

February 16, 2020
It's Always an Inside Job
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Matthew 5:21-37

"You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

23-24 "This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

25-26 "Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.

27-28 "You know the next commandment pretty well, too: 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.' But don't think you've preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

29-30 "Let's not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here's what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

31-32 "Remember the Scripture that says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are 'legal.' Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you're responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you're automatically an adulterer yourself. You can't use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

33-37 "And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious

lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

(The Message version)

“You have heard it said ‘do not commit murder’; but I say to you, if you have been angry with your brother, you’ve already committed murder in your heart.” Just when we were feeling all good about ourselves for not killing anybody this week!

One way to think about this text is as Jesus’ remake of Moses on the mountain, not taking the Law away or replacing it, but restating it for a modern age in which the people of God find themselves once more living under a kind of Pharaoh – an emperor who believed there was no limit to his power. An empire that could squish their people like a hill of ants, if it chose to – and did, in fact, not long before Matthew wrote his gospel. This Law, Jesus promised them in his remake called the Sermon on the Mount, will sustain your generation too, so long as you understand its purpose.

The world will not conform to your expectations just because you kept these rules perfectly. The Law is NOT a set of rules by which you shall win some game. The Law is a set of values by which you shape your life together in this kingdom I come to establish among you. A life in which each person is *in-cal-cue-laa-blee* precious to the God who created them. You are as precious as the next human being. The next human being is as precious as you yourself.

No set of values could be more opposite to the values of this world. Great is the temptation to tone down the original meaning of the Law, because difficult is this way of life. The four examples in our text today are proof positive of that temptation. The “antitheses” they’re called. Six times in chapter five, Jesus repeats, *“You have heard, blah, blah, blah, but I say to you, blah, blah, blah.”*

“You have heard it said, ‘do not commit murder,’ but I say to you, ‘if you have been angry with your brother you’ve already committed murder in your heart.’” Jesus isn’t letting us off the hook for a second. Turns out, NOT killing anyone is too low a bar for the people of God. Jesus expects us to get right with him and with each other from the inside out.

Why? Because, that’s the way it all works anyway. As Ann Lamott says, it’s always an inside job. What goes on in here (head) and in here (heart) – this is ground zero for everything that goes on out here between human beings. There are two dozen psycho-social explanations for why it works that way, most of which come down to whether we got to the age of three believing the world was a safe and trustworthy place or not. For our purposes here, and when Jesus delivers the Law that will govern life in the kingdom he’s come to establish, ground zero is the human head and heart where he begins.

I want us to pray, then consider each of the four low bars Jesus mentions in our text – the low bars of murder, adultery, divorce and oaths – versus the high bars of anger, lust, justice and simplicity.

First, a prayer: *Father, Mother, Friend of ours, to you we pray, wishing everything didn't have to be difficult and knowing mostly it's us who make it so. We want our way and we want our way to please you. People annoy us so, O God. It's hard not to wish they wouldn't. To change our own ways instead, especially our ways of thinking and talking to ourselves, as if no one else can hear us. You hear us. We hear ourselves. We talk ourselves into worse ways of behaving. May your word speak louder than the sound of our condescension, toward ourselves, toward each other, toward people we don't even know. May your affection for us and your grace on our behalf soften and sweeten our thoughts, O God. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

I call it a low bar, but there are some days when not killing people is easier than other days. I've not been angry enough to kill someone. I have been angry enough to see how a person could be angry enough to kill someone.

That's the anger Jesus is talking about. Anger that has you cursing someone, calling them a fool, damning them to hell, wishing them dead. Or the kind of anger that kills them over and over, in one's heart and mind. The kind of anger that is delicious to take out and page through, reliving the hate rather than healing from the hurt. The hate feels powerful, while the hurt just hurts. The problem, of course, is that hating doesn't heal. It's like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die. I can't remember where I read that – Frederick Buechner, maybe.

Anger kills the angry person, slowly. The angry person is the one being dehumanized first. Hear in Jesus' teaching the invitation to choose. Know in him the power to choose, to give up anger as your antidote to the hurt. Instead of what someone else has done *to* you, use your heart and head to focus on what God has done *for* you. It sounds exactly like something a preacher would say. I would love to be more clever than that. But it's the gospel as I know it. We have the choice to let go of what others have done to us and cling to what God has done for us.

To trade our anger for gratitude is an inside job, friends, that only takes a lifetime to accomplish. Lucky for us we have all the time in the world. When I teach the Ten Commandments to kids, Number Six is "Don't steal someone else's wife or husband." Setting an ever higher bar than that, Jesus said, "Don't even steal them in your heart and mind. Don't mentally take them home and do with them as you please, as if they belong to you heart, mind and soul. Don't mentally dismember them, removing all things that make them human: a brain, a spirit, a personality, a voice – keeping only the parts that make you tingle."

Don't miss Jesus taking up for women here. His first hearers surely didn't, not in this teaching or the one about divorce. Suggesting that men control themselves, even in their thoughts! Jesus had women disciples. I wonder what he heard being whispered about them. I wonder if he encouraged those women to be patient or be themselves.

