

Jesus' Ethic of Love

Part 1: Anger/Murder; Lust/Adultery; Divorce

Matthew 5:21-48

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Why oh why, you must be wondering, couldn't this have been a snow day? This long passage from Matthew 5 is indeed extremely challenging, and among the most difficult set of sayings attributed to Jesus.

I had hoped to briefly comment on all six issues that Jesus addresses – **anger, adultery, divorce, swearing oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies**. But in order to do any justice to each of these topics, I will only get through half of them today, saving the last three until next Sunday. Consider yourself warned.

One of my primary goals in this sermon is to provide you with a broader understanding of **Jesus' purpose behind these tough instructions, which act as a calling to a higher righteousness**. We will see how we are to put the love that Jesus demands of us in to action. In other words, we will **look deep into Jesus' tough ethic of love as it applies to his vision of living in the idealized realm of God**.

I have read many biblical commentaries on these scriptural verses. As you might expect, not all of them agree as to how to interpret these difficult sayings of Jesus. The resource I found most helpful, and the one that reflects my current best 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 early Christian church hotly debated what force 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 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 into the heart of the law**. That, my friends, is part of the very definition of a progressive approach toward biblical interpretation. **The deeper intent of the law, therefore, is still in force for the church**, and 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.

Each example is introduced by the formula "You have heard it said... but I say to you." This carried the practical effect of declaring: **Here is what the law says, but I am**

going to the heart of that law to show how to live out its deepest meaning in the realm of God. What is presented, then, is not a new law but a call to a new way of life.

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 realm of God for murder, there is also **no room for the kind and level of anger that leads to murderous or vicious 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, in the Christian community, is meant to be an expression of the faithfulness God demonstrates toward the world. As an aside, given that, I see no reason why that cannot also apply to married couples of the same gender.

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 sex object. Lust, Jesus teaches us, is the first step in the direction toward adultery.

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, but 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 heart 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' statement 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, is what we call hyperbolic language, or hyperbole. It is exaggerated, over the top language that is intentionally designed to make the point in the extreme. It is *not* to be taken literally. Applied in this case, we are to realize that the realm of God is so precious, so much of a treasure, that absolutely nothing should be allowed to interfere with our participation in it.

Tom Long goes on to add an important element to understanding this part of the passage. He notes that modern psychology reveals that we 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, adultery, is what Jesus claims is not to be part of the ideal vision of the realm of God.

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

In the ancient 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 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 position of power.

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." That word in the Greek, however, is not clearly defined or understood. The main point, though, is that **Jesus allows no room for the practice of divorce in a culture where divorce is an assault on the value of a person, an abuse of power, and a trivializing of faithful commitments.**

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?

While it is true that in our day and age some people still casually leave their marriages, most have ended them because, to the best of their ability, they felt they had to. That almost always involves a long process of introspection and eventually grief over the loss of one's initial expectations for their marriage.

So what do the words of Jesus mean for those who are divorced? Again, historical context is crucial. The word "divorce" 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 out (or more likely, threw the woman out) with little effort or ceremony. **So much for defending "traditional marriage."** But since that time, especially in societies where Christian faith 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 such 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 physical, emotional, or even spiritual danger. Jesus' word about divorce, however, was spoken to **preserve the value and worth of both persons in the marriage.** So 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. **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 that this sermon only scratched 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.

And as I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, I will wait until next week to address the remaining three examples of Jesus' call to a higher righteousness. Those issues involves the imperatives to:

- Be truthful in all our speech, thus negating the need to swear an oath.
- Renounce our right to retaliate and seek revenge against those who have hurt us, choosing instead the path of non-violence.
- Love not only God, our neighbor, and ourselves, but even our enemies. Why? Because God does not hate the enemy.

I'll also wait until next week to comment on Jesus' final difficult command in this section to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

It is my hope and prayer that through God's indwelling Spirit we will be lead and empowered us 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.