

Matthew 5:17-5:20, 27-37: Jesus & Law I/II

Introduction:

Well, friends.

We're wading into Jesus' "Mountain Top Teaching," today, the "Sermon on the Mount" that we've at least heard of, if we haven't heard well.

But it's difficult to hear, the stuff that Jesus says as he teaches these crowds around him. Today is the first part of a small, two-part message that will walk us through chapter five of Matthew's gospel. It's a string of incredibly difficult passages, not to understand, necessarily, but to live with and live up to.

Today, I hope we can talk about some of what we see as Jesus begins to double-down on the law, the rules for living that God gave to Israel. These were meant to mark their life as a people, shape them and help them to live up to their side of the great marriage-like commitment God made to them. They were God's chosen people, and God wanted them to live like it, so they could bless the world the way they were meant to.

The scripture behind today's message won't make us feel comfy and happy; at best, a few of us might stray into relief or pride, which aren't, you know, gold medal feelings. Let's pray that we can come to today's

passage with God's love for us in mind, and our hearts open.

Prayer:

There are a couple of things we need to talk about before we talk about the scripture that was read to us today.

Prereq: "Get 'em!"

First, I just want to point out that there's a type of person who really, really enjoys talking about the ways we can fail God. They just take pleasure from

We're called to make critical judgments, thoughtful judgments about what's better and worse when it comes to living for the Lord. Our standard is Jesus, the words he says, the life he lives. But when we find ourselves pleased that someone has drawn a line in the sand, pleased that someone has made sure everyone knows what's good and bad, pleased that sin has been called sin, I wonder if it doesn't reveal something less than christlike in ourselves. What I mean is this: You never see Jesus taking pleasure from calling out sinners. He doesn't rejoice in it, it doesn't make him feel good--about himself, or about his family, or about his people. The only people in Scripture who take pleasure from "hard talk," from are the Pharisees, who Jesus roundly denounces. I think for those of us who deeply fail God in all sorts of ways, we

have a very fine line to walk between, on the one hand, noting other's failures, and desiring to avoid them, reject them, condemn them even, and, on the other hand, taking pleasure, feeling good about ourselves because of the way we are getting it right. If it's true that you can't put your identity, your sense of self-satisfaction, in anything you can lose, then we ought not to put it in our behavior, either, because we're all one bad choice away from really blowing it. I've become convinced that no particular sin is outside my capacity.

If we find ourselves, because of personality or circumstance, ready to take pleasure in some good, old-timey, calling-out-sin, I think it's worth checking our guts to find out why. The reasons could range, you know, from just wanting the security that comes from clear lines in the sand, to some sinful desire to feel good about ourselves because of what we're not doing today, but might do tomorrow. In general, though, mercy--that thing we've been privileged to have and show, so that we might be shown it to others--isn't at the heart of this.

Prereq: Fellas

Also, as I'm sure we noticed, in Matthew Jesus is talking to fellas. He's talking to men. This makes enormous sense, given the situation he's in, teaching to a crowd of mostly men in a society run by men. Mostly men, because women didn't have the social

freedom to galavant around the countryside, and they didn't have the cultural or religious power to initiate a divorce.

We don't operate with these social, cultural, religious rules, even though now and then people, mostly fellas, wish we did. Our society is one in which, at least on paper, if not on paychecks, women and men are equal, have the same freedoms, rights, and responsibilities. We believe that the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, male and female, and we recognize that the early Church was one in which women were prophets and leaders, and that as an alternative society, set up against all the world's societies, the church was a place from its first days where women could do things like galavant around the countryside if they wanted to.

Why this doesn't show up as much in Matthew-- although it's there--as it does in, say, Luke, is again because Matthew is writing to those who are more culturally Jewish than they aren't, and, frankly, it was primarily the men who were in charge, primarily the men who received the message Matthew was given. The very fact that equality between women and men shows up at all in Matthew--and it does--is a revelation of what a radically different life Jesus' followers were called to live.

