

Preaching Discipleship: Higher Standards

Matthew 5:17-31

February 13, 2011

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of the letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least in these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard it was said to those of ancient time, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.” 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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift before the altar and go; first to be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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.

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” 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.

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Before I read the scripture this morning I want to say a word about it. This is not an easