

Sermon – “More than Rules”

Sunday, February 16, 2020

Scripture Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37

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Our first scripture reading comes from the ancient book of Deuteronomy. It shares some of the words of Moses, spoken to the assembled people at a time when he had led the Israelites all the way to the edge of the Promised Land, and he was about to hand over leadership to his successor, Joshua, before they entered the place they had been seeking for forty years. Listen now for God’s Word to you in Deuteronomy 30, verses 15 through 20.

¹⁵ See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

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Our New Testament reading comes from the Gospel According to Matthew, in the fifth chapter, verses 21 through 37. This passage comes from the middle of Jesus’s long and well-known Sermon on the Mount. Hear now the teachings of our Lord:

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, you will be liable to judgment; 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. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court 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.

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. 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.

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.

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.”

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One of the difficult things about becoming an adult is coming to terms with your parents having, over time, changed their views from the ones that you absorbed *from them*. It feels a little unfair. Here you developed your character and identity largely based on the wisdom and practices learned from the most formative people in your life, and then for the rest of your life you find yourself surprised here and there to encounter places where the thing that was obviously true in your family is no longer believed by the very people who instilled it into the family.

It is tough to begin with when something previously unquestioned is yanked away and presented back to you as something needing re-examination; it leaves you feeling like you are on shaky ground. Most adult people have likely gone through some kind of crisis of how they look at the world at some point. But it adds an extra degree of frustration and surprise when your own teachers are the ones who yank away what they themselves taught you.

And really it’s unfair on both sides, because of *course* your way of looking at the world gets adjusted over time by your experience. Only a silly or very stubborn person would cling at age 55 to exactly the same way of seeing things he or she had at age 25, ignoring all the new information encountered in three more decades of life. One way or another, for better or for worse, we all shift over time.

But this does leave the younger party stuck sorting out new things that were unexpected. Does this shift represent a move toward greater wisdom, the results of an open mind having encountered more of life? Even then, it involves figuring out what to do with a new proclamation that apparently depends on experience you don’t yourself have, yet. Or has the person who taught you what was important gone and let something important get eroded away by the world? Or has he or she taken something once held lightly and let it become encrusted, turning some part of the self into an unyielding, close-minded, petrified piece of inflexible rock? Often people present a complex mixture of these types of changes.

And it does not cause difficulty only when the change is for the worse. I have witnessed how difficult it can be for persons to come to terms even with their parents having improved themselves. We all learned how to be a grown man or woman *from somebody*, and you feel like a grown man or woman when you act out the ways of adulthood. When a person whose destructive behavior became a part of your own sense of identity turns his or her back on that kind of behavior, it can feel like someone has yanked away your very sense of who you are and what it is all about.

Think of the woman whose subservience was an unswerving, dependable part of the household, and how her adult daughters, living the same way, might struggle with how to understand it and be forced to question themselves when one day this woman finds her own voice and learns to stand up for herself.

Think of the young man who learned from his father that treating women with disdain was part of what it meant to be a man, and who one day is faced with an older father who has reformed a part of himself and is making respectful compromises in his second marriage he never would have allowed with the young man's mother. That sort of thing has moral repercussions, even judgmental ones, for the younger man's sense of manhood, and for his own marriage, if it is patterned after the one he learned from as a child.

It can be hard to take, and I have seen people who are unable to overcome their own parents' self-betterment.

It may be that the hearers of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount are faced with a hardship not unlike this one. "You have heard it said," Jesus declares, about the things learned of old, "But I say to you..." something new.¹ Jesus is not just talking about habits of life or the family tradition, either. He's actually quoting the *laws of God*, the foundational beliefs and practices that have been at the center of the identity of this entire people for centuries, and updating them.² This is audacious, a lot more so than we might notice, so far removed as we are from the time in which he spoke these words.

But we do still feel much of their weight. Did you feel uncomfortable at some of today's reading? It is pretty rough stuff to ask of us. Maybe we aren't people who have built our entire sense of self around how well and proudly we follow the words of religious law, but we still are folks who like to think of ourselves as "pretty good people," and so this kind of teaching is hard to hear. The curtains are pulled back on the demands of what it really means to be righteous, and they are far higher than we like to pretend. It's sometimes easy if we just score ourselves on a few big things—hey, I've never murdered anyone, after all—but Jesus is saying that *everything* counts. Anger and animosity, how you look at and think about other people; all of that is a part of who you are and how good you are.

¹ This pattern, of "You have heard that it was said...But I say to you" carries on well past the end of today's reading. It runs the entire length of Matthew 5:21-48.

² In today's reading of Matthew 5:21-37, Jesus re-interprets four ancient laws. The commandment against murder is found in Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17, with murder being condemned numerous other places as well. The commandment against adultery is found in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. Practices regarding divorce are found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Prohibitions against swearing falsely and swearing falsely by the name of the Lord are found in Deuteronomy 23:21-23 and Leviticus 19:12, respectively, and the commandment against making wrongful use of the name of the Lord (or "taking the Lord's name in vain") found in Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:11 probably also is applicable, as well as assorted other passages. On the last question of what someone is doing when swearing by certain things, Jesus is alluding to other scripture as well: Isaiah 66:1, which reads "Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool" (NRSV).