So as we think about the passages that were given us today, we have to do triple work: bridging the gap

between our society and Israel at the time of Jesus' ministry, thinking about what it means that we all, men and women, are the body of Christ, have the Spirit together and the implications that has for what Jesus says here, and then figuring out how to live in light of what we're taught. It's work, you know? There's less work if you're in a world where there are barely any women in crowds like this, and only men have power, but we who have come to believe that Jesus loves women as much as he does men, and treats us equally, have to believe that the work is worth it.

Jesus' Fit:

The question of how Jesus fits into what God has already been up to with Israel is a fundamental one that the early Church had to understand. How does Jesus' teaching relate to the Law and the Prophets, the way of life, that they'd been living up to--or trying to--since Jesus showed up? How does Jesus' teaching relate to the covenant relationship God has made with Israel?

Jesus knows this is on people's minds as they gather around him; it makes perfect sense for him to address it, especially given what he's going to go on and say today. Let's walk through this:

Fit: 17

He launches his first great teaching with this:

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

This is straightforward, right? But we've gotten used to thinking about all the Israelite stuff before Jesus as “bad” and after Jesus as “good,” that it's really difficult for us to emphasize that Jesus “fulfilled” the Law and the Prophets instead of “abolishing” them. We want him to have done both; but you can't do both. You can abolish them, and launch something new, or fulfill them. This is just like forgiveness: you can't say to someone “You're forgiven” and make them pay you back or make up for it; you can only say, “You're forgiven if you've really forgiven someone, eaten the costs of their sin against you.” Jesus can't “fulfill” the Law and Prophets--that is, be the thing that the Law and Prophets was building toward, the place where the Law and the Prophets, which acted as a nanny, a caretaker, wanted Israel to arrive at--he can't “fulfill” the purpose of the Law and Prophets and also abolish them. He can do one or the other. And in claiming to fulfill them, he's claiming that they were good, too; that they did what they were meant to do, after a fashion. They got the job done: Israel arrived to this point safely, and now he'll take it from here.

He continues:

Fit: 18

18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

And this makes perfect sense, too: These things aren't poofed out of existence just because they've done their job; they've achieved what they were meant to do.

Fit: 19-20

But he continues with something that we could find tricky. He says:

19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is a great passage for scholars to argue about. Is Jesus really saying that obedience to the Old Testament Law is important for Christians, given all the other scriptural witnesses saying that this Spirit-driven, deeper-standard is in play? No. Is Jesus simply

emphasizing a high view of Scripture, that all should have? Maybe. Does this chunk of text only matter until "everything is accomplished," which happened in Jesus' death and resurrection? Or is Jesus, in some way, talking about what he's about to say?

I dunno. I think that maybe Jesus is talking about what he's about to say, here--and "the least of these commands" are the commands he's about to give. And we can't set these commands he's about to give aside; they are different from the Law and the Prophets, which have stepped aside, been set aside, because Jesus has arrived. So, what we can't do is set aside the "least of these commands" Jesus is about to give.

Most importantly for us, though, is that when Jesus says our righteousness has to exceed the Pharisees, he's not saying that we have to follow the Law better than they did. He's actually not talking about the same righteousness, when he talks about the Pharisees' and our own.

The Pharisees' righteousness--their way of being faithful to God's covenant--was expressed through strict observance to the Law, but as we'll see and have seen in other Gospels, the Pharisees figure out all sorts of ways to get around what God asks of them. Our righteousness--our way of being faithful to God's covenant--is different from theirs, different ever since Jesus' death and resurrection.

And Jesus is saying that we have to be better at our righteousness than they were at theirs; our covenant faithfulness has to exceed theirs. Our commitment to keep our promises to God has to exceed their commitment to keep their promises to God, even though we show our promises differently: for us, we live by the Spirit, trust Jesus, and become like him in whatever we do.

They lived a life of separation with all sorts of ritual practices and habits that distinguished them from the rest of humanity. Their very separation led them to despise others and sin against them. Our covenant faithfulness, our righteousness always leads us to greater engagement with others.

