

Pako Morning Service 26/02/2017

Scripture Readings: Leviticus 19:1-18; Mat 5:21-26; Sermon: "Don't murder – not even in thought"

Congregation, do you ever wonder why Governments are forever legislating new tax laws? Now one answer may be that they are always looking for ways to rise their income to pay for services, but I tell you that one major reason is that sinful man may be OK in obeying the 'letter' of the law, but not the 'spirit of the law.' Regarding taxation, sinful man is always looking for loopholes to dodge and governments and tax offices are flat out writing new legislation to plug the holes. Last week I mentioned that Jesus not only fulfilled the law and the prophets for us, he raised the bar when it comes to obeying the law for us. We were left with the question, "how do we surpass the Scribes and Pharisees in righteousness?" "How do we understand the new commands of the Kingdom that Jesus has ushered in?"

In a nutshell, we now no longer just keep the letter of the law, we are also called upon to keep the 'spirit' of the law. Notice how Jesus begins our text and indeed throughout the rest of the chapter. V21, "And you have heard it was said." V27, "You have heard that it was said." V31, "It was also said." V33, "Again you have heard it was said." V38, "You have heard it was said." V43 "You have heard it was said." Now each time Jesus recites an OT law or some form of it, but then goes on to show the spirit of the law. So, keeping with our text, "You have heard it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" That's the letter of the law! No doubt most of the Scribes and Pharisees and probably all of us could say, "We have obeyed the letter of the law for we have not murdered anyone!" But then Jesus goes on to say, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults (Raca- in the Greek) his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You Fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." That is obeying the 'spirit of the law' and I dare say all of us have failed that to some extent.

With the 'spirit of the law' in mind, we realise it is much more difficult to surpass the Scribes and Pharisees in righteousness. We tend to think they were misdirected and hypocritical, only keeping the letter of the law, but with this higher expectation, we soon see we haven't been all that different. The point of Jesus's teaching here is not that we try surpassing the Scribes and Pharisees with legalistic righteousness, but a righteousness that comes from the heart. Jesus knew that there is no moral net is fine enough to catch every moral question that swims. No law is comprehensive enough to cordon off all sin; regulations cannot control the sinful heart. Rather, Jesus addresses the heart and mind, the motives of obedience. We surpass the Scribes and Pharisees by having a heart for God. This true righteousness shows itself when disciples do the right things for the right reasons. Our righteousness should never be based on fear or retribution or being caught out, but out of love for God and man. Jesus wants his disciples to obey from the heart.

So, Jesus gives an example by restating the law against murder in v21. In general practice, this law is generally appreciated and obeyed. People generally don't go about murdering people. However, Jesus probes the depths of our attraction for this law by exploring the pre-murderous moods that lie behind the act. Some people just love murder mysteries, whether on TV or book form. In every case, murder is preceded by the murderer being filled with anger towards the intended victim. Murderers are generally angry people. Sometimes that anger is caused by hatred or intense jealousy, but whatever it is, that too is regarded as murder even if it doesn't lead to the ghastly deed of taking someone's life. That's why Jesus says, "Everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (5:22). Now Jesus isn't saying that there is never a time for righteous anger. There is! Jesus threw money changers out of the temple (Mat 21:12-13). He became angry at hypocrites (Mark 3:1-5) and even grew exasperated with his disciples (Mark 7:18; 9:19). But Jesus' anger is so different to ours. He was "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6; James 1:19). His anger was mingled with grief over such sins as hypocrisy, willful misunderstanding, fruitlessness, and unbelief. Jesus did not become angry at personal mistreatment. When arrested, mocked, beaten, and crucified, he was as quiet as a lamb led to the slaughter. He did not rebuke his tormentors or offer a self-defence. Jesus was silent, except to say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Peter says, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Sadly, our anger is often just the opposite. We burn with anger at petty offenses to our honour. We scream at referees whose whistles harm our favourite team. We become offended at minor snubs, minor acts of disrespect. We rage at people who cut us off in traffic or squeeze yellow lights until they run red. Ironically, we are slow to become angry over sins that offend God. When someone offends God, perhaps by taking his name in vain, we stay calm and say, "What do you expect of sinners?" Of course, it is good to stay calm, but there is a place for righteous anger, not least being for grief over sin (see Psa 11:4-6; 119:136; 139:21-22). But it's not just anger that convicts us. Jesus also prohibits casual insults and contempt. "Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" (Matt. 5:22b). The terms "raca" and "fool" are not quite identical. "Raca" expresses contempt for someone's mind. It means "Stupid idiot! Dummy! Moron!" "Fool" on the other hand expresses contempt for someone's heart and character. It means "Scoundrel!" If "raca" insults the intellect, "fool" insults the heart. Put

