

6 Epiphany Matthew 5:21-37
Christ and Grace February 16, 2020
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Last week in our gospel reading from Matthew Jesus announced that he had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. This week, Jesus gets more specific in talking about the law. It sounds like he is here not only to fulfill the law but to make it even more exacting, more difficult to follow, and in some rather radical ways.

Jesus does that. He does radical things. In fact, I'm pretty convinced Jesus was a radical. He offered radical hospitality and forgiveness, and he was radically inclusive. In today's reading, as Jesus continues his sermon on the Mount, he is offering us a radical interpretation of Hebrew Law.

I don't know about you, but there is no way I could ever live up to all these standards. Oh, we're fine with all that other stuff – hospitality, forgiveness and inclusion, but now Jesus is giving us more than we bargained for. This sounds a lot more like extremism than a message of love. Perhaps we're missing something here.

Some scholars say that Jesus is being radical by initiating a new law that both intensifies *and replaces* the Hebrew law. This way of understanding Jesus' words takes the ethical and moral demands of the Christian faith very seriously, but it reduces the Christian life almost entirely to a matter of rules and codes of behavior and it also discounts the faithfulness of the Jewish Children of God.

Other scholars go in the opposite direction. They say that Jesus is using hyperbole to take the law to extremes in order to show us that we are utterly helpless to follow the law. Understood this way, the law's chief value isn't to guide us in a moral way of life, but instead to show us just how much we are in need of God's grace.

So what do you think Jesus is doing here? How many of you consider yourselves to be "rule followers", raise your hands? Yes, we rule followers hate it when people butt in line, we always color inside the lines, and we eat dessert last. But if we are honest, we can probably admit that from time to time we mess up, we break a rule here and there. Because none of us is perfect all the time. And those times when we mess up? Is there anything better than having a friend or loved one forgive us? When they tell us it's okay and they love us despite our faults, that's pure grace!

And so I wonder if perhaps Jesus is not so much concerned with the law as he is with relationships. So much of the time we think the law is about doing the right thing, following all the rules, and avoiding a penalty. But at its foundation, the law is really concerned with relationships.

If we look at the first and original Law given to us by God, The Ten Commandments, we can see that the first four deal with our relationship with God. We are to love God who is our only God, we are not to misuse God's name, and we are to set aside a day to rest with God. The second six

address our relationships with each other. Honor your father and mother (which we can extend to respecting the wisdom of elders), do not kill, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, or envy another. The function of these laws is to point us toward ways to honor those with whom we are in relationship – God and neighbor. But somehow we forget that, and get all caught up in keeping the law for the law's sake.

Perhaps this is why Jesus intensifies the law - not to force us to take it more or less seriously, but instead to push us to imagine what it would actually be like to live in a world where we honor each other as people who are truly blessed and beloved of God. Jesus is asking his followers, and all of us, to shift our focus from the external requirements of the law to the internal law that has been written on our hearts, that gives us the grace to reconcile, to forgive, and to live in healthy and whole relationships.

It's not enough, Jesus says, to avoid murder; you also have to treat each other with respect, not letting yourself fly off the handle in anger because that, too, demeans and diminishes God's children. It's not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other people by seeing them as a means to satisfy our personal agendas and consumer mentality. It's not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We shouldn't treat anyone as if he or she were disposable and we should make sure that the most vulnerable are provided for. It's not enough, Jesus says, to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all. There would be no need to swear to tell the truth if we all just told the truth. Let your yes be yes...and your no be no.

If we see God's Law only in legal terms, it ends up being a moral, and all-too-often, self-justifying check list: No murder today; check! And yet our harsh words might be killing a person's spirit; No lying; check! But our gossip can infect a community. Jesus, it seems, wants more from us. Actually, he wants more for us. He wants us to regard each other as God regards us and to treat one another the same way. His approach to the law is radical because he calls us to look beyond the law to see its goal and end: the life and health of our neighbor, the life and health of our community! What Jesus is telling us is that being part of the kingdom of God is not simply about following a set of laws but is a way of holding the well-being of our neighbors close to our hearts while trusting they are doing the same for us.

During this season of Epiphany, we celebrate the central, most radical message of our faith -- God came here to be with us. And it wasn't because God was angry or sick and tired of our misbehavior. It was because "God so loved the world." God doesn't look at the world and see a bunch of unruly law breakers who need to be punished. Instead, God looks at the world, looks at you and me, and sees people of enormous potential whom God created and believes in and loves deeply. God isn't really interested in our keeping the law for the law's sake, but rather for our sake.

When we begin to integrate that message into our very being - when we, in a word, make that message incarnate, we discover a new, radical reality in our lives. Then it becomes our turn, our joy, to honor each other in the radical way Jesus would have us do, so that with God's help and each other's help, we can become the people God created us to be. Amen.

With acknowledgment for many ideas from David Lose, “Radical”, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1521>