**6th Sunday after Epiphany – February 12, 2017 – Mighty Fortress Lutheran, Hiram, GA**

**based on Matthew 5:21-37 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Live a Life of Self-Control**

My friends, the words you will hear from Jesus today will hurt. They may offend you. They will make you squirm in your seat, and it’s surprising. Because these words are part of his famous Sermon on the Mount… you know, that time early in his ministry when Jesus gathered his disciples on a grassy hillside in Galilee “and he began to teach them saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs in the kingdom of God. Blessed are those who mourn, they will be comforted.” We heard last week from this same sermon, “You are the salt of the earth. You are light in this world.” Later in this same sermon our Lord gives us a most excellent outline for prayer: we call it The Lord’s Prayer. This is the same sermon where he tells us not to worry! Just as he clothes the flowers of the field and feeds the birds of the air, he will feed and clothe you because you are worth more than many sparrows!

It is in this same sermon that Jesus says things that make me feel like a horrible person. He touches on three areas of my life and yours where we don’t always exert self-control, the kind of self-control God seeks for us as his children.

Jesus begins with murder. He says, “Don’t do it!” And we nod our heads and say, “Yep, I’ve kept that one, Jesus.” The Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, felt that they had kept his commandment to the letter. After all, they had not run anyone through with a sword. But Jesus digs down to the heart of the commandment, “Anyone who is angry with his brother or sister is a murderer. That one will be subject to judgment.” Jesus equates anger and hatred to murder.

Who of us hasn’t been angry with someone? Driving on Atlanta roads? Shopping in a store? In the classroom, which teacher hasn’t been angry at students or students at their teacher? At home with our family members? Even at church with members of our church family?? That means we’re murderers??

The problem is that this doesn’t make sense to the sinful society in which we live. It doesn’t make much sense to our sinful selves. If someone wrongs you, get back at them! T his mantra is constantly streamed into our living rooms, on our TV shows and movies, from the old *Count of Monte Cristo* to *John Wick 2*, there was even a TV show entitled *Revenge,* there’s part of us that cheers when the bad guys get what they deserve. Don’t we do that in our own hearts when we refuse to forgive, when we refuse to apologize and seek reconciliation? What we’re doing is telling God is this: “I have a right to get back at them, because my pride is more important and of greater value to me than your will for me to forgive, to love, to be kind and patient.” We lack self-control.

The illustration Jesus uses drives the point home, “If you’re about to go to court, why not settle the dispute before it gets to a lawsuit? If you don’t, you’ll be thrown into prison where it is impossible to pay the debt.” In the same way, it you refuse to forgive, if you continue to harbor anger and hatred in your heart, Jesus says, you, too, will be thrown into eternal prison, where there is no possibility for parole, all over an angry heart.

The second area of life Jesus addresses is marriage and all of the blessings that God gives in marriage. Again, the Pharisees would boast that they had kept the commandment to the letter. “Jesus, we have never cheated on our wives!” Jesus again addresses the heart of the commandment, “Guys, if you look at a woman lustfully, or gals, if you look at a man lustfully, you’ve already broken the commandment.” Are our minds and hearts pure and blameless?

If you were to hand over your laptop, cell phone, tablet and computer and allow us to display up on these screens here every website you’ve ever visited, every movie you’ve rented or streamed, every text you’ve sent to someone of the opposite sex, would it be blameless and pure? If we were to think back to those times we were with boyfriend or girlfriend when no one else is around, would God consider it pure and blameless? He has given sex as a gift to married people, have we violated that gift?

But again, our sinful society says, “You have desires. They are only natural. You have passions that are only natural, act on them! Besides, you love each other. Why shouldn’t you be able to express that love? You deserve to be happy. God doesn’t want you to be unhappy, does he?” There’s part of us that agrees.

Jesus preaches on and says, “If your eyes are wandering, gouge them out! If your hands are going places they shouldn’t be, cut them off!” Now, Jesus is not promoting self-mutilation. He’s saying, “Do whatever it takes to stop it!” But if we are that unwilling to curb our passionate lust and desires, unwilling to do whatever it takes to fight against it, Jesus says, we will burn in hell, both body and soul. Again, what we’re telling God is, “My passions, my desires, my pleasure, my happiness is more important than your will for my body, for my sexuality, for my marriage.” No self-control.

Finally, Jesus concludes this part of his sermon by addressing our mouths, and what comes out of them. Jesus quotes commands God had given about taking oaths. When Jesus says, “Don’t make oaths at all! Don’t swear at all!” the problem in Jesus’ day was again with the Pharisees. They had created a scale of oath taking. For example: if you said, “I swear by the temple that I will do this…” that was a pretty important oath. But if you said, “I swear by the gold on the temple building…” that was an oath you could not break. You see, by building this scale of oaths, the Pharisees wanted the ability to lie, cheat, deceive and get out of the promises they had made.

