

Scriptures

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

² Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰ You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹² And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴ You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Psalm 119:33-40

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.

**Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.**

Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

**Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.**

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

**Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.**

Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.

**See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.**

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon: You Have Heard It Said - Part II

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This week is the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew’s gospel. This is tough stuff, it hasn’t been an easy couple of weeks – not by any means. Two weeks ago the theme was anger. The anger and the hate that we store up and direct towards people who are different from us - foreigners and immigrants, right wing ideologues, left wing radicals, the marginalized and voiceless, and the powerful and privileged – all anger and hate is the same as murder according to Jesus. I’m guessing that makes every one of us murderers.

Last week we moved from our relationships with outsiders to that most cherished relationship – marriage. Jesus warned us that breaking that covenantal relationship has dire consequences for ourselves, our spouses, our children, and indeed society at large.

As we continue to read Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount it doesn’t seem as though Jesus is slowing his pace at all, in fact, just the opposite. We are told to turn the other cheek, to forgo revenge, give more than required when we are sued, go the extra mile, give to all who beg, lend without limits, love our enemy, pray for our persecutors and greet the stranger. We’re asked to do the opposite of what seems normal or reasonable.

And to top it all off, as if the preceding list was not already enough to make us feel crushed under a burden of unrealizable behaviours, Jesus casually adds ‘in fact, why don’t you just be perfect, just like your father in heaven is perfect.’

How can this be? I can’t be perfect. I can’t even fulfill the first part of the instruction about anger. I’m already lost and without hope. And it’s no go to try to tell myself that Jesus didn’t mean what he said, that it was all idealistic hyperbole. Jesus opened this particular speech by saying that in no way was he intending to abolish the law; that not one letter or stroke of a letter would be dropped from the law. Jesus isn’t kidding around, he means what he says.

Not only does he tell us this in words – his actions demonstrate his commitment. Jesus really did turn the other cheek, offer his back to be scourged, and love his enemies – ‘forgive them father, for they do not know what it is they do.’

Often as Christians we divide the word of God in two; we separate the Old and New Testaments, and we privilege one over the other; the new supersedes the old. We don’t always do this consciously, but there is the feeling out there that the Old Testament God is the ‘judgy’ God of fire and brimstone, and the New Testament God is one of love and forgiveness. The Old Testament God had lots of rules and demands; the New Testament God just wants to be our friend.

However – there is only one God. God didn’t change his character between writers the way a soap opera changes actors. The God of Law is the same as the God of Grace.

‘But what of the Jerusalem council?’ you may ask. ‘Didn’t they decide that Gentiles didn’t have to follow the purity laws of circumcision, haircuts and the dietary laws?’ The short answer is – yes, that is true. As non-Jewish followers of Christ we are allowed to enjoy a bacon cheeseburger.

But look at how the laws of the Hebrew testament shape Jesus’ teachings. Verse 17 of Leviticus 19 which we read this morning says ‘You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin.’ In the sermon on the mount Jesus says ‘if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.’

Leviticus: ‘you shall not lie to one another, and you shall not swear falsely by my name.’ Jesus: ‘Do not swear by heaven, God or your own life. Simply let your yes be yes, and your no be no.’

Leviticus: ‘: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’ Jesus: ‘Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect.’

I don’t know about you, but I’m seeing some pretty distinct continuity here. I don’t see any way of rationalizing the claim that the New Testament supersedes the Old and that the law no longer applies. The law is still in force, and truth be told, I stand before you this morning guilty under the law. Sort of.

What is the purpose of the law? Clearly we are all under guilt according to the law – there isn’t one of us who is not. If there are any among us who claim to never have coveted something that didn’t belong to them, looked at another with lust, or been angry with or hated someone, then clearly that person is guilty of being a liar. We’ve all broken the law, many of us have done so even this morning.

There are two normal reactions to this. The first is to shrug off our transgressions and just say ‘hey, nobody is perfect and we all make mistakes.’ The problem with this is that both the Old and New Testaments tell us to be holy and perfect. Nowhere in the bible does it say that we should just try our best and be happy with that. There are no participation ribbons. Shrugging off sin reveals that since we don’t take our sin seriously, neither do we take God seriously.

A theology that does not take sin seriously is based on fantasy. Rather than seeing God as God has revealed himself through scripture, we picture God as we’d like to see him – our buddy, our pal who will overlook our little foibles. But that denies the facts that God has told us that sin leads to death; sin cuts us off from the life-giving God because sin is so detestable that God cannot allow sin to exist in his presence. Sin is serious business.

This leads us to the opposite reaction to our own guilt, which is despair. If we realize the gravity of our situation and understand the effects of sin, then we realize that we are in an impossible situation. We have hated, we have lied, we have broken covenants with God and with each other – and none of that can be undone. We cannot erase the past; we can apologize, but we can never undo the damage that we have caused. We can't wipe away the stain. Ever.

This leads to despair; a hopeless paralysis. In our human reactions to sin either sin doesn't really count and God will give us a pass – which really means that God doesn't care - or sin does count and since we've already sinned, then we're finished – which also means that God doesn't care.