A Gift: 19

There's a great clause here, though, a gift we have to keep in mind as we move forward in what Jesus says. He says:

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

I just want to point out that to be called “least in the

Kingdom of Heaven” is better than to not enter at all, and Jesus implies that these Pharisees, whose righteousness isn’t all that great, they aren’t participants. We here, though, we are: We’ve been given all the privileges of citizenship in God’s Kingdom, even as we wait with longing for Jesus to return and fully establish it, ending death and pain and sin and fear. That’s, I think, the “everything being accomplished” that we’re looking forward to. We won’t need the babysitter of the Law, which isn’t babysitting anymore anyhow, and we won’t need, not really, to trust in Jesus’ faithfulness anymore, because that trust will be fully fulfilled; it’ll become who we are.

To be least in a world where there’s enough of what’s good for everyone, and no death, isn’t that terrible a card to draw. That said, if our goal is to jump the lowest bar, it reveals something about our motives...it may in fact be an indicator of just how little faithfulness is a thing we’re trying for these days.

“You’ve heard that it was said...”

And so, when Jesus goes on from here to say “You’ve heard that it was said,” then quotes an Old Testament commandment, he’s not abolishing the commandment as he doubles-down on it. He’s simply doubling-down on it. He expresses the heart of the matter, reveals the spirit behind the thing, and disallows those who follow him the workaround that the Pharisees have been using.

He's taking the great responsibility that comes with our privileges as citizens in God's Kingdom, and saying that we have to be faithful to the Spirit of the command both qualitatively and quantitatively more than the Pharisees have been. All of this is in keeping with what Paul can call the "law of Christ," a great ethic not of rule-keeping, but of character-change.

But these are hard things, the things he says. He says this:

Lust:

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' [e] 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

So again, let's note that Jesus' condemnation about "looking lustfully" and so, "committing adultery" with someone in your heart is as true for women as it is for men. Married people are in play; either the lusty attention is focused on one, or you, the attention giver, is one. Jesus is talking to men, and typically "adultery" had to do with the status of the woman: if she was married, it was adultery, whether or not the man was married; if the woman was unmarried, the behavior was still illicit, still out of bounds, it was

termed differently.

And Jesus doubles down on the original commandment against committing adultery: The heart of the matter is lust, and acting on lust in any way--here he highlights where eyes go--that's what's out-of-bounds for his followers.

The issue isn't a particular behavior, per se, it's the lust that drives a range of behaviors, each of which are bad--eyeballing somebody else because you think they're really hot is an equivalent to adultery. At least, it is in our hearts, and Jesus makes that internal arena equivalent to whatever is external.

Lust: Compartmentalizing

The Church has always struggled with doing a dangerous thing, which is to go beyond this equalizing thing, and suggest that the heart is all that matters: if internally, we're good, then externally, we can do whatever we like. Paul came down hard against this way of thinking, and we in the room poo-poo this, and say "Thank God we don't do that." And yet our power to compartmentalize our sin, and suggest that what we do "isn't really us," or "isn't true to our values," even though we've done it, is inexhaustible, really. Our world, and the way our basic posture is toward our internal thoughts, feelings, emotions, and the like, positions us to do this, so we have to be careful. In some ways, we're the extreme opposite of the people

in the crowd Jesus was talking to, which is why we can feel so superior to the Pharisees even as we end up just like them now and then: they took nearly all their cues externally, and the behavior that they did was bad: “Do not commit adultery” was an external thing; Jesus is reorienting them toward the internal truth that it’s the lust in themselves and its expression in all sorts of ways that is the bad thing. I sometimes wonder if what we need is a reminder that the standard isn’t just internal, but external, too, and we can’t simply compartmentalize things we do when the lights go down or no one is around, because they don’t “feel like” the “real us.” Again, I’d return us to a reminder that no sin is outside our bounds, and the fact that Jesus privileges us with citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven at all, much less as the least notable member of it, is a shocking, gracious thing to do.

