

Jesus on Life - The Sermon on the Mount
Part 1
Matthew 5–7

Sermon 1: Taking Time to Pause
Matthew 4:23–5:2

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout these sermons you'll see the notes we used to communicate with the media team. A worship outline for this series can be found at the end of the series.]

Several years ago I heard a speaker talk about “hurry sickness.” ***[slide: At the top of the slide, put the caption: “Hurry Sickness.” In the background, put a photo of a hurdle race, with a man/or men dashing over the hurdles]*** The speaker defined hurry sickness as ***[add quote to slide (with the hurdle image still in background): “The continuous struggle to participate in more and more activities in less and less time.”]*** That describes a lot of people I know, including a lot of us in this church today. Huge numbers of Americans are chronically busy, rushed and harried, and could easily be diagnosed with hurry sickness. ***[end slide]***

One small example of hurry sickness is the rapidly shrinking American vacation. Over the past few decades, American vacations have grown shorter and shorter. Years ago people routinely took two-week vacations. Over time the two-week vacation gradually became one week. Then the typical American vacation was reduced to four days. And now it's down to three days. And, when Americans finally do take a vacation, many take their work with them. I saw an example of that during my last trip to Destin, Florida. I was taking a walk on the beach when I saw a man sitting under an umbrella, typing on a laptop computer, and talking on his cell phone. I thought, What a wonderful vacation he must be having!

Americans are in a hurry. We're busy. We're rushed. We have no time. As Max Lucado once noted, “America is the only country on earth with a mountain called ‘Rushmore.’” And rush more we do—with a vengeance! But sadly, this rushed, harried, busy life is taking its toll. It's hurting our bodies; it's hurting our relationships, and it's hurting our souls. In the end chronic busyness makes for an extremely impoverished life.

I came across a story a couple of years ago that I've been wanting to share with you. Today seemed like a good opportunity. In this story Satan called a meeting of all his demons and devils. *[slide: image of Satan figure, with flames around—not too scary but not comical either]* Please don't take this story literally!

At his annual demons convention, Satan said, "We can't keep Christians from going to church or reading their Bibles. But we can still destroy their spiritual lives." "How shall we do this?" shouted all the demons. Satan replied, "Keep them busy." He explained: "Keep them busy in the nonessentials of life. Tempt them to spend, spend, spend, and borrow, borrow, borrow. Convince them to work six or seven days a week, ten to twelve hours a day, so they can afford their lifestyles. Keep them from spending time with their children. Overstimulate their minds so they cannot hear the still small voice of their Creator. Entice them to play the radio or CD player whenever they drive. Pound them with endless e-mails, text messages, and cell phone calls. Keep TVs, DVDs, CDs and PCs going constantly in their homes.

Fill their coffee table with fluff magazines and multiple newspapers. Pound their minds with the news twenty-four hours a day. Invade their driving moments with billboards. Have them squander hours a day away online, with mindless e-mails, text messages, MySpace, Facebook and Twitter messages. Flood their snail mail mailboxes with junk mail, mail order catalogs, and every kind of newsletter and promotional material.

Even in their recreation let them be excessive. Have them return from their recreation exhausted, disquieted, and unprepared for the coming week. Don't let them go out in nature to reflect on God's wonders. Send them instead to amusement parks, sporting events, and loud concerts. Satan concluded, "By keeping their world busy and noisy, we can destroy their souls."

With that the convention ended, and the demons went eagerly to their assignments causing Christians everywhere to get busy, busy, busy." The story ended with an acrostic for the word busy. *[add to Satan image screen, from top to bottom, in big letters for an acrostic: B U S Y]*. The letters to the word busy—b, u, s, y—stand for *[add to screen as I get to them: Being Under Satan's Yoke]* I'm not too big on Satan stuff. But this story contains much truth. Being too busy destroys the human spirit and is destructive to the Christian life. *[end slide]*

Americans, especially American Christians, desperately need to slow down. We need, at least occasionally, to take a pause from our busy lives. That's true physically. To be physically healthy, our bodies need to pause for rest and recuperation. That's true relationally. To be relationally healthy, we need to pause from our busy schedules and spend time with the people we love. And that's true spiritually, which is our focus today. For us to maintain healthy spiritual lives, we need regularly to heed the words of the psalmist to, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10 NIV). In short, to keep our souls healthy, we must take time to pause.

All of which brings me to today's Scripture reading. In this text we see that Jesus and his disciples were busy people. But we also see that they took a break from their busy schedule. Let's look again at the entire passage. It begins, **[slide: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people." (Matt. 4:23 NIV)]** The text is clear—Jesus was a hardworking, busy man.

The text continues, **[new slide: "News about Jesus spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him." (Matt. 4:24-25 NIV)]** People were coming from all over to see and hear Jesus and to be healed. In fact, so many people were flocking to Jesus and his disciples that the crowds were beginning to overwhelm them, as we see in these next verses.

Let's read on. **[New slide with background image of Jesus sitting down, speaking to his disciples on the mountain (leave room for three points under this passage, as you will see below): "Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying . . ." (Matt. 5:1-2 NIV)]**

Jesus and his disciples needed a break from their work with the crowds. In short, Jesus and the disciples needed to pause. So they left the crowd, went up to a mountainside, and sat down. Don't miss that. Jesus and the disciples didn't go into the midst of the crowd to heal their hurts. On other occasions they did—but not this time. This time they retreated up the mountain for awhile. They didn't stay all that long. And, after a break, they came back down

from the mountain and resumed their work with the crowd. But, at least for a little while, they took time to pause. If time permitted, many other biblical examples could be given of Jesus and the disciples taking a break from their work. You see, we cannot stay busy all the time and be effective Christians. Like Jesus and the disciples, we need times to rest, to reflect, to regain perspective, and to recharge our spiritual batteries. If we stay busy all the time, we will destroy our souls. So we must occasionally pause and renew our inner life.

Oh, I can hear the skeptics out there. You are thinking, You don't know my schedule. I don't have time to pause. Well, neither did Jesus and the disciples. So they TOOK the time. They MADE the time. And, if we are smart, so will we.

Let's look more closely at this passage from Matthew 5. In these verses, the disciples did three things. First, they took time to be with Jesus. ***[add to slide: (underline the above words in Matthew 5, "came to him") and add: 1. They took time to be with Jesus.]*** As you can see in these underlined words, the disciples came to Jesus. They wanted to be with him. Like those early disciples you and I also need time with Jesus. And that's the core purpose of worship. Through songs and prayer and especially through Holy Communion, we gather in this place every Sunday to spend time with our Lord.

Second, they took time to be with one another. ***[add to slide: (drop the underlined words above and now underline the words, "His disciples" and "them" and add: 2. They took time to be with one another.]*** The disciples didn't come to Jesus as individuals; they came as a group. Christians simply cannot make it without the support, care, and encouragement of other Christians. So we gather in this church every week for worship and small groups in order to be with other believers.

Third, they took time to hear God's Word. ***[add to slide: (drop the underlined words above and now underline the words "he began to teach them saying:" and add: 3. They took time to hear God's Word.]*** On that mountain Jesus' disciples listened to Jesus preach his most famous sermon—what we call the ***Sermon on the Mount***—which we are going to review in the weeks ahead. Like those early disciples, we also need to hear God's Word. So we come to this place every Sunday for worship and for small groups, hoping to hear a word from God to help us on our journey.

Every Sunday you and I have the opportunity to live out this threefold example of the early disciples. On Sunday mornings God calls us to pause from our busy schedules and gather in this sacred place for these three holy purposes. First, God invites us to spend time with Jesus in worship. Second, God calls us to spend time with one another as a community of faith. And third, God invites us to hear his Word. In the weeks ahead we are going to hear the words Jesus shared with his disciples on that mountain years ago. We are going to focus on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, which is recorded in Matthew 5, 6, and 7.

These three chapters of Scripture contain Jesus' teachings on many important subjects. I like to call the Sermon on the Mount **[new slide: (same background image of Jesus preaching to his disciples on the mountain. At the top of the slide put the caption) "Jesus on Life."]** Over the next several weeks, we will review these teachings of Jesus, which cover topics like **[add to slide two columns of the following ten words, five words in each column, with bullets in front of each of them: Success, Money, Anger, Prayer, Sex, Peacemaking, Marriage, Divorce, Anxiety, Judging]** and other important subjects. I'm looking forward to pausing with you on Sunday mornings as we spent time with Jesus, with one another, and with God's Word as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount.

It's time to wrap up. **[end slide]** As I prepared for this sermon about taking time to pause, I recalled an old episode of *ER*. As you probably know, *ER* was a long-running show about a hospital's emergency room. In this particular episode, several actors got sick in the middle of a theatrical play. Somehow they made it to intermission; then they rushed over to the *ER*. The director of the play was pressuring the *ER* doctors and nurses to give the sick actors a quick fix and then send them back to the theater so they could finish the second half of the play. A nurse named Abby said, "Why in the world would you want to send these sick actors back to the theater?" The manager said, "The show must go on!" Abby looked at him and said, "Why? Why must the show go on? Why can't the show just stop every once in awhile?"