But God does care, and this is where we see how the law works. We are guilty – all of us. But God does not intend for us to live a half-life of despair under the burden of guilt. God doesn't lead us to guilt only to leave us there. Guilt and conviction have a purpose – to lead us back to God.

Much of the world lives apart from God. Perhaps apart from God is not the right phrase, but unaware of God, or uncaring of God. In many ways they consider themselves free of the shackles of religion; they are able to make up their own rules about what is good and bad - if there are such things – and they get to sleep in on Sundays. However, they are unwitting slaves to sin.

To a large extent their desires and preconceptions control them – we all have masters, though many people are not aware of their masters because they never consciously chose them, they just fell under their power. My brother and I recently had a conversation about ignorance, and the problem with ignorance is that the ignorant are never aware that they are ignorant. They don't know what they don't know.

These people live under the oppression of their sin and their own demons, whether they are aware of it or not. But, this is not the way they were created to live. We were made in the image of God, with all the freedom and power that that implies. God did not create slaves – if that was what he had in mind we would not have been given free will. God created agents of power, not robots.

Sin has turned us into slaves, and God wants us to be free. But to become free we need to become aware of our sin. We need to turn and see our masters, the ones who control us, before we can be free. And so God has given us the law.

When we look at ourselves using the law as a guide we become aware of the sins that control us. Painfully aware. We are convicted. And naturally when we see the extent of the sin in our lives we feel powerless to change it – and indeed we are powerless since we are slaves to that sin. That's the very thing that makes it sin – the power it has over us to dim the image of God in us.

So the law is revelatory. It reveals to us our sin, and our inability to do much of anything about that sin. This is where God steps in. We can't do anything about sin, but God can. Jesus cleanses us from our sin, gives us new life in him, and invites us to return to the abundant life that God created us to live. We were never intended to live in guilt or wallow in guilt – it is a wake up call, a tool that God uses to shake us out of our ignorance and cause us to lift our eyes from our own ways to finally see him.

This is how I can say that I am guilty under the law – sort of. I am guilty – of that there is no doubt – but I have been set free of the bondage of that guilt and the sin that produced it. I am both under the law and free of the law.

This fundamentally changes the way that we view the law. The law is not a set of rules that we keep in order to find salvation – if that is the case then we truly have no hope. Instead, the law serves two purposes. First, the law wakes us up to the reality of ourselves, and our need for salvation. This is the Old Testament understanding of law.

Then Jesus adds a new dimension to it. Remember, he didn't abolish the law, the law still exists to reveal our sin to us and lead us to God, but now Jesus uses the law to set forth God's vision of the Kingdom. With the incarnation of Jesus, God's kingdom was announced and inaugurated; the Spirit of God was poured out over the earth and the people as the Old Testament predicted.

The law is not the gateway to salvation, but now becomes salvation's way of life; it is our blueprint for living, our roadmap. It is our special calling to embody this kingdom way of life against the ways of the world as a public witness to the beauty and blessing of life. This returns us to the words that Jesus used to open this teaching – that we are to be the salt and light of the earth. We are a beacon to the nations.

Now we are ready to grasp what it means to be holy, as God is holy, and perfect, just as our heavenly father is perfect. In Leviticus, where we are told to be holy, there are many rules and they are interspersed with the repeating refrain 'I am the Lord your God.' This is a clue. As we try to fulfill the law and live the future kingdom into the present, our focus should not be on the rules, necessarily, or on ourselves as we try to fulfill them, but on God.

As he gives the rules, God keeps calling the focus back to himself. Here's your commandment – now look at me. I want you to do these things – now look at me. If our focus is on ourselves, we will only be aware of our failure. If our focus is on God, we are aware of his greatness and power – a power that now resides in us after Jesus made our approach to God possible and poured out his spirit after his resurrection.

Filled with the Holy Spirit and with our focus fixed upon God, then truly we are filled with the holiness of God. In the presence of God we grow to become more like God. The word translated as perfect, that Jesus used is a derivative of *telos*, which means perfect, but also complete, mature, developed, or full grown. We are completed in Christ.

As maturing Christians we discover that we who know God's love are able to love our enemies. We who are forgiven by God are able to forgive others. We who receive abundant blessings from God are able to give freely and generously.

Just as God fills all things, yet is wholly other, so we as God's people are very much part of humanity, yet set apart. The law, especially as elaborated upon in the sermon from the mount, depicts a way of life that is markedly different from the ways of the world.

We are not the same as those out there. We are not meant to blindly follow the ways of the world, we are called to be light and salt, swimming against the tide of our culture. A dead fish will float downstream, but it takes a live fish to swim against the current.

Jesus promised to Peter that he would make him a fisher of men. God is looking for live fish; we who were previously dead in our sins have been given life as we have turned to Jesus as a result of our conviction under the law.

If this sermon on the mount series of sermons has been hard on you, if you are feeling the weight of conviction, then blessed are you among all men and women. Thank the Lord your God because what you are feeling is God calling you to life. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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