

Heartfelt

Deuteronomy 30:15-19, Matthew 5:21-22, 33-37

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15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity....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. Deuteronomy 30:15-19

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.

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 God's footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great Divine....37 Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. Matthew 5:21-22, 33-37

Say the word “radical” to the average person and the name of “Jesus” will likely not be the first thing that springs to anyone’s mind. If you think about “radical acts,” the Sermon on the Mount is unlikely to come to mind, either. As we have explored the last few weeks, we tend to think of the Sermon on the Mount as gentle and soothing. The Beatitudes are so lovely. Other teachings in this part of Matthew, like Jesus’ teaching of what we now call “The Lord’s Prayer,” and the lilies of the field just does not strike us as all that radical. And yet, it’s true.

Let’s remember the root of the word “radical” is the Latin *radix* and that is the Latin word for “root.” The radix is what is at the bottom of something, at the foundation or below the foundation, at the roots. The radix gets at the root, at the origin of something. (1)

And so there is a sense in which a radical is someone who wants to return something—a political system, a religious belief system—to what it was intended to be in the beginning, at the root of all things.

In this passage from Matthew 5, Jesus is indeed a radical because what he is doing with the Law (Torah in Hebrew). He is going deep, getting everyone’s attention back to the basics and the root origin of God’s commands and covenant—Jesus wants us to go underground to see what has been holding this whole thing up from the beginning so as to understand afresh.

Take the original commandments and deepen their intended meaning. Maybe to day it sounds like

“You haven’t stabbed anyone or shoved someone to his death off a cliff? Good for you, but when in your anger you told Harold last week to go take a flying leap, and you took your anger out on your spouse, that was serious and not in keeping with Divine intentions.”

“You haven’t sworn a false oath in God’s name? Good for you but when you knowingly lied to your boss or made a promise you never intended to keep, then are taking the ‘Do not give false witness’ command lightly.

Tough stuff. Let’s focus on the teaching about anger. It seems extreme to provide teaching on anger from a section in the Torah that deals with murder. The people know the law, and what the law has to say about murder, but there is no specific teaching in the law about anger. The comparison is clear. Murder is serious and so is anger. There is a need in the first-century church to look at relationships and how individuals treat each other. There is a value to life and how we value the lives of others.

So is Jesus changing the Law into something new and different? No, he is bringing everyone back to the roots of why God gave the Law in the first place. Certainly, external behavior and actual deeds are always worse and more injurious than secret thoughts.

So what is the point? The point is that the Law of God was meant to foster human flourishing at every level, including at the deepest levels of our hearts and minds. God wants us to respect each other, to love each other, to see God’s own image residing deep within one another. We are not to use people as pawns, as objects, as the targets for our desires to manipulate, and then discard.

And it’s not enough that all of this does not show up on the outside of our behavior. Hypocrisy is everything it’s cracked up to be and eventually it has a way of brutalizing the hypocrite, too.

Remember in *The Inferno* Dante’s clever punishment in Hell for hypocrites: they were clothed with elaborate golden garments, but the garments were lined with lead. To wear this attire every day literally weighed the person down with weariness and an unending sense of burdensome heaviness. And that is what unremitting anger and longing and deception does to us on the inside: it weighs us down, saps our joy, and sooner or later really will show up on the outside in how we treat others, talk to them, regard them.

Jesus is saying too often with people we know, in the community, if you are angry with a brother or sister are likely to insult them. "You fool" or worse.

It comes down to - How do we see others? How do we treat them in our heart of hearts? Do we think it doesn't matter how furious we are at every driver who cuts us off or makes some mistake in traffic (a driving mistake that we surely have made more than once ourselves)? Do we think it's pleasant to nurse a grudge for years such that every time we see Sally or Sam our innards are in a knot? Do we think that this other person who just asked us a question is so worthless and we consider them to be a fool or sometimes translated idiot?

