

Have You Heard?
Encounters with Jesus in Epiphany
Matthew 5:21-37
6th Sunday After the Epiphany
Pastor Dea Sharp, Pikes Peak UMC

Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

Concerning Anger

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.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[a] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult^[b] a brother or sister,^[c] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell^[d] of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister^[e] has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^[f] and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court^[g] 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.

Concerning Adultery

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.^[h] 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.^[i]

Concerning Divorce

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.

Concerning Oaths

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.^[j]

When I was little, I had bronchitis a lot.

How I got through elementary and junior high, I do not know.

My 7th grade science teacher used to complain, “I’ve got a coon dog at home that sounds like you.”

Wasn’t nice. But it was true. I barked like a dog.

I also had a great aunt, Mamie, who had “the cure.”

With the admonishment of “It’ll be good for you...” she’d boil water, add a dollop of Vick’s vapor rub, put a towel over my head and then my head over the pot to inhale the fumes.

Darn it if Aunt Mamie wasn't right. But, thinking back, I DIDN'T LIKE IT but, it *was good for me.*"

What's good for us?

Today's OT reading is from Deuteronomy. (30:15-20)

I want to read just a couple of verses for you.

"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 [God's] ways, and observing [God's] commandments, decrees, and ordinances, THEN you shall live...and the Lord your God will bless you...."

Moses is laying the laws of GOD before the Israelites...the "it's GOOD FOR YOU" laws.

And Moses is giving them the ol' "IF-THEN" formula for their conduct.

It's like he's saying, "So here's your chance. You can choose the way of life that is going to make our society, the world, God's Creation a better place."

Boy howdy, don't we hear those kinds of (I'll be nice) "*suggestions*" coming from our legislators?

Yes, some laws would make things better: ban graffiti or how 'bout a law to just be nice.

I suppose that's okay...to make laws that make society a better place.

But not everyone agrees what a better place IS.

And how do we enforce the laws? Or what if the enforcement is worse than the problem?

We end up with more laws

And unsolved problems.

In our Gospel reading today JESUS is laying down the law.

The difference here is, that for Jesus, it's not wishful thinking.

Jesus has come from Heaven to earth.

And he's been telling people that with his coming, the kingdom of heaven is coming.

Jesus has the REAL "this is what's good for you!"

Jesus is the one who brings people to their Heavenly Father; he wants God to rule in their lives.

God has given the commandments.

It's what Moses was referring to.

Some people would argue (isn't it too bad there are so many of *them*?) that the commands are TOO difficult to follow.

God's intention, I believe, was that they are simple principles about what human life is; about God's will for life **with** God AND with each other.

When we funnel down OUR society's laws, they really DO go back to what God has said is right and wrong. And that's whether the law makers recognise the authority of God or not.

Then, our law systems (or even church governing bodies) make adaptations to "fit" what people think is reasonable or unreasonable (or enforceable.)

There's a lot of compromise and still no human system of law manages to create a society so that it is completely good.

HERE Jesus gives us his version of the law. What's GOOD for us.

"YOU have heard" – he starts, with the things that people have already been taught.

For the most part, they already accept "what they've heard" as right and wrong.

And there is heavenly authority in Jesus' version of the law!

"You have heard what was said to people long ago."

He's referencing Moses' words from Deuteronomy.

"That's the law (I'm paraphrasing) as it has been passed down through the centuries. *But now I say to you...* THIS is the law, from God, that goes to the real heart of living lives that truly reflect the will of God."

Dear Ones, our *human* laws can only control what people do.

If we're charged with a crime and go to trial, we can only be found guilty according to what we did or said, things that others witnessed. That's how the jury will try us.

But God's will goes much deeper.

God is concerned about who we are because that's what is reflected in our thoughts and feelings – the things that go on in our hearts and your minds.

No HUMAN jury can know *that* for sure BUT God knows US there. And God holds us accountable there, too.

Jesus lived among us. He knows about the laws of humans, that tell us what's right or wrong...and the consequences of breaking those laws. But Jesus wants us to "get" the law and will of God, where we're under the RIGHT jurisdiction that goes right to our very being.

Jesus spoke the about the laws that hold us accountable to God. Jesus spoke about facing the court he is pointing to - the court of God that already knows all the evidence. There are no loop holes in the court of God.

As I reread these verses, and you heard them again, Jesus is talking about laws that not only describe crimes against society, but sin against the will of God.

You shall not murder...

...not commit adultery...

...about divorce and swearing oaths.

These are tough verses – and I admit, I've avoided them for sermons over the years, 'cause they make us squirm.

Jesus isn't just talking about breaking God's laws and being judged.

When we're guilty of being out of the will of God, the *consequence* is of being cut from the kingdom of Heaven; of losing our place under the *proverbial towel over the vapor rub* (for our own good) of God's grace and goodness.

