin Requires A Savior
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Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

My fellow Toledoan, Gene Krantz, former flight director at NASA, never actually spoke the words. They have, however, become closely associated with Apollo 13. You'll recall there was an accident in space on the way to the moon. The engineers had to find a way to get the crew returned safely. In the movie version of the event, Krantz said, "Failure is not an option." This is how he looked at the mission.

In our mission to keep God's commandments perfectly, failure not only is an option. It is the only option for us. There simply is no way to achieve this goal of absolute obedience, this requirement Jesus puts on us later in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." [5:48]. Even if we obey on the surface, the depravity of our hearts is disobedient.

Beauty may be skin deep but sin lies deep in our hearts. We are conceived with sinful hearts. We are born with sinful hearts. We continue to have sinful hearts in our chests even as the Spirit has created new hearts of faith for spiritual and eternal life. Every inclination of those natural hearts are only evil, all the time, to paraphrase God in Genesis 6:5.

With these words in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminds us about the depth of our sins. Can there be any argument or debate about this? **The Depth of Our Sin Requires A Savior.** Failure to obey God's law perfectly is our daily reality. Our failure requires but one possibility for salvation, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus referred his listeners to the Old Testament on sin, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago." He then pointed to the sins of murder, adultery, and the taking of oaths. Jesus also referred them to the accommodation God allowed on divorce for the sake of society. This was not something God's Word had commanded. "It has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce," means the people looked on this as something pleasing to God when it was not.

There is more to the law God gives. The law often contradicts what people say is right. Jesus digs deeper into the depth of our sin. "But I tell you..." Sin goes beyond the actions of our bodies' members. The depth of sin lies in the very thoughts and desires of our hearts. James wrote, "Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, gives birth to death." [1:15]

You are a murderer though you have never taken a human life. You have had an argument with someone that needed resolution in repentance before coming to the Lord. You are an adulterer though you never have been unfaithful to your spouse, or had sexual relations apart from marriage. You are guilty of misusing God's name though you have not committed perjury.

Those sins lie deep in our hearts waiting, not always struggling to get out. Murder comes out in anger and calling someone a name, like, "You fool!" We think it is all right to approach God even when we continue to hold grudge, or hatred for another. Adultery comes out in sexual desire apart from marriage, or for someone to whom you are not married. Thoughtlessly asking God to witness what we say, "Honest to God," as the truth is a misuse of his name and a sin. We are just to tell the truth and not lie.

Jesus uses hyperbole to emphasize just how deep sin goes in our hearts. Obviously we are not, literally, to pluck out an eye, or cut off a hand. To accomplish the intent of not sinning, we would have to cut out our hearts. We look into the mirror of the law and see total depravity. That depravity leads us into nothing but sin. It would be better to lose an eye than to lose our entire body in hell, but that won't work.

In all this, it is clear there is no way I can keep God's will perfectly the way God commands. I need a Savior. The depth of our sin requires a Savior. Salvation is impossible for us. The one possibility for salvation is our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Jesus has led us to take a long and hard look at ourselves. We see the depth of sin in our hearts. Matching the depth of our sin, in fact, deeper than our sin, is the forgiveness of those sins we have in Christ. Paul wrote to the Romans, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more." [5:20] The new heart the Holy Spirit has given us has the desire not to sin and leads us into confessing those sins.

Still, not sinning and confessing our sin do not save us. It is Christ's perfect obedience of the law he offered up on the cross that has saved us. Jesus had no sin, in his heart or in his members. He never lost his temper. He never held a grudge. He never lusted. He never swore an oath on God's name when he spoke because he always spoke the truth.

Jesus' righteousness is perfect righteousness. His righteousness was transferred to us sinners on the cross where he took our sins and their guilt and punishment and left them there when he died and was buried. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all your sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations that was against us and stood opposed to us; he took it away nailing it to the cross." [2:12] Jesus rose again to new life. This is the new life we receive in Holy Baptism which buries us with him in death and raises us with him to new life.

Our mission as Christians is not striving to be perfect in order to be saved. Failure is the only option there. So, we ask with the first disciples as St. Luke records, in 18:26, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus answered, "What is impossible with man, is possible with God." Salvation is not only possible but it is reality. Jesus Christ has engineered our safe return to his Father's kingdom. Amen. <SDG>