

The Law and the Prophets

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter,^[c] not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks^[d] one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Concerning Anger

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[e] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult^[f] a brother or sister,^[g] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell^[h] of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister^[i] has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^[j] and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court^[k] with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Concerning Adultery

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.^[l] ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.^[m]

Concerning Divorce

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But 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.

Concerning Oaths

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.^[n]

Concerning Retaliation

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,^[o] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

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Matthew 5:17-48

When Jesus Starts Meddling

Kerra Becker English

There's a reason that Christians would sometimes prefer their Christianity to come from sources other than Jesus. The Jesus we meet in this sermon makes us uncomfortable. It's not the "rah rah America" Jesus who wants nothing more than for us to be healthy and wealthy. It's not the meek and mild Jesus that your grandmother told you about so you would "Be nice" like Jesus. Jesus isn't a superhero. He's not your best buddy. He's not even your merciful savior in this text. He's proclaiming that heaven will ALWAYS be out of our reach unless we live up to this ridiculously high standard he's about to lay on us.

With knowledge of the law that would make any Pharisaic scholar proud, and with his absolute confidence of proclaiming the prophetic voice of the Lord using his own words, Jesus continues preaching about what he expects from his followers. He takes the law that we are presumed to know and closes every loophole available to us. You think you're doing well by not murdering anyone – well, if you can't control your anger, you are no better than a murderer. You think you're doing well by not committing adultery – Jesus says, if you've so much as looked at someone with lust in your heart, you might want to consider how much your eye is really worth. You think that you are generally fair in your ways of interacting with the world – you haven't even begun to give enough if you still have a coat on your back. Anyone can love the people who love them. Jesus wants us to love our enemies.

This is not typically how we “teach” Jesus. Here at Ashland Presbyterian Church, we boldly proclaim the love and forgiveness of Jesus. We say that’s what he was about and what he calls us toward. We most certainly honor the compassion of Jesus for the wounded in body and spirit, even if we would like to measure up better in our own compassion as we are sent to serve others. During Lent, we will certainly mention the bodily sacrifice of Jesus as uniquely Jesus’ gift to give. But my hunch is that even the fire and brimstone street corner preachers would think that Jesus was getting a little “extra,” going a bit “over the top” with this message. It’s easier to think that Jesus is against what we are against, and to about the same degree. We can be against murder, and adultery, and lying. We can be saddened by divorce without shaming those who have found themselves there. But anger seems unavoidable. Sensing a little appreciation for an attractive person, harmless. Oaths something that can be trifled with because it’s nothing more than words. And enemies are called enemies for a reason. Loving them is impossible, right?

It’s funny that as Christian as we want to claim that we are – these red-letter words are so easily written off as hyperbole. We’ll take all kinds of other messages legalistically if not literally – but Jesus says something that makes us a little squirmy, and it must be “for effect.” Jesus didn’t mean it as he said it, and if he did mean it as he said it, it still doesn’t mean he meant for us to follow it, and if he didn’t mean for us to follow it, then let’s just pretend he never said it in the first place. Let’s move on to Paul’s grace and truth and forget about Jesus’ calling us to task in ways that are as impossible now as they must have been then. Oh, how little has changed among Jesus’ followers.

I know I can read through the Sermon on the Mount, this section in particular, and find myself sorely lacking. I can be nice to people to their face. I can avoid physically cheating on my spouse. I have yet to murder anyone. And I can even be good at loving most of my neighbors.

But Jesus is spot-on about how our motivations can break down so quickly and lead us into the territory of not being nearly as good as we think we are. It's not just our outward appearance that God sees, God knows our inward motivation. God knows what's in our heart. God knows what we've been thinking. God knows when there's a smile on our lips but contempt in our innermost being. It's scary, right?

