

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *The Savior's Sermon*
Service Theme: *Live a Holy Life!*

Sermon Theme: *Wholly, Wholly Holy* (February 12, 2023)
Matthew 5:21-37

Let's start with a loaded question: Would you say you are a "good person?" Everyone wants to answer, "Yes!" So people begin defending their "goodness" by compiling a list of everything they think makes them "good." "I'm a hard-working employee." "A faithful spouse." "A loving parent." "A dedicated student." "I put others' needs ahead of my own." "I donate my money and time to charity." "I come to church every week." "I pray every day." "I'm a sinner, but I do lots of good to balance out the bad." "I've never been arrested or committed any really bad sins." "Compared to all the horribly evil people in the world, I'm great!"

People usually characterize themselves as "good" based on the "good" things they do, and the "bad" things they haven't done. But is that enough? To properly answer that question, we need to remember Jesus' concluding words from last Sunday's teaching about being salt and light in the world. ***"I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."***

Jesus makes it clear that the most important question isn't, "Are you a good person?" but, "Are you a holy person?" Because just 11 verses after today's sermon text, Jesus demands, ***"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*** The angels in heaven sing about the triune God, ***"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty."*** And because God is perfect and holy, Jesus teaches that his disciples need to be

more than, "Good! Pretty good! Better than most!" We need to be **Wholly, Wholly Holy**. Completely perfect in every way.

In Jesus' day—and in ours too-- people tend to rank some sins as worse than others; and primarily, we villainize sinful outward actions. That's why the bar Jesus sets for holiness must have shocked his listeners! Not just our actions or words make us unholy, but even our thoughts and attitudes! And it's not just holiness in some of God's commandments, but all of them!

Jesus begins, ***"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'"*** I think most everyone agrees with God's 5th Commandment for all people. Murder is bad, and we shouldn't do that. But through the phrase that recurs in this section, ***"But I tell you,"*** Jesus teaches that 5th Commandment holiness goes deeper than that. ***"But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Anyone who says to his brother or sister, 'Raca' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."***

In Jewish culture, calling someone, "Raca" was like calling someone an idiot—showing contempt for their mind. And the Greek word, "More," translated, ***"You fool,"*** expresses a contempt for a person's heart, like calling them a bad person. So, Jesus says that we don't only break the 5th Commandment by literally taking another person's life. Harboring anger towards someone in your heart, or showing contempt for them by our words makes us unholy.

That's why Jesus encourages his disciples to do everything necessary to show love and forgiveness, and pursue reconciliation with anyone with something against them, or anyone they have something against—whether family and friends, or adversaries.

I'm guessing we don't struggle with calling people "Raca" or "Μωρέ." But I bet holding grudges against those who have hurt us; hating people who are different from us; or cutting off people who anger us are far heavier struggles. If we're honest, we're far more comfortable

holding onto anger or refusing to apologize to those we've hurt than Jesus' words say we ought to be. You might think, "I've never murdered anyone, so I've got the 5th Commandment down!" But can anyone claim they've never felt hatred for someone else, or refused to let go of grudges? Can anyone claim to be holy?

Jesus continues, "***You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'***" Again, I think we'd agree with God's 6th commandment. We've probably all felt sadness or anger, or said, "How could they?!?" when someone cheats on their spouse. But once again, Jesus hits us with a "***But I tell you...***"

"...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." 6th commandment holiness goes deeper than just never cheating on your spouse. It means not even having a lustful thought about someone who isn't your spouse. Easier said than done in our sex-obsessed culture where every advertisement includes scantily-clad models, and every movie and TV show includes at least some sex or nudity. Where pornography is a billion-dollar industry, and the average child is exposed to porn before they graduate elementary school. Where the commitment of marriage is overshadowed by hookup culture, living together without the marriage commitment, and mockery towards anyone who follows a biblical view of sexuality.

Jesus continues about marriage, "***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.'***"

The men of Israel had adopted the mindset that as long as they gave their wife a certificate of divorce, which would at least ensure her some legal protections, they could divorce them for any reason. Sounds a lot like our world, where nearly 50% of marriages end in divorce, and most people would rather throw it away and get a new one instead of trying to fix it. But again, Jesus says, "***But I tell you...***"

While we might hear the 6th Commandment and think, "I've never cheated on my spouse, or gotten a divorce, so I'm holy there!" Jesus says holiness is a matter of our hearts, minds, and actions! Can anyone claim they've never been impure in any of those ways inside and outside a marriage bond? Can anyone claim to be holy?

Finally, Jesus teaches about our relationship with God himself. "***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...'***" wait for it... "***But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all. All you need to say is simply, 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.'***"

Admittedly, I've never struggled with making oaths in the name of the city of the Great King. But do we unnecessarily tack on God's name to make our promises sound more trustworthy? "I swear to God, I will!" But Jesus says that 2nd and 8th Commandment holiness is about being so trustworthy and reliable that you don't have to swear on anything at all! A simple "yes" or "no," is all people need to trust you.

