

You Have Heard That It Was Said ...

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Lent is taken from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Ironically, it's not Gospel—it's pure law and it's not meant to make us feel good about ourselves.

In fact it's intended to make us feel guilty, so it's hard to hear.

Jesus wants to make us aware of how sinful we really are

He does this by showing us that we have not grasped the full meaning of the law and that as a result, we have been living in sin whether we knew it or not.

So it's a perfect message for the Lenten season!

As a way of getting into the subject I would like to tell you a true story I recently heard about a very special dog.

It took place back in 1908 in Paris, France.

There was a large dog—a Newfoundland—which belonged to a family who lived by the river Seine.

One day the dog heard the screams of a child who had fallen into the river and couldn't swim.

The dog ran from his yard, jumped over a hedge, leaped into the water and pulled the child to safety.

When people found out what had happened they called him a "hero dog" and gave him a beefsteak as a reward.

Happy child, happy parents, happy dog.

But this dog's career as a hero was not over.

The very next week another child fell into the river and the dog jumped in, pulled her to safety and was fed another beefsteak.

A week or so went by and still another child fell into the river and was rescued by the dog.

But people began to wonder what was causing children to fall into the river.

As reported by the *New York Times*, what they found was that whenever a child would get close to the bank, the dog would come up behind him and give him a nudge, causing them to fall into the river.

Then he would jump in after them, pull them to safety and wait patiently for his beefsteak dinner.

Like one of Pavlov's dogs, this Newfoundland quickly learned that all he had to do to earn a steak dinner was to pull a child out of the water.

If that meant that he had to push the child into the water himself, well that was just a detail that was lost on the dog.

I love this story because I can just imagine this dog pushing kids over the edge and then dragging them to safety, all the while thinking that he was doing a good thing.

He was saving a child wasn't he? And getting a reward besides.

The dog didn't see anything wrong with what he was doing; he was just following a law that he had been trained to obey: "If someone falls into the river you jump in and save him."

If you have to push him into the river, so what?

The dog's understanding of the canine law in some ways resembles the understanding we have of the Ten Commandments.

The law says, "Don't murder anybody" and we say "That's easy. I have no intention of killing anyone."

No problem!

The law says, "Don't commit adultery" and we say "Got it! Look but don't touch."

No problem there either.

The law says, "Don't get a divorce, except for marital infidelity on the part of your spouse."

We say, "No problem. I have no intention of divorcing my spouse.

“We’re married for life and that’s that.”

Like the dog, we think we’re doing good by obeying the letter of the law.

But Jesus let’s take a closer look at these commandments.

When the law says, “Do not commit murder” your first thought is that you’ve never murdered anyone and you never will.

And that’s probably true.

I’ll bet everybody here this morning feels like they’ve followed that law all their lives and that there’s no chance of them disobeying it and that everything’s okay.

But Jesus says, “Hold on! Not so fast!”

“You have heard it said that whoever murders will be liable to judgement, *but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement.*”

Jesus is saying that anything that might lead to murder is breaking the commandment.

To flare up in anger against someone or to nurse anger in your heart against them is tantamount to murder in God’s eyes.

And that’s not okay.

To call someone a bad name even in your imagination is breaking the command.

Ever had a few choice words for someone who cut you off in traffic?

That’s not okay.

To have given offence to someone and then fail to take steps to make it right with them is breaking the command.

And that’s not okay and you’re not welcome at the altar until you do make things right.

Considered in that light, it’s not such an easy law to follow, is it?

I’m pretty sure that every one of us here has broken the “don’t be angry with your neighbor” law hundreds of times.

And can anyone here honestly say that they're not harboring some old hurt, some anger, some resentment against someone who once hurt you or harmed you?

Jesus calls that a form of murder.

Now if that message is hard for you to hear, it's supposed to be hard.

Jesus' words are intended to make you think that you're a lot more sinful than you thought you were.

He's saying, "Bad dog. Stop pushing children into the river so you can save them and get a reward."