together, they imply that someone is worthless and good for nothing. We should treat no one, whether young or old, whether weak in mind or weak in body, as if they have no value. Whoever violates this principle, Jesus says, is liable to judgment before the Sanhedrin which was the highest court in Israel. More than that, contempt makes us liable to the very court of God and the fires of hell, or the Gehenna, a burning rubbish dump outside of Jerusalem. Jesus is saying that anger and contempt are interior states that can lead to murder. Indeed, they are forms of murder, and deserve a murderer's punishment. As John says, "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). And since "raca" means "idiot," and "fool" means "good for nothing," then most of us are murderers. How often haven't we said someone is an idiot, worthless, good for nothing. Sometimes we may have even said or wished they were dead! Sometimes we can even murder with our look.

Even in Christian homes, children sometimes hear their parents say they are worthless, good for nothing, untalented and unwanted, and sometimes even worse. Such language murders the soul. Let's not forget that a murderous spirit can lead to action as well. Abortion occurs because people judge that an unborn human being is worthless. Euthanasia for the ill and the aged occurs because some people think that a life has no value and is not worth the cost of preserving it or it has just become inconvenient. I guess the list is endless. Neglect of the hungry, the homeless, and the chronically poor should never be because we judge them worthless, for then we are murderers. And the real danger is that the thought "he is worthless" can lead to murder, and according to Jesus is liable to judgment, even if the action never follows.

Well you may be sitting here and be thinking, I haven't murdered anyone and my character is such that I don't harbour angry or revengeful thoughts towards anyone. Well, Jesus doesn't let us off the hook so easily. Jesus says we must make peace with others so that their anger and murderous intent will dissipate. Note vv 23-24; "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift." Please notice the structure. It's not if you have a problem, but if the brother has a problem with you. And notice also the first word of v23, "So" (NIV=Therefore). The reasoning of the verses goes this way. If it is good for us to refrain from murder and murderous attitudes, then it is also good to prevent murderous attitudes in others, if possible. That is, we should love our brothers enough to act to remove their murderous dispositions toward us. Jesus says that this duty is so important that a worshiper should interrupt the sacred duty of presenting an offering to God on the altar to make peace. Let put it in modern day terms. Today, it is more important to be reconciled to a brother than to go to church, since worship is a sham if anyone hates his brother and fellow worshiper. And again, notice that Jesus does not even say whether the brother is right to be offended. The anger may be just or reasonable, or it may not. We may have offended him, or he may have taken offense when none was given. But even if we believe ourselves innocent or consider the problem trivial, if enough tension exists that we remember it and it troubles us, we should stop and seek reconciliation.

The final verses Jesus commands us to remove anger in an adversary. (Mt 5:24-26), "leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." We are responsible even to prevent murder in our enemies. Jesus envisions a foe taking a disciple to court over a monetary problem (vv 25-26). Jesus' instruction is that we as His followers must try to make peace, even on the steps of the courthouse at the last minute. Make peace, Jesus says, lest greater grief come. Today, people sue each other over all sorts of things, from the most serious to the most trivial. As Christians, we ought to be careful about the way we insist on our rights. We must even watch ourselves, to see if we are harbouring anger, licking our wounds, or plotting revenge. Of course, one party cannot make peace alone. Paul says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). He concedes that it may be impossible, if someone refuses your plea for peace. But we must try.

On occasions that may mean taking responsibility for our mistakes. If most of the fault lies with others, our confession may free them to confess their faults. Even if another party refuses to join our quest for peace, we can still apologize and make amends for our part. As a practical matter, don't do it over the phone or by email. In my experience, peace-making usually works best face-to-face. The command "Do not murder" seems so simple, but now we see it isn't quite that simple. In fact, Jesus' word exceeds our capacity. But the same Jesus who issues these commands also blesses the poor in spirit—those who know they cannot obey. The same Jesus who issues these commands gave his life as a ransom for disciples who cannot obey them. More than that, Jesus also gives empowering grace. He sends his Spirit to give us the capacity to begin, at least, to obey him. Yes, our obedience is always imperfect, but we can make progress. I can still abuse a driver who cuts me off in traffic, but I would like to think I don't do quiet as often. I still mutter things under my breath towards those who offend me or try to diddle me, but I would like to think I am making progress. Last week I said Jesus raises the bar when it comes to the law. This week, we pray, Lord help us to obey perfectly as our Heavenly Father is perfect. Amen.