

“Getting past bare minimum”

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37
(February 12, 2023)

I want to begin by saying, right up front, that today’s passage from the Sermon on the Mount is *not* an easy one. For example: the part that talks about plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand. Yikes! That does sound a bit extreme – doesn’t it?

This Sermon on the Mount is serious business. But I don’t want us to get stuck on a bit of first century Jewish hyperbole. Hyperbole is a rhetorical device used to make a point. It’s an intentional exaggeration that’s meant to be taken seriously, but not literally.

We do it too. We say ...
“I’m so hungry, I could eat a horse.
Or my feet are killing me.
Or that plane ride took forever.”

None of these things may literally be true. But we understand what the person is trying to communicate. So don’t get hung up on those two tricky verses about eyes and hands – and miss the point of Jesus’ teaching.

In this passage there is an invitation – a gracious, loving invitation – to move deeper in our relationship with God and others. This passage is all about *relationship*! And that’s what I want to talk about today.



Jesus begins with some antitheses: things set in contrast to each other. “You have heard it said ... But *I* say to you ...” This happens at least three times in the section we’re looking at today. And more, if we were to continue.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder.’” That’s a direct quote from one of the Ten Commandments. (Exodus 20:13) Jesus does not negate that commandment.

Sometimes I think we see the Old Testament and the New Testament as worlds apart. And when you first read this passage it may sound like that is what Jesus is saying too. But it’s not!

There were some in the early church who dismissed the Old Testament. They said the God revealed in the Hebrew scriptures was a vengeful God, not at all like the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Of course, there are some differences, but that is a grave mis-reading of scripture. And the church, collectively, said so.



In our passage, Jesus does not write off the Old Testament. Instead, he shows that his teaching is in continuity with what has gone before. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets,” he said. “I have come to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17-18)

Jesus said that anyone who teaches people to break the commandments will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. And further, unless your righteousness *exceeds* than the scribes and Pharisees – and remember, they were real sticklers about these sorts of things – you will never enter the kingdom! (Matthew 5:19-20) Does that sound like someone who dismissed commandments? No, not at all.

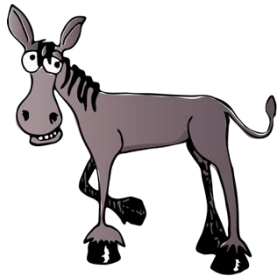
You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder. . . . But I say to you . . .” Now, get ready for this. He intensifies the old commandment, and goes deeper too. And he points to things that motivate us to murder. Things like anger and insults.

“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.” That’s not letting us off lightly!

Jesus knows the progression of thoughts and attitudes and actions that, if left unchecked, will lead to no good end. So he tells us to nip it in the bud. Don’t get anywhere near to murder. Guard your thoughts. Be careful how you think about your neighbour. Don’t nurse that grudge. Don’t think of that other person as some worthless fool. Learn to respect everyone you meet.



Now we better hit the pause button. Because, as you can see, Jesus’ words are getting kind of close to home. At least they are for me.



When I have a disagreement with someone, it’s so easy to dismiss them out of hand. I see someone going on about something and I think to myself, “What a jerk! That guy doesn’t know what he’s talking about!” And it’s true, he might not.

But those are not attractive thoughts and feelings – and, as your pastor, I’m embarrassed to say that I have them. They certainly won’t do anything to enhance my relationship with that other person. And it’s only a small way to go until those inner thoughts become some unpleasant action.

Probably *not* murder, thank goodness! But you know how things can get out of hand and go farther than we intend them to. It happens all the time: in our families, in our places of work, and in our churches. One little word sets off a whole string of actions, then re-actions. And it’s not easy to walk them back. “So don’t even go there,” says Jesus.



And it’s not just anger. It’s looking at people with any sort of unwholesome thoughts or attitude. As though they are not real people at all, but objects to be possessed.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” But I say to you, watch out for lust and unbridled fantasies that lead you down a road you don’t want to go. (Jesus also mentions divorce in this context – but I’m going to leave that one for another day.)

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely . . .’ But I say to you work at being honest. Every time, all the time. Plain and simple. And then you won’t have to swear an oath at all. Be people who live with integrity, in relationship with God and with others.

Did you hear that word relationship? There it is again! Don’t do things that *break* relationships, but rather things that *build* them. That’s what the biblical word “righteousness” is all about. To be righteous is to be in right-relationship, first of all with God, and then also with others. It’s to live in right-relationship with the whole creation.

