

“Unless you are perfect...” Matthew 5:21-37

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.”

During the last week with His disciples Jesus foretold them also about the Last Day, when all the nations of the earth will be gathered before the glorious throne of Christ and the great final separation will begin. We all will be there. No avoiding that.

Then the glorious Son of Man will separate people one from another. Some, those who are blessed by the Father, will inherit the Kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world. Others will enter into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. (Mt 25:31-46) This is a very confronting picture...

The inevitable question that we need to answer is this – what are those criteria according which “the sheep will be separate from the goats”? This really is a life and death question. Even more, it is a question about our eternal life and death.

A few verses later Jesus gives us the answer: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48) Wow... How does that sound to you? You must be as perfect as your heavenly Father...

In the section which we read today Jesus illustrates what He means. He says a series of sayings which begin with: “You have heard... but I say to you...”. And as He

elaborates on each of the topics, He explains to us the true meaning of the Ten Commandments, He reveals what our Father's expectation towards us are.

One important lesson that we need to learn is about the nature of our sin. About how the Triune God sees our sin. We could easily apply similar sayings to our situation. You may have heard people saying that they haven't murdered anyone, haven't stolen anything, haven't committed adultery, and basically – haven't sinned... ever!"

And then we can respond: "But Jesus, the Son of God, to whom the Father has entrusted all judgment, He says – that this is not about your actions only. He says that this is also about your words, and about your thoughts, about your desires and emotions. That is the extent to which you need to be perfect!"

People tend to think about sin as some really bad actions. The Word of God teaches that it is the same sin that begins in our hearts, resides and grows in our minds, bursts out in our words and eventually manifests itself fully in our actions.

For example, murder never begins with murder. First, there is anger or envy, or jealousy in our hearts, then we entertain evil thoughts about that person, then we speak scornfully about them or to them and finally – we act with physical violence. But it is the same sin all the way long... just different stages.

I have often used it, and many of you would have heard the illustration of our sin, using the story about NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). It is a made-up story, but it is really helpful as we try to grasp the depth of our sinfulness.

As you may know NASA develops various cutting-edge technologies. They have developed this helmet, this scanner of electro-magnetic activity in our brain, and when they read it, they can project what they read on the screen.

Which simply means that all your thoughts will be seen on the screen... I have this thing, a little prototype with me, and I would like one or two of you to volunteer to have all your thoughts projected on the screen for, let's say, 15 minutes.

Who would like to volunteer? Most of times, when I ask this question, people start laughing. If we are honest and self-conscious, we realize that if that happened, if everyone saw our thoughts, then probably we would need to leave the country.

As I said before, this is a made-up story, but it illustrates the problem that we have, and which so many try to deny. Our sin. Even if the best technologies can't reveal our thoughts, all our secrets are known to our God and will be revealed on the Last Day. Remember, be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect!

How could this be that we, who most of times know pretty well, what is good and what is not, why do we have such shameful and evil thoughts? Then I ask the question – are we in control of our thoughts? Are we, or are we not?

We could say “yes” and “no”. Yes, we are in control over our thoughts at least to some extent, when it comes to deciding what to do with them – are we going to dwell on them and act on them, or reject them and turn our focus somewhere else.

And no, we are not in control in regards to what thoughts come into our mind. They just appear. Often in the most inappropriate moments. Where do they come from? And what about our emotions and our desires? Are we in control of them?

Most people know that anger or hatred or envy or jealousy aren’t good emotions. But then from time to time they just overtake us. We know that lust and coveting are not good desires, but... what to do if it still happens?

Are we in control over them? Where do they come from? Jesus Himself answers this question: “For out of the heart [out of our good and pure hearts] come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” (Mt 15:19) Be perfect as your Father is perfect!

Do you think pastors are just splitting hairs? Who cares what I think, or feel or desire? Right? No! Our Creator cares. Jesus Christ, who will sit on His glorious throne of judgement, He cares. For these are the criteria for separating the sheep from the goats.

This is where the line is drawn between eternal life and eternal condemnation. These are not minor issues. This is life and death issue. This is why Jesus highlights its importance by giving these almost crazy tips for holy lives.

“If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out!” “If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off!” Sounds crazy, but ... “it is better than that your whole body goes into hell.” Have you tried this hard? Have you fought your sinfulness with all your willpower?

The thing is, as we just reflected, that in our situation it would be proper to use a different saying: “If your heart, if your whole inner being causes you to sin... cut it out, destroy it... for it is better to die to sin, than that we go into hell.”

This is the price if you want to inherit the Kingdom that is prepared for you from the foundation of the world. Are you able pay it? Can you? No... we can’t. And the wonderful, the Good, the beautiful News are that we don’t have to.

Someone has already done this for us. And this is what Jesus was referring to with the opening words of the Sermon of the Mount, when He spoke about those people who are blessed by His Father who is in heaven.

Remember “blessed you are...”? Paul summarizes it wonderfully in his letter to Romans. We read these verses in every funeral: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom 6:3-5)

This is how it works according to the mysterious and unbelievably gracious plan of our God. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, steps down from His divine glory, humiliates Himself, becomes one of us, and then ... takes our place. Even on the Cross.

Meaning, He assumes responsibility for every wrong act that we have done, you and me, and for the countless good thing that we should have done, but have left undone. For every hurtful word that we have ever said to people created in God’s Image.

For every shameful thought that we have entertained. For every twisted desire that our hearts have ever produced. He takes the consequences of all our sins upon Himself and receives the death that our sins deserve, mine and yours.

But because He is without sin, without blemish, He is raised from the dead for glorious life everlasting. Then He invites us, and all the nations of the world: “Come and be united with me in Baptism, be united with me by means of my Holy Spirit!”

For if you are united with Jesus, then you have died with Him. Then your sin already has received its wages, that is, death. Then in the eyes of God the Father you are as perfect as Jesus is. Now you are as perfect as the Father.

Now you are His beloved child, His son, His daughter. Now you are on your way to inherit the Kingdom, that is prepared for you. Just remain with Jesus. This is the answer to this life and death question – what criteria will be used on the Last Day.

If you are united with Jesus in your Baptism, if you are united with Jesus in His Spirit, if you are united with Jesus in His Holy Mean, if you follow Him, if you live for Him, if you are a member of His body, the Church, then – you are perfect in the eyes of your Father, who is in heaven.

And then nothing, nothing will be able to separate you from His love, and no one will be able to snatch you out of the Father’s hand. When your time comes, you will see your Lord and God as He is, and more – you will be made like Him.

I pray that the clear words of Jesus help us to realize the depth of our sinfulness, our inability to be good in God’s eyes on our own, and that this divine wisdom would lead us humbly and joyfully to receive the greatest of God’s gifts – the forgiveness of all our sins and the live eternal through Jesus Christ.

And may the new hearts that He gives us are never idle, may we never stop walking in the newness of life, loving our brothers and sister, cherishing marriage and chaste life, and speaking the way that honors our Lord, always being busy spreading the Father’s grace and love to all whom God sends our way. Amen.