Lust: Dismemberment:

But Jesus jumps to this image of dismembering yourself, if that’s what it takes to keep yourself from “being thrown into hell,” as it’s translated. He says this:

29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off

and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

We could say a lot about this, but the point Jesus is making in this moment is, I think, a principle point: That it's worth going to extreme measures to keep ourselves from experiencing the judgment that sin does bring. He also lifts up the truth that our behaviors--whether it's the glancing of an eye or the legs walking us into someone's bedroom--count. They count. We are totally familiar with language of our own bodies betraying us, whether we're talking about our backs going out or getting a cramp. But Jesus is talking here about our bodies betraying us in other ways, as being, oh, energized by lust so that we do that which we ought not do, because it's equivalent to adultery.

Have we overly-compartmentalized ourselves, so much so that we can do things we ought not do, because they are behaviors energized by lust, and still believe that we didn't "really" do them? Jesus gives us an image of strategic self-dismemberment as totally reasonable, if what we seek to do is avoid judgment. But it's hard to care about judgment if we don't believe that the lust that energizes our behaviors is "really" ours. We, out of all kinds of people in the world, need to be the ones who unflinchingly own both

our capacity for sin, --the stumbling, the falling down outside the boundaries of behavior that Jesus reveals to us--we have to own both our capacity for sin and the stumbling we make. We can do that because we recognize all the things I try to remind us of all the time: God loves us, we bring God pleasure, we have privileges and power that we barely tap, and nothing can separate us from the love of God that this Messiah envelopes us with. If all that is true, and we still can't own our sin, and strategically work to minimize it, then what's up? What aren't we getting?

But here's where what Jesus shares gets difficult, because he goes on to talk about adultery in a way we'd rather not hear it. Again, when he says "adultery," he's using a specific word that means when a married woman is slept with, right? Here, Jesus takes another passage of Scripture, and doubles down on it, raising the standards of behavior for his followers:

Divorce

31 "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' [f] 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

We are so bound up in culture, here. You know, right,

that in cultures where Messiah Jesus' news about the Kingdom of Heaven comes to those who have ancient histories of polygamy, husbands taking multiple wives, that when divorce takes place there, it's devastating to those women who are released out to fend for themselves? So this passage must be interpreted sensitively in those places; generally, husbands stop sleeping with all their wives, but the truth is that even that creates a terrible mess.

In general, we don't seek to sensitively interpret this passage so much as to ignore it. We might talk about the way remarried people aren't, you know, committing serial adultery by staying married, and I'd land there if I land anywhere. But honestly, I have nothing to say here, except, I guess, to invite you into my gut, my process on this stuff, and to say that no one is perfect, no not one.

I would advocate for divorce in certain circumstances as much as I've advocated for marital therapy in others. Life is a mess. If that feels like I'm, oh, capitulating to the mess of life, to some fallen worldliness, or not being dogmatic enough, it's because I am. Maybe I don't have the energy, maybe I don't have the conviction: What I'm not going to do is talk about how important it is right now talk about how important it is to obey this passage and others like it that discuss divorce in the New Testament, and then go on to ignore it in my daily and vocational life. That's

hypocrisy. I'm not going to resist celebrating the way those who have been remarried following divorce have gone on to bear witness to the Messiah in powerful ways. I'm not going to preach as if we ourselves aren't divorced and remarried. It's striking that out of the teaching Jesus gives here, this is the one that some Christians take most literally and interpret the most legalistically (Boring, 1995, 192).

Soon, in Matthew 19, Jesus will again address divorce, and he'll say, there, "I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery." So we see, there, Jesus giving a qualification on the teaching he gives here, as he mentions marital unfaithfulness. This gets called the "exception clause."

Divorce: Honesty & Wrestling

What I'd encourage us to is honesty. We can trick ourselves into saying that we're not, you know, "really" adulterers because we only look and don't touch. We can trick ourselves into saying that the lust that so often directs our behavior isn't our "true selves," and so we can basically ignore it. It's more difficult to say that we aren't divorced and remarried, when we are, or that those we love and fully, completely support, aren't divorced and remarried when they are, without the "exception clause" ever having been in play. It's ridiculous to even think about how that would work, you know?