And that righteousness is rooted in our inward being. It's who we are on the inside that affects who we become on the outside. Didn't Jesus say that? It's what goes on in our hearts that ultimately makes us clean or unclean. (Matthew 15:19)



We know it's true! There is a connection between our *inner* world – what's going on inside each one of us, and the *outer* world – the way we live with our neighbours in God's creation. In a couple of weeks we'll enter the season of Lent. And that's a time of year when people of faith think even more about these things, with a view to drawing closer to Christ, that his character may become embodied in our lives.

But please note: We don't change our inner lives on our own.

When Jesus says, "Don't be angry," who can possibly do that? And what kind of anger are we talking about anyway? Because he himself lost his temper when he saw injustice. This is complicated and difficult, and we need help!

And as for thinking lustful thoughts ... We can't just flip a switch and stop them from happening. Because we're human, and desire is part of who we are.

And telling the truth? Well, we do tell a certain version of the truth, though we're prone to manipulate it to make it serve our purpose. And aren't there occasions when it's best to hold things back?

We don't really know what Jesus means. And it's almost impossible to do it anyway.



But that's where *grace* comes in.

Which is to say this one thing ... and listen carefully: It's by grace that we change our inner lives. This is *God's* doing, not our own. It's the Spirit of the Lord that transforms us from the inside out, and makes us into the image of Jesus.

I said at the very beginning of this sermon that this is a gracious, loving invitation to move deeper in our relationship with God and others. If all you hear from Jesus is multiple commands and hard, demanding ways, then you're missing the point.

The commandments of God are meant to show us life. Real, authentic life. The kind of life that God intends for everyone. And longs to *give* us! Life that is kind and loving and caring. Life that is considerate and respectful of others. Life that is full of God's Holy Spirit.

LOVE

When asked which commandments are most important of all, Jesus said the whole law can be summed up this way: Love God and love your neighbour. (Matthew 22:36-40) Jesus lived this "kingdom" life. He embodied God's way in the world.

And this is what he offers to us when we *open* ourselves to the work of God, when we say "Yes Lord, I want to go *beyond* rigid obedience. I want your transforming Spirit to be within me."



The religious people of Jesus' time, the scribes and Pharisees in particular, paid close attention to the *letter* of the law. But Jesus invites them to go beyond that, allowing an inner transformation to take place.

There's nothing God wants more than to *transform* your life from the inside out. So that now your *whole* being can love and serve the Lord. It means getting past the bare minimum – where we do what the letter of the law requires, but never really allow the Spirit to change us.

We may not murder, or commit adultery, or break an oath. But do we *love*? Does our inner being lead us to a more authentic, holy, life-giving relationship with the world around us?



In closing, I want to share an example of what this might actually look like.

Not long ago my daughter and son-in-law in Ontario received a notice from their landlord. She needed them to vacate the premises, because circumstances in her life had changed, and now the landlord herself needed somewhere to live.



The rental market in that part of the country is really tight. Finding another place would not be easy. “Could you allow us some time?” my daughter asked. And the answer came back. “Yes, of course. I have a friend I can stay with for a while. I’m sure we can work this out.”

That response went *beyond* the letter of the law. The place was hers and she had every legal right to take it back. But can you see what motivated those actions? In her heart there was compassion and generosity and understanding. And all those things transformed that situation and made it full of grace.



“Sermon on the Mount” by Laura James, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=57891> [retrieved February 7, 2023]. Original source: Laura James, <https://www.laurajamesart.com/collections/religiou s/>.

And it was that same gracious spirit that motivated my daughter and son-in-law’s response: to find a place as quickly as they could, so as not to take advantage of their landlord’s generosity.

Out of the heart comes God’s goodness. And that good motivates our actions. And those actions can influence the lives of others. God’s love at work within us can ripple out to change the world – at least our little part of it.



Is God at work in your life today? Is love taking root in your heart and in your soul? Can you allow the Spirit of Jesus to become more and more a part of your *inner* being, so that your *outer* being can also be transformed?

There’s a gracious *invitation* in this passage: To go *beyond* the bare minimum. Beyond a rigid, external adherence to the law. And allow a truly life-changing *relationship* – a *right* relationship with God and others – to grow and flourish. May it be so!