

Sin... and forgiveness

When I was first commissioned as a lay preacher, I had the privilege of visiting many churches and leading services. It was a strange experience – there'd be either phone calls or email exchanges to arrange things, and then I'd turn up on a Sunday morning at a church I'd never been to, meet people I'd never met before, and effectively 'run things' for the morning. I'd generally get to choose what I'd preach on, more-or-less plan the order of service, and usually pick the hymns too.

Occasionally, I'd be nudged in the right direction – 'we don't usually sing that hymn' or 'we always end the service in this way' – but mostly what I wanted happened. It was a remarkable thing.

After one of those early services, a fellow approached me and asked a question "Richie, why do we confess our sins in church every week?" and then he added, "After all, we're all old people here, and we don't sin very much."

It's a reasonable question. Why do we confess our sins over and over again? Why do we need to be assured of our forgiveness over and over again?

It is a good question, but I think my questioner was more testing my theology – making sure I believed what he considered the right things to be – rather than wanting to learn something he didn't already know.

My answer was satisfactory to him, and he told me that he looked forward to welcoming me back to that church in the future.

Part of my satisfactory answer to him was from our gospel reading today: Jesus said "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.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. (5:21-22)

As I commented last week, we modern people tend to have a hierarchy of sins or wrongdoings. Murder at the top. Speeding by a little bit at the bottom. We tend to think that if we haven't murdered anyone, or robbed a bank, or had an extramarital affair, then we're okay – we haven't 'sinned'.

If you think about it, you'll find it's pretty easy to avoid committing those 'big sins'. It's pretty easy to not murder someone, or not rob a bank, and so on.

Being human, we like our concrete rules. Thou shalt not murder. Easy. But being human, we also like to explore the edges of those rules – to find the loopholes and the grey areas. For instance, murder is killing someone. That's pretty clear. But what if you kill someone in self-defense? But what if you kill someone to protect others? What if this? What if that?

In our gospel reading today, in the sermon on the mount, Jesus tells his listeners – and us – that there's something deeper than rules and loopholes – "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.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." (5:21-22)

Sometimes people suggest that this means being angry at someone is just as bad as murdering them, but that's clearly not the case – if you're angry at someone you can definitely stop being angry with them, whereas if you murder someone, that's a permanent outcome.

So, perhaps anger isn't equivalent to murder, but each is subject to judgement. Each can show our need to be forgiven.

Jesus is talking about anger with brothers or sisters, but some anger may be justified. Paul quotes King David from Psalm 4:4 when he writes to the Ephesians “In your anger do not sin”. Paul’s point seems to be that not all anger that Christians experience is bad, some things can make us righteously angry.

In fact, some things should make us righteously angry!

Righteous anger is being angry at what makes God angry – and God does get angry – God’s anger is a by-product of his goodness.

God’s very righteousness demands God’s anger at things that destroy and corrupt God’s creation. Everything that causes suffering and destruction.

So, our anger is righteous when we are angered over those things too.

But the anger that leads to judgement – the anger against our brothers and sisters – is dangerous, and we must deal with it urgently.

Jesus tells us how important dealing with our anger is when he says “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (5:23-24)

It can be a tough thing to do. Our nature is to let anger simmer – or even worse, to plot revenge. But Jesus tells us we need to seek reconciliation.

He goes on to tell us to “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.”

Again, it’s about resolving conflict, urgently. Do it before you get to the judgement. This isn’t about a plea bargain after you’ve been caught having committed a crime, it’s about civil matters. Businesses, where partnerships fail. I guess marriages, too, when they fail. And disputed wills. If these things can’t be resolved, then there will be legal fees and court costs involved too – and of course the anger will build too.

Having dealt with murder and anger, Jesus moves on to talk about adultery – and he does it in a similar way, he says “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” (5:27) Of course, his listeners would have known it – along with “You shall do no murder”, as part of the Ten Commandments – which were central to Jewish law and teaching.

But again, Jesus says, there’s more to this commandment than simply obeying it, and explains “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (5:28)

Adultery might be easier to ‘get away’ with than murder, but even so, most people manage to resist it most of the time. But are we tempted? Do we resist mostly because we don’t have the opportunity?

Left unsaid are those other things which we don’t do because we don’t have the opportunity, or because the consequences would be potentially to dire for us. We don’t steal things – but we can certainly want things. Realistically, in our society, envy and greed are often more of a problem than outright theft. The greed that causes people to exploit others, the desire for money and power that

makes people put work over relationships, the forlorn hope that keeps people going back to the poker machines time and time again.

We may not murder, commit adultery or steal. We may not “sin very much” as that man claimed, but we all have our problems – our faults, our failings, our sins.

