

Impossible Living Imagined

The fourth of five sermons in the Lenten series

“A People of Salt and Light—Jesus’ Model for Community”

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- Matthew 5:17-48 ²¹“You have heard that people were told in the past... ²²But now I tell you....” (vv. 21-22 excerpts)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus presents not new law for believers to follow, but a call to a new way of life.

“Are you serious?!?” That may have been the thought flashing through the minds of the disciples and crowd as they heard Jesus present this extended discussion in his Sermon on the Mount. I encourage you to have your pew Bibles open this morning, because you may find it helpful to glance down at the biblical text from time to time.

The first section of the Sermon on the Mount has a special name – the “Beatitudes.” Today’s selection also has a special name. That name isn’t as charming as “Beatitudes.” The name for this section sounds scholarly or legalistic. This section contains what are called the “Six Antitheses.” You know the term “thesis” means an idea or proposal that’s put forth. An “anti-thesis” (or “antithesis”) is a counter-proposal. In this section Jesus puts forth six antitheses identifiable because of the formulaic expression, “You have heard that it was said in the past... but now I say to you....”

As you can see in your pew Bibles, Jesus introduces this section with some “Teaching about the Law,” then offers six antitheses about Anger, Adultery, Divorce, Vows, Revenge, and Love for Enemies. Upon first reading or hearing them, you’ll probably think a couple of things:

1. these are a lot of rules
2. these rules are hard, sometimes impractical, maybe even downright impossible.

There is a lot in this section. I could spend an entire sermon on each antithesis. Maybe I will some year. But today I’ll simply make a brief observation about each antithesis to help us discover how they challenge us but also give us freedom as an expression of God’s graciousness. I don’t want us to get bogged down in the many layers of meaning of each proposal, because here’s what I want you to take from this overview of today’s scripture lesson: “What is presented in this passage is not a new law but a call to a new way of life.”¹

The first paragraph in this section includes verses 17-20. Matthew was writing his gospel account of Jesus for Jewish people who had embraced Jesus as that long-awaited Messiah. These Jewish Jesus-followers didn’t see themselves as separate from other Jews; they still thought of themselves as Jewish. Because they were still Jews, you can imagine how they would have balked at any suggestion that the Messiah would throw out Jewish teaching and practice. That’s why in Matthew’s gospel we hear Jesus announce that he’s not come to do away with the traditions and teachings. No, he says he has come to fulfill the purpose of those traditions and teachings; he has come to complete them.

Then in verse 21 we hear the first antithesis. Jesus references the sixth of the Ten Commandments which prohibits murder (Deut. 5:17) but goes beyond that to say that one shouldn’t even express anger toward another. This is one of many examples of Jesus using the oratorical device of hyperbole, of exaggeration, to make a point. Is it humanly possible never to become angry? No. What about the

¹ Douglas R.A. Hare. *Interpretation: a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993, 51.

example Jesus gives of abandoning your worship offering in order to reconcile with someone you've offended? We might think, "Okay, so I leave my pledge envelope on the pew cushion and go apologize to my friend across the aisle." But in Jesus' day, your religious offering might be a pigeon or goat or sheep. Probably impractical to say, "Stay, Fleecy – I'll be right back." What we might take from this is that Jesus is less concerned with the fulfillment of religious rituals and more concerned with preserving and healing interpersonal relationships.

The second antithesis, found in verses 27-30, deals with two more of the Ten Commandments: the seventh commandment against adultery and the tenth commandment against coveting another's property. In our day we have a hard time understanding that these commandments originally were less about sexual fidelity and more about property rights. In ancient times a woman was considered the property of her husband, and a man's infidelity with another man's wife threatened that husband's exclusive rights to his wife and the assurance that her offspring were his own.

But Jesus goes beyond extramarital affairs to warn against even indulging in lustful thinking, because as Jewish philosophers commonly observed, "thought is father to the deed."² Perhaps Jesus is also looking ahead to the distinctive nature of the community he would create which would not only welcome women as well as men, but even see women in positions of leadership in the early church – women like Phoebe, Prisca, Mary, Junia, Julia. "The new relationship with women among Jesus' followers required of men a new kind of self-discipline."³ Women should be viewed not as potential temptresses but welcomed as sisters. We're seeing such an attitudinal change again today in the development of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood.

The third of the six antitheses is one that certainly catches the ear of any who have personal experience with divorce. My parents are divorced, my uncle is divorced (twice), both of my brothers are divorced, and some of you are divorced. Some people self-righteously claim, "Well, the problem is that divorce is too easy to get these days." In fact, in ancient times divorce was much, much easier to achieve – the man could take the action himself as long as certain witnesses were present.⁴ The Old Testament acknowledged the occasional necessity of divorce and provided some regulation, restrictions and protection. In a nutshell, what Jesus proclaims is that God's vision for family life is for monogamous commitment rather than what I'd call sequential polygamy – a series of spouses over time.

Verses 33-37 present the fourth antithesis about vows or oaths or promises. How often do we hear someone say, "I swear to God I didn't say that" or "I promise on my mother's grave that I'll do what I said"? Then and today somehow we get the idea that the truthfulness or sincerity of a pledge or promise is enhanced by invoking an oath. But Jesus implies that "it is God's will that men and women be absolutely truthful in their words and faithful to their commitments." Ironically, "certifying one's word by appeal to heaven, earth, [etc.]... simply raises suspicion concerning the depth of one's commitment to the truth and to promises."⁵ The New Testament letter of James echoes Jesus' teaching when James writes "...Do not use an oath when you make a promise. Do not swear by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Say only 'Yes' when you mean yes, and 'No' when you mean no..."⁶

This next antithesis is a real challenge for us: "turning the other cheek." This is contrasted with the *lex talionis* – the law of retribution that we know in the expression "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." As barbaric as that sounds, the law of retribution was actually an improvement because it placed a comparable restriction on seeking vengeance: *only* an eye for an eye, rather than, say, *two* eyes for an eye. But here as in the rest of this section Jesus is speaking philosophically, not literally. That's apparent in the examples he gives.

For instance, he says that if someone sues you for your shirt, give him your coat as well. The Greek word translated "shirt" means something like a nightshirt that would go down to your ankles – in

² *Interpretation*, 53

³ *Interpretation*, 53

⁴ *New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 191b

⁵ *Interpretation*, 54

⁶ James 5:12 Good News Translation

effect, underwear. And the word for coat is like a tunic or cloak. If you did what Jesus said, you'd be standing naked in court, and as much as most of us would be horrified by that prospect, the Jewish culture objected to public nudity even more. So obviously Jesus couldn't have meant that literally.

Then Jesus refers to the common practice of soldiers being allowed to grab any passer-by and have him carry their gear for a mile. You might recall that the Bible's story of Christ's crucifixion includes an example of this: the Roman guards forced Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for a while. "There's ample evidence that soldiers were frequently guilty of abusing their right to impress local civilians and that this was a cause of great resentment.... By going a second mile, one could demonstrate to the oppressor one's inner freedom from oppression."⁷ So although we're not to apply these examples literally to our lives, neither are we to dismiss them as fanciful. The reason why is explained in the last of the six antitheses.

It's the one in verses 43-48 about having love for enemies. It's natural to be friendly to friends. We all do that. "In human society everywhere, it is normal to return love for love and hate for hate. [One Bible scholar has observed that] Christians who do no more than this fade into the background; they cannot serve the world as salt and light."⁸ So Jesus presses us to go beyond what's in our nature. "Praying for enemies involves a serious attempt to see them from God's point of view."⁹ As Jesus points out, "[God] makes [the] sun to shine on the bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil."¹⁰

And a final comment about the final verse in this passage: in verse 48 Jesus states, "You must be perfect—just as your Father in heaven is perfect." If all that's come before this hasn't raised your eyebrows, this directive certainly will: we are to be "perfect"? We know that no human is perfect (not even my grandson Rhys!). So why would Jesus put that impossibility out there for us to aspire to knowing that we can't achieve it? Here's why: it has to do with what the word "perfect" means in this context. What has Jesus just been speaking about? The need to be generous in showing love—even love toward those who are unlikely to respond in kind. Jesus just said that God blesses all with sun and rain—not just those who we might judge to be deserving. God is single-minded in the desire to show love to all, and that's what the "perfection" called for in this verse means: "completely devoted." We are to be completely devoted to showing love for others, just as God is completely devoted to loving us all.

In the Six Antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus doesn't tell Christians how to respond to every situation we might encounter in our daily life. But he sets a tone with these sayings which are "meant to shock the imagination and instill a profounder insight into God's intention."¹¹ Jesus calls us to a new way of life that would seem absolutely shocking to the world around us.

As a community of faith seeking to follow the way of Jesus—and as individuals sharing our lives in this community of faith—we are called to live in a way that seems impossible based on our innate human behavior. Indeed, relying on our nature, it is impossible. But now we open ourselves to God's generous, forgiving, empowering, transforming love. In doing so we experience what's described in the closing verses of Ephesians Chapter 3: that God, "by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, [and so] to [God] be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."¹²

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⁷ *Interpretation*, 56-57

⁸ *Interpretation*, 61

⁹ *Interpretation*, 59

¹⁰ Matthew 5:45 Good News Translation

¹¹ *Interpretation*, 58

¹² Ephesians 3:20-21 New Revised Standard Version