The only answer I have to the questions that this passage presents to us is to wrestle with it authentically, remembering our standard, Christ, and our ability to deceive ourselves. This attitude, this posture, that I'm presenting; it's the only thing my sense of personal integrity allows me to have this morning, at least.

And Jesus talks about personal integrity in today's passage. He says this:

Oaths:

33 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; 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 even one hair white or black. 37 All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.[g]

Again, Jesus revisits a standard that everyone holds, and suggest that we misunderstand what it's all about.

The point in swearing an oath by something is to

communicate to the person this: “You know that thing we think is so important? If it’s not important to you, at least, it really is to me. Well that thing that’s so important and special, I’m as serious as that thing is important. I’m as serious about what I’m saying as that thing is important.” For us, we learn as little kids running with other little kids to “swear to God!” because what’s bigger than God, right?

But the idea that we can verbally link our credibility to something important--God--and that this matters at all is a total fiction, right? It’s a joke. It’s like a magic trick that only works as long as the person in front of you really, really, believes in magic. But it also makes a dangerous assumption that apparently the Pharisees have missed: It assumes that you have the freedom and the right to leverage whatever you’re swearing by, swearing to. The only one in the crowd Jesus is preaching to who has rights over heaven, earth, Jerusalem, is Jesus: and he’s not using them for himself. Of course Jesus suggests that to do what the Pharisees have been doing comes from the evil one; he just witnessed firsthand the devil’s attempt to offer him power over everything, a claim to the entirety of creation that he didn’t have rights to give away.

To swear by our own heads is to imply that we have power over ourselves that we don’t even really have. All we have, in the end, is ourselves: our yes and our no, and this is what Jesus points out.

Our privileges as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven come with responsibilities; one thing they don't come with is the freedom to use our status, our special positions, our power as children of God, for our own self-service. And the only reason to swear an oath in the way Jesus presents this here is to prove to others that you are what you cannot prove to them without time and relationship. And the only reason to swear an oath in the way Jesus presents this here is to prove to others that you are what you cannot prove to them without time and relationship. Relationships, over time, create in others the power to know whether our "yes's" and our "no's" are really what they are. Status--"I'm a Pharisee" or, say "I'm a Christian"--can shortcut things now and then, but only to those who've already decided our kind is a good kind. In the end, it's our integrity, experienced by others over time, that proves we walk our talk, proves that the commitments we make are ones we follow through on.

Commitments:

And in the end, today's passage is about commitments.

To talk about adultery and to talk about oaths is to talk about commitments, the commitments we make in marriage and the commitments we make every day. On the one hand, there's this class of special, unique, powerful commitments; on the other, there's the

thousands of yes's and no's we make throughout our day, our week, our lives.

Jesus is talking to us, as people who have committed to following him, to claiming our citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven, whether it results in great or little things, the least or the greatest importance.

And everyone I've ever met, Christian or not, has broken the commitments that they've made. And many, many of the Christians I know have, over time, learned to keep the commitments they make in ever greater ways. For some of us, this is easy: We say yes, we mean yes, no matter what and as long as it's up to us--which it isn't always--whether that's "yes" to marriage and its demands, or "yes" to "I'll pay you back."

Today's passage invites us to think of our promises, and keep them better. It invites us to consider our boundaries: What have we said no to, and yet, do anyway? In places where we're succeeding in the moral standards that the Messiah's followers are meant to live by, we're invited to consider how we can deepen this success, and let it influence not just what we do with our eyes and our feet, but what posture and virtue we strive to make a home in our hearts. In places where we're not succeeding, and lust or anything is directing our steps or our glances, what might we do that will keep us from stumbling?

The standards of the Messiah are high, but only because he knows that our calling is to bear witness to the inexhaustible power of a God who loves us and seeks to bless the world through us. It is so easy to live comfortably with our routine with Jesus, what's normal, now, especially for those of us who have been following him for a generation or more. And yet if our "yes" to what he asks of us needs to be greater, I hope that we can be a community of people who say it together, and help each other offer it personally, too. Let's also help each other as we try to make sense of what Jesus asks of us today.