

SCRIPTURE

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 judgement."

²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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.

²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Come 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. ²⁶ Truly 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."

²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If 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.

³⁰ And 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."

³² But 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."

³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

³⁷ Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

MESSAGE – LAW OR LOVE?

I have a confession to make. I often live my life incognito. As I go through the day to day details of life – buying groceries, swimming at the pool, talking with neighbours – all those little interactions that we have all the time with other people – I usually keep my mouth closed about my profession. I'm very slow to tell people that I'm a minister.

It's not that I'm ashamed or embarrassed at all about what I believe and what I do – and a good thing that is because Jesus outright said that those who are ashamed to admit their allegiance to him he will also be ashamed to introduce to his father. I'm not shy about who and what I represent, but I usually make a point of not mentioning that I am a pastor when I first meet people because it changes the way they act. They tend to be less natural around me – suddenly they're trying to behave in a way that they think meets my expectation.

I think cops get this reaction a lot as well. Once we see the uniform or the lights on the car we tend to stand a little straighter, speak a little softer, or drive a little slower. Cops get a bit of a distorted view of human behaviour because many folks get self conscious when they see the uniform and change what they're doing.

Same for ministers. Once folks find out who I am suddenly they're apologizing for inconsequential things – the off-colour joke they just told, or the rough language they were using. Last summer during one of our bbq's I had to run over to the variety store for some more ice. It was a hot day – I was wearing a kilt at the time, and the woman working started making some rather predictable comments – I wonder what is under that kilt? I wish a breeze would come along so I could see – the kind of comments that women likely hear all too often. Anyway, I really didn't pay much attention, but then the owner of the store said 'Hey, you know that's the minister across the road right?' It's funny how much and how quickly people change when they hear that fact.

Anyway, where I'm going with this is that after people find out I'm a minister and get over the initial apologizing for their language as though I'm some sort of delicate flower who has never heard vulgarity before, there are a few standard questions or comments that follow. There's the inevitable 'I'm spiritual but not religious' statement, or 'my grandmother was a Presbyterian in Flin Flon – do you know her?'

And this is the one that almost always arises. 'I don't like the Old Testament God – always smiting and demanding – too harsh. The New Testament God is so much kinder and more loving. That's the one I like.' I hear this often, both in the church and out. I suspect that it's one of those tropes that get repeated often enough that people start to take it as a given truth, but without having to think too deeply on it.

I would suggest that this morning's gospel reading challenges this assumption. As Jesus rattles through a series of 'You have heard it said....but I say' statements we discover that Jesus calls us to a much higher standard than the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament. Jesus is a far more demanding taskmaster than his Father.

Let's start with his first reinterpretation of God's law.

'You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement."

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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.

Now, does that fill you with fear? It should. God said we shouldn't murder – and almost every one of us make it from birth to death without murdering anyone. It's not even really that hard – in fact it's probably harder to break that law than it is to follow it.

It's hard to kill. There have been a few creatures that I've had to kill – mice caught in sticky traps, lobsters when I worked at the Keg. For most of us killing is not easy, taking life is no small matter. Murdering another human being – I suspect that few among us would actually be able to go through with it. Following God's law isn't so hard at all.

But Jesus said 'If you are angry, you are subject to judgment.' That's a whole different ball game. Who among us hasn't been angry? Who has been angry already this morning?

Jesus goes on to say that those who give voice to their anger by calling someone names are liable to the very fires of hell. This is a very big deal; Jesus is taking this very, very seriously. According to Jesus, taking down someone publicly is no small thing at all, and this is a lesson that is particularly applicable to today's culture.

We live in a society in which public shaming has become the norm; this is very prevalent on social media. While the technology that enables our electronic communication has some real benefits in bringing people together, the fatal flaw in Facebook, What's App, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram – all those ways of connecting, is the lack of personal contact. What I mean is that we are able to post things about people that we would never say to their faces. This has led to an online culture in which accusations and innuendo carry more weight than actual conversation.

Something pops up in our feed – a picture of someone with a caption that says 'this creep kicked a puppy – share his face everywhere.' And people do. Nobody knows who he is, or what the real story might be, but our righteous indignation flares up – we get angry – we click share and contribute to the online death of someone that we don't even know. These actions have real world results.

People lose jobs and families because of online accusations. People's characters are crushed, even to the point of suicide. We see this call out culture all the time – CEO's, actors, singers – any public figure who says or does anything that the mob doesn't approve of are virtually

flogged, almost always on the basis of hearsay. They are judged by the court of public opinion without reference to fact or circumstance.

When Jesus said that when we start calling names we unleash hellfire, it appears that he is speaking directly to us. He's nailed our present culture, even from two thousand years in the past. But we're not unique – this behaviour has been around since the start, it's just that technology has accelerated and amplified the effects of our murmuring and whispering. Our rumours spread around the world and destroy lives in the space of a few hours.