LISTENING GUIDE

Jesus on Life: Taking Time to Pause

They took time _____

"Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples **came to him**, and he began to teach them saying:" (Matt. 5:1-2 NIV)

They took time _____

“Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. **His disciples** came to him, and he began to teach them saying:” (Matt. 5:1-2 NIV)

They took time _____

“Now when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and **he began to teach them** saying:” (Matt. 5:1-2 NIV)

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Sermon 2: Redefining Success

Matthew 5:3-12

Two weeks from today most Americans, including most of our congregation, will watch the Super Bowl. **[slide of football image, better if it's Super Bowl image]** We love the Super Bowl—when the best of the best play for the ultimate sports victory and we crown the number one team in the world. America loves the Super Bowl because America loves a winner, because America loves success. **[end slide]** In fact, it's fair to say that Americans are consumed with being successful. And the pursuit of success is certainly not a bad thing. It's important to try to excel. But, as Christian believers, we must be careful about how we define success. The dictionary defines success as “having attained wealth, fame, or rank.” **[slide: (with background photo of famous movie stars, perhaps on the red carpet at Oscar night, maybe Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) Success: Having attained wealth, fame, or rank]**. And Americans, by and large, buy into that definition. Success means making all A's on the report card, winning sporting contests, making lots of money, or acquiring fame, beauty, or power—perhaps even winning an Oscar. But what if that's a faulty definition of success? What if our definition of success is all wrong?

Years ago I heard a story about two Kentucky horse farmers. **[slide: photo of horse race, two horses neck and neck in a close race]** They both owned racing stables, and they had developed a keen rivalry. One spring each of them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking a professional rider might help him outdo his neighbor, one of the farmers hired a top-ranked jockey. Hiring a professional jockey was unusual for this event. This was a low-key, community race, mostly for fun, like a pickup basketball game. But this horse breeder wanted badly to beat his neighbor so he hired a professional.

Near the end of the race, the two horses were neck and neck with a large lead over the rest of the pack at the last fence, but suddenly they ran into each other, and both horses fell down, unseating their riders. Thankfully, neither the horses nor the jockeys were hurt. Well, the professional jockey remounted quickly and rode on to win the race. Returning triumphantly to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him, fuming with rage. “What's the matter?” the jockey asked. “I won, didn't I?” “Oh, yea,” roared the farmer. “You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse.” In his hurry to remount after the fall, the

jockey had jumped onto his competitor's horse. **[(Leadership (Fall 1991), 44.) [end slide]**

That story has bothered me since I heard it. What if we are riding the wrong horse in this matter of success? What if fame and rank and wealth aren't success at all but just a cheap imitation. If so, we are wasting our lives, frantically riding the wrong horse in our pursuit of success. And when we get to the finish line, we'll realize too late that we didn't win at all, that our idea of success was all wrong and we rode the wrong horse to the end.

Today's text from the Sermon on the Mount speaks powerfully to the issue of success. However, Jesus has a radically different understanding of success than we usually do. Indeed, Jesus totally redefines success. Let's take a moment and compare how our culture and how Jesus define success. Please see the listening guide in your bulletin, which we have also placed on screen. **(Listening guide can be found below.)**

[slide of the following two-column listening guide. It all needs to fit on one slide. Add underlined words as I get to them. It moves pretty quick, so you'll need to be on top of it. See underlined words below in the manuscript]

Cultural Success

Kingdom Success

Being _____

Being _____ (v. 3)

Being _____

Being _____ (v. 4)

Trusts _____

Trusts _____ (v. 5)

Craves _____

Craves _____ (v. 6)

Serves _____

Serves _____ (v. 7)

Outward _____

Inward _____ (v. 8)

Seeks _____

Seeks _____ (v. 9)

Being _____

Being _____ (v. 10)

In our culture, success means being independent **[slide: add to first column: independent]**. We admire the self-made, proud, self-sufficient person. But kingdom success means being dependent **[slide: add to second column: dependent]**. In verse 3 Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3 NIV). “Poor in spirit” is the opposite of being self-sufficient. The poor in spirit are people who recognize they need God, who know they are not independent but desperately need God.

In our culture success means being happy **[slide: add to first column: happy]**. We are big into the pursuit of happiness. But kingdom success means being burdened **[slide: add to second column: burdened]**. In verse 4 Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matt. 5:4 NIV). This describes people who have a deep burden for the brokenness of our world. They grieve over the pain in God’s world and seek to make it better.

In our culture, successful people trust self **[slide: add to first column: self]**. They trust their own power and resourcefulness. But success in God’s kingdom means to trust God **[slide: add to second column: God]**. In verse 5 Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek” (Matt. 5:5 NIV). Meek doesn’t mean a mousy spineless person. For example, both Moses and Jesus are described as meek. A meek person is a person who trusts God.

In our culture, successful people crave possessions **[slide: add to first column: possessions]**. More stuff is always better. But in the kingdom, a successful person craves righteousness **[slide: add to second column: righteousness]**. In verse 6 Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6 NIV). Their highest ambition is not a promotion, a new car or house, or a good return on their investments. Instead, their first priority is to seek God’s kingdom.

In our culture successful people serve self **[slide: add to first column: self.]** They take care of number one, and other people are often used as tools for self-advancement. But successful kingdom people serve others **[slide: add to second column: others.]** Jesus says in verse 7, “Blessed are the merciful” (Matt. 5:7 NIV). Success in Jesus’ eyes has to do with mercy, kindness, compassion, and grace, of being a servant to others.

In our culture successful people are concerned with outward show **[slide: add to first column: show.]** They want to wear the right kind of clothes, drive the right kind of car, live in

the right part of town, go to the right parties; they are deeply concerned about what others think about them. It's a tiring and exhausting way to live—always keeping up appearances—but many do. Successful people in the kingdom, however, are not concerned about outward show but about inward character **[slide: add to second column: character.]** In verse 8 Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart” (Matt. 5:8 NIV). They are not captive to cultural values and outward show but seek inward purity and unquestionable character.

In our culture successful people seek dominance **[slide: add to first column: dominance.]** Power and control are the name of the game. But in the kingdom successful people seek harmony **[slide: add to second column: harmony.]** In verse 9 Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt. 5:9 NIV). They are agents of reconciliation and peace. Relationships, not power, are what matter most.

Finally, in our culture, success means being popular **[slide: add to first column: popular.]** We want everyone to like us. But in the kingdom success means being faithful **[slide: add to first column: faithful.]** In verse 10. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness” (Matt. 5:10 NIV). He is describing people who are so serious about their faith—so faithful to God—that they have different values and standards than our secular culture. Because of that, they are sometimes misunderstood and occasionally even persecuted.

So which horse are we riding to the finish line? Our culture's horse—of fame and power and wealth? Or the kingdom's horse, as seen in this text? This is a hard passage because it makes middle-class American Christians uncomfortable. Jesus questions everything we believe about success; he redefines it in a radical way. **[end slide]**

Yet, if we are honest, we know our culture's definition of success is inadequate, and even oppressive, because it's impossible to attain fully. Can we really be beautiful and sexy and popular and intelligent and clever and rich and famous and wealthy? None of us can match up to such standards of success. And ultimately our culture's definition of success is not only shallow; it's bankrupt. I know many people who are successful in our culture's eyes but completely empty inside.

American Christians desperately need new models of success. Instead of looking up to rich businessmen, talented singers, beautiful movie stars, and overpaid athletes as examples of success, we need alternative examples. Instead of mindlessly affirming cultural models of success—which are often bankrupt—we need to affirm kingdom models of success. So, before concluding this sermon, I'd like to offer up one such model, a hero of mine, my Uncle Jack from Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Uncle Jack retired a few years ago from a factory job. By our culture's standards Jack is not an exceptionally successful man. He doesn't own a large house, is not part of the social elite of his community, didn't have a status job, is not a member of the country club, doesn't have advanced educational degrees. However, Jack has his priorities in order. He knows what matters. His life counts for good. From my perspective Jack is an extremely successful man.

First, Uncle Jack loves God. His commitment to Christ and Christ's church runs deep. In fact, Jack and his wife Betty first took me to church. Through their influence I came to know Jesus. Jack serves God at his church as a deacon and junior high Sunday school teacher.

Not only does Jack love God; he also loves people. He is deeply devoted to his family. He gives them the gifts of his time, love, and support. Jack also knows how to be a good friend. He understands that relationships—with family, friends, and church family—are what count most in life.

Jack not only loves God and people, but he also loves life. He knows how to laugh. He enjoys a good joke. He takes great joy in playfully teasing children. When I was a young boy, Jack used to slip his comb out of his pocket while I wasn't looking and rub it behind my ear. "What's that noise?" I would ask. "What noise?" he responded with a smile. Jack used to hide behind the bushes in front of his house as my cousins and I returned home from a movie or playing ball. As we walked to the house, Jack jumped out from behind the bushes and scared us half to death. We loved it! When I was a small child, Jack used to tease me by telling me I had garments all over my body. "Where are they? Get them off!" He also used to kid me about having lots of ancestors. I didn't know what ancestors were, but I was convinced they were something terrible. Jack's teasing, however, was done in love. We always knew it was in jest and just for fun.

I have many memories of picnics, July 4 celebrations, and trips to the lake with Jack and Betty and my cousins. I remember Jack's smile and his celebration of life.

Like all of us, Jack has experienced hard times. Although I remember laughter and love and trips to the lake, that's not the entire story. Jack and Betty struggled for many years to care for their aging parents. They fought a major battle with cancer and have watched their daughter fight cancer. Several years ago their son-in-law died from throat cancer. Through it all, however, Jack continues to trust God, love people, and celebrate the joys of living.

