

Jesus' Higher Standard of Ethics

Part 1: Anger, Lust, and Divorce

Matthew 5:21-32
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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After hearing this passage of scripture, raise your hand if you wish this had been a snow day. Me too. And as you can see by the title of this sermon, this is just Part 1, where we will explore Jesus' higher standard of ethics in relationship to anger, lust, and divorce. Next Sunday's passage continues with instructions on swearing oaths, retaliation, and love of enemies.

Today's passage from Matthew 5, still in the first of three chapters known as the Sermon on the Mount, is indeed extremely challenging, and among the most difficult set of sayings attributed to Jesus.

One of my primary goals in this sermon is to **provide you with a broader understanding of Jesus' intent and purpose behind these tough instructions, which call us to a higher level of righteous living.** Overall, they teach us how to put the love that Jesus demands of us into action.

As you might imagine, not all biblical commentaries agree on how these scriptural verses should be interpreted. The resource I found most helpful, and the one that best reflects a progressive understanding of these biblical verses is by Presbyterian author, preacher and biblical commentator Thomas G. Long. (*Matthew*, from Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.) Much of this sermon reflects his very thorough work on this complex scriptural passage.

First, we need to remember that **Matthew wrote his Gospel to a community of Jewish Christians, people who had been raised on the laws of Moses** as the embodiment of the will of God for human life. The new and evolving faith tradition of Christianity hotly debated what force these ancient Hebrew commandments now had in the context of the new event of Jesus Christ. They asked: Does Jesus leave the law intact, or does he replace the law with something new? As it turns out, Jesus offers instead a third alternative, albeit with its own tension. The law neither remains as it is, nor is it done away with. Rather, we are told that **the law is fulfilled and transformed by Jesus.** The result is that **the Christian community is to look beneath and behind the commandments in order to discern their actual intent.**

Another way to put this is that Jesus enables his followers, then and now, to **pass through the literal letter of the law in order to get to the heart of the law.** That, my friends, is part of the very definition of a progressive approach toward biblical interpretation. Or to put it in judicial terms, **Jesus was not a strict constructionist.**

The deeper *intent* of the law, therefore, is still in force for the church. Jesus illustrates this with six examples of practical ethical issues where the heart of the law leads to a new and greater righteousness – a way of living life in relationship with others the way God intends it to be lived. What is presented, then, is not a new law but **a call to a new way of life in the realm, the kin-dom of God.** Each example, and we will look at three this morning, is introduced by the formula “You have heard it said... but I say to you...”

The **first example** of how to live into the ideal vision of the realm of God addresses the matter of **anger and how it can lead to broken relationships, and worse**. The Old Testament law condemned murder (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:18). But at the heart of this law lays a respect for the life of another. Jesus warns us that while there is no room in the household of God for murder, there is also **no room for the kind and level of anger that leads to violent or murderous actions**. That's why this passage from Matthew goes on to say that we must do all we humanly can to make peace with those around us, and especially with those within the community of faith. And we are encouraged to do so before it's too late.

The **second** of Jesus' examples of getting behind the literalness of the law to the heart of the law as God intends deals with **adultery and lust**. (I'd venture to guess it's been a long time since you've heard a sermon address these topics.) Marriage, within the Christian community, is meant to be an expression of the faithfulness God demonstrates toward the world. **Adultery breaks the bond of faithfulness. And lust, defined as a covetous sexual desire for a person other than one's spouse or partner, contemplates such a break of faithfulness**. Lust also demeans the personhood of another if seen only as a sexual object. **Lust, Jesus teaches us, is the first step in the direction toward adultery**. Or to quote our Baptist friends, lust is a slippery slope.

The law of Moses forbids **adultery** (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), but not primarily because it involves sexual relations with another person outside one's marriage partner. Rather, it is condemned because **it invades and destroys the marriage covenant itself**. It is that covenant agreement and vow between two people that forms the context for trusting and joyful sexuality. Jesus, therefore, again goes to the intent of the law by speaking out against **lust** by recognizing its **power to divide, disrupt, and destroy relationships**.

