

The Letter of the Law / The Spirit of the Law

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

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

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February 12, 2023

After hearing this long passage of scripture, which is part of what is known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew, how many of you wish today had been a snow day? I think I do. Yet, my hope is by taking a closer look we will recognize that **Jesus' overarching message concerns the importance of right relationships that are part of the new way of life we are called to live in the kin-dom of God.** What Jesus does is to enable his followers, then and now, to **look deeper than the literal letter of the law in order to get to the heart and spirit of the law.**

Jesus' teachings are not meant to contradict or invalidate the Ten Commandments, and other specific Hebraic laws, but rather to expand upon their **intent**. Each of the six ethical issues he addresses is introduced by the formula "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." They include: murder/anger, adultery/lust, divorce, swearing oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies. So, without further ado, let's just jump into the deep end of the pool, shall we?

The **first** example of how to live into the ideal and ethical 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 is 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, though oftentimes difficult to achieve, must always be part of the very foundation of a family, as well as a community of faith. We are called to 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 to be considered as a covenant agreement 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 that anything that causes us to objectify others must be cut away and discarded.

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 I want us to seriously look deeper into this one today, primarily by looking at it through its historical context. 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. On the other hand, 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 fairly common in our society, even though a recent study found divorce is at its lowest rate in the past 50 years. Here's a question pastors often face. 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 (including my two brothers), have ended their marriage because to the best of their ability they came to the point where they felt they had no other choice, or the choice was made for them. 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 and staying 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 relationship can become distorted, perhaps even dangerous. 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. Our empathy is required.

The **fourth** teaching concerns the swearing of an oath. This is like 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 declaration is to be made with honesty and 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 defiant resistance. We are all aware that violence begets more violence. And yes, we know that even a nonviolent response does not always prevent further violence. Yet, **we are challenged to bear witness to our Christian identity by finding just and nonviolent avenues to peace in the midst of violence.** I realize I'm basically out of time and can't get into a detailed explanation of this part of the scripture passage, which deserves a full sermon in itself, as does each of the six.

Nor is there time for a full look at Jesus' **sixth** teaching about loving not only those who love us back, but also loving those we find unlovable, like an enemy. I'll simply quote Presbyterian biblical commentator Thomas Long who summarizes it this way:

The reason that one ought to [love one's enemies] is because God is like this, and we are God's children. **God does not hate the enemy;** indeed, the good gifts of life – the sun and the rain – are lavished on everyone. If we love only those who love us, we are not imitating God. We are simply imitating the world, for even tax collectors and Gentiles love those who love them.

Through all six of 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, faithfulness, integrity, justice, forgiveness, dignity, and non-violence – must be our values, embodied and visible in and through our lives. And when they aren't, we must do the hard work to make amends.**

May God bless and empower you and me, and us together as this covenant community of faith, with the strength and courage, patience and humility, and the commitment needed 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"