So, I'll ask again, "Are you a holy person, according to all of God's standards?" Maybe your defense mechanism is to say, "What's the big deal? So I sometimes harbor grudges, or have lustful thoughts, or misuse God's name. No one's getting hurt." Or maybe we've gotten way too comfortable and content with being "pretty good," or in following some of the commandments, even if we refuse to follow all of them.

I think King David would disagree. Every sin is serious. A lingering glance became lustful feelings, which became physical adultery. And after an unexpected pregnancy announcement, David added lies, deception, and ultimately murder. Every sin is serious, because sin always snowballs.

And even if it doesn't, Jesus makes clear that even those sinful thoughts or attitudes are open rebellion against what God commands of his creation, deserving of eternal judgment. Did you notice how often Jesus mentions hell fire and judgment when discussing these sins? Jesus warns that such sins are so serious that "***If your right eye***

causes you to stumble, gouge it out; if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off.” Jesus isn’t espousing self-mutilation. Even a blind person can have lustful thoughts, and someone without hands to kill someone can have feelings of hatred. Rather, Jesus is saying that these sinful thoughts, actions, and attitudes are so serious that we should do everything necessary to avoid them, because ***“It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.”***

And even if the pet sins you struggle with didn’t make Jesus’ list here, all unholy thoughts, attitudes, or actions rob us of the holiness God says we need. As the list of our guilt piles up, we sink further into despair. To make matters worse, our lack of holiness isn’t just a problem of our hands. The heart of the matter is... a problem with our hearts! As King David said in a Psalm, ***“Surely I was sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*** Everyone has a sinful nature passed down from our physical and spiritual forefathers characterized by complete depravity. Not only can’t we be good or holy on our own. We don’t even want to be good or holy according to God’s standards!

Like the Apostle Paul writes in Romans, ***“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** So when Jesus says we need to be “wholly, wholly, holy,” our convicted hearts should cry out in despair, “How? That’s impossible, Jesus!”

Exactly. It’s impossible. We’ll never be wholly holy on our own. So why does God demand us to do something we literally can’t? As a parent, I get it. Sometimes one of my kids gets overly confident in their independence. Sometimes, they think they can handle something that I know they can’t. So I’ll let them try. Because when they fail, they see the truth that they really can’t do it on their own, and need Mom or Dad’s help!

Likewise, our sinful nature has the spiritual self-righteous overconfidence of a 4-year-old that we don’t need God, and can do it all by ourselves! But when Jesus teaches that discipleship requires holiness in our every thought, word, or action, we have to humbly bow

our heads and acknowledge, “I can’t do it, God. I’m not a holy person. ***Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.***”

We need to get to that point, because it forces us to rely on the only truly good person; the only one who really was and is wholly, wholly holy-- in every thought, word, attitude, and action: the one who’s preaching this Sermon on the Mount—Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who would later sacrifice himself on the cross, dying the death unholy sinners like us have earned, so he could wrench us out of the fires of Hell that he warns our lack of holiness deserves!

That truth obliterates two things—any, “I can do it myself” feelings of self-righteousness. And any feelings of superiority that might make us look down on others as being “less holy” than me! That takes us back to one of the first Beatitudes that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** Blessed are the spiritual beggars. Those who acknowledge and live the truth that they can’t contribute anything to their salvation, but that they’re completely reliant on God’s grace for salvation. As Martin Luther once said, ***“We are all mere beggars showing other beggars where to find bread.”***

Jesus is the bread of life, who makes us wholly, wholly holy in God’s sight. Because as Paul writes, ***“God made him who had no sin—Jesus—to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness—the holiness and perfection—of God.”***

That’s the answer to the loaded question. Are you a good person? Are you a holy person? Certainly not on our own. But through faith in Jesus that connects us to his wholly, wholly holiness, yes! You are!

And since we have Jesus’ perfection, that frees us to not be OK with pretty good, but to strive for perfection in our lives as salt and light! In Gospel-motivated thankfulness, we see that Jesus’ commands about our thoughts, words, and actions aren’t burdens that deprive us of blessings. But direction for how to live a life that will be unbelievably blessed!

Think how much more blessed your life would be if you lived in love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, rather than anger and hatred? If your mind and heart were fully committed to God's plan for marriage, rather than the temporary, lying lusts and desires of our sinful hearts? And when we fail, we run back as beggars to the one who has supplied our every spiritual need. He who was wholly, wholly, holy, so that you could be too; so that the kingdom of heaven is yours. As Jesus started the Sermon on the Mount, so we conclude it: We are blessed—blessed in Him!