

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

“How fast can I go before you will stop me?”

Sitting across the table from me with a cup of coffee in his hand was a highway patrolman. Dennis Eckmann did not belong to the congregation I served but if something happened to him I would have been asked to do the funeral. We both were in the habit of stopping by Adolph’s Café for morning coffee – sometimes we ended up sitting

within talking distance at the table where the men of the community gathered each morning and afternoon. Each time I sat near Dennis this was the question I asked. Each time his response was the same.

“What, can you speed a little? Is it all right if I sin a little?”

“You do” was my reply. “So how fast can I go before you will stop me?”

“What does the law say?” Dennis answered.

“Fifty-five.”

“I guess that is the answer to your question.”

“But really, how fast can I go before you will stop me?”

Both Dennis and I knew what the law said and both of us knew that the law was not exactly enforced. I wanted to know how far I could go without being punished.

A man looks at a woman – a woman looks at a man. Each is married to someone else. They speak words – they speak with their eyes. Is it innocent friendship – a healthy caring? When is it something more? Where is God’s boundary line with this? The Ten Commandments say that coveting someone else’s spouse is out of bounds – Jesus says a lustful look is breaking the commandment against adultery. Where is the line between admiring and desiring? It is not out there in the world but it is in here – in the heart and in the mind – inside where no one but you and God can see.

Now both Dennis and I knew that the issue was not how fast people can drive but how to keep people safe. The cost is way too high when speed leads to someone being injured or killed.

Marriage needs protection. Vows are made so that even when love is not strong marriage will survive. Each partner is protected by faithfulness in marriage – when people follow their eyes and their desires great harm can result. Jesus was not labeling sexual desire as evil – God created us to experience sexual desire. Marriage is a gift from God as an institution in which natural desire can lead to blessings for the couple, for their children and for us all.

In the same light God created us as people who would experience anger. God is angry when people are harmed or hurt – God is angry when we do not respect God and trust God and listen to God – God is angry when parents are not respected by their children. But anger can destroy a relationship. The story of the flood is a story of anger taking charge – humans and animals wiped out because of God’s anger with sin. When the flood waters receded God decided that flooding was not the way God would choose to deal with humans again. When the time was right God sent Jesus to carry wrath into death – to bury God’s anger with us.

And our anger with one another? When we keep it and hold onto it – clobber our neighbor with our anger Jesus said it is murder. Anger kills – even if no gun is fired – no poison administered - the anger we carry in our hearts kills relationships. That is what God’s anger with sin was doing – killing God’s relationship with humans. That is what the anger that you and I can carry in our hearts is able to do – kill our relationship with one another.

“Be angry but do not sin – do not let the sun go down on your anger.” In the letter to the Ephesians this command is given.

Be angry. There is much to be angry about. When clergy sexually abuse children, when the wealthy manipulate laws for their own advantage, when children are hungry because a father or mother chooses drugs or drinking over working and providing for them, when the lazy are protected from the consequences of their laziness, or when waste and pollution ruin some of God’s creation there is much to be angry about.

“Be angry but do not sin.” Do not lash out in anger – do not let your words become weapons to harm your neighbor. Work for change – stand up against injustice – stand with those who have suffered from injustice but do not let hatred take up residence within you. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

With Jesus teaching here today it is not about how much we can get away with. It is about each of us looking into our own hearts and asking Jesus to take from us whatever is not worthy of him. For your own sake and for the sake of your neighbors ask Jesus to help. Amen.