And although Jesus accepts us we are, and we can be and are forgiven no matter what we done, Jesus doesn't want us to stay there. In church we often say “we repent of our sins” – we turn away from them. In the gospels we read of Jesus meeting with and eating with sinners, of saving an adulterous woman, of reaching out to a tax collector. Whatever they'd done didn't stop Jesus reaching out to them, but he wanted them to change: “Go and sin no more” he said.

Jesus wants his disciples – us – to change. To live the way that God wants us to live.

It's important. And it's urgent. And it can be difficult and confronting. Jesus uses some pretty dramatic imagery when he tells us “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.”

Please don't take this literally! Jesus' point is not that we should gouge out our eyes or sever our hand. His point is that serious about eradicating what's wrong from our lives.

The language in these verses reflects the realities of the traditional law where an injured party was allowed to inflict similar injury in return—“eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). If someone accidentally put out your eye, Jewish law allowed you to put out his or her eye in return. While that practice was severe, it also served to limit the injuries that the aggrieved party could inflict on the one who inflicted the original injury. If someone put out your eye, you could put out their eye in return, but you were forbidden from killing him.

While Jesus' phrase is hyperbolic, nowadays we do sometimes inflict suffering to prevent greater (or longer) suffering – we amputate to stop the spread of gangrene, we drill into teeth to remove decay, and of course we use chemotherapy to fight cancers.

And so it is as we think about how we live our lives: We need to treat the temptations we have seriously. If gambling is a problem, don't go where there are poker machines. If drinking is a problem don't have alcohol in the house. If you find yourself attracted to someone to whom you're not married, don't be alone with them. And so on.

Today is our third look at Jesus' sermon on the mount, and we've now covered the first thirty of ninety-nine verses. I shared that the Sermon on the Mount is one of the most famous speeches on all time, and that it's most well-known for the beatitudes – the blessings that we read in verses three to twelve. But they're not the most well-known verses – because the ones that are so well-known come in the next chapter, when Jesus says “This, then, is how you should pray” and continues, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done...” and so on.

The Lord's prayer reflects the teaching from the sermon on the mount we've covered so far.

Jesus says to pray “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”

We usually say “forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” which is closer to the translation the Luke’s gospel gives us (Luke 11:4), but Jesus’ use of ‘debts’ here emphasises that forgiveness is costly. Just like doing the right thing can be costly to us, forgiveness is costly.

Just like not hating, not being greedy and avoiding temptation can be hard and can hurt, so can forgiving. If you forgive someone, you can’t hold whatever it was against them anymore. In the ancient Jewish culture if you forgave someone, you gave up the right to claim an eye for an eye.

Forgiving someone is hard because we don’t forget. And we have to live with the consequences of whatever it was they did or said. But Jesus calls us to forgive regardless, and calls us to pray for forgiveness in the same way we are forgiven. In fact, in verse 14 of chapter 6, he tells us “For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”

We are assured of God’s forgiveness by the death of Jesus, and we remind ourselves of that each week in church when I say something like “In Christ, our sins are forgiven” and we respond by saying “Thanks be to God”.

And we say we don’t need to do anything to receive that forgiveness, other than turn to God.

But in the sermon on the mount, Jesus says: if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. How do we make sense of that? That if we don’t forgive, we won’t be forgiven?

I think we can sense of it when we realise that we are forgiven when we turn to God, and we do that by repenting – by turning away from living the ways of the world. If we bear grudges and resentment, then we’re not living the way that Jesus told us to live.

And it’s not easy. And we’ll fail. But God won’t fail – so when we do, we can go back and seek his forgiveness. John writes that “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Time and time again.

People often say “I could never forgive Hitler”, but we probably don’t need to start by forgiving Hitler. Start by forgiving the little things. The person who accidentally collided with you in the supermarket. The spouse who forgot to do something. You may not be in a position where you need to forgive a murderer... but you can definitely forgive someone who’s angry at you. You may not need to forgive adultery... but you may need to forgive a lustful glance. You may not have to forgive theft... but maybe you could forgive the greed of others.

To return to the original question “...why do we confess our sins in church every week?” We might think we don’t sin very much, but if we stop to think about it we find that we do. We might not murder... but we certainly can get angry. And we might not use the word ‘sin’ but in our hearts we know that things aren’t right for us – or for anyone. We need the certainty of God’s forgiveness in our lives.

The certainty of God’s forgiveness which was paid for us through the death of Jesus.

We need to turn to him, and part of that is to forgive others – everyone needs forgiveness. Modern society likes to judge. Modern people like to condemn and cancel. Christians often choose to judge rather than forgive – but I often think of that old prayer “Oh Lord, let me forgive those who sin differently than I do.”

Our forgiveness of others needs always to be part of our response to being forgiven by God.

Why do we confess our sins in church every week? Because we need to. We need to recognise our sin. But we always follow that up with assurance of God's forgiveness.

Remember, always, as the psalmist (Psalm 103:8-10) says:

⁸ The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.

⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever;

¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve
or repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Amen.