

Our church is known for holding to certain standards that other churches may not emphasize as strongly. We take seriously the sixth commandment, **"You shall not commit adultery."** This commandment has many applications. We believe that marriage, as the one-flesh union instituted by God, is a lifelong covenant between husband and wife. To go against this is sin. Adultery is sinful. Divorce, when contrary to God's design, is sinful. Fornication is sinful. Living together is sinful. We call for repentance in these areas because unrepentant sin separates us from God, and we cannot, in good conscience, allow members to continue in sin without addressing it.

We also teach that same-sex sexual relationships are contrary to God's order. Those who experience same-sex attraction are called to deny themselves, repent, and follow Jesus, just as all of us are called to deny our sinful desires and follow him. This is not easy, but it is the path of discipleship.

Additionally, we care deeply about the third commandment: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it." This is why, in April, our congregational assembly will vote on a policy requiring members to partake in communion at least four times a year. If members are absent without explanation or communication, they will eventually be removed.

These standards may seem strict, but they exist for a good reason: to help one another get to heaven. If a congregation isn't focused on this, it has lost its way. Repentance is essential for true faith. Without it, we remain alienated from God's commands and promises.

However, holding firm to these standards can create a dangerous mentality. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking, "As long as I follow these rules, I'm good." Or what's worse: "I easily follow these rules, what's wrong with them?" I'm good; they're bad. This is self-righteousness—a deadly spiritual condition.

This was the Pharisees' problem in Jesus's day. They meticulously followed certain rules—washing their hands a certain way, observing the Sabbath with extreme care—but they ignored weightier matters like justice, mercy, and faith. Jesus accused them of **"straining out gnats while swallowing camels."** They were so focused on the things that they wanted to emphasize—things, by the way, that they were already doing—that they were unaware of how recklessly they were breaking God's commandments in other ways.

Throughout the Gospels it is clear that the Pharisees were annoyed with Jesus. In the end, they hated him so much that they got him killed. Why did they hate him so much? It was because he pointed out those things they didn't want to have pointed out. He showed them their hypocrisy. They saw themselves as the "good people," unlike the "sinners" they looked down upon. They didn't fornicate, commit adultery, or skip church. Jesus shattered their self-image. He showed them that they were just as sinful as those people they loved to despise, if not more so, because they ignored the deeper commands of God while pridefully clinging to their own self-righteousness.

We're no different. None of us like to be told we're wrong. If someone criticizes me, my first reaction is defensiveness. I might think, "Well, you're not perfect either!" or "I'm not wrong—you are!" It's rare, to say the least, to immediately respond with, "You're right. I was wrong." Yet, if or when we should come

to that point, it's exceedingly good for the soul. It's the beginning of trying to live in the truth—however painful that might be—instead of covering our tracks with lies.

This brings us to Jesus's commands in Gospel reading today. His words are challenging, even offensive to our natural instincts. I suspect that there were all kinds of reactions among you. Maybe some of you didn't hear his words at all because you were zoned out. Maybe you heard them and thought, "That sounds weird. I'm not smart enough to understand that." Maybe you heard them, and then purposely put them out of mind.

Let me remind you of what Jesus said: "**Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who abuse you.**" When have you had affection for the one who was trying to make your life miserable? When did you do something nice to the person who gives you dirty looks?

But we're not done yet. Unfortunately, it gets much worse—practically ridiculous: "**To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your outer garment, do not withhold your inner garment either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.**"

This is where a person could get upset. How could Jesus make such awful commands? "**Give to everyone who begs?**" Most of those people are crooks and drug addicts! And we are to sit idly by or even forfeit our goods to scoundrels? Once they've taken our stuff, we shouldn't demand it back? Let us shunt aside these ridiculous things, lest they should see the light of day!

And yet, of course, even while I react this way, I'm still one of the good ones. I go to church, don't I? The failure to do—the failure to even try!—Jesus's commands doesn't make me a bad person. If he wanted me to follow them, he should have made better commands!

I don't think there is any other way to handle these commands—at least not at first—if we are to really wrestle with them. The easy way to deal with them is simply to ignore them or somehow explain them away as not being applicable. But if we are to take Jesus's commands seriously, I think they have to make us upset. We really, really don't want to follow these commands.

Notice how this puts us in the same position as those people with whom I started—the people who might be looked down upon. Those who struggle with God's commands regarding marriage, divorce, or relationships have their reasons, just as we have our reasons for resisting Jesus's call to love our enemies or give generously. We all pick and choose which commands we follow based on what feels reasonable or convenient to us.

The ray of hope comes, when, God willing, we start to come to our senses and think: "God's commands are not bad, like I originally thought, but rather good."

Instead of mocking Jesus's commands, what if we were to realize that being merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful is a good thing? To be faithful to one's spouse unto death—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health—is honorable and sacred. God's Law is not bad or foolish. It is holy, righteous, and good. For that very reason it exposes us as sinners. It exposes our pride, self-

centeredness, and unwillingness to suffer. But this exposure is not meant only to shame us—it's meant to heal us. To be exposed as inadequate is painful and embarrassing, but it's part of the cure.

John the Baptist and Jesus had a very simple message that is just as applicable today: **"Repent, and believe the Gospel."** First of all, with **"repent,"** if you find yourself resisting God's commands—whether about marriage, generosity, or loving your enemies—I encourage you to pause and ask yourself why. What if our resistance is not because of some defectiveness of the commands, but because of the hardness of our hearts? What if God is calling us to something deeper, something more beautiful than we can imagine?

That, indeed, is just what he is doing. He is calling us out of our hypocrisy, fakery, being judgmental, covering our tracks with lies, so that we may come into his grace and his truth. When we come to Jesus we don't need to pretend to be good people anymore. We can confess our sins, and **God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** Already in the midst of being exposed as evil, we can and should fully embrace God's acceptance of us in Jesus, knowing that his grace extends on and on. The difficulty—the seeming impossibility—of keeping God's commands reveal our need for God's grace. We cannot do these things by our own strength or willpower. But we surely will not do these things if we've made up our mind beforehand that we don't need to do them or won't do them.

Believe—have faith—in God's promise to transform us, not because of anything we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us. As we repent and believe the Gospel, do not be afraid. Be very courageous! **God, who has begun a good work in you, will bring it to completion on the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