We love to think sometimes of Jesus as the guy who came in and freed us from the demands of the law, but here we see Jesus telling us that the true demands of goodness are even *greater* than the outward demands of the law. And if we want to believe that no matter how we treat our neighbors, all we need to do is run over and kneel down at the altar of God and we can get a free pass, well, Jesus calls that into question, too, implying that God holds us to account for the debts we owe our neighbors.³

The extra demands go well beyond the little bit we just read. Further on in the same sermon, Jesus tells his hearers not to seek revenge but turn the other cheek, to seek the best for our enemies, and to take the things the law or religious devotion demands of us, like alms, fasting, and prayer, and hide them away where they cannot be done for show.⁴

So what are we to do with all of this? We are the grown-up children of God, and we hear a reading like this one and find that some of what we tend to hold to even in the context of our faith itself is challenged by what Jesus says here. Some of us have generally settled on the idea that if we just follow the rules, we're in good shape. That's blown away here. Some of us have developed the idea that maybe the Old Testament was all about rules, but now with Jesus the rules don't matter so much. That, too, fails to square with Matthew's account of Jesus, who far from dropping the rules, actually says they don't go far enough. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," he declared shortly before the passage we read.⁵

Here we are, then, Jesus calling into question some of what his hearers thought they had learned about life from their Father in heaven. I began with illustrating how it is hard to hear new things coming from your own parents, and I do not, of course, mean to take the analogy so far as to suggest God cared about some things in the old days and other things later—that God's mind was changed by age and experience. But the experience from our end can be similar: realizing that your parent has a somewhat different set of values than you assumed, a disconcerting experience, which is part of why these words from Matthew are a somewhat disconcerting passage.

Every single one of Jesus's teachings in this reading could be sufficient grounds for a thousand sermons, each challenging to us in its own way, but today I focus primarily on the overall implications of this entire set of teachings. I think we might draw three essential, basic observations from this part of the Sermon on the Mount.

First, a truly Godly life goes way beyond outward adherence to the law. Goodness is not just a matter of appearance, or action, it is embedded in our thoughts. The very way we contemplate the persons around us is faithful or unfaithful. Big deeds are what they are, but the state of who we are inwardly is of great importance. Goodness is not a shell or a costume that we wear; it is something that is not really there if it is not thoroughly there, deeply there. If we are not of one accord with ourselves, if we do not murder our neighbors in body but we do in spirit, we are far from heavenly beings. Christianity is more than rules, but it is not less than them.

³ Note the section at Matthew 5:23-26.

⁴ See the teachings which immediately follow today's reading: Matthew 5:38-6:18

⁵ Matthew 5:17 (NRSV).

The second point flows directly from the first: we shouldn't think so much of ourselves. We love to measure ourselves, because we are so good at devising scales on which it turns out that we measure up. Sometimes educational systems receive criticism for encouraging teaching to the test itself, rather than teaching toward the learning goal and then letting the test serve as an estimate of how likely it was that the goal was achieved. Well most of us really like to do even one better than that: we don't really like getting taught at all, so we go looking for a test we can already pass, and then we feel good about ourselves for our passing grades.

This is all too much silliness. By the true standards of goodness Jesus Christ shows us in passages like this one, we're all in trouble. It was apparently important to Jesus to point this out, that we're nowhere near as good as we think we are, and so I think the only appropriate response is for us to adopt a posture of humility and drop whatever proudly blind notions we may have of ourselves. We all know what it is like to be near people who very obviously think too much of themselves: they are insufferable, and worse, they are unlikely to reform, because they already think they are all they need to be. It is hard to be told by Jesus that we are *all* more or less such people, when measured on the truest scale, but I think we need to hear it.

Third: we don't have much place to judge others. One thing which follows inescapably from finding that our own goodness and nobility is nothing to stand tall about is that we are not, in reality, in a position to look down on anyone else. Jesus makes this point explicit, in fact, a little bit later in the same homily. You may remember his words from a few verses later: "Do not judge," he declares, "so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye?"⁶

It all adds up to a pretty significant challenge, what Jesus says here. Does it all feel kind of unfair, like an abrupt confrontation with our settled way of seeing things? When we stumble on some of the harsher and more direct words of Jesus it usually does. He was always good at turning things upside-down, and flipping things over isn't just something Jesus does to *other* people.

And compared to what an encounter with Jesus does to the unquestioned pieces of ourselves, the regular ways in which our identities are tested by new challenges are trivial. You stopped at the butcher shop on your way into town to get the perfect rack of ribs to share with your earthly father, who taught you the art and science of barbeque, only to arrive at his house and discover that he has now taken up veganism? It'll be okay. You'll find a way through. You'll survive, maybe even with your habits remaining intact.

You will not survive with everything intact, though, when you encounter Jesus Christ for real. I can promise that. And that is a very uncomfortable blessing. Let us take the invitation to give up our comfy assumptions, go ahead and hear this and all the challenges to our identity that are found in Christ, and in so doing be remade, for "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation," Paul wrote: "everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"⁷ Amen.

⁶ From Matthew 7:1-5 (NRSV).

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV).