

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

To follow up on last week's lesson in which Jesus taught about the need to surpass the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, here he provides specific examples of how we are called to do that. There are strong contrasts depicted here, and the criticism of Jesus seems to be directed at community leaders who pose as moral beacons when their own conduct is shameful. For example, religious leaders absorbed in self-satisfaction rather than true adherence to a higher morality. In any event, what we have here is Jesus telling us what God's kingdom looks like by sharp contrast with what prevails on earth.

The commentary Jesus offers here about anger leading to murder, about reconciliation as a way to shortcut the path to violence, and how we are to regard adultery, divorce and oaths – all of it can appear very unrealistic and impossible to achieve.

But let's remember what Jesus is doing here. He is showing his followers the true purpose of the Law by pointing out how failure to follow it can have disastrous consequences. And to make the point, he engages here in a good deal of exaggeration, but exaggeration was a critical part of Aramaic speech and writing patterns at the time. His audience would have seen it for what it was --- a teaching technique. Thus, we can not take seriously or literally any statement such as "if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away." But such language makes the point so much better than a mere admonition about altering our behavior.

On the topic of anger, the real question Jesus is raising is this: how can we defuse anger and prevent it from spilling over into violence? The point of the commandment against murder is not just to *stop short of actually killing someone*, but not to even let matters get that far out of hand, not to allow anger to devolve into violence. Obviously, what is called for is reconciliation, but that is a very difficult thing to accomplish. The key to being able to reconcile, however, is the ability to abandon our feelings of superiority to others and to actively promote humility. Thus, if the wording of the commandment is "thou shalt not kill," the real lesson is "don't let things deteriorate too far before you defuse it with an act of humility," and I think we all understand exactly what this means. It means abandoning our concentration on *our* needs at the expense of others, because that way lies failure and resentment and even the possibility of murder itself. But it can all be stopped before it ever gets started.

Strictly speaking we are not absolutely forbidden to feel anger. Rather, we are advised about how to try to control it when it arises. Or perhaps it would be better to say that what Jesus offers us is a vision of *his own* character which is "gentle and humble in heart." What is prohibited is the holding on to anger and the expression of anger in acts of insult."

In the same way, Jesus tells us he does not come to abandon or repudiate the law, but rather to fulfill it. Thus, “he uses traditional teachings on murder, adultery and prayer as essential grounds for building *his own case* for righteousness.” In this way he intensifies and radicalizes the original teachings of the Law. No longer do the teachings on adultery and murder apply strictly to acts of murder and adultery. Instead, “they become *doorways* into the examination of the internal dynamics behind anger, derision, slander, false generosity, litigiousness, arrogance, lust, temptation, alienation, and divorce.”

He *internalizes* the law. It is no longer simply actions and behaviors that matter but attitudes and emotions. Yet the heart of the Law remains “whole-hearted love of God and neighbor.”

He connects the dots from “outward acts to internal orientation.” When we are motivated internally by love, many of these behaviors are no longer operative. It is “easier to make a sacrifice at the temple than to do justice, and it is easier to keep the commandment against murder than it is to avoid anger in one’s heart.” Thus, what Jesus is doing here is making the Law *more difficult* to follow, not less so. This is because the intent of the Law is to make possible a life free of resentments, stress, conflict, and violence. God’s purpose in establishing the Law is to provide for a fuller life, a life free of attitudes and behaviors which impede our ability to get along with one another in community. God’s law is about “human flourishing at every level.”

Jesus is offering a more radical ethic, one that speaks to God’s expectations of us. A radicalized law is one which focuses attention on God’s original intent in providing it to his people. When Jesus says that the poor in spirit, those who mourn and those who are pure in heart are blessed, it is not because they are exemplars of the law but because their hearts are properly oriented to make possible that fuller life God intends for his creation. That primary intent is what Jesus is talking about. It isn’t enough to just barely comply with the minimal requirements of the law. We are called to seek its true meaning.

But Jesus is here is not limiting his commentary to anger between individuals and violence between aggrieved parties in a dispute. He’s also speaking about Israel and the kind of *collective activity* which can lead to even more dire consequences. That kind of anger and resentment is at the center of most human conflicts.

He is warning Israel to abandon her whole manner of relating to the hated occupying power. What they’re doing isn’t working. It’s counter-productive. Allow matters to go that far downhill and you are surely courting disaster, the kind of disaster that has huge consequences because it extends beyond individuals to involve whole peoples. In other words, war rather than simply *individual murders*. In a sense he is saying that their current attitudes and behaviors are going to lead inevitably to a huge disaster --- something like what happened in 70 C.E./A.D. with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Jewish people into every corner of the Mediterranean world.

The commentary on divorce can be unsettling for us in our relatively enlightened age. Jesus is, of course, completely opposed to divorce except in cases of adultery, and this makes us uncomfortable because in our time, divorce can occur simply because people have grown apart.

But the point he is making here is that what begins relatively innocently in a passing thought can develop into an active form of lust, and then we are not very able to control ourselves when such primordial feelings surging up in us. What looked fairly simple can easily become something tragic. He is commanding us to “avoid the gaze and the lustful imagination” that follow an initial sexual impulse, because this is so frequently the cause of divorce. And adultery, of course, is prohibited in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

The law of Moses specified a divorce process, but in reality that process privileged men at the expense of women. Jesus didn't like that. He wanted to forbid divorce except in cases of unchastity, because in his view, there can be “no room for divorce which represents an assault on the value of persons (usually the wife), an abuse of power, or a trivializing of faithful commitments.”

His teaching on adultery and divorce reinforces the dignity of women and warns against a culture of male privilege. So, there are elements of modernity here, but it is also a rather traditional view of marriage and divorce. For example, Jesus advocates for disciples with integrity, the kind of “people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear that they are telling the truth because they are truth-tellers.” Thus, it's pretty clear that he would not have looked favorably on divorces resulting from one party growing tired of the other or both admitting that they have simply grown apart. Nor does he appear to allow for divorce resulting from abuse.

If we can envision the teaching of Jesus here as being directed primarily at his disciples, we can begin to grasp his larger purpose. Jesus knows that “to be part of a community means you are not alone.”

This is something the disciples needed to hear. How they would work out what it means to be disciples of Jesus is not something that could be accomplished by solitary means. It “could and should happen within a community of the faithful.” Only in community could they achieve what their Lord was asking of them. Our God is a god of community. The law is written for people living in community. Without guidelines for behavior, the community comes undone. The law is meant to promote life together in healthy relationship.

Moses said, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess...Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so

that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Amen.

Sources

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