He may not be successful in our culture's eyes, but when I read today's text, I think of Jack. He fully lives out the eight beatitudes we covered earlier. Jack knows he is not an independent, self-sufficient person. He is dependent on God. Although he knows much happiness, Jack is also burdened by the brokenness in our world and seeks to do his part to help. Jack trusts not in himself but in God. Jack craves righteousness more than he craves a bigger piece of the American pie. Jack isn't consumed with serving himself, but tries to serve others. Jack doesn't try to impress others with outward show but lives a life of inward character. Jack doesn't seek dominance but harmony. Whether in his family, church, or community, Jack is always a peacemaker, attempting to reconcile differences. Jack lives according to kingdom values, not cultural values. So according to Jesus, Jack is an extremely successful man.

When Uncle Jack comes to the end of his life, he won't have a big stock portfolio or fame or power or status. But he will have the joy of knowing that he invested his life in kingdom values. And when he passes to the other side, he will hear the voice of Jesus say, "Well done my good and faithful servant, enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

###

Sermon 3: How to Share Your Faith Without Turning People Off

Matthew 5:13-16

Several years ago Eugene Peterson wrote an interesting article called *“My First Convert.”* In the article Eugene Peterson, a pastor and author, told a story from his childhood. He was raised in a conservative, evangelical Christian home where he was taught that good Christian boys never fight with their fists. His mom made him memorize Bible verses such as “Bless those who persecute you” and “Turn the other cheek.” And Eugene did a pretty good job of avoiding fights until he came across Garrison Johns, the school bully. Every day after school Garrison stalked Eugene down and gave Eugene what he called “my daily beating.” Well, this went on for many weeks. Every day as Garrison beat him up, Eugene would quote to himself, “Bless those who persecute you” and “Turn the other cheek.” But one day, something happened, something snapped in Eugene.

Garrison was about to give him his daily beating when Eugene forgot his Bible verses and fought back. To Eugene’s surprise, and to Garrison’s surprise, Eugene was stronger than the bully. He wrestled Garrison down to the ground, sat on his chest, and pinned his arms to the ground with his knees. Garrison the bully was helpless. Eugene hit him with his fists. It felt good, and he hit him again, and blood spurted from Garrison’s nose, producing a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering Eugene, egging him on, “Black his eye! Bust his teeth!” Eugene said to Garrison, “Say Uncle.” Garrison would not say it. So Eugene hit him again. More blood, more cheering, more fists to the face. Finally Eugene’s Christian upbringing kicked back in. He said to Garrison, “Say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.’” And Garrison said it. Eugene concludes the story by saying, “Garrison Johns was my first convert.” ***[Christian Century (September 23-30, 1998), 877.]***

Although I don’t recommend it, I found Eugene Peterson’s method of personal evangelism quite interesting! As you know by now, today’s topic from the Sermon on the Mount is evangelism. I know that’s not a hot topic for most of us. But don’t worry, there are plenty of hot topics from the Sermon on the Mount coming up in the weeks ahead, including money, sex, marriage, divorce, and dealing with anger. But in today’s passage Jesus commands his disciples to share the gospel with others, whether we want to or not. Unfortunately, evangelism is not very popular in most mainline churches. We talk a lot about being inclusive,

open minded, caring for the poor, improving race relations, seeking peace, and caring for the environment. But we don't talk much about evangelism. And I understand why. Most of us have been turned off by evangelistic methods that we don't like. Have you ever been accosted by a person on the street handing out a religious track and asking you, "If you died tonight, where would you spend eternity?" People can't stand that kind of evangelism. Let me mention just a few examples of evangelistic methods that turn people off.

For example, take fear evangelism. **[slide: 1. Fear Evangelism]** In this evangelistic approach, you try to scare people into accepting Christ. Years ago, when I pastored in Arkansas, a film was being shown in Baptist churches all over the state. It was called *The Burning Hell*. It showed people burning alive with worms crawling out of their eyes and skin falling off. Right after the film preachers would get up and say, "If you don't come and get saved right now, you will fry in hell," and young children, scared half to death, would run forward at the invitation to be saved. I remember getting a phone call from the group that was promoting the film. They said, "Pastor Martin, when can we schedule *The Burning Hell* for your church?" I said, "When hell freezes over." I'm usually more diplomatic than that. But fear evangelism, especially with children, is completely inappropriate and totally against the spirit of Jesus.

So is manipulation evangelism. **[add to slide: 2. Manipulation Evangelism]** I've seen this done at funerals. I remember one funeral of a teenage boy. The preacher completely abused the emotions of the moment and manipulated the young people who were at the funeral. He gave a long, drawn-out, extremely emotional and manipulative invitation during the funeral service. I was outraged at this abusive form of evangelism.

Another method I can't stand is sales-pitch evangelism. **[add to slide: 3. Sales-Pitch Evangelism]** In this method a person approaches a prospect with a canned sales pitch, as though the gospel of Jesus Christ can be sold like soap. That kind of approach absolutely turns me off.

Well, we see these abusive forms of evangelism, and we think, Evangelism is not for me. But listen, there is another way to do evangelism, an authentic way, a Jesus way. I'm talking about lifestyle evangelism—sharing the gospel by living like an authentic Christian. We see that clearly in today's text. Please read with me:

[slide (put salt shaker image in background): “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.]

Let's read on in the text. ***[slide: (candle image in background): “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matt. 5:13-16 NIV)]***

This passage is a clear call to do evangelism. But not an evangelism of fear or manipulation or a memorized sales pitch. No, Jesus calls us to lifestyle evangelism, to share the gospel by living like a Christian. Jesus uses two vivid images to communicate this kind of evangelism—salt and light.

[slide: image of salt shaker (same one as you used for background image)] In the ancient world salt had many purposes. Like today salt was used as seasoning, ***[add to slide: 1. Salt as Seasoning]*** to add spice and flavor to food. Jesus is saying that we are to add life and spice to the world as vibrant examples of Christianity. Salt was also used as a preservative, ***[add to slide: 2. Salt as Preservative]*** to preserve food and fight decay. Jesus is saying we are to help preserve Christian values in our culture. Salt was also an antiseptic, ***[add to slide: 3. Salt as Antiseptic]*** used to heal wounds. Jesus wants his followers to help heal the wounds of hurting people. Salt was also used in small amounts for fertilizer, ***[add to slide: 4: Salt as Fertilizer]*** to help nurture and grow plants. In that same way, we are called to nurture and support other people. Jesus said, “Be the salt of the earth!”

Jesus also used the image of light. ***[slide: image of candle burning (same one used for background image)]*** In the midst of darkness, we are to be a light, a guide, a hope for others. Christians are called to be the light of the world, to be a vibrant witness of Christian living. ***[end slide]***

Jesus is talking here about lifestyle evangelism. Sharing Christ through the way we live. Living such a vibrant Christian life that non-Christians will be attracted to Christianity. In short, we are called to do evangelism through authentic Christian living. That does NOT mean we

should never give a verbal witness of our faith. We should. Whenever the occasion is appropriate, we can and should gently share with others that faith is an important part of our lives. And we can invite others to church, where they can experience the Spirit of Christ in Christian community. We reach a lot of people that way. But, according to Jesus in this text, the primary way we are to share our faith is by living a Christian lifestyle. By loving and serving and caring for people. By being people of integrity. By living out Christian values. By being salt and light to others. As Saint Francis of Assisi said, **[slide with image of St. Francis of Assisi with the quote, “Preach the gospel at all times, use words if necessary.” (St. Francis of Assisi)]**

A few weeks ago I heard a story that vividly illustrates today’s message about sharing our faith by our actions and not just our words. The story ran on ESPN and also made the Internet rounds. The story was written by Rick Reilly, a writer for Sports Illustrated who writes a sports column called “*Life of Reilly*.” The story begins with these words. **[slide (with high school football team image) “They played the oddest game in high school football history last month in Grapevine, Texas.”]**

The story involved two high school football teams. The first team was Faith Christian School in Grapevine, Texas. The other team in the story was Gainesville State School. Well, Faith and Gainesville played each other a few months ago at Faith Christian High School. But, as Rick Reilly reported, it was an odd game. For example, when the Gainesville players ran onto the field, hundreds of fans from Faith came onto the field and made a forty-yard spirit line for their opponents to run through. The Faith fans even made a huge banner for the Gainesville team to run through. Rick Reilly said that seeing Faith Christian School enthusiastically root for their opponents was one of the weirdest sights he has ever seen. And that was just the beginning. Faith fans cheered their Gainesville opponents on throughout the game. Even the Faith cheerleaders were cheering for the Gainesville team. The ending of the game was also strange. Faith won the game, 33-14, but the Gainesville players were so happy that after the game they gave their head coach a sideline squirt-bottle shower like he’d just won the state championship. They were ecstatic even though they had just been walloped. They were happy because they scored two touchdowns near the end of the game—their best offensive work of the year. Of course, it didn’t hurt that Faith played their third string players in the last quarter of the game. But regardless, the Gainesville players were joyful about their two touchdowns. If you were at the game that night, what happened after the game was perhaps

the strangest sight of all. When it was all over, twelve uniformed officers came onto the field. They lined up the Gainesville players and put handcuffs on them. Then the players were marched to the team bus and returned to Gainesville maximum security correctional facility seventy-five miles north of Dallas. You see, Gainesville is a team of high school teenagers in prison with convictions for drugs, assault, and robbery.

Weeks before the Faith-Gainesville game, the coach at Faith Christian High School decided that he wanted his team and his school to give a Christian witness to the Gainesville team of juvenile offenders. Faith Christian High is serious about their faith and wants to share their faith whenever possible. Well, the Faith coach got this wild idea. He thought, "What if half of our fans, for one night only, cheered for the other team?" He sent e-mails out to the school and community asking the fans to do exactly that. Some people were naturally confused.

One Faith player walked into the coach's office and said, "Coach, why are we doing this?" The coach said, "Imagine if you didn't have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people suddenly to believe in you." Well, the school responded with great enthusiasm. The night of the game, the Gainesville team of convicted teenagers looked behind them and saw something they had never seen before. Hundreds of fans. And actual cheerleaders! All cheering them on with gusto. It was a strange experience for those boys. One of them, a boy named Gerald, said, "We can tell people are afraid of us when we come to the games. You can see it in their eyes. They're looking at us like we're criminals. But these people were yelling for us. By our names!"

After the game both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray. A boy from the Gainesville's team named Isaiah surprised everybody by asking if he could say the prayer. Faith's coach said, "We had no idea what the kid was going to say." Isaiah led the prayer with these words: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank you, but I never would have known there was so many people in the world that cared about us." It's a good thing everybody's head was bowed because, if not, they would have seen Faith's coach wiping away tears, along with many boys on his team. As the Gainesville team left the field in handcuffs to go back to prison, the Faith team gave them each a bag for the ride home—a burger, some fries, a soda, some candy, a Bible, and an encouraging letter written by one of the Faith football team members.

Now I don't know what those Gainesville boys were thinking on their bus ride back to the prison that night. But my guess is that at least a few of them were thinking, "If what I experienced tonight is Christianity, then I'm interested in learning more."

"Preach the gospel at all times," said St. Francis. "Use words if necessary."

###

Sermon 4: When Religion Goes Bad

Matthew 5:17-20

For just a minute, let's pretend we are in a chemistry class in high school or college. **[slide: photo of chemistry lab]** For those of you who, like me, did not excel in chemistry, don't worry; we won't stay in the class for long. Let's now pretend that the teacher has put up a chemical formula on the board that says $\text{NH}_4 \text{NO}_3$. **[add to slide: $\text{NH}_4 \text{NO}_3$]** Does anyone know what that is? That's the compound for ammonium nitrate. **[add to slide: ammonium nitrate]** Aren't you glad you came to church today! We're probably the only congregation in town today that is teaching the chemical formula for ammonium nitrate. Well, this compound has many uses. For example, **[slide: photo of fertile, healthy soybean crop in field]** it's used to fertilize soybean crops. Ammonium nitrate adds important nitrogen into crops, significantly increasing the yield, to better feed a hungry world. Unfortunately, that's not the only use for this chemical. **[slide: photo of destroyed, blown up federal building in Oklahoma City]** Ammonium nitrate is also used to blow up buildings, including the federal building in Oklahoma City years ago. Ammonium nitrate can be used for great good or for terrible evil.

The same thing can be said of religion. **[slide: 2 images: image of the interior of an ancient-looking cathedral on half the screen; on the other half put image of the interior of a mosque, with men kneeling in prayer to Allah]** On the one hand religion does wonderful things. Religious faith from all traditions gives people meaning, direction, and hope. Religious faith brings people together in loving and supportive communities. Religion builds hospitals and schools, educates minds, feeds the hungry, and fights for justice. Religion is a powerful force for good in the world. But, as we all know, religion sometimes is a force for evil. Religion, even in the Christian faith, sometimes fosters prejudice, ignorance, intolerance, legalism, and judgment. Sometimes religion even turns violent, as we see in radical Islamic terrorism. Religion, like the chemical compound ammonium nitrate, can be a force for great good or for great evil. That's true in today's world, and that was also true in Jesus' day. All of which brings me to today's text from the Sermon on the Mount.

Today's text begins with these words, **[slide (with ancient-looking Scripture image like a scroll in background): "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the**

Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matt. 5:17 NIV) These words of Jesus raise the question, why would people think that Jesus had come to abolish the Law and the Prophets? Where would they get the strange idea that Jesus came to abolish the Bible, which—as Jesus said in the verses that follow—was completely false? So where did the idea come from that Jesus was trashing the Bible? The answer is that the Pharisees, Jesus’ archenemies—by their choice not his—were saying exactly that. They said to people, “Jesus doesn’t believe the Bible. Jesus doesn’t obey God’s commands. He’s a heretic, a dangerous threat to our religion.”

For example, the Pharisees taught that no work of any kind could be done on the Sabbath. So when Jesus, out of God’s compassion and love, healed people on the Sabbath, the Pharisees said, “See, Jesus doesn’t believe or obey the Bible.” Instead of rejoicing that a wounded child of God had been made whole, they attacked Jesus for breaking their harsh, joyless, legalistic religious rules. The Pharisees are a prime example of religion gone bad. Their religion had become toxic. We see that in the last verse of today’s text where Jesus said, ***[slide: (same background image as last slide): “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20 NIV)***

In this text, and in many other passages of the Bible, Jesus warns us to stay away from toxic pharisaical religion. So let’s quickly review the two major attributes of Pharisee religion, which, unfortunately, is still alive and well in today’s world.

[slide (at top of screen put) Attributes of Unhealthy Religion] The first attribute of pharisaical, toxic religion is an arrogant attitude. ***[add to slide: 1. An Arrogant Attitude]*** In Jesus’ day the Pharisees believed they alone had true religion, and anyone who disagreed with their perfect understanding of God and faith were wrong. They felt superior to other people, and they looked down on anyone different from them. A biblical example of that kind of arrogant religion is found on the front cover of today’s bulletin. That passage, from Luke 18, tells the story about the Pharisee who went to the temple to pray and prayed, “Lord, I thank you that I’m better than everyone else.” He reeked with arrogance. That kind of toxic religion is what Jesus is talking about in today’s text. Unfortunately, arrogant religion is still alive and well today. A lot of religious people in today’s world believe they alone have pure religion, and

anyone who differs from them is wrong. That kind of superior, arrogant religion is dangerous. It tears apart families, it tears apart churches, and worse.

For example, I recently heard the story of Brad Hirschfield, an orthodox Jew from Chicago. Over time, Brad became a religious extremist, convinced his way to God was the only way. He moved to the West Bank in Israel and embraced a fiery political Judaism. Packing a Bible in one hand and a 9 mm pistol in another, he joined a group of radical Jews at a settlement in the West Bank. They believed their religion alone was pure and that their Muslim Palestinian neighbors' religion was evil. One day Brad and his militant buddies got into a firefight with a group of Palestinians. During the fight several of his friends began randomly shooting into a school and killed two innocent Palestinian children.

That event changed Brad's life forever. He became physically ill on the spot, nauseous at what he had become—a radical, arrogant, religious fanatic. Since that day he has dedicated his life to challenging self-righteous, absolutist, black-and-white, arrogant religion that believes it is superior to others. He recently wrote a book called *[slide of book cover, You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism]* Thankfully, Brad now has religious humility. He has abandoned arrogant religion for a more loving, grace-filled, tolerant religion.

Jesus warned his followers again and again to reject arrogant religion and to be humble in our approach to faith. The fact is, none of us have all the answers. None of us understand everything about God. We all, in the words of the apostle Paul, “see through the glass dimly” (see 1 Cor. 13:12). Therefore, arrogant religion is not a part of authentic faith, and we should do all we can to rid ourselves of that kind of attitude.

A second attribute of pharisaical, toxic religion is a judgmental spirit. *[go back to previous slide, Attributes of Unhealthy Religion, and add: 2. A Judgmental Spirit]* The Pharisees of Jesus' day were unbelievably judgmental. They condemned anyone different from them, all in the name of God. Sadly that kind of judgmental religion is alive and well in today's world, especially among the extremes. I find that in religious-right fundamentalist churches and in far-left liberal churches, who can be as arrogant and judgmental as those on the right. These extremists, both on the left and on the right, condemn everyone who disagrees with them.

That kind of judgmental religion reminds me of an old story that has troubled me ever since I heard it. Many years ago a ship sank off the coast of Nova Scotia during a winter storm. Many people perished, including the captain. The crew gathered seventy of the passengers, including women and children, and put them into a huge, open rowboat. However, the weather got rough, and the crew thought the boat was overcrowded. In an effort to get the ballast right, they picked up people and tossed them into the sea. Then the boat started leaking. Throughout the night, as the boat sank lower, more people were thrown off the boat to drown in the frigid waters.

The next morning the crew arrived on shore with only nine people on board. Tragically, judgmental churches often act like that. They want to get the ballast just right so they throw out the sinners. Here are divorced persons; let's throw them out. Here are alcoholics and drug addicts; let's throw them out. Here's an unwed mother; let's throw her out. Here's a liberal; let's throw him out. Here's a homosexual; let's throw him out. That kind of mean-spirited judgmental religion hurts the reputation of Christianity and is the complete opposite of the grace-filled spirit of Jesus Christ. Please hear this. I'm not saying there are no standards. There are. And I'm not saying there is no sin; there is plenty of sin. I'm just saying that it's not our job to do the judging; it's God's job. Over and over again, Jesus told his followers to leave judgment to God. Therefore, we must do all we can to rid ourselves of a judgmental spirit.

Let's look again at today's text. ***[add to bottom of slide: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:20 NIV)]*** These are serious words of Jesus. He clearly warns us to reject toxic religion, religion that has an arrogant attitude and a judgmental spirit. Instead Jesus calls on us to a religion of humility and a religion of nonjudgment.

I once read an article by a man named John Pierce from the state of Georgia. In the article he told about going to a revival meeting as a teenage boy. The evangelist at the revival was a modern-day Pharisee, full of arrogance and judgment. He railed against all the sinners in town, especially young people who smoked, drank, had sex, and danced. He threw in other prohibitions, like watching certain television shows and movies. In the end he had a long list of "don'ts." He finally got to the altar call. He urged all parents of youth to come forward. John's father reluctantly went forward. Then the preacher asked all the youth to come

forward. John didn't want to walk forward but felt pressured to do so. So he walked down the aisle and stood by his dad.

Then the evangelist said, "Now young people, I want you to do two things. First, tell your parents that you love them. Second, promise them you will never do the things I have preached against tonight. He was referring to things like dancing and watching TV and movies and stuff like that. At that point the preacher stopped talking and waited for the youth to tell their parents they loved them and then promise not to do all the things the preacher had condemned. John wasn't sure what to do. He loved his dad, but he didn't see anything wrong with dancing or a lot of other things on the "do not do" list. He finally hugged his dad and quietly said, "Dad, I love you. But you can forget about some of that other stuff." John's dad smiled, hugged him back and quietly said, "Well, son, one out of two ain't bad." (***Baptists Today [December 2008], 7.)***)

John's father knew that arrogant, judgmental religion was not the religion of Jesus and had no place among Jesus' followers. He knew that real religion, the religion of Jesus, was a religion of love and grace and tolerance and humility. May that be true in your life, in my life, and in the life of this church.

###

Sermon 5: Is It Bad to Get Mad?

Matthew 5:21-26

[Note: During my seminary years I took a class on anger and the Christian by Dr. Andy Lester. Many of the insights from that class are included in this sermon, and I want to credit Dr. Lester for his contributions.]

Several weeks ago my wife and I and some good friends went to a TPAC production of The Wizard of Oz. ***[slide: image of Wizard of Oz movie]*** Like many of you, I grew up on that movie so it was fun seeing it on stage. As you know, early in the story Dorothy's beloved dog Toto bites their mean neighbor, Mrs. Gulch. In response, Mrs. Gulch—a rich but mean woman—gets a court order from the sheriff to take away and destroy Dorothy's dog, Toto. This breaks Dorothy's heart and deeply angers her Aunt Emma. In a moment of intense anger, Aunt Emma says, "Elmira Gulch, just because you own half the county doesn't mean you have the power to run the rest of us. For twenty-three years I've been dying to tell you what I think of you. And now, well, being a Christian woman, I can't say it!" ***(If you have projection capability, you can show this clip on screen. See chapter 5:9:37 to 10:21)***. Aunt Em was mad as fire, overwhelmed with anger, but since she was a Christian woman, she did not feel she could express her anger.

We are currently walking through the Sermon on the Mount, and today's passage deals with the emotion of anger. Please turn to your listening guide in your bulletin. You'll need it to follow along. You always know you are in trouble when the listening guide is twice as long as the order of worship! ***(Listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)***

Today is a teaching sermon, so it will be longer than normal. But dealing with anger is an important subject, and we need biblical guidance on it. Over the next few minutes, we will ask two simple questions about anger and the Christian faith. First, is anger a sin? And second, how should Christians deal with anger?

First let's ask, "Is anger a sin?" ***[slide: Is Anger A Sin?]*** To answer this question let's dive right into today's text. Please look at passage number 1. ***[add to slide: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall***

be liable to judgement.” (Matt. 5:21 NRSV)] That’s clear enough. The Bible says we should not murder. But in verse 22 we read, ***[slide: at the top of the screen put, Is Anger a Sin? Then add, “But I say to you that if you are [continually] angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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.” (Matt. 5:22 NRSV)]***

Jesus says the root of murder is unresolved anger. Anger which festers and leads to insult and contempt for another person and which can finally lead to murder. This raises an important question. Is the raw emotion of anger a sin? Many of us have been taught that it is. Like Aunt Em in The Wizard of Oz, we’ve been told that good Christians don’t get angry, and if we do, we don’t express it. Indeed, this very verse from the Sermon on the Mount seems to say that anger is sinful, that anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment. But that’s not a correct interpretation of this passage. In some cases of biblical interpretation, it’s critical to understand the exact meaning from the Greek language, in which the New Testament was originally written. This passage is one such example. The verb tense here is present participle—which means continual action. Literally, this verse says, “Anyone who is continually angry.” It means to nurse your anger, to let it fester. To let it grow without resolving it, letting it teem and swell and boil. That kind of anger leads to malice and hate and insult and contempt, and that is sin. But the sin is not the anger itself; it’s continual nursed unresolved anger that is sinful.

Let me illustrate this from the life of Jesus. Most all of us here today would affirm that Jesus was sinless. But Jesus got angry on several occasions. ***[slide: image of Jesus cleansing the temple (John 2:13-16), the angrier looking the better!]*** Let’s examine some examples. ***[Note: At this point I quickly reviewed numbers 2-5 in the listening guide (see below).]*** We cannot escape the fact that Jesus got angry on numerous occasions. If anger is sinful, then Jesus is a sinner. But we know that Jesus was sinless. So please hear this: anger by itself is not a sin. It can certainly lead to sin. When it’s unresolved, anger can lead to horrible things like murder. But the emotion of anger itself is not inherently sinful. That’s the idea behind Ephesians 4:26, number 6 on your listening guide. ***[slide: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.” (Eph. 4:26-27 NRSV)]*** Paul says, “Be angry.” He knew people would get angry. It’s a normal part

of human experience. People are going to get angry. It's part of our human makeup, the way God made us.

We cannot avoid anger. And we shouldn't. Anger can have positive results. Anger at injustice, for example, leads people to noble actions. Most of you are familiar with the group called MADD. It stands for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. This group was born out of anger, anger that drunk drivers were killing innocent people. And that anger has been channeled into positive results. Anger can sometimes have good results. In fact, we should all get mad a lot more often than we do. Mad that children go to bed hungry in our own country. Mad that millions don't have health care. Mad that our planet is being destroyed by greed and irresponsibility. Mad enough to do something to solve these and other problems. Righteous anger can lead to good results. But, as we all know, anger can also be destructive—sometimes terribly destructive. So the Bible says, when you get angry, which you will, don't sin with your anger. Deal with it in a responsible, Christian way.

And that leads to our second question, How should Christians deal with anger? **[slide: At top of slide, in large letters, put: How should Christians deal with anger?]** This is a complex subject, so I will only be able to deal with it in broad strokes. I'd like to suggest four biblical strategies for dealing with anger that I learned from my old seminary professor, Andy Lester.

First, don't nurse your anger. **[add to slide: 1. Don't nurse your anger.]** That's the point of two passages we have already seen. In Matthew 5:22 Jesus says: "Don't be continually angry. Don't let your anger grow and fester." Why? Because nursed anger is destructive. It's hard on us physically. Doctors know that unresolved anger causes all kinds of health problems. It's hard on us relationally. It poisons our relationships. It's also hard on us spiritually. We see that in this text in your listening guide from Ephesians 4. Paul says that when we nurse our anger, we "make room for the devil." Unresolved, nursed anger can become demonic. It can ruin us physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. By the way, ignoring anger is just another way of nursing it. It stays hidden away, but it doesn't go away. It grows and festers and destroys a person inside. Well, how can we deal with our anger? First, don't nurse it or ignore it.

Second, do attempt to resolve your anger. **[add to slide: 2. Do attempt to resolve your anger.]** Seek out the person you are in conflict with and talk it out. That's exactly the point of this

passage in your listening guide. Look again at today's text from Matthew 5:23-24. Jesus tells us that when we perceive that somebody is angry at us, we should go and talk to them. In this next verse from Matthew 18, Jesus says that when we are angry at somebody, we should go and talk to them about it. Either way, if they are mad at us or we are mad at them, Jesus commands us to go and seek reconciliation. This is true in our family life, in our marriage, at work, at church, and everywhere else.

And when we go, we are to go with a Christian attitude. Don't attack the person, for that will only make it worse. Rather, go and say something like, "I get the feeling you may be upset with me. Can we talk about it?" Or, "I got angry about something the other day, and I feel like we should talk about it." Remember, reconciliation is not promised. We may not be able to work it out. But at least we've cleared the air, and we've obeyed the Bible. And my experience is that we can usually work it out with the person. Or at least we can agree to disagree but do it with a Christian attitude.

As a pastor, I have to deal with anger all the time because you can't have church without some anger. For example, years ago a man in my church was unhappy with me over our search for an associate pastor. I wanted to call a woman, and he was completely opposed to having a female minister. By the way this was not a United Methodist Church, which fully affirms women in ministry. The fact is, I didn't handle this situation well. I publically discounted his opinion in a committee meeting. I brushed off his concern, even said it was silly. Well, it embarrassed him and made him angry. After the meeting he began complaining about me all over town—how I was a liberal preacher and all.

When I learned that he was upset, I went to see him. I said, "Jim, I understand you are unhappy with me concerning our search for an associate pastor." He said, "I sure am. In fact, I'm pretty angry." We talked for over two hours. I apologized for discounting his opinion, for saying it was silly. It was wrong of me to do. He apologized for criticizing me around town. We still didn't agree on this issue, but we came to respect each other. And you know what? Jim ended up becoming one of my biggest supporters at that church. He and his family moved away several years later. The week before he left, I baptized his daughter. Of course, not all stories have such happy endings. Sometimes people refuse to reconcile. But we are called by God to attempt reconciliation. Jesus is clear on the issue. When we are angry, we are commanded to try to resolve our anger.

Third, sometimes share your anger. **[add to slide: 3. Sometimes share your anger.]** There are times when you cannot talk directly to the person you are having problems with. That person might be dead. I've talked to many people through the years that are carrying huge amounts of anger toward their mom or dad, but their mom or dad is now dead. So what should they do? Share the anger with another person, someone who can accept their anger and listen and be supportive. Another example of sharing our anger might be anger toward an employer. Some bosses are not very mature, and if you talked directly to him or her about your anger, it might jeopardize your job. What can you do? Share your anger with another person.