He is showing you your sin and trying to make sure that you can't close your eyes, stick your fingers into your ears and pretend that everything's okay.

You are not okay and I am not okay and we need to face up to it.

Then there's "Do not commit adultery."

To all of you who think that you have obeyed this command by not having had physical relations with someone other than your spouse as long as you have been married, once again Jesus says, "Not so fast."

Have you ever had a lustful thought?

Don't you understand that lustful thoughts about someone other than your spouse ARE a form of adultery?

The impure thoughts of our hearts are as bad as the impure actions of our bodies in God's eyes.

Jesus considers this so important for us to understand that he says that it is better to tear out your eye or cut off your hand rather than nurse lustful thoughts in your mind.

That's how serious he is.

God judges us by what we think as well as by what we say and do.

And by that standard, none of us obeys the commandments.

Then there's Jesus' words about divorce.

This is always hard to preach on because the subject hits so close to home for so many people.

His words are hard to understand, so if they give you heart burn, come talk to me.

But remember that Jesus is doing the same thing here that he does in all the rest of his preaching on the law.

He raises the bar of legal obedience so high that nobody can live up to it in order to show us just how sinful we really are.

“Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital infidelity, causes her to become an adulteress.”

What can that possibly mean?

He is saying that even when the wife is innocent and her husband divorces her without cause, she is affected by her husband's sinful action.

Now this is one of those places where the English language doesn't provide a good way to translate the active and passive verbs in this commandment as we find them in the original Greek of the *New Testament*.

The husband who abandons his wife is the one who actively sins against her.

But the abandoned wife is also affected by the husband's sin.

She is dragged into passive adultery—wounded by the adultery committed against her.

She did not sin, but she is stigmatized by the husband's sin.

Some people will say, “What did she do to drive him away?”

Others will say, “There's two sides to every divorce.”

I know of a judge in Portage County who, every time he grants a divorce says, “There go two people to make four people unhappy.”

The innocent wife will almost certainly share in the blame for the divorce in the court of public opinion.

Jesus' point is not to heap guilt on the innocent wife, but to point out that someone who sinfully abandons his marriage drags other people down with his sin.

The husband who abandons his wife commits an active sin of adultery, but the abandoned wife and even her potential second husband have adultery committed against them.

They did not sin but they will be hurt by the sin.

God said in *Genesis 2* that in marriage, a man and a woman become one flesh.

And since they are one flesh, divorce is a form of amputation, and amputation causes pain and scarring to both partners no matter who divorces whom.

Jesus' intention is not to crank up guilt on the abandoned spouse, but to point out how someone who sinfully abandons their marriage drags his wife into his sin.

Jesus is not victim blaming; he's demonstrating the effect of one person's sin upon other people who are connected to him.

This same line of reasoning can be applied to all the other commandments.

The underlying message in each case is: just because you are technically obeying the law in your words and actions, doing what it commands and refraining from doing what it proscribes, don't think that you are obeying the law.

And if you're not obeying the law, you are sinning whether you know it or not.

God knows what is in our hearts and he judges us by what is there.

Therefore he forces us to become more aware of how sinful we really are by raising the bar of legal obedience so high that nobody can possibly reach it.

He uses the full weight of the law to convince us that we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

That we need forgiveness!

That we need the Gospel!

As long as we think that we're okay with God based on our outward obedience to His Law, we won't feel much need for forgiveness.

We'll just idle along, feeling good about ourselves and not giving much thought to the price that was paid to earn that forgiveness.

Jesus came for one reason, and that was to die for us so that we would be saved from death and hell.

He suffered OUR punishment in order to save us from eternal agony.

This is why the season of Lent should be a vital part of our Christian lives.

It focuses our attention on our sins of thought as well as our sins of word and deed.

Jesus tells us that in our hearts we are murderers and liars and adulterers.

The more that we accept this truth, the more we will repent of our sins and the more we repent of our sins, the more joy we will feel when Easter comes and we celebrate the forgiveness of our sins that Jesus has earned for us.

And that will be a lot better than a beefsteak!

Amen.