It is scary, but it's also freeing. I know that can sound really weird, so I'm going to try to explain what I mean by that. In seminary, we all had to read broad sections of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin is the great – great – great something Grandfather of the Reformed tradition of which we are a part, and he is also the quintessential curmudgeon yelling at kids to get off his lawn. Even most Presbyterians today want to get as far as we can from his grumpy roots. He had a surly and pessimistic way of looking at humanity, not unlike what Jesus expresses in this passage. But in his own mystical way, if you can call it that, Calvin understood the dark side of human nature, and felt that knowing the depth of our wickedness might help us to get a clearer glimpse of who God truly is.

His ability to find colorful language to address the horribleness of the human condition is hard to match. One such quote is on the front of your bulletin if you wish to follow along: *For, as a veritable world of miseries is to be found in mankind, and we are thereby despoiled of divine raiment, our shameful nakedness exposes a teeming horde of infamies. Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God.* He goes on to say: *Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and -what is more- depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone.*

Really there is no one who explains this like Calvin, and I love being able to tell you that this particular passage comes from Book One, Chapter One, part One of his Institutes. Calvin STARTS there! The first two pages. Which kind of makes you wonder where he will go next.

Now, I happen to love feel-good spirituality, happiness meditations, and imagining fully that I am gloriously made in the image of God. I do. And yet, there have been times in my life where THIS spiritual gift of Calvin meant even more to me. There are those times when Calvin absolutely has it right that we must be so “stung by the consciousness of our own unhappiness” that we realize that goodness can only be found by putting our trust in God. It would be blind of me to think that my interpretation of the world is the only correct one. I sometimes need that metaphorical slap in the face that I have been at least ignorant or vain, and maybe even depraved and corrupt in my motivations. I can be operating out of any one of the sins that the Roman Catholic church deemed deadly and have difficulties realizing it. I can be full of pride, anger, lust, gluttony, greed, envy or sloth. Or I can be deceitful. Or I can let my fear keep me from doing what’s right. There are plenty of ways that I can sinfully botch up relationships or ruin my own happiness – without ever breaking the letter of the law. Jesus knew that. Calvin may be the world champion of knowing that.

And this Presbytery tends to be enamored with this particular morsel of theological argument. They want candidates who have looked long at hard at their own sin and depravity or so it seems. At yesterday’s meeting, and at just about every meeting where a candidate for ministry gets grilled with theological questions to pass that particular hurdle to becoming ordained – one of the questions is bound to be “What is the Reformed understanding of sin?” Even knowing that question ahead of time, it makes the candidates squirm. Even knowing that it’s GOING to be a question, it makes the audience squirm. It’s a rough question to have to

answer in front of a crowd. But the Reformed understanding of sin has always been pretty simple, to take it with utmost seriousness. Our own sin should convict us long before we understand that in Jesus, that conviction is not going to be what cages us, it's what sets us free. In Jesus, even our darkest motivations can be challenged, examined, and transformed by the love of God. We are not stuck there. But to get unstuck, sometimes we have to be confronted by those ugly motivations rather than think we are getting points for simply not doing the worst crimes that we've thought about committing.

In today's world - as a plethora of unspoken and unbecoming motivations seem to be in the air we breathe - we might need more of Calvin's truth serum to remind us to look at how corrupted we've become and look up, look up long enough, to put our trust back in God to understand where goodness comes from. In an age where contempt is so thinly veiled for people who don't think like I do... like we do - can we look long enough at ourselves to burn away those motivational sins and start to live fully and freely into the love of God? Jesus, in this sermon, has to be taken seriously. I don't think it would be wise of us to dismiss this text as "he really didn't mean it." Our anger, our lust, our casual treatment of covenants and oaths, our unwillingness to look at enemies as people just like us - can make us hard and turn us ugly against each other. Jesus knew that. He pointed it out so we could grow beyond it. You've heard it said - "an eye for an eye" - well, an eye for an eye would make the whole world blind. Instead, Jesus calls us to forgive, even the person that is the hardest to forgive - which is usually ourselves. Amen.