

## **Keeping the Rules or Keeping the Relationship? A Sermon on Matthew 5:21-37**

You have heard it said, “The Old Testament is a book of law and judgment.” You have heard it said, “The New Testament is a book of grace and love.” But I say to you, “Welcome to today’s gospel!” (Matthew 5:21-37, Epiphany 6A)

Today’s gospel won’t let us make those simple and inaccurate distinctions. Jesus’ words show continuity and consistency between the Old and the New Testaments, not separation and opposition. According to Jesus it’s not just for murder that we will be held liable but also for anger, insult, and name-calling. By his definition adultery is not solely determined by physical relationships but by the thoughts, desires, and fantasies within us. In Jesus’ eyes divorce might sometimes be legal but there are always lasting consequences. For Jesus honesty and truth-telling are not to be governed by an oath but by every word we speak.

If we thought Jesus would cut us some slack on the law, we need to think again. He seems to be doing just the opposite. Jesus does not reject the law. Far from it; he intensifies it. He does not change the law, he interiorizes it. That means that life is lived from the inside out and that the quality of our relationships arises from and is determined more by what is going on within us than by what is going on around or outside us.

Jesus’ intensifying and interiorizing of the law means that we cannot live as one person on the inside and another on the outside. It’s a remedy to living a divided and fragmented life. To the degree we are divided within ourselves, one person on the inside and another on the outside, we will be separated from God and each other.

Jesus is more interested in our lives and relationships being put back together, made whole, than he is in superficial compliance with the rules. I think that is why he intensifies and interiorizes the law. I think that is also why he is so critical of the scribes and Pharisees. It’s why, immediately before today’s gospel, he says that unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. The law was never intended to be the goal. It was always intended to be a means of establishing, nurturing, and protecting relationships. And Jesus’ fulfillment of the law exchanges your sin for His righteousness!

We can too easily forget that the law is more about relationships than it is rules. When that happens, we're in grave danger of keeping the rules and losing the relationship.

More than once I have said to my wife, "Just tell me the right answer and I'll say it. Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." I was trying to keep the rules, not the relationship. It's not hard to guess how well that worked. It did **not**! She did not want the right answer or even the right behavior. She wanted US. She wanted **relationship**. That's what today's gospel is about.

If we are to be faithful to Christ, then we must take an honest look within ourselves and answer some hard questions. In what ways is our life divided and fragmented? Are we living as one person on the inside and another on the outside? Have we kept the rules but lost the relationship?

Most of us have probably never murdered another person. But have our anger, insults, or name-calling left another dead to us so that they are just no longer a part of our world? We may not be in an adulterous affair but have our thoughts, fantasies, or the way we see and perceive another objectified and depersonalized another? This is about more than sexuality. It happens every time we dehumanize and strip another of life making them a thing to be used. Maybe we've never been divorced or if we have there were good reasons and it was necessary, because sometimes that is the reality, but there's a deeper question. Have we treated another as disposable, here today gone tomorrow, as if we had no need of them and they had no inherent value?

Perhaps that's a part of what intensifying and interiorizing the law looks like. Jesus is not trying to make things harder, to trap us, condemn us, or judge us but to make us whole, to put our lives and relationships back together so that our "yes" really is "yes" and our "no" really is "no."

We were broken, sinful and wretched. A stain soaked deep into the fabric of humanity. Consumed by death, covered in darkness, lost in the wilderness, set a drift in the vastness. But God was unwilling to watch His creation wander endlessly. He was unable to sit by as we dove deeper into the abyss. He was overcome by love, by grace, and by mercy. He took our pieces and gave them purpose. He took our shattered spirit and gave it hope. He took our destiny and reshaped it. Though we were unworthy, He counted us worthwhile.

We were broken...But in the hands of God, we have been made whole. Through the gift of faith in the life, death resurrection and ascension of Jesus, our lives are continually being put back together. The Grace and forgiveness showered upon us is to be shared and LIVED!

Obedience to the law is more than just keeping the rules. It is, ultimately, keeping the relationship. That is a choice each one of us makes every moment of every day. That choice comes from deep within us. It is the choice between life and death. Isn't that what we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy?

*"I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse." (v. 19a)*

The good news is that God gives us what we choose. The bad news is that God gives us what we choose. The choice is life or death; physical, emotional, and spiritual. Let's not think this is only about **our** life or **our** death. That's just another symptom that our life is divided and fragmented. We're **all** in this together. None of us ever really lives an individual life isolated from others. We're not choosing life or death only for ourselves but for each other, for our neighbors, for our enemies, for the stranger on the street, and for the anonymous face across the world.

As one of our early church fathers, St. Antony the Great, said, "Our life and our death is **with** our neighbor." If we choose **life** for another, so have we chosen life for ourselves; and if we choose **death** for another, so have we chosen death for ourselves. Christ died so that YOU might LIVE!

*"Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,..."* That's why this intensifying and interiorizing of the law is so important and necessary. It is Jesus' way of saying, "Choose life. Choose life. Choose life." If that is what Jesus asks of us it is only because that is how he and his Father are. They always choose life. They always keep the relationship.

Every time we choose life, every time we keep the relationship, we are participating in the life of God. We are exhibiting the divine attributes that are inherent in our createdness – in the image and likeness with which He created us. We are making God present in this world through our life and humanity. The reason we can do this with each other is because God first does it with us.

The next person we meet will set before us a choice – a choice between life and death. It may be at lunch, in our family, at work, at school, running our errands, or any one of thousand other places. Regardless, the choice will be there. Let's not leave here today not knowing what we will choose. The choice does not depend on the person or the circumstances. It depends on us. Let's **choose life**, let's keep the relationship. Let's **not stop** choosing and keeping so that wherever we go, whoever we are with, whatever we are doing there is nothing but life, there is only life, there is nothing but God, there is only God. And what we do is for the glory of God!

And why we ask ourselves, "How can I help others Experience Christ?"

In Jesus' Name. AMEN.