

Gathering Question:

What advice would you give a person who is struggling to get along with an irritating individual? What standard does Jesus use for determining right and wrong? Back up your answer with some Scripture (from memory is fine without the chapter and verse numbers). Do you think Jesus' standard is fair, unfair, realistic, or unrealistic? In a normal week does your thought life tend to please or displease God?

What is Wrong with Private Sins?

Anger, rudeness, and vengeance can often seem justified when we have been antagonized. Private thoughts of lust may seem harmless. Jesus, however, calls it something else. He calls these things “murder” and “adultery.” That seems awfully harsh doesn't it? What harm is it for a person to harbor anger and resentment, or what is the harm in indulging in some private lust when you see an attractive person? Isn't it true that the most important thing is that we not actually do anything about it? Surely we can think angry thoughts without harming another person, can't we? Surely a person can indulge in a “harmless” bit of fantasy without actually living out the fantasy?

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus confronts the idea that private sins do not hurt anyone. Of course they do! If you indulge in harsh attitudes and sexual fantasies you will find over time that you will live in those mind worlds and eventually thinking about those things will not be enough for you. Anger and lust always tend to grow and so over time what might have been a slight irritation for you is now outright hatred and what might have started as a fleeting fantasy has developed into an obsession. Eventually you find yourself trying to discover an outlet for the things that have been going on in your mind for a long time. Sin is an “inside job.” It starts on the inside of a person and eventually makes its way to the outside. Jesus makes it clear that this kind of a life is not acceptable to God.

The scribes and Pharisees calculated that the Law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions. But they were better at arithmetic than obedience. So, they tried to make the Law's demands less demanding and the Law's permissions more permissive. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus seeks to reverse this tendency. He came to deepen, not destroy, the Law's demands.

Read:

Matthew 5:21-30

Reflect:

1. Why do you think calling a person “Raca” or an “empty headed fool” is warned against by Jesus? How can such language lead to other things?
2. Are verses 29, 30 to be taken literally? Explain your answer. In your own words try to explain what Jesus means by these verses.