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Sermon

But I say to you ...

Matthew 5:21-37

12th February 2023

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Over the last two weeks we have followed Jesus' manifesto teaching: the Sermon on the Mount. Having laid out how different his values are from the usual selfish human values, Jesus assured his hearers that he had come to fulfil the Law. He then gave six interpretations of aspects of the Law of Moses. "You have heard it said.... But I say to you." We encounter four of them in today's passage concerning: murder, adultery, divorce and oaths.

In each case, he clarifies and supports the intent of the Law against contemporary interpretations. Their interpretations had distorted the law sometimes to be more rigorous than God intended, sometimes to let people wriggle out of unwelcome restrictions.

Anger

First he addressed murder by going deeper - to its root which is anger. Cast your minds back to the first murder in the Bible: Cain killed his brother Abel. What was the progression for Cain? Abel offered a lamb from his flock to God whereas Cain offered vegetables he had grown. God did not accept Cain's offering because it was not according to the principle of sin offerings. Cain became angry and God warned him, "Why are you angry? ... sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."¹ Cain allowed his anger to grow into hatred which flowered into murder when he attacked and killed his brother.

Jesus goes to the root of the problem and addresses anger and the abuse of others which rises from it. He warns us about being angry with each another. As we hold onto anger, we are prone to abuse others and not to honour the image of God which they carry.

The word he uses, "*Raca*," was Aramaic meaning empty-headed. The Greek word behind "fool" was "*moros*" from which we get "moron" – so it is equivalent to calling someone an idiot. Jesus takes this very seriously – to treat another with contempt is to strip away his personal identity and wrongly make him something he is not.

A very current application is the rise of internet flaming and abuse. It is extraordinary what vitriolic comments are made online. And it is not rare – there seems to be a disconnection from reality when people type which allows them to write things they would never say face to face. Even in the comments sections of

¹ Genesis 4:6-7

the major newspapers, people's comments on articles rapidly become personal, unpleasant and abusive. When people email others, they often seem to forget themselves and their words can be vicious. We need to remember if we are arguing a point, not to resort to attacks on the person with whom we disagree. Let us be careful of our words when we speak or write to others.

Jesus is not saying anger is sin. It is what we do with our anger that matters. There was a major baseball game in Boston in 1894 where a fight broke out between two players. Within minutes all the players from both teams had joined in the brawl. It spread to the grandstands. It went from bad to worse. Someone set fire to the stands and the entire ballpark burned to the ground. Not only that, but the fire spread to 107 other Boston buildings as well.²

Jesus is not saying anger is sin. Jesus himself had righteous indignation against sin as he cleansed the temple. Paul wrote, "In your anger, do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."³ That is good advice. Deal with your anger before it has time to curdle into something worse. Maybe there is the need to address some wrong. Maybe you need to find out whether the wrong was actually done or have you misunderstood?

This is the origin of the Peace we exchange before communion. The Peace is not intended as a general chat and how-do-you-do. It gives us a chance to make sure that relationships are good before coming to communion. Occasionally, we need that opportunity where there is unresolved offence between individuals.

Adultery

When Jesus turns to consider adultery he starts with the 7th commandment "You shall not commit adultery" but draws on the tenth commandment, "Do not covet your neighbour's wife..."⁴

If you want to stop the big sin, nip it in the bud. Have you tried to dig out a well-rooted plant in the garden and thought how much easier it would have been when the plant was small? Don't indulge the minor sins which will grow into major issues. If you covet (that is long for and desire) someone other than your spouse it is likely to end up in adultery – so don't go there.

Let's be clear. The consistent standard of the New Testament taught by Jesus and the Apostles is that sexual relations are to be confined to marriage and marriage is holy. We read in Hebrews 13:4[NIV] "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

Marital purity is exclusive devotion - to keep themselves only for the other. Jesus uses exaggerated examples to drive home the seriousness of the matter. We are not really to gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands but he intends to shock us into taking the issue seriously.

Divorce

In the matter of divorce, there was a debate in Jesus' day between two schools on the matter. The provision for a bill of divorce was made, Jesus says in Mt 19:8, because of the hardness of people's hearts. The Law allowed divorce in cases of 'indecency'. The debate was over what that meant. Some argued any offence was enough, others that it meant only unchastity (i.e., unfaithfulness).

Jesus does allow a divorce because of marital unfaithfulness. But he warns against divorce on lesser grounds which, being invalid before God, leaves the parties liable to the sin of adultery if they remarry. By the way,

² "Daily Bread", August 13, 1992

³ Ephesians 4:26

⁴ Deuteronomy 20:14

St Paul also allowed divorce if a married person was converted and the spouse refused to live with him/her because of the change of faith. In that case, he said they should be free.⁵

We should not push Jesus' words further than he does. He does not say unfaithfulness requires divorce – the wounded party may choose to forgive and continue with the marriage.

He does not say remarriage after a legitimate divorce is invalid. The purpose of a bill of divorce was to make that legal.

He does not say divorce and adultery are unpardonable sins. They are serious but they are not the unforgivable sin.

Oaths

When Jesus turns to oaths, he addresses the way people pile up false assurances of their truthfulness. He warns that swearing on heaven or on earth or on Jerusalem all risk breaking the commandment not to take the name of the Lord in vain since they are his throne, his footstool and his city.

Have you noticed some people assuring you that they are telling the truth? It is a sign they do not expect to be believed perhaps because they know it is not true. Jesus says, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'." Say what you mean and don't embroider it.

I am reminded of the old principle of honour in the British financial world where huge deals were conducted on a word and a handshake. Legal safeguards and elaborate contracts are only arise because of distrust. If you know the character of the other party is true you can be far more relaxed.

The point is not to refuse to swear an oath in court setting: Jesus himself was put under oath in his trial. Rather he teaches us the importance of simple trustworthiness in common life without the need for oaths.

Conclusion

Let me finish with a quote from the theologian Joachim Jeremias:

What Jesus teaches in the sayings collected in the Sermon on the Mount is not a complete regulation of the life of the disciples, and it is not intended to be; rather, what is taught here is symptoms, signs, examples, of what it means when the kingdom of God breaks into the world which is still under sin, death, and the devil. You yourselves should be signs of the coming kingdom of God, signs that something has already happened.⁶

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⁵ 1 Corinthians 7:10-15

⁶ Quoted in *Kingdom Vision eBook* by Scott McKnight from the Story of God Bible Commentary storyofgodseries.com