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Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And 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. ³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But 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. ³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (see also in Message)

I’ve preached for more than four decades, yet I am still overwhelmed by the audacity of daring to articulate God’s Word to you. But this is nothing compared to what Jesus dared to do in the Sermon on the Mount. When He said, “*You have heard it was said...but I say to you...*” Jesus was claiming to speak as if He were God, with the right to un-do centuries of Jewish teaching. He declared that what they had been taught, by the highest authorities for over a thousand years, with its roots going back twice that far, had been wrong.

We could spend months dissecting what Jesus said about murder, hatred, anger, adultery, lust, divorce, but I have just one take-away...

This week, someone came up to me and asked, “Are you born again?” I was able to answer confidently, “Yes!” It’s a beautiful phrase rooted in Scripture, that richly describes the new beginning, the new life, that is a gift from God for each one of us. Even though Jesus only used it in one conversation with one person and never said it again, it’s the rallying cry of many Christians. I was raised to treasure being one who is born again, and I still treasure it. That’s why even though it’s fashionable, you will never hear me mock those for whom that phrase is precious, because it is for me too. But I knew where this conversation was going. This person had heard me preach, and as he saw it, I wasn’t preaching the truth.

Speaking faithfully the truth of God in limited human words matters to me. I never presume that I have a special pipeline to God, so while I could almost predict what he would say, I listened. He was respectful; he didn’t yell or call me names, exactly. But he said that what I preach is at the core horribly wrong. In his mind, I do not sufficiently warn people that there’s *only one* way to salvation, and unless people believe certain specific things and follow certain steps, they are in danger of hell. He pretty much said: People are headed toward hell because

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they haven't done *this*, and you're not warning them, so you probably are headed there too.

I don't simply dismiss that. My friend the other day was not crazy—because to our minds, *it makes sense*. Don't we teach our children that there are consequences? We live with thousands of laws, because we know that if we break them, people could be hurt. I do not preach that if we simply mean well, we have nothing to worry about. That's one reason why this work I do is sometimes almost terrifying.

It took me back to a time when that reflected something I really tried to believe that understanding of the Gospel myself. And that is the reaction Jesus faced, when He preached that day on that hillside. His listeners had been held captive by the fear of not believing enough, or not believing and behaving in the right way.

But Jesus was clear: getting our behavior exactly right, even believing exactly right, will never bring salvation to anyone. Salvation is God's gracious gift, embraced in humble, grateful faith, and lived out in every dimension of life. Jesus came to set us free from the fear of not measuring up to any human standard, and free from those who would dictate to us how we should live, believe, or think.

And ironically, Jesus sets us free...by *raising the bar higher*.

Yes, Jesus says, murder *is* horrible—but more damage is done by anger, hatred, vindictiveness, and the myriad ways we push each other away. We may not call people “fools”, as He mentions—but we have an extensive arsenal of loaded word-weapons to belittle and hurt others. Adultery *is* a betrayal of a precious and beautiful trust; but masking our fantasies behind a veneer of propriety is infinitely worse, because it tears at the fabric of our sacred promises, and we're living a lie. Here and in Matthew 19, Jesus says that divorce cannot be excused as merely a civilized way to solve a problem; no matter what may compel us to break that bond, we have an obligation to acknowledge its destructive potential for all those divorce affects.

Jesus isn't done; He will go on to say that “an eye for an eye”, which *feels* like justice, is never, *ever*, the way of God. He will also say that the very *idea* of loving one's neighbor but *hating* one's enemy—again, it seems so reasonable—is an insult to the God who made even our enemies as worthy of love as our friends.

Through and through, Jesus rejects the idea that we please God by conforming to someone's expectations, because *that's too easy*. To follow Christ is to seek reconciliation with all people as much as we seek peace with God, even if it means “leaving our gift at the altar”, walking out of church to find that person from whom we are estranged, and sort things out first. The bar of discipleship, people, is higher than any law on the books.

So Jesus does not call us to a list of rules. Instead, He calls us to a *covenant*. About 4,000 years ago, God invited Abraham to leave a comfortable life and follow where God was going to lead him, and the entire world would be blessed. His descendants would outnumber the stars. Scripture says that he had his moments of doubt and failure, but Abraham followed. He and God entered an open-ended Covenant relationship, marked by love and trust, come what may.

That's the soul of a covenant: a *relationship*, freely chosen, not forced. It's a lot like marriage: we promise ourselves to someone out of love and joy, and as it grows we do things not because some law requires it, but because we choose to: what we do outwardly is born within; we have coffee every Saturday morning together, we dance to a certain song, we make each other their favorite dinner, we make love (yeah, I said that in church!); we have special nicknames,

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special traditions (you did remember Valentine's Day, do you not?)... because we're living out a covenant that we treasure: I am yours, come what may. And we have tremendous freedom to shape that relationship in our own distinctive, joy-filled ways.

That's what Israel had lost—freedom was replaced by rules imposed by someone else...and the joy of Psalm 119, today's other reading, was gone. Over the centuries, the clergy of the day tried to explain how to “walk with God”, and that relationship morphed into list after list of detailed rules. They meant well, but they turned the Covenant into a contract: If you do this, then God will do that. But only if you follow the rules.

I understand. I think we actually prefer rules. There's a perverse freedom in rules—we can obey them on the outside, and hide our pet resentments and desires and hatred... Jesus reminds Israel (and us) that we're called, not to be robots following rules, but to be God's companions, who actually delight in one another. And that won't happen if we hide behind the fig leaf of merely following the law. Our Lord pleads with us not to abandon the Covenant God offers. He calls us back to it and calls us to let *nothing* get in the way of its freedom and joy.

That's my takeaway: Let *nothing* stand between you and God. If our rules keep us from Kingdom life, throw them over the side...if your possessions are more important to you than your relationship with God, give them all away. Instead: embrace the gift of God's promise, hand-delivered in Jesus, who calls us to follow Him. Accept His invitation to walk in trust, transparency and love with God and each other. Because nothing is worth preventing you from the life God longs to give you. It's like being born again.

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