

Jesus Raises the Bar

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
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Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:17-37

For the past few weeks I've been preaching on the Sermon on the Mount, the single largest collection of Jesus' teachings, found in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of the gospel of Matthew. The Sermon on the Mount is one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible. It is also one of the most challenging, because it includes the "hard sayings" of Jesus, the things Jesus asks of us that seem the hardest for us to do. The Sermon on the Mount gives us Jesus -- the radical rabbi.

In the excerpt read this morning, Jesus says that he has come not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them! He warns us not to break God's commandments or teach others to break them. Rather, we should follow them and teach others to do so as well. What's more, Jesus urges us to exceed the scribes and Pharisees in our righteousness – a tall order given that the Pharisees were considered to be zealous observers of the law. How could we ever be more righteous than they were? What does Jesus mean? What does this greater righteousness look like?

Well, Jesus gives some concrete examples of what he means, using the formulaic phrasing: "You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you."

"You have heard that it was said . . . , 'You shall not murder'; But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

"It was also 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.”

“You have heard that it was said . . . , ‘You shall not swear falsely,’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all.”

Jesus considers the prohibitions against murder, adultery, divorce, and false swearing, three of which are from the Ten Commandments. These laws deal with overt actions, prohibited behaviors, things we’re not supposed to do. But Jesus wants us to go deeper. Jesus offers a radical perspective on God’s commandments, radical in the sense that he wants to get at their root. He wants to go to the heart of the matter. He wants us to look inside ourselves at the thoughts and emotions that drive our actions. He wants us to be transformed – not just outwardly (in how we behave) but inwardly as well (in how we think and feel).

You haven’t murdered anyone yet? That’s good! You’re doing well! But what if you are so angry and enraged at someone that you’d like to scream “I could kill you! I could just kill you!” Doesn’t that make you a murderer at heart, if not in actuality? Even if you never kill the person you are angry at, the pent up anger and rage inside you might very well drive you to some other destructive act or behavior. If nothing else, anger and rage will eat you up inside. To harbor malice against others is poisonous to your relationships and is hazardous to your health.

So, Jesus counsels us to be quick to reconcile with those with whom we are in conflict. For example, “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.” Or, say you are and your accuser are on your way to court. “Come to terms quickly with your accuser,” Jesus says, lest you end up in court before a judge and the judge throws you in jail.

Jesus moves on to adultery, which in his day referred specifically to a man having extramarital sexual relations with another man’s wife. In ancient Israel, wives were considered to be the property of their

husbands. The wife “belonged” to her husband and so her having an extramarital relationship violated her husband’s rights. A man could have an extramarital relationship with an unmarried woman and not be guilty of adultery, but if the woman was married, both he and she were guilty.

We find the prohibition on adultery in the Ten Commandments. But Jesus extends it. Not only is the act of adultery to be avoided, Jesus says, it’s best not to fantasize about it either. When married people lust after others, they become adulterers at heart, and that can’t be good for their marriages or for their souls.

To emphasize his point, Jesus uses some very harsh, exaggerated language: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; . . . And 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.”

Now, I don’t think we’re supposed to take him literally here. I can’t believe Jesus would really advocate that we engage in self-mutilation. But even if we don’t take Jesus literally, I do think we are to take him seriously. He is using hyperbole to make his point as strongly as he possibly can. And given the divorce rate in the United States, we might want to pay attention to Jesus’ warning about the potential consequences of misplaced passions.

Jesus’ teachings shift again, from adultery to divorce.

In the first century, since wives were considered to be a man’s property, divorce was the sole prerogative of the husband. So, here, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus suggests that there is only one justification for a man to divorce his wife, he is attempting to make divorce more difficult in order to protect women from the arbitrary whims of their husbands, who were permitted to divorce their wives virtually at will.

Finally, Jesus speaks of the taking of oaths to ensure the truth of what someone says. In Jesus’ day as in ours, you were not supposed to “swear falsely” – you were not supposed to “lie under oath.” But Jesus questions the value of taking oaths. If you take an oath to ensure that you are telling the truth, it implies that your word cannot

be trusted when you are not “under oath.” So, Jesus suggests, why not forgo swearing oaths altogether? Why not simply be straightforward and honest with people all the time? Be a person of your word. Let your “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no.”

We may have thought we were doing well if we never murdered anyone, never committed adultery, and never lied under oath. But Jesus raises the bar. He ups the ante. He goes to the heart of the matter. Taking God’s commandments at face value and following them isn’t enough for Jesus. Not only does Jesus want us to obey the letter of the law, he wants us to abide by its spirit as well!

And so he asks us to go deeper! He asks us to look within ourselves at the internal thoughts and emotions that drive our actions. He asks us to look at the anger within us, which at its extreme can drive us to murderous acts. He asks us to reconcile our conflicts with others before they get out of hand. He asks us to curb our lustful thoughts and feelings, which can so easily lead to adulterous affairs. And he suggests that we forgo swearing oaths and just be honest with one another.

Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. By following his teachings, our inner thoughts and feelings can be brought into line with our outward behavior and relationships, making us people of integrity. Right thoughts and feelings, right actions, right relationships, together make up the greater righteousness to which Jesus calls us. May we follow where he leads. Amen.