Whereas the Old Testament God told us not to murder bodies, Jesus has upped the ante by saying that we cannot murder reputations, character, or spirits either.

What's more, he identifies where this all starts. Anger. Murder is the result of anger. Sometimes murder is the result of greed, but most murders are crimes of passion. Anger is the root.

Character assassination is also the result of anger. Name calling and accusation arise from feelings arising from resentment, bitterness, and indignation.

Even if our anger isn't expressed in insinuation and imputation, or outright killing, when we bottle all that up inside we end up doing violence to ourselves. Violence of some description is the inevitable result of anger. So Jesus goes right to the root and names anger as a sin that we are accountable for.

It's so bad, he says, that we dare not approach God while we harbour anger in our hearts toward someone else. Resolving that anger is even more important than coming to church, he said. Turn around and heal those relationships before you come to the temple.

Never mind our heavenly father, Jesus said we can't even go before a human judge carrying those feelings. It brings to mind images from Judge Judy or Jerry Springer – the amusement factor is based on folks being angry and irrational in public.

But can we be responsible for our feelings? Can we simply choose to not be angry? Why would Jesus ask such a thing of us?

He doesn't limit it to anger either. He speaks of adultery. Like murder, adultery is something that most people have thought about, but few are bold enough to actually do such a thing. As such, we comfort ourselves with the thought that since we controlled our bodies we are therefore justified. Not so, Jesus said. If you're thinking about it, you're guilty.

Like with the anger, this is a demand I find difficult. I can keep my hands to myself, but how can I not notice a shapely form? Can I tell desire not to arise?

When Jesus takes the emphasis off of our behaviour of murder or adultery, and places it on our thoughts of anger or lust, what he is saying is that it is not as important what we do as it is who we are. Jesus seeks transformation.

It's not that God does not also want us to transform, but with Jesus there is a shift in focus. In some ways this change reflects our maturity as a race. Think of us as a child.

When our children are young we focus our disciplining on behaviour. Don't smack your brother, don't draw on the wall, don't throw your food, don't have a meltdown in the middle of the grocery store. The hope is that our kids will learn something from following these rules; they will learn to respect other people, other things, and themselves. They will take what is happening on the outside and internalize it – these rules model and normalize certain behaviours that become formative to the child. The intent is that the child will grow into the environment that we provide – will take the shape of mold that we raise her in.

We focus on external behaviour when the child is young because as yet there is not a whole lot inside – just chaos and cornflakes. They are a conflux of impulses and desires which are not yet tempered by understanding or wisdom, so we control the exterior in hopes that the interior will follow that form. With young children we work from the assumption that environment shapes character.

But as we grow and our mastery over our surroundings increases we realize that there is a stronger force at play. For young kids, environment may shape character, but as adults we find that our character shapes our environment. How we think and what we do changes our very reality. The movement has gone from outside in, to the inside out.

And so we might consider that when our race was young, God taught and molded us through rules – through external means. But when Jesus came along and started treating us not as servants but as friends, not as infants but as adults, he started saying things like 'you were taught not to kill. But now I'm going to teach you what leads to killing and we're going to work on that.'

When we're young our outer form reflects our environment – as we mature and develop our outer form reflects what is going on inside. So as we grow our focus should shift from our outer behaviour to our inner motivations, and this is exactly what Jesus is pointing out.

This is the move from law to love that most people see as the progression from the Old Testament to the New. Only it's not a move from legislation to licence as many portray it. Jesus is not saying that we can ignore the law as long as we cover everything with some hazy idea of love. 'Not one dot or letter of the law changes' he said. There is still full accountability. But our motivation changes.

We are no longer to merely act holy. We are to be holy. This is a much higher calling. And much more difficult. This means that merely doing the right thing is not enough. If we do the

right thing grudgingly, with resentment in our hearts – we may as well not do it at all. It has no value – it's washing the outside of the cup, putting lipstick on a pig.

It's no longer enough to not kill, or not step out on our spouses. It's not enough to follow the letter of the law, because Jesus wants us to be filled with the spirit of the law. Because we can follow the law and still be cruel and oppressive to those around us. It was true in Jesus' day, and it's certainly still true today.

Which is why Jesus is seeking not to form us but to transform us. Not just shaping the outside, but shaping our inside. That's why he talks of love. Love is not a replacement for the law, it is in addition to the law, and indeed is the only way that we can fulfill the law.

I'm reminded of something that CS Lewis wrote. He said that our outward actions don't so much serve to sentence us to heaven or hell, as they serve to make us into either more heavenly or more hellish beings. He recognized that God's goal is not to make us conform to certain rules, but to form us into certain kinds of beings. He doesn't want us to toe the line, he wants us to transform.

God is less concerned about what you do as he is about who you are. The outside only matters in as much as it is an expression of what is on the inside. You were made in the image of God. That is what is on the inside. Let it shine.

In St. Paul's wise words 'Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.'

And then you will be ready to be witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Christ Jesus.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.