Maybe the person you are angry at is not capable of dealing with direct anger. For example, it might be a mentally handicapped person or a person with dementia. To confront them directly with your anger would be inappropriate. But keeping our anger bottled up is also unhealthy so we need share it with someone else. I once had parents in my church who had a mentally challenged child. They dearly loved their child but sometimes got exasperated and angry with him—even though he couldn't help his behavior. Obviously, they could not deal with their anger directly so they found a support group of parents with disabled children where they could safely share their frustrations and anger. So in some cases, when you cannot deal with your anger directly, share it with somebody else. Talk to a friend or spouse or pastor, somebody you trust. That's the spirit of this passage in Galatians 6 in your listening guide. Please read it with me, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2 NRSV).

What should Christians do with anger? 1. Don't nurse it. 2. Do attempt to resolve it. 3. Sometimes share it. And finally, choose to forgive. **[add to slide: 4. Choose to forgive.]** We need always to remember that our faith is a faith of grace. Even when we are angry, we can choose to forgive people. That doesn't mean that we ignore their behavior or accept abuse. I'm not talking about that. I'm simply saying that we can, if we will, choose to forgive people who fail us, thus liberating them and us.

Resolving anger is serious business. Let's look one final time at today's reading from the Sermon on the Mount. In today's text Jesus said, **[slide: "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or**

sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23-24 NRSV) Jesus says, “If you are at church, trying to worship God, and remember that you are angry with someone or someone is angry with you, you should leave the worship service, and go try to reconcile with that person, and only then should you return to worship.

Jesus is making an important point here. Our relationship with God will not be right until our relationships with others are right. If we have unresolved anger toward others, it will hurt our relationship with God. Perhaps the best thing I could do at this point is to dismiss everybody here today who has a conflict with another person—just have you leave and go see that person. But I won’t embarrass you. You can wait until after the benediction. But if you take your faith seriously, you will seek reconciliation with that person. Your emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual welfare is at stake.

Let me tell you an old story about Leonardo da Vinci, the famous artist who painted *The Last Supper*. ***[slide of Da Vinci’s Last Supper painting]*** During the time Da Vinci was painting The Last Supper at a monastery, he had a terrible argument with a man. He became extremely angry and lashed out at the fellow. Afterwards he returned to the monastery where he was painting the last supper scene. He was working on the face of Jesus at the time. But as hard as he tried, he could not paint the face of Christ. The unresolved anger in his heart made it impossible. How do you paint the face of Jesus when you want to rip off the head of another person! So he finally left the studio, found the man with whom he had fought, and apologized for his inappropriate behavior. The man accepted the apology, and they worked out their conflict. Afterwards Da Vinci returned to the monastery and painted the face of Jesus.

LISTENING GUIDE

Is It Bad to Get Mad?

1. Is Anger a Sin?

1. *Matthew 5:21-22 NRSV*

(v. 21) “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’

(v. 22) “But I say to you that if you are [continually] angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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."

2. *John 2:13-16 NRSV*

"The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!"

3. *Mark 10:13-14a NRSV*

"People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant . . ."

4. *Matthew 23:13, 16, 24, 28, NRSV*

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. . . . Woe to you, blind guides! . . . You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, . . . for you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. . . . You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell."

5. *Mark 3:5 NRSV*

"[Jesus] looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart."

6. *Ephesians 4:26-27 NRSV*

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil."

2. How Should Christians Deal with Anger?

1. Don't _____ your anger.

"But I say to you that if you are [continually] angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." (Matt. 5:22 NRSV)

"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." (Eph. 4:26-27 NRSV)

2. Do attempt to _____ your anger.

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or

sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” (Matt. 5:23-24 NRSV)

“If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back.” (Matt. 18:15 GNT)

3. Sometimes _____ your anger.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2 NRSV)

4. Choose to _____

“For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” (Matt. 6:14 NRSV)

###

Sermon 6: Adultery, Lust, and the Problem with Pornography

Matthew 5:27-30

[Note: Given the sensitive nature of this sermon, I sent the following e-mail to our congregation the week before the sermon. I also placed it in the bulletin and newsletter the week before:

Dear Church Family,

As many of you know, I am currently preaching through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). This Sunday, February 15, we will cover Matthew 5:27-30, which addresses the subject of human sexuality. The text requires me to address the subject of adultery, lust, and pornography. The sermon will not be sexually graphic and will not, in my and Bucky's (our associate minister) opinion, be inappropriate for children. It might even provide an opportunity for you to talk to your older children about sex from a Christian perspective. However, I want parents to know this subject will be discussed on Sunday morning and make their own decisions about bringing their children. I hope to see you Sunday as we engage this crucial subject.

In Christ's Love,

Martin Thielen

(The announcement did wonders for attendance! We had a full house.



It may not always be evident, but a lot of planning goes into our Sunday morning worship services. For example, I give Windell a schedule of my sermon topics several months in advance. I list the Scripture text, the topic, and a brief synopsis of the message. This allows him to pick appropriate music. For example, here is what I gave Windell for today's service. **[slide: (at top of screen put) Scripture: Matthew 5:27-30. (under that put) Topic: Human sexuality, including adultery, lust, and pornography.]** Then I added an additional statement. **[add to slide: "I dare you to find a good anthem and congregational songs on that subject!"]**

I'm going to talk with you today about sexuality. **[end slide]** I certainly did not choose this subject; it chose me. We are working our way through Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and today's passage deals with this subject. To be honest, I've been a little nervous about today's sermon. Obviously, human sexuality is a complex topic, and we will not begin to cover all the ramifications. My goal today is modest. I simply want to walk through this passage of Scripture with you and make some applications.

Let's look again at the text. Jesus begins, **[slide: "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'" (Matt. 5:27 NIV)]** God says clearly in the Bible, "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod. 20:14 NIV). It's one of the Ten Commandments. Why is God so opposed to adultery? It's not because sex is bad. Sex, in its appropriate context of marriage, is a wonderful gift from God—which I'll have more to say about later. But when sex is misused, it can be destructive. In a way human sexuality is like fire. Fire is a wonderful gift with many benefits. **[slide: photo of people enjoying a campfire]** For example, most of us here today have had wonderful times with family, friends, scouts, and church youth groups around a campfire. Fire can cook our food and keep us warm. But fire can also be destructive **[slide: photo of raging fire]**, like the raging wildfires of recent days in Australia, which have killed hundreds of people and destroyed entire towns and forests.

Like fire, sex can be positive or destructive. Sex in the context of a loving marriage is like the fire of a campfire, to be celebrated and enjoyed. Sex in the context of adultery, however, is like the raging wildfires of Australia, doing horrible damage to people's lives. I could tell you story after story today about people who have torn their life apart, along with their family, by committing adultery. Adultery is destructive to people's lives—in every possible way.

That's why the book of Proverbs says, **[add to slide (with raging fire in background): "He who commits adultery has no sense; he who does it destroys himself." (Prov. 6:22 NRSV)]** Why does God hate adultery? Because it is destructive. It is not worth the pain. Oh, grace is available. God will forgive. And sometimes spouses will forgive. Even when that happens, however, the consequences never fully go away. The bottom line is that adultery hurts, wounds, and destroys—so God says don't do it.

Let's read on in today's text. **[slide: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt. 5:28 NIV)]** Jesus says, the ROOT of adultery is lust. And that reminds me of an old story. Years ago a couple wanted to have a child but could not have one. Finally, late in life, the woman became pregnant. When she got the news, she shouted at the top of her voice, "That's fantastic!" So, when her son was born, she named him Fantastic. Fantastic married and had a good life. However, late in his life, he told his wife that when he died, he did not want his name put on his tombstone. He said he absolutely hated his name, so please leave it off his gravestone. Well, when he died a few years later, his wife honored his request. She did not put Fantastic's name on his tombstone. Instead, she wrote, "Here lies a man, who, throughout his entire married life, never once looked at another woman." And everybody who saw the tombstone said, "That's fantastic!"

Well, is that what this text means—that a married man must never look at another woman and that a married woman must never look at another man? No, that's impossible. All persons, even happily married ones, are going to notice attractive people. What Jesus is saying is, "Don't repeatedly lust after a person who is not your spouse." It's like I said about anger last week. This verse literally means, to lust continually—to keep on lusting, to continue to have sexual fantasies about them. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther put it this way. When talking about lust, he said, "I can't stop birds from flying over my head, but I can stop them from nesting in my hair."

What Jesus is saying is, "Don't continually lust after a person who is not your spouse. Don't flirt with them, or engage in sexual fantasies about them, or make sexual comments to them, or inappropriately touch them. Such lust can only lead to trouble." This verse also means that Christians should avoid lust-producing activities such as sexually explicit music, or movies, or television shows, or pornography.

It's impossible to talk about today's Scripture passage without addressing the topic of pornography. The sad truth is, pornography, especially Internet pornography, is a major problem for millions of people. Let me say clearly today, using pornography is not appropriate behavior for Christian believers. And I'm not just speaking moralistically, like some preachers who condemn porno as "smut." There are far more serious critiques against pornography than just being "dirty." Let's review just a few of the massive social and spiritual problems with pornography.

