

“You’ve heard it said... But I say...”

A new take on old instructions.

Anger, Lust, Divorce, Oaths, Retaliation, Love of Enemies

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

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I will start this sermon the same way I have every other time I've preached on this Gospel passage by asking, Don't you wish today had been a snow day? I do!

I have one overarching goal for this sermon. It is to provide a broader understanding of **Jesus' intent and purpose behind these admittedly difficult teachings**. The overall point is they teach us about ways to put Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves into action. And the overall focus is on **interpersonal relationships**, on the new way of life we are called to live in the realm and the kin-dom of God.

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. The deeper *intent* of the law, therefore, is still in force for the church, for Jesus' teachings are not meant to contradict or invalidate the Ten Commandments and other specific Hebraic laws, but rather to fill them out. So how does he do this? Jesus provides six examples of practical ethical issues where the heart and spirit of the law reveal a way to extend, intensify, and even deepen the original meaning. Each of the six teachings is introduced by the formula “You have heard it said... but I say to you...” The six deal with the issues of murder/anger, adultery/lust, divorce, swearing oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies. So, let's just jump into the deep end, shall we?

The **first example** of how to live into the ideal vision of the kin-dom 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). Murder is obviously not the right way to live in community with others. 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 violence towards another**. 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. **Reconciliation** must always be part of the very foundation of a community of faith. **Our community should embody practices of regular and repeated forgiveness**.

The **second** of Jesus' examples 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 a covenant based on faithfulness. Adultery breaks the bond of faithfulness**. And lust, defined as a covetous desire, whether sexual or not, 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, by**

objectifying another, is the first step in the direction toward adultery. Lust is indeed 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**. Jesus makes the point is that **anything that causes us to objectify others must be cut away and discarded**.

That leads us to Jesus' **third** that deals with **divorce**. This is another topic not often addressed from the pulpit, primarily because it is a field filled with landmines. But I want us to concentrate on this one this morning. 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 about divorce still assumes that divorce is always initiated by men, from a cultural position of power and control and possession.

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" – unchastity on the part of the woman. Unchastity implies any sort of sexual activity outside of and in violation of a marriage covenant. 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**.

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 these words in Matthew? 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, honor and respect 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, mutual

honor and respect. **Yes, a marriage can become distorted. It can betray its intended purposes and become a place where people are in actual physical, emotional, or spiritual danger.** 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, honor and respect 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 dogmatically defending the institution of marriage as such, with a judgmental eye cast upon those who are divorced. Let's move on.

The **next** teaching concerns the **swearing of an oath**. This is similar to adding gravity to one's vow or promise by invoking the name of God or anything else. Something like, "I swear to God that I'm telling the truth." Jesus teaches that we should not swear an oath at all in an attempt to prove our honesty and truthfulness. In one of my favorite teachings of Jesus, he simply states that **our yes must mean yes, and our no must mean no. That doesn't mean we can't change our mind, rather each decision is to be made with integrity because it forms the very foundation of building trusting relationships.**

The next example, which is Jesus' **fifth** in his list of six, deals with the issue of **substituting retaliation or revenge with active nonviolence or resistance**. Sorry, but I'm out of time and can't get into an explanation of this, which deserves a full sermon in itself. Nor is there time for the final teaching about **not only loving those who love us back, but also loving those we find unlovable, like an enemy.**

Through all six these examples, **we are called to break any cycle we see growing within ourselves of resentment, unfaithfulness, abuse, dishonesty, hatred, violence, and injustice.** God's values – values of love, compassion, integrity, justice, forgiveness, dignity, and non-violence – must be our values, visible in and through our lives. May God bless and empower you and me, and us together as this covenant community of faith, with the strength, courage, humility, and commitment to make it so.

Amen.

Resources:

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

Feasting on the Word;

Feasting on the Gospels; Wikipedia, "Turn the Other Cheek"