

The Tough Ethics of Love

Matthew 5:21-48
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I know what you're thinking after hearing today's long Gospel reading from Matthew 5. "I wish *this* had been the Sunday service that was canceled due to snow!" I was thinking that myself. This passage is indeed very challenging, and no one sermon will do it justice. In fact, while I was hoping to even briefly comment on all six issues that Jesus addresses – **anger, adultery, divorce, taking oaths, retaliation, and love for enemies** – I realize that I can only get through three before running out of time.

So one of my primary goals is to provide a broader understanding of the purpose of these examples that call us, as followers of Jesus, to a higher righteousness. You might say that this is where the rubber hits the road, revealing how to put the love that Jesus demands of us to into action. In other words: it reflects the tough ethics of love.

These verses function to show us the interplay between Jesus' vision of the kingdom of heaven – the idealized realm of God, initiated by Jesus in the here and now – and the practical ways that this vision is to be lived out in Christian community.

I have read many, 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 reflecting my current best understanding is Thomas G. Long's *Matthew*, from Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. Much of this sermon reflects his work.

We first need to remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel to a community of Jewish Christians, people who had been raised on the law of Moses as the embodiment of the will of God for human life. The early church hotly debated what was the force of these ancient commandments now that the new event of Jesus Christ has occurred. They asked: Does Jesus leave the law intact, or does he completely replace the law with something new. As it turns out, Jesus, as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount, offers instead a third alternative.

The law neither remains as it is nor is it done away with; rather, it is fulfilled and transformed by Jesus. The result is that the Christian community can discern in the commandments their true intent. **Jesus enables us to pass through the literal requirements of the law into the heart of the law.** Following Jesus' example, the church is called to ask of every piece of the law, "What is the will of God that stands behind this commandment, and how may we be obedient to that will?"

What Jesus reveals is that we are called to a different kind of righteousness, a righteousness that seeks to be ever expressive of the merciful, forgiving, reconciling will of God that lies at the center of the law. The deep 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.

Each example is introduced by the formula "it was said...but I say to you." This carried the practical effect of saying, "Here is what the law says, and I am going to the heart of that law to show how children of the kingdom of heaven live out its deepest

meaning." The gospel writer Matthew intends to present Jesus' interpretation of God's will in a way that contrasts it with previous understandings and interpretations. Therefore, **what is presented is not a new law but a call to a new way of life**. Each of these six examples was undoubtedly a matter of concern and debate in Matthew's church.

The first example of how to live into the ideal vision of the realm of God addresses the matter of angry words and broken relationships. The Old Testament law condemned murder (Exod. 20:13; Deut. 5:18), but at the heart of this law lies a respect for the life of another, regard for the right of another to be, and reverence for another as the creation of God. Jesus warns us that while there is no room, of course, for murder, **there is also no room for the kind and level of anger that leads to murderous words or vicious deeds**. That's why this passage from Matthew goes on to say that we must do what 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. Marriage, in the Christian community, is meant to be an expression of the faithfulness God demonstrates toward the world.

Adultery, obviously, breaks the bond of faithfulness. Lust, meaning a covetous desire for a person other than one's spouse or partner, contemplates such a break, and, thus, is the first step in that direction.

The law of Moses forbids adultery (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), not primarily because it involves sexual intercourse but because it invades and destroys the marriage covenant, which forms the context for trusting and joyful sexuality. Jesus, therefore, again goes to the heart of the law by his word against lust. While recognizing that sexual urges are powerful, creative, and energizing; they can also divide, disrupt, and destroy.

We need to be very careful here, however. 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, 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. In this case, the kingdom of heaven is so precious, so much of a treasure, that absolutely nothing should be allowed to interfere with our participation in it.

Tom Long adds 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, to some degree or another, is always at work. If that is the lust that Jesus opposes, then we would have to remove not only our eyes and our hands, but our brains as well. Jesus speaks, however, not of psychological introspection, but of people's 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.

For Jesus, lust is a covetousness at the heart of a person, a distortion of the human will. In other words, an intention to break sacred covenant poised just this side of action. 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.