That word in Greek is interesting. The Greek word in verse 22 is *raca* is the equivalent of our word "idiot." When Jesus refers to calling someone "a fool," he uses a term that calls into question the other person's morality—it might be the equivalent of calling someone "a dirty rat," someone you don't trust. Taken together Jesus is decrying our belittling of people's mental powers and our belittling of their moral status.

"Let your anger get the best of you in simmering grudge-bearing," Jesus says, "and sooner or later you'll start to denounce the people around you as stupid and immoral—as not worthy of your time." You may even start to regard them as sub-human, and it's a short step from that to treating them in sub-human ways, too. Anger and resentment and grudges affect us.

But Jesus is not just being tough on us: he is at the end of the day reminding us of a truth: God created us to flourish in his good creation. God wants all of us to flourish. We are called to see how routinely we undercut the flourishing of our neighbors and of ourselves. The thread of the biblical narratives is that the Creator God of the cosmos is with us, in us and really does desire to see all things and all things and all manner of things going well in her good creation.

There is a list in the section of Matthew. It is not Jesus scaring the disciples into following the rules. Hearing and believing "but I say to you" is a promise of compassion and love; of opportunity and potential. Potential meaning budding, imaginable, possibility, and promise.

"But I say to you" casts the net of God's love wider than we would typically allow. "But I say to you" presses us to extend the arc of righteousness beyond the reasonable. "But I say to you" names the truths of the injustices all around us but yet invites us to hope nonetheless.

We can take the teaching of Jesus and hear it in a deeper way. Not replacing previous rules or laws but expanding them. "What does it mean to be faithful to the Scriptures?" I suspect Jesus would respond, "The point is *not* to be faithful to the Scriptures, but to be faithful to the living God who continues to be present among us." I like what Mark Davis says about this question and this passage –

I even wonder if the point is to move "the Scriptures" from being a noun to thinking of "scripturing" as a verb—a witness to how God's is really present among God's people. The accounts of creation, the Ten Words on Mt. Sinai, the stories of the people of Israel, assorted

types of Psalms, proverbs, and prophetic utterances, as well as the words that Jesus is speaking in this text, are all ways of “scripturing” God’s presence in differing times and contexts.

It is not the written accounts themselves, but the real incarnation of God’s word through God’s people that is the point. “Scripturing” is the act of giving witness to that presence. As such, Jesus’ words here do not signify the ‘final revision’ of old Mosaic laws. They signify a way of “scripturing” God’s presence, (2)

which will always be a way of loving God, ourselves and our neighbor with our whole heart.

Remember that both in the context of the Hebrew scriptures and the Greek NT, the heart was understood as the central part of a person. All thoughts, all love, all choices came from the heart. Let’s be willing to engage in “scripturing” God’s presence as we lean into Jesus’ radical teachings and remember the words of Moses in Deuteronomy - Choose life and Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

To do that we hold onto a vision and dream. It seems so daunting to discern God’s dream for us when there are so many competing views and interpretations battling for our allegiance. Yet Deuteronomy encourages us to believe God’s dream is not too far away, it is not hidden. God’s word to us is very near, in our mouths and in our hearts.

“Choose life” is a good phrase to remember in the midst of our discernment.

Will our choice make life better for ourselves or for others?

Will our choice extend God’s love and grace to someone?

Will our choice help the world be a more life-affirming place for all of God’s children?

Will our choice help someone else see there is life after mistakes, and tragedy, and loss?

You have heard it said, choose life. But I say to you, don’t define that too narrowly.

Choose life in the little decisions and the big.

Choose life for you in a way that invites others to choose it for themselves, because we can only choose life for ourselves.

Choose life with humility and grace, recognizing others may choose differently.

Choose life with joy and hope that the God who created us is working with us to redeem it all for beauty. May it be so. Amen.

1) <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-02-06/matthew-521-37/>

2) <https://politicaltheology.com/the-politics-of-scripturing-matthew-521-37-d-mark-davis/>