Let's start with some of the social problems. **[slide: (at top put) Social Problems with Pornography]** For example, social scientists are learning that pornography is addictive. **[add to slide (with a bullet): It is addictive.]** Many users need more and harder pornography, and it becomes a destructive cycle in their lives. Another problem with pornography is that, among some users, it stimulates sexual violence. **[add to slide (with a bullet): It stimulates sexual violence.]** Sex offenders almost always have pornography in their possession. Porno also builds up unrealistic expectations for sex. **[add to slide (with a bullet): It sets unrealistic expectations.]** Many men who are or have been users of pornographic materials are chronically disappointed with their wives because real women cannot match the unrealistic expectations men have seen in the pictures; nobody could. These unrealistic expectations do great damage to relationships. Porno also victimizes children. **[add to slide (with a bullet): It victimizes children.]** Not only child pornography, which comes straight from the pits of hell, but children and youth who see pornographic materials get wrong messages about sex; they get warped sexual values. Well, I could go on and on. For example, **[add to slide (with a bullet): It contributes to sexually transmitted diseases.]** pornography also contributes to sexually transmitted diseases. Obviously, not by looking at images on the screen. But pornography encourages people to engage in risky sexual behavior. Well, pornography, especially online porn because of its easy access, is a huge social problem in this country. It's destroying a lot of people's lives.

Not only is pornography a significant social problem, but it's also a major spiritual problem. **[slide: (at top put) Spiritual Problems with Pornography]** To begin with, pornography is an assault on Christian marriage. **[add to slide (with a bullet) It is an assault on Christian marriage.]** For example, it rejects Christian values of fidelity and monogamy. Pornography does not promote lifelong, married, monogamous sexual relationships—quite the opposite. Along that line, pornography also wounds spouses. **[add to slide (with a bullet) It wounds**

spouses.] For example, I've talked to numerous women through the years who were heartbroken that their husbands were using pornography. It made them feel inadequate and undesirable and highly vulnerable. One woman said to me, with tears in her eyes, "How can I compete with that?" The same dynamic would be true for men. If their wives were using pornography, it would do great damage to their husbands' sense of manhood, their masculinity. These kinds of wounds go deep. God does not intend for us to hurt our spouses in this way.

Another problem with pornography is that it reduces sex to an entertainment level, **[add to slide (with a bullet): It reduces sex to entertainment.]** as though sex were a mere leisure activity with no commitment or love or spiritual dimensions. That kind of sex is cheap and unsatisfying and anti-Christian. Perhaps the biggest problem with pornography is that it reduces human beings to objects. **[add to slide (with a bullet): It reduces human beings, especially women, to objects.]** It degrades people, especially women. It ignores their personhood; it sees people only as objects and body parts, detached from their souls. In pornography, people are disposable accessories to be used and then discarded.

Well, in today's text, Jesus condemns adultery and lust, which includes pornography. Not because sex is bad but because adultery, lust, and pornography are destructive, they deeply hurt people. Let's finish reading our text. **[slide: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matt. 5:29-30 NIV)]**

Jesus says the answer to adultery, lust, and pornography is just to say no. Jesus says loud and clear, "Don't engage in this behavior. And, if you are already engaging in this behavior, then stop it before it seriously hurts you and the people around you." Now obviously, in this passage, Jesus is using hyperbole; he is exaggerating. Jesus does not want us literally to chop off our hands or pluck out our eyes. But he is warning us to stop this kind of destructive behavior before it ruins our life. Stop the lustful fantasies. Stop the flirting. Stop the phone calls, text messages, and e-mails. Stop the inappropriate sexual comments, and stop the inappropriate physical touching. And, if you have already stepped over the line and engaged

in adultery, put an end to it now. And finally, if you are using pornography, stop using it today and never use it again.

(Note: If you do not have projection capability, you can skip this section. Or you can explain the movie scene verbally.) At this time I want to show you a movie clip. Don't worry, we are not going to show a pornographic movie in church today! This clip comes from a movie about marriage called *Fireproof*. In this story a married man is using Internet pornography. This man's use of pornography is deeply wounding his wife and seriously damaging his marriage. He finally realizes that his use of online porn is a destructive influence in his life and that he must put an end to it, once and for all.

During this clip you will see this man read from a handwritten book. The book is from his father. It's part of a forty-day, "love dare" effort to save his marriage. Every day for forty days, he reads a statement from his dad about marriage, and then he tries to follow his dad's advice, all in an attempt to save his deeply troubled marriage. This day his dad's advice deals with pornography, which he calls a parasite. Let's look now at the clip. **[DVD clip: Chapter 20-21. 74:22 to 77:05 plus 77:33 to 77:44.] (In this clip the man takes his computer outside and destroys it with a baseball bat.)** Well, destroying your computer may seem like a radical solution to the problem of pornography, but this man has the right idea. Whatever it takes, we must put an end to the destructive use of pornography.

I wish today that sexual problems like adultery, lust, and pornography could be solved by a sermon alone. But you and I both know that is not realistic. Many people today, including people in this congregation, have serious sexual problems and addictions, including pornography addiction. And most people with sexual problems and addictions need outside help to overcome their struggles. So in today's bulletin you will find a list of resources that can help you with this problem. I've listed the name and number of our own competent and compassionate counselor, Bucky Hesson. Bucky has done a lot of work in this area, and he would be happy to help you work through it in a nonjudgmental and confidential way. For those of you who prefer an out-of-town counselor, I've listed the name of a Nashville counselor who does a lot of work in this area. Not only does he do individual counseling, but he also offers support groups, which can be invaluable in overcoming sexual problems like pornography addiction. I've also listed a book and a DVD.

- Book: Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker with Mike Yorkey, *Every Man's Battle: Every Man's Guide to Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2009).
- DVD/CD: *Somebody's Daughter* (order at somebodysdaughter.org)

If you need help in this area, I hope you will seek out one or more of these resources. Please know that God cares deeply about your sexual struggles. God loves you in spite of them. God does not stand in judgment of you. Instead, God wants to help you, and he can use these resources listed in today's bulletin to do so.

Jesus doesn't pull any punches in today's text. He is direct and clear. And while it may seem that Jesus is being negative about sexuality, that is not at all true. Jesus just knows how destructive sexual sin is, and he wants to help us avoid that kind of pain. But hear this clearly: God is not against sex. Quite the contrary. God created sex in the first place. Sex is God's idea, God's creation. The Bible tells us that when God made man and woman, including their sexuality, he said, "This is very good!" Jesus once said about marriage, **[slide: "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." (Matt. 19:5 NIV)]** You see, sexuality in its appropriate context of marriage is celebrated in the Bible. For example, the Bible says to men, "rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . May her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love" (Prov. 5:18-19 NIV). If you think God is down on sex, read Song of Solomon. It will make you blush! This book of the Bible is a celebration of erotic sex in its rightful context of married love. God is not against sex; God is FOR sex in its proper context—the covenant of marriage. **[end slide]**

Before I end, let me tell you a story about a grandmother and her granddaughter. The little girl asked her grandma, "Grandma, how old are you?" The grandmother said, "It's not nice to ask people how old they are." Later in the day the little girl said to her grandmother, "Grandma, I know how old you are; you are 68." "How did you find that out?" asked the grandmother. The little girl replied, "I looked at your drivers license and found out what year you were born. I also saw something else on your driver's license. I saw that you got an F in sex." Well, don't get an F in sex! Listen to these words of Jesus, obey them, and you will be blessed for it.

###

Sermon 7: “Till Death Do We Part?”

Matthew 5:31-32; 19:3-9

An elderly couple decided to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary in a big way. They returned to the city where they went on their honeymoon fifty years earlier. Throughout their second honeymoon trip, the husband was deeply emotional. He often told his wife, “Honey, I love you.” “Honey, if I had it to do all over again, I would marry you again.” Finally, they came to the last day of the trip. Over lunch, the husband, overcome by emotion and love, took his wife by her hand and said, “Honey, I’m proud of you.” Well, his wife had become a little hard of hearing over the fifty years. She responded, “I’m tired of you too.”

Today we are going to talk about the difficult and complex subject of divorce. If you are a guest, we are walking through Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It’s a collection of many of Jesus’ teachings, including his teaching about divorce. To help organize our thoughts on this complex subject, I want to hang today’s message on three pegs. Please turn to your listening guide, which is printed in your order of worship. (Listening guide can be found at the end of the sermon.)

First, let’s look at biblical passages concerning divorce. **[slide (with bible background): 1. Bible Passages]** As Christians we naturally turn to the Bible for guidance on many subjects, including divorce. Unfortunately, the biblical passages on divorce are not simple and clear-cut. Let’s look at three of them. This first passage comes from Deuteronomy 24:1. Please read with me, **[slide: “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.” (Deut. 24:1 NRSV)]** In biblical days divorce was clearly permitted.

Unfortunately, in Jesus’ time, this law was terribly abused. Men could divorce their wives for anything. If she annoyed him, or was unattractive, or couldn’t cook well, or burned his toast, or if he found someone he liked better, then he could divorce her. All he had to do was give her a one-page certificate of divorce. This system was incredibly oppressive to women. Women were often used up and then thrown away with few options. Unless they had relatives to move in with, they were literally out on the street, with few alternatives other than begging

or prostitution. This was long before the day of alimony and child support and an equitable division of assets between husband and wife. Well, Jesus wanted to put an end to that sort of abuse to women, and that is reflected in the next text from the Sermon on the Mount.

Please read with me, *[slide: “You have heard that it was said, . . . ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.” (Matt. 5:27, 31-32 NRSV)]*

I want to note two things about this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. First, there is an exception clause to Jesus’ general prohibition against divorce. As we see in this text, Jesus allowed divorce when one party committed adultery. Jesus knew that adultery usually destroyed a marriage, so he allowed this exception. However, we don’t find this adultery exception in similar statements by Jesus in the Gospel of Mark and Luke, so that complicates things.

Let me make a second note about this passage. The phrase “causes her to commit adultery” is unclear in the Greek text. Greek experts cannot agree on the meaning. Many biblical scholars say this text means that when you divorce your wife, it makes her look like an adulterer. It stigmatizes her, and if she remarries, it stigmatizes their marriage. The language is ambiguous and unclear. We don’t know if Jesus is saying it actually causes her to commit adultery or it only makes her look like she has done so. So, what do we do with this verse? Some say that any divorce, except in the case of adultery, is prohibited by Jesus.

But what if a woman is being abused by her husband? Is she doomed to stay with him and be physically damaged and mentally ravaged as well? Would Jesus tell an abused woman that she has to stay with an abusive husband the rest of her life, take the violence, perhaps even be killed by him? Do you think Jesus would say that? Or what if two people tried everything they could to make a marriage work. They went to counseling and everything, but still the marriage was intolerable. Would Jesus doom them to a lifetime of bitterness and unhappiness? Christians and biblical scholars disagree over this. I do not believe that Jesus is giving a legalistic approach in this passage. I think Jesus is doing two things here. First, he was trying to protect women. He was fighting against the corrupt system of divorce of his day that allowed a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all and was hurting women terribly.

Second, Jesus was advocating God's ideal of lifelong, permanent, monogamous marriage. That's God's hope and will for us. But I do not think Jesus is laying down a legalistic rule that never allows divorce under any circumstance. Instead, he is trying to protect women from an abusive divorce system, and he is lifting up the ideal of lifelong permanence. This, however, is my own interpretation, and some disagree.

The uncertainty in today's text is complicated by other passages in the Bible about divorce. Let's look at the third example in your listening guide. **[slide: "If any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And, if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. . . . But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound." (1 Cor. 7:12-13, 15 NRSV)]** In this text the apostle Paul allows divorce in some circumstances. When a Christian believer is married to a nonbeliever and the unbeliever wants a divorce, Paul allows it. The text says, "The brother or sister is not bound." In other words, they can divorce and, presumably, remarry.

These three passages illustrate that you cannot give one clean, neat, clear, absolute answer about the Bible and divorce. The Bible does not speak with one voice on this matter. Passages exist that say you can divorce for any reason, and other passages say you can get divorced for some reasons, and still other passages that say divorce is never acceptable. Biblical passages on divorce are messy, confusing, and complicated like divorce itself. Since that is the case, we need to look beyond specific biblical passages and look at overall biblical principles.

[slide (at top of screen): 2. Biblical Principles] As we discuss the subject of divorce, two biblical principles need to be mentioned. First, let's talk about the principle of permanence. **[add to slide (with a bullet) The Principle of Permanence]** God's ideal for marriage is permanence. God wants a married couple to stay married until "death do we part." God's intention, his desire, his hope, his ideal for marriage is lifelong permanence. God wants a couple to experience a lifelong monogamous relationship, a relationship of love and support and friendship and meeting sexual needs. Indeed, that kind of lifelong companionship is a great gift from God. God wants couples to stay together for life, not to divorce. In fact, the book of Malachi says, "For I hate divorce says the LORD" (2:16 NRSV). Why does God hate divorce? Because God knows how destructive it is. Divorce hurts people in terrible ways,

including children, and God does not want that. God's ideal for marriage is permanence. We must never lose sight of that or compromise that ideal.

The second biblical principle is the principle of forgiveness. **[add to slide (with a bullet) *The Principle of Forgiveness*]** Although God hates divorce, God does NOT hate divorced persons. Yes, divorce represents failure and sin and is short of God's ideal. But forgiveness is available for those who are unable to reach the ideal. The Christian faith is a faith of grace, of forgiveness, of second chances, and that includes divorce. That doesn't mean the church should compromise the ideal of permanence. We must always hold that up as God's best for us. But the church must also offer grace to those who fall short of the ideal. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. God's grace is big enough to forgive even divorce. Just look at the story of Jesus and the woman at the well. She had been married five times and divorced at least four times. Yet Jesus forgave her and pointed her to a new future. God does the same for us today.

Well, so far, we have looked at biblical passages and biblical principles concerning divorce. Before concluding, I want to talk about one more thing, which is the most important thing I have to say today about divorce. Let's talk for a moment about divorce prevention. **[slide (with theme slide photo of wedding ceremony): 3. Divorce Prevention]** Unfortunately, there is a myth among some Christians that says, "If we just love Jesus and go to church, divorce won't happen to us." But that's a myth. Good Christian people who love Jesus and go to church get divorced all the time. Just this past week I visited with one of my best friends in the world, who, like me, is a minister. He told me that he and his wife have separated and that a divorce is almost certain to follow. Listen—nobody is immune to divorce, not even Christian ministers. Therefore, all of us need to put serious effort into divorce prevention. Preventing divorce is far better than going through the pain and agony of a divorce. Divorce prevention is far better than divorce litigation and a lot less expensive.

(Note: If you do not have projection capability, you can skip this section or explain the scene verbally) Last week I showed you a video clip from a movie called *Fireproof*. Today I want to show you another clip from that movie. In this film a husband and wife are in serious trouble and are near divorce. However, the husband, a firefighter named Caleb, comes to realize that he still loves his wife and wants to save the marriage. She, however, is not convinced it can be saved. In the scene we are about to watch, Caleb's wife is staying home

from work, sick. In a small effort to express his love for his wife, Caleb goes to the store and gets her some medicine and food. When he gets back home, Caleb tells her that he still loves her, that he wants to work out their problems, and that he is willing to make the necessary changes to make it happen. She wants to believe him but is not sure she can trust him. With that background, let's watch the clip. **[video clip: Chapter 25: 96:46 to 99:51, about three minutes. The clip begins with her saying, "Caleb, I want to believe this is real . . ." Use English subtitles for those who have hearing issues.]** Well, Caleb is on the right track. He does everything he can to prevent a divorce and to renew his marriage. You and I would do well to follow his example.

[previous slide (photo of wedding ceremony): 3. Divorce Prevention] So how can we prevent divorce? First, we need to be intentional about keeping our marriage healthy. A strong marriage doesn't just happen. It takes work and a lot of it. Marriage is full of ups and downs and struggles and requires constant diligence to keep it healthy. If our marriage is NOT healthy, we need to do everything in our power to restore it. Today, if your marriage is less than healthy, I want to encourage you to take concrete actions to strengthen it. Recommit yourself fully to your spouse. Decide to love him or her with self-sacrificing love. Spend time together. Talk about how you can improve your marriage. Read books on how to strengthen your marriage. Watch *Fireproof* together and then discuss it. Participate in our upcoming marriage enrichment class. If needed, seek counseling. But one way or another, renew your marriage. Because preventing divorce is a thousand times better than going through a divorce.

For those of you who need some help in this area, I've listed several resources in today's bulletin. First, I've listed our minister of congregational care, Bucky Hesson. Bucky has strong expertise in marriage counseling, has helped a lot of people with their marriages, and can help you with yours. If you prefer an out-of-town counselor, one is listed. I've also listed a good book on marriage (*The Seven Principles for Making Marriages Work* by John Gottman) and you would do well to read it. I also encourage you to watch the movie *Fireproof*. This movie won't save your marriage, but it's an inspirational story about preventing divorce. And, as noted in the box in your bulletin, we will be offering a marriage enrichment class here at our church in April. If your marriage is struggling, or if you simply want to make a good marriage better, please use these resources. God can bless you through them. **[end slide]**

Let me end with an old Jewish legend. The story is told about a man who had grown weary of life, including his marriage. Tired of everything, he decided to leave his hometown, his wife and family, and search for the legendary Magical City he had often heard about, where everything was wonderful and rewarding. His journey was long, taking him to many different places. Finally, one night he found himself in a forest. Just before he lay down for the night, he carefully took off his shoes and pointed them in the direction he was going, in the direction of the Magical City. While he was asleep, however, a prankster came by and turned his shoes around, pointing them toward his hometown. When the man awoke the next morning, he stepped carefully into his shoes and continued on toward his destination to the Magical City. Sure enough, several days later he came to what he thought must be the Magical City. In fact, as he looked around, it seemed somewhat familiar. He took a path that led him to a familiar street, where he knocked at a familiar door. A familiar woman answered the knock, and behind her he saw familiar children. And there, in his Magical City, he lived happily ever after.

LISTENING GUIDE

“Till Death Do Us Part?”

1. Biblical _____

“Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house.” (Deut. 24:1 NRSV)

“You have heard that it was said, . . . ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.” (Matt. 5:27, 31-32 NRSV)

“If any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. And, if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. . . . But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound.” (1 Cor. 7:12-13, 15 NRSV)

2. Biblical _____

The principle of _____

The principle of _____

3. Divorce _____

Worship Outline for the Series

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. (Matt. 6:9 NRSV)

Opening section of worship, including singing, passing of the peace, opening prayer, etc.

He began to teach them saying (Matt. 5:2 NIV)

Scripture reading, any special music, sermon

Your kingdom come, your will be done (Matt. 6:10 NRSV)

Song of response, invitation, affirmation of faith, baptism, etc.

Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven (Matt. 6:20 NRSV)

Offering. If you take up an offering before the sermon, you can place this before the sermon.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6 NRSV)

Holy Communion

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Matt. 7:24 NIV)

Closing benediction and closing song, sending forth to serve God