The crimes that Jesus repeats in today's Scripture passage – the ones that God's laws are to help us avoid, are bad.

But the underlying causes that bring about the misconduct are deeper than we acknowledge.

Murder, obviously, is one of the worst crimes.

No society can thrive if lives are destroyed. That's SO simple that we shouldn't have to write it down.

But God knew...that anger and hatred IS.

Clear back to the third chapter of the Bible when Cain murdered Abel.

THAT was never in the plan!

Hurting and belittling others – not in the plan!

So God gave us the laws – to hold us accountable AND with a clear penalty – that we'd be separated from God.

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Jesus also spoke about adultery – a difficult subject to make laws about, let alone enforce.

God designed marriage – and I will proclaim it to be between one man and one woman – to create children and families but also to provide love and companionship; not hurt.

So, Jesus gets to the “this is gonna be good for you” to proclaim that adultery begins a long time before someone DOES anything – EVEN if they DON'T DO THE THING!

The expression of desire....or JUST A LOOK, Jesus says, can lead to sinful and destructive conduct.

God's plan doesn't *include* “destructive and sinful!”

Then Jesus talked about, what we call, PERJURY – taking or making AND THEN breaking an oath. Lying.

Taking an oath is promising, to God, to tell the truth 'cause God can hold us accountable when we don't.

Sounds like that's a good thing!

In Jesus' day people made oaths to convince others that they were telling the truth.

But Jesus says (THESE ARE NOT SUGGESTIONS): You don't have to take an oath to tell the truth.

TRUTH should be so ingrained into our mind and conduct that we always tell the truth – with or without an oath!

As Jesus gives us his law, his account of the will of God, he demands obedience – a holy way of living - that goes all the way to our hearts.

He included relationships.

- Before WE'RE judged, make peace with someone you're NOT IN peace with.
- Before WE stand before the Throne of Heaven, stand up for the responsibilities of marriage partners and families.

These aren't "just" laws, but a way of life.

Jesus, in some "tough love" words is giving us THE way of life that fits THE life in the Heaven, even while we're still HERE on earth.

And, before we get too "*I'm good – I don't murder or lie*" Jesus reminded his audience – AND WE ARE THEM – that "just" living a good, law-abiding life does not make us righteous – at least not according to God's standards of righteousness.

God's demands go much deeper.

A few more verses further (we didn't read them today), Jesus sums up his requirements for the kingdom of heaven.

He said, "*Be perfect, ...as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives the perfect picture of the perfect life in the kingdom of Heaven. AND he confronts us with painful truths.

And we have to face them: I don't keep the laws.

Even if I try my very hardest I can't keep the laws.

I'm confident that I can discipline myself enough to make sure that I don't strike out and kill someone, even if they've made me very angry.

But I don't always have the self-control to stop myself from getting angry or saying terrible things about them - out loud, under my breath, or in my thoughts.

I can be very careful when I take an oath, but I don't always remain (doesn't this happen to all of us) truthful enough to always tell the truth if I think MY purposes aren't going to be served.

Jesus' laws show us that we are sinful.

He doesn't just remind us – he TELLS us - how terribly devastating sin is. Sin destroys me and you completely; right to the center of our hearts; our very being.

Jesus' perfect laws show us that we are perfect sinners – or maybe it's IMPERFECT sinners.

And, you know, laws never make people good.

Laws stop us from doing some bad things, but laws never make us good.

Jesus' laws demand perfection.

They address what is righteous, inside and out, but Jesus' laws do **not** make us perfect.

Jesus' laws confront us with our sin and our inability to obey God's perfect will.

I don't know about you, but this MESSAGE IS EXHAUSTING!

But praise God...and Lord have mercy...

GOD MADE THE ORIGINAL PLAN – and God knew that there would come a time when there would be a need for redemption and renewal in relationship WITH GOD...

So, we have a "BUT GOD" lifeline!

When we realize that we don't or can't obey in the way that God expects.

THAT'S when we're ready to come to Jesus:

Jesus please help me.

Forgive my sin and disobedience.

Free me from punishment.

Jesus demands perfect righteousness and we don't have it.
But Jesus does, and he gives it to us.
His death pronounced us not guilty.
We're covered –FROM HEAD TO TOE with his "what's good for you" grace.

Jesus was perfect and obedient...
...HE obeyed God's holy law for us,
...and HE freed us from God's just sentence with his own death.

We can't do it on our own.
We sin. We don't obey God's commands.
But Jesus brings the kingdom of heaven to us, through his life and death.
And through HIM, we are given grace and forgiveness to live with Him forever.

"Have you heard that it was said," Jesus asked.
Well, "I've got something that's REALLY good for you.

Amen!