We need to be very careful, however, with this biblical passage. Jesus' states that it would be better to cut off your hand or tear out your eye than to allow sight or touch to entice you to lust after another person. From a literary and oratory perspective, however, this is what is called hyperbolic language, or hyperbole. It is exaggerated, over the top language that is intentionally designed to make a point in the extreme. It is *not* to be taken literally.

Thomas Long goes on to add an important element to understanding this part of the passage. He notes that modern psychology reveals that we, as humans, are basically always in the "on" position as sexual beings. Sexual desire, then, to some degree or another, is always at work. If that is the kind of lust that Jesus opposes, then we would have to cut out not only our eyes and our hands, but our brains as well. Instead, Jesus speaks of our basic attitudes, **the choices that we make about what we allow to take root in our imaginations**, to shape our thoughts, to govern our actions, and to mold our relationships. Allowing lust to grow until it is ready to spring into destructive action, as in the form of adultery, is what Jesus claims is not to be part of the ideal vision of the kingdom of God.

That leads us to Jesus' **third example** that deals with **divorce**. This is another topic not often addressed from the pulpit, primarily because it is a field filled with landmines. But here goes.

In the ancient patriarchal male-dominated world, the laws of Moses specified a divorce procedure where the husband could write a certificate of divorce and send his wife out of the house if he found something – anything – objectionable about her. Women, according to the law, had no such right. Jesus, however, claims that there is no divorce procedure a man can follow that will leave him with clean hands. So notice that

Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount about divorce still assumes that divorce is always initiated by men, from a cultural position of power and control.

Yet it is true; there's no getting around the fact that Jesus clearly speaks to forbid divorce. The only exception to this rule is "unchastity." The main point is that **Jesus allows no room for the practice of divorce in a culture where divorce is an assault on the very personhood and value of a woman, where it is an abuse of power and a trivializing of faithful commitments.**

As always, the tough question for us is how to apply Jesus' words today in the 21st century. Divorce is common in our society, with approximately half of all marriages ending in divorce. Hardly any family is untouched by it. But is divorce always outside the bounds of the Christian faith? And is remarriage always forbidden by the Sermon on the Mount?

It is true that in our day and age some people almost casually leave their marriage. "It's just too much work." Most folks, however, certainly the ones I know, have ended their marriage because to the best of their ability they came to the point where they felt they had no other choice. That almost always involves a long emotional process of introspection and eventually grief over the loss of one's initial expectations for one's marriage.

So what do the words of Jesus mean for those who are divorced? Again, historical context is crucial. The word "divorce," as used in the Sermon on the Mount, does not mean exactly what that word means today. **In the first-century world, divorce was closely associated with what we would call today, "abandonment."** Someone (the man) simply walked away (or more likely, threw the woman out) with little effort or ceremony. So much for defending the biblical sanctity of "traditional marriage." But since that time, especially in societies where Christianity has been a factor, divorce laws have been changed to make abandonment illegal.

Marriage is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for the persons involved! In Jesus' day, the typical customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values. Today, ironically, living in a hopelessly broken marriage can itself sometimes be an assault on those same values of safety, nurture, and mutual honor. Yes, a marriage can become distorted. It can betray its intended purposes and become a place where people are in actual physical, emotional, or even spiritual danger. **Jesus' word about divorce, therefore, was spoken to preserve the God-given value and worth of the woman in a marriage covenant. It was indeed a feminist perspective.**

So today when a marriage itself becomes the very arena where people are destroying and abusing each other, it is appropriate to ask how best to maintain the safety, nurture, and honor of the marriage partners. **For some, the only loving answer is divorce. This means viewing with compassion and understanding the people involved and their relationship,** not merely defending the institution of marriage as such.

I'm afraid this sermon only scratches the surface of the difficult issues this biblical passage forces us to face and deal with. And in all seriousness, if you have any questions or concerns, I encourage you to give me a call so that we can visit.

It is my hope and prayer that through God's indwelling Presence we will be lead and empowered to a greater wholeness and righteousness as we seek to live out Jesus' admittedly tough ethic of love.

Amen.

Resource:

Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, pgs. 52-64.