Jesus’ point was this, “If you’re going to say something, mean what you say and say what you mean. Let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes’, and your ‘No’ be ‘No’. Speak the truth when you speak. Do not swear unnecessarily. Don’t use God’s name needlessly to make a promise.

And again, this doesn’t make sense to our sinful society. If you need to tell a little white lie, that’s ok. If it’s a half-truth, that’s ok, as long as it doesn’t really hurt anyone. It’s ok to use God’s name to make your promises, to use God’s name as an exclamation or response to surprise or shock. But again, what we’re telling God is this: “I will use your name how I want. I will break promises, lie, be deceitful if I need to, because my reputation and my pride, my goals and desires are more important than your name and how you want me to use it.” Jesus says that if this continues to be our attitude, “Your words aren’t coming from the Spirit who lives inside you. They are coming from the evil one.” No self-control.

These words of Jesus’ sermon hurt, because they clearly show where we are not blameless, where are not pure. They clearly show us we have a problem with self-control, with controlling our anger, our hatred, our lust, our desires and passions, our words, and because we lack perfect self-control we are not good people. We do not deserve God’s grace and mercy. We do not deserve to go to heaven when we die. Jesus is telling us these things so that he might save us from the fires of hell. He wants us to see that salvation cannot and could not be from ourselves. He wants us to repent of our sins, and see our need for a Savior, and that Savior is Jesus.

So let’s look at Jesus and examine his life and compare it to the commands he gave. “Do not be angry!” When we look at Jesus, we see lying flat, his back pressed against a rough piece of wood, soldiers stretching out his arms, pounding large spikes through his hands, and Jesus doesn’t speak a word of anger or hatred toward them. But we hear these words fall from his bloodied mouth, “Father, forgive them.” Forgive them. As he hangs on the cross, as his enemies shake their fists at him and curse him, no words of revenge spew from his mouth. In fact, at the very end we hear him shout, “It is finished!” and he dies. He dies for those who hated him, he dies for those who crucified him, for us who have murdered our brothers and sisters with our words and with our hearts, for us who have refused to forgive - Jesus lives a life of love and forgiveness and dies to earn forgiveness for you and me. You are forgiven because of Jesus’ self-control.

Now let us look at your Savior’s sexuality. How did he practice self-control? God’s Word tells us that he was tempted in every way just as we are… those same temptations that befall young teenage boys, the temptations of the flesh that young men in their twenties and thirties fall into… those temptations were paraded in front of Jesus. But God’s word tells us, “He was tempted just as we are, yet he was without sin.” His eyes never wandered. His heart never lead to lust. He was pure and blameless in his thoughts and his actions towards women. Here is an example, not just for married people and single people, but more than that. By that blameless and pure life he has saved us from our sins of the flesh. Perfect self-control.

Jesus then shows us the perfect marriage union, between God and his Church. God sent his Son to die for his bride, to wash her with water and the word. Whatever you did in the past, as a single person, as a married person, it is forgiven. Hebrews 7:26 “Such a high priest meets our need, one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.” He unites himself to you in the perfect marriage through faith. And he has washed you pure. He has dressed you with the white wedding dress of his holiness and purity. You stand holy in God’s sight.

Finally, let us listen to Jesus’ words. Was he honest, truthful in all he said? What do we see Jesus doing with God’s name, with his words? As a 12 year old boy we see Jesus in the temple, he’s in church, studying the word of God, asking good questions about the bible. We see Jesus using God’s name to give thanks, to share his Father’s Word with other people. And when he was asked to swear, to testify in court, by the name of God on high, if he was in fact the Son of God, Jesus made that oath, “Yes, I am the Son of God,” even though that confession confirmed his execution. Jesus was and is truth. “Jesus appeared so that he might take away our sins, and in him is no sin.” By his self-control of his words, Jesus forgives you and me. The blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin. Every sin.

Forgiven, Jesus now says, “You will go and live a life a self-control. You will forgive. You will speak peace to each other. You will reconcile. You will be pure in your thoughts, with your words and actions with members of the opposite sex. You will do whatever it takes to rid your life of those things that cause your eyes to wander. You will be respectful with your spouse. You will respect and honor marriage and all of its blessings. You will use God’s name and his word correctly.” When you stumble and fall, look to him who was perfect in self-control for forgiveness, for strength.

When you live this way, the world will look at it and say, “That’s different.” It will not make sense to the world to live this way, but to God it makes perfect sense. He intends to bless you. He wants you to live this way, because it is the best way for you. Having been forgiven, cleansed, and purified by Jesus’ blood, this is the way we want to live. This is the way we will live, because that's who we are. This is how God created us in Christ Jesus through faith. God grant you the power and grace to live a life of self-control. Amen.