I once sat in seminary preaching class while pregnant, listening to men students discuss whether it was appropriate for women to preach while pregnant. Their anxiety about the presence of sex in the pulpit was so transparent, I hardly kept from laughing. And too shy to speak for myself, the only woman in the class that day, I was also angry that that professor said nothing. I'm the mom of girls who would have the lot of them for lunch now.

Lust is injurious, friends. It is one point on the continuum of sexual exploitation that does real harm to both victim and offender. Both are dehumanized. One has taken what does not belong to them; one has lost what they did not consent to give. And rather than bearing witness to the divine worthiness and fundamental equality of human beings, the ancient gender inequality of this world is perpetuated.

In India I was invited to speak to young graduate students, mostly men, about gender inequality. They asked me why I thought it persisted in the 21st century. I asked them why the only students serving tea in our class were women, no men? I asked how many of them thought it was safe for their sisters or girlfriends to walk home from a bar late at night? I asked if any of them felt unsafe walking alone or in pairs anywhere in their town at any time of day or night? Or felt anxious entering their empty apartments alone? I told them the same is true everywhere in the U.S., except for the tea. We drink coffee, and lots of men serve coffee. But women are less safe than men. And until that is not true, gender inequality persists.

Lust, as Jesus described it, is the mental possession, the mental objectification of women, that denies their full humanity and makes them less than equally human in this world. The church has struggled to know what to do with Jesus' teaching on divorce. The result has been that divorced people didn't find much grace at church for a long time. Can you guess what changed? More and more church people got divorced, for one thing. Then clergy people started getting divorced. It's a lot easier to judge other people's marriages than it is to admit how difficult marriage is.

Moses made it possible for husbands to divorce their wives. *Get a witness and give her a certificate.* The idea being, he didn't get to just disappear. Again, Jesus keeps the Law but raises that bar. Insists that those who love the Lord can do better than a witness and a piece of paper. A witness and that piece of paper were useless to her at the grocery store. Marriage is really, really, really complicated. I hear Jesus instructing married people to recognize and respect that. And injustice isn't Christ-like, even when it's legal.

As Peterson says it, *you don't get to use a legal maneuver to cover a moral failure.* Divorce is sometimes ugly. It is always grievous. Justice remains the bar.

Simplicity. It took me an absurdly long time to realize that's the word I wanted. Jesus says, "*You've heard it said, 'do not swear falsely.' But I say to you, 'don't swear. Period. Say what you'll do and do what you say.'*" Peterson says, "*forget the religious lace.*" I love that. The low bar is, don't lie – which is easy enough for most people. The high bar, though: don't overpromise. The inside job is telling ourselves the truth. Telling ourselves the truth about what we can do and what we can't, because we are extremely susceptible to the worldly message that a good person is a busy, overcommitted, exhausted person.

One of the world's favorite conversations is, "Who is the busiest?" And so, we end up trapped by the mistake of making promises we intend to keep, before doing the inside work of discerning what promises we *can* keep. And that, friends, is lying. The lying Jesus is talking about? Sure. This and more, no doubt.

Hoping other people will think each of us to be as good or faithful a person as we mean to be, instead of the weak and flailing person we fear we are, we end up lying – to ourselves and to others. The lie itself was created in the world somewhere, by some time management system that wanted to sell us the perfect planner, and we got hooked because we already felt so overwhelmed. But we baptized it and made it our own – but it's still no less a lie – and de-humanized ourselves by believing we could be more than a single human being. At least that is what I learned about myself.

Add up the hours it would truly take to do everything on your to-do list. Subtract eight hours for sleeping. Then do the simple math. Can that to-do list be finished in the time available? If not, from what other human life are you borrowing that time? Also, believing you thrive on less than seven hours' [sleep a night](#) is another lie you tell yourself. It is hard to hear that our good intention and overpromising are often a form of lying. But once I named it, it was much easier to quit. As usual, Jesus' corrective is grace. And, as usual, even grace is an inside job. Give yourself the room to name what you truly can and cannot do. It may be less of some things you are doing now and more of what you'd rather do. But tell yourself the truth first. Then do and don't accordingly. Therein faithfulness is found. And the kingdom finds its most peaceful place.

I suppose it comes down to this: in every sentence of the Law we find an opportunity to be more or less truly human, more or less liberated, more or less fit for kingdom service. If we choose the lesser, everyone is going to suffer: me, others, the kingdom too. Every time someone is de-humanized, space is made for violence and abuse, and the tolerance of that abuse. Anyone we consider less human than ourselves is someone whose mistreatment we might bear. I could never kill a puppy; they have feelings just like me. But I've killed a million flies, just because they bother me. A mouse got in my car not

long ago. He or she is dead now. Regrettable. But not as regrettable as having a mouse living in my car.

Brown children in cages hurts us. But our own children in cages we would not tolerate for a single day. This is a terribly hard thing to know about ourselves. We dehumanize other people. We do it all the time. Otherwise, our hearts would shatter into a million pieces and we'd never get anything done. Maybe that's it then. Maybe we're not supposed to get anything done, until all the human beings are finally free to be fully human. Maybe that's the point of everything, including the Law Jesus re-gives God's people here in Matthew and the inside job he seems so bent on.

God give us the courage and the grace to do as he commands. Would you pray with me?