



**Dr. James C. Howell**  
**Matthew 5:21-30**  
**February 13, 2011**

Rob, thank you for that very cheerful uplifting reading. (laughter)

Nine days ago, by some crazy luck, I found myself in the city of Berlin. I went to visit the home where Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his parents lived. This is not unusual tourist itinerary of Berlin. I went there – I don't know why I like to go to places like this, you know, Bonhoeffer, one of the great Christian heroes, sometimes I think to myself that if I get near where someone like that was I might soak up a bit of it by some kind of osmosis. It was very cool to be there and I decided just to walk around his neighborhood and try to find his elementary school, and as I was walking, a young woman pulled up in a car, the window came down. I had taken a little German years ago and I deduced she was asking me for directions. Now I always want to be helpful if at all possible, so I'm locked in with her and I'm kind of trying to understand and she's just strained and I'm just strained, and it's just getting nowhere at all. So finally I said "Sprechen Sie English – Do you speak English? – and she said "Nein" – no. And then she just looked at me and went "humph" – like I'm in Germany, disappointing somebody. She reminded me though of somebody I had had a conversation with here.

I was not able to give that woman directions in Germany, and when I was here before I left for Germany, I met with a woman – this woman stumbled into our church before Christmas. She had no real church background. She liked the church at Christmas. She heard about this revival thing we were doing. She came to the revival and she said "I'd like to meet with you and talk about my life and how to become a Christian." And I thought – cool. "That's great. Please come." She came and I said, "Tell me about your life." Oh my goodness. She told me about her life and she has just such a cool life. I mean, she's at great parties and has fantastic friends and can jet off to the Bahamas on a whim and eats at all the most fantastic restaurants. She described her whole life to me and then she said "Now, what's it like to be a Christian?" And I found myself – I was a little bit embarrassed – like, it's going to look boring by comparison. I thought I need to snazz it up a little to make it look alluring to this person. I mean, What am I going to say? Well, what Christians do, instead of, you know, jetting off to the Bahamas for a weekend, we sit around a table and we read an old book together, close our eyes – we do that – and instead of going to exotic restaurants, we go to the shelter downtown and we serve soup to people that don't have any food. I just thought it wouldn't sound very exciting.

What's so good about Christianity? Sometimes we think about our goodness as Christians and that can actually become a problem. I've been thinking a lot lately about goodness. Jon Bon Jovi says this thing, that our goodness can actually crush another person. I thought about this in my own life. You know, when I got married and became a father, I was going to be good. I was going to do things for them. And what Bon Jovi says is sometimes you can do so much for other people that you actually crush and belittle them in the process. Or Bonhoeffer said this thing about goodness, he said, "Sometimes we get really attached to our own goodness and sometimes we prefer our own goodness to God's will."

You see what I'm saying? We have our sense of what's good. We want to just stay with that instead of asking God, "What do you really want me to be doing?" which might not fit our cozy notion of goodness – goodness. Sometimes our goodness can block us from God because we get so attached to our goodness that we forget our need for God's mercy, our need for God's help. Sometimes goodness becomes a matter of avoidance. We avoid certain things and think that that is, in fact, our goodness. Avoiding things is not all that bad, by the way.

Anne Tyler in one of her novels tells about a guy who says "I think God should give me some credit for the things I thought about doing that I didn't actually follow through on." And that seems about right. But if goodness is a matter of avoidance, that tends to become a bit boring, doesn't it? – avoiding.

This is what Jesus talked about in his first sermon. He stood up and he said *The poor are blessed and the meek are blessed and the peacemakers are blessed.* And then he launched into this thing where he talked about killing, and he talked about adultery. He said *You have heard it said you shall not kill* and I'm sure most of the people standing there had never, in fact, killed anyone, but they had seen killing happen. Those bloody Roman soldiers had killed people in their very village and they thought God should punish those who killed or committed adultery. Maybe most of those standing there had not committed adultery. Maybe they knew somebody who had and they saw how destructive that had been and they thought "There needs to be a judgment from God." But Jesus says the avoidance of killing and adultery is just only so good. He adds this, he said, *You have heard it said 'Thou shalt not kill' but I say to you, if you have harbored anger in your heart, if you have looked at anyone and even silently in your heart thought 'You fool' then you are guilty of murder.* And he said, *Maybe you haven't committed adultery but I say to you if you have looked on someone else with lust in your heart, you are guilty of adultery.* We cannot know Jesus' tone of voice, but my suspicion is Jesus wasn't saying "Don't get angry" because he looks angry saying that, doesn't he? Don't get angry or don't look at anyone with lust, I think Jesus says it in more of a plaintive way, in a pleading way. Jesus loves us and he wants to set us free from those dark inner forces that can be the end of us.

Did you ever notice this? You know somebody and they seem like a great person and then suddenly they self-destruct. Suddenly one day the career imploded on an ethics violation or suddenly one day they tie on one too many and they get a drunk driving charge, or something happens and the reason for this often can be that we are not attentive to our hidden selves. We are not attentive to the secrets that are perhaps even secrets to our own selves in our souls. Jesus, like some psychoanalyst, wants to probe inside our souls, not to scold us, but to set us free – to set us free.

Think about anger – anger. We live in a society that very much enshrines anger as the norm of the day. In fact, good people seem to be the really angry ones. The angriest people I know are some of the really good people. They are angry because others aren't as good as they are, or others aren't good in the way that they think they should be, so they become very angry, and it feels very good to them to be angry and there's so much rancor and everybody is annoyed about something or another. And Jesus understands how anger corrodes our soul.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once said that when we become angry we think about the effects on ourselves. He said it would be as if you had a rat in your house. He said "We've got to get rid of the rat and what you do to get rid of the rat is you burn your house down." It's a bad idea.

Jesus understands what anger can do to the soul and he would set us free from this. He would have us when we feel a surge of anger to train our eyes upon Jesus and be relieved of that burden of being angry.

Let us speak of lust – lust. It's difficult to talk about lust in church. In fact, a couple of years ago I sent out an e-mail to you guys about lust and many of you have some Puritanical e-mail blockers that would not permit the word "lust" to come through. Jesus talked about it, but you can't get it on your e-mail. That was topped only by the other year at Christmas I sent one out about the Virgin Mary and there were some e-mail blockers that said "You can't use the word virgin." Think about this – lust. How do we think about lust? I'm not sure what it is exactly. I'm reminded of the old Lewis Grizzard thing about the distinction between naked and nekked. He said that naked is when you don't have any clothes on and nekked is when you don't have any clothes on and you're up to no good. They laughed harder at 9:45. Lust – what is the nature of lust? Lust has in its nature the taking of something that is beautiful and making it tawdry. Lust has in its nature looking at something that is beautiful and treating it as an object instead of something that really is a beautiful creation of God. Lust has in its essence – this is when we look at someone else and they become a means to our end instead of something that should have its own life and thrive on its own. If we think about it in this way, lust is not just about sex, it's about many other things. We constantly are being used for somebody else's end and don't you get weary of it if you work for one of those – what was the term we used – troubled banks? Any corporation that you work for, does the corporation love you back? I don't think so. You're a means to their end. They use you for whatever it is that they are after. And it could be humiliating after a time.

I've talked to a lot of people over the last couple of years who are unemployed, and they're trying to find jobs, and they apply somewhere and maybe they get an interview and they go and then they don't get the job. Then they apply somewhere else and they get an interview and they go and they don't get the job. This happens over and over, and I ask them "How does that feel?" Sometimes they say it feels discouraging; most of the time they say it feels humiliating. We get humiliated all the time if we think about it. If you think about the advertising that we are peppered with, it should humiliate every one of us. It's all sexually charged. It all treats you as if you are no more than some base creature that just wants to consume whatever it is that they are throwing at you. Jesus looks into our souls and he wants us to be free of dark desires, whatever it is that plagues us, whatever it is that might be the undoing of us, whatever it is that is demeaning to other people and to ourselves.

Jon Bon Jovi, when he talked about that goodness thing, he went on to say this. He said "Love is not doing things for other people." He said "Love is when you look at the other person and you say I see the light shining in you. You are good. You are beautiful. I trust you. You can really be somebody." That's what love is. And so it occurs to me that when we think about lust or anger or whatever else it is that bristles inside our souls, that is not of God. If we thought of prayer as not so much this discreet activity where we stop and we bow our heads and we say a

few things to God and then our prayer is done, but if we thought of prayer as an ongoing activity that God is my traveling companion throughout the day and wherever I go, God is there with me and God sees what I see and if I see something I say "How about that or what should I do here or did you see . . ." and if we do this, God will be there and whenever we are tempted to look with lust or to rise up in anger or whatever it might be that is demeaning to us and to the other, God could whisper in our ear "Don't you see the light shining in that person? Don't you see that that person is good? Don't you see that person is someone that I died for? Don't you see that person as light shining in them?"

I thought about the woman that I visited with here and I was worried that Christianity might sound boring. I suspect that in her very hip, fast-paced party world, no one ever really looks at her and says "I see the light shining in you. You're good. I trust you. You're a child of God." I bet no one sees her that way. People see her as a means to an end and maybe, just maybe she's a little bit weary of that.

I think about the woman in Germany who asked me for directions as a funny thing that happened. I frustrated her. She gestured and then she turned and drove away, and just as her car went around the corner I remembered something very important, and that was that in my back pocket I had a map, and I could have pulled out the map, and she could perhaps have found the way to wherever she was going.

How should we say it? God has given us a map. God has given us a map. God has shown us the way. We don't have to wander around lost. We don't have to be the victims of our own desires and those of others and what is so humiliating for everyone. God has given us a map to show us where the light is. God has given us a map and maybe it's not such a boring activity after all. Maybe it's the best thing that we could do for our souls to just gather around a table with others and open a very old book because in that book there are the words of life. It is only in that book that we are told "You have the light of God shining in you." Maybe it is, in fact, the most exciting thing possible to go and to serve soup to someone who is hungry and to see the light shining in them because when we see the light shining in them we notice that there is a bright light shining in us.

Jesus quite mercifully said, *You have heard it said you shall not kill and you shall not commit adultery but I say Be set free from anger. Be set free from lust. Notice the light that is in you. Notice the light in others. Follow me for I am the light of the world.*

Thanks be to God.