Amy-Jill Levine, writing in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, summarizes it this way, "By collapsing the distinction between thought and action, this extension of the law

against adultery to include lust suggests that **no one should be regarded as a sex object.**" Enough said.

That leads us to Jesus' third example that deals with divorce. (When was the last time you heard that topic addressed from a Presbyterian pulpit?) In this case, in particular, we must know what divorce meant in ancient times. Basically, it was a male-dominated world where men were in charge and could make the decision about whether or not their wives were welcome in the home. **A wife, you see, was seen as little more than the legal property of the husbands.**

The law 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. Makes you wonder how many men would have been thrown out of the house if the tables were turned, and women had the right to do so if they found anything objectionable about their husbands. Probably close to 100%.

Jesus, however, claims that there is no divorce procedure a man can follow that will leave him with clean hands. To abandon a wife, with or without a divorce certificate, is, in essence, to treat her as worthless (that is the effect of the phrase "causes her to commit adultery," Matt. 5:32) and to be guilty of destroying her as a person. Even to participate in a secondary way in such a custom ("whoever marries a divorced woman," Matt. 5:32) is to support its destructive effects. Notice that Jesus' statement in the Sermon on the Mount about divorce still assumes that divorce is always initiated by men.

Yes it is true, 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, however, is that Jesus allows no room for the practice of divorce in a culture where divorce is an assault on the value of persons, an abuse of power, and a trivializing of faithful commitments.**

The question for us is how to receive Jesus' words today. Divorce is common in our society, with approximately half of all marriages ending in divorce. Hardly any family is untouched by it.

Is divorce outside the bounds of the Christian faith? Is remarriage forbidden by the Sermon on the Mount?

True, in our day and age some people still casually leave their marriages. Most divorced people, however, have left their marriages because, to the best of their ability to see, they had to. What do the words of Jesus mean for these people? We need, first, to acknowledge that the word "divorce" in the Sermon on the Mount does not mean exactly what the word "divorce" means today.

In the first-century world, divorce was similar to what we would call "abandonment" – someone simply walked out (or, more likely, threw the woman out) with little ceremony. In societies where the church has been a major factor, divorce laws have been changed to make abandonment illegal. In other words, most contemporary divorce laws have been affected, to some degree, by the Sermon on the Mount.

Again, the most important need, though, is to discern what lies at the heart of Jesus' words, just as Jesus discerned what lay at the heart of the law of Moses.

Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity, the faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for persons. **In Jesus' day, the customs and practices of divorce**

were a direct assault on those values. Today, ironically, a hopelessly broken marriage can itself sometimes be such an assault.

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, where they are tragically dishonest and mutually destructive.

Jesus' word about divorce was spoken to preserve the value of the people involved in marriages. When a marriage becomes the very arena where people are destroying each other, we should ask how can the safety, nurture, and honor of the marriage partners best be preserved? This will mean viewing with compassion the people involved and their relationship, not merely defending the institution of marriage as such.

Much like we will hear Jesus say later in Matthew concerning the Sabbath, "Marriage was made for humanity, not humanity for marriage."

Since this is already a longer than usual sermon for me (and somewhat uncomfortable) I will have to wait for another occasion to address the remaining three examples of Jesus' call to a higher righteousness, with their imperatives: to be truthful in all our speech, thus negating the need to take oaths; to renounce our right to retaliate and seek revenge against those who have hurt us, choosing instead the path of non-violence; and to love not only God, our neighbor, and ourselves, but even our enemies. Why? Because God does not hate the enemy.

I'll close with a comment on Jesus' final command in this section to **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"** (Matt. 5:48). "Perfection" here is not making an A+ on every test in life, or to live entirely without fault or defect; perfection is wholeness, consumed by love. **To be "perfect" is to respond to other people – even our enemies – with the kind of compassion and desire for good that expresses the way God responds to the world. It means that since we are made in the divine image we are to strive to imitate the ways of God – God's all-inclusive love – in our everyday lives, and in our church life.**

May God, through the indwelling of God's spirit within us, lead and empower us to this level wholeness as we seek to live out the admittedly tough ethics of love.

Amen.

Resource:

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