

### Paying the Last Penny

Okay, I want to begin with just a bit of shop keeping. I think I know the answer to this but I just want to make sure. Has anyone here ever murdered anybody? No? Okay, good. That was easy. Now, you men—have any of you ever committed adultery? (I hate to ask this; I know this is a bit awkward. But Jesus talked about it; I thought we should too. Adultery, in case you're not sure, refers to having sexual relations with another man's wife.) No one? Good; we're half way done. This next one is just for the men also. Have any of you ever divorced your wife without making it legal—without going through an attorney, or otherwise applying for some kind of official document? Alright. Okay, I just have one more question, and this one is for men and women. Have any of you ever sworn an oath dishonestly? For example, have you ever raised your right hand in a courtroom and said, "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God," but you had no intention of telling the truth? (Just to clarify, if you tell a lie but didn't swear an oath first, that's okay. It's the oath part we're concerned about.) No? Good. Well I have good news. We're off the hook. We're good to go. Our slate is officially clean.

Or, is it?

I hate to say it, but it's human nature to want to get off the hook. To want to do precisely what's expected of us. No less—but certainly no more. You see, if we know exactly what's expected of us, then we can know when we've met that expectation, and are therefore, and henceforth, off the hook. So that, like Pontius Pilate, we can wash our hands clean, and have a completely clear conscience. But here's the problem: are we ever, really, completely off the hook? Are our hands ever completely clean?

In the beginning of the book of Exodus, the Israelites received ten commandments. That's a nice, round number. Easy to remember. Just the right number to fit on a yard sign (or two stone tablets). One of them is "You shall not murder." (Or if you prefer King James English, "Thou shalt not murder.") That one's easy, right? None of us have the impulse or the will required to murder someone. Besides, it's way too much work. You have to go out and buy a gun, or if you lived in Jesus' time, stockpile a whole bunch of rocks. Even then your aim better be pretty darn good. And of course there is that little matter of the punishment prescribed for murder. It isn't specified in the Ten Commandments section; nor does Jesus quote the precise punishment in our text. He simply says that if you do murder you shall be liable for judgment. You have to read the fine print at Exodus 21 to find out what that judgement is.

Let's say such and such a person annoys you, so much so that you decide you'd like to live your life completely free of said person. So you make plans to murder them. But then you find out, just in time, that in Exodus 21:12 the punishment for murder is being put to death yourself. Which ends up negating your motive for murdering them in the first place, which was to live your life free of the annoying person. You get the logic?

So that one's easy: do not murder. Check. No murder. Clean slate. I'll just have to find some other way of getting rid of the annoying person. Maybe by being really mean to them; then they will leave me alone. But then Jesus calls a time out, and says, "Now, I know the sixth commandment says "You shall not murder." But here's what it really means: When someone

annoys you, you shall not be mean to them. At all. No calling them names; no putting a pile of dog dooky on their front porch. In fact, even if you get angry with or feel annoyed by them, you are liable for judgment.

What? But . . . that's impossible. I spend half my day being angry or getting even with others, honking my horn when someone cuts me off in traffic, or better yet, cutting them off. That'll show 'em! To which Jesus replies, "Then you should spend the other half of your day making things right again, by apologizing—for starters, to God, and if at all possible, to the other person. Every single one of you human beings is precious and valuable. Don't hurt one another. And if you do, apologize; make it right. "But," we protest, "that's even more work than murdering someone." To which Jesus says, "Yep, that's right. Living your lives the way God intended takes a lot of work. You better get used to it."

What about the commandment against committing adultery? Can we at least cross that one off our worry list? We have no intentions about having inappropriate relations with another person's spouse. And anyway, it's kind of an awkward topic to talk about. Especially in church. To which Jesus seems to be saying, I don't care if it's awkward; we're going to talk about it. "I've seen the way you look at other women or men sometimes. And furthermore, I can read what's in your thoughts. When you look at someone or think about someone in that way, you're treating them like an object, rather than a precious human subject. It demeans them. And it demeans you. Don't do it.

Well, what do you want me to do, Jesus? Pluck my eye out? Jesus chuckles and says, "Well that would be a bit extreme, don't you think? But I like it as a metaphor or reminder. Don't do it. And when you do do it, stop it. You can do better. And by the way, quit reading everything the Bible says so literally and legalistically. Use the head God gave you. Listen for the metaphor. Look at the big picture. Try to find the point behind the point."

So then, to make things even more confusing, Jesus pulls out the line in the law implying divorce is okay, as long as you obtain a certificate of divorce, and makes this one more extreme by declaring that divorce is never okay, that it creates brokenness and undoes one of life's most sacred and important covenants. So where does that leave those of us who have had a broken marriage? Are we going to hell? Should divorce never be an option? If we take a tip from Jesus' previous examples, it would be to shed legalism, look at the big picture and try to find God's intention for this life God has given us. Namely, that God intended, for those of us who do get married, to make these relationships ones of love, commitment, and compromise. Ideally such relationships will not become irrevocably broken. But if they do, we must do what we can to make things as right as we can, in a way that respects and values the worth of the other.

And what about Jesus' fine tuning of the commandment to not swear falsely, but to carry out the oaths we have made after we swear them? He seems to make this one more legalistic by saying that we should never swear oaths, period. And so, being the good, Bible-believing Mennonites that we are, we refuse to swear oaths, even in the courtroom, and lo and behold, having seen our proud piety, the courts now allow us to affirm rather than swear. Aren't we doing good, Jesus? Aren't we finally following properly one of your difficult commandments?

To which Jesus would have no choice but to point out that we're still merely trying to get off the hook. What matters is not whether we affirm rather than swear. What matters is that we mean what we say, that we speak truthfully at all times; not just in the courtroom, but in all

situations. Lying to another person is just another way of insulting them. We might even say, murdering them. "Thou shall not murder," says the law. We can bend or twist this commandment, or any other, any way we want, but ultimately all of God's commandments come down to this: that we treat others the way we want to be treated. It's that simple. And it's that difficult. There are no shortcuts. No quick or easy ways to ourselves off the hook. We will not get out of the responsibility God has given us until we have paid the very last penny.

When we fail, and make no mistake, we will fail, the best we can do is learn what we can, make whatever amends we can, and keep moving forward. This, amidst the weight of God's word, and the complexity of God's commandments, is the meaning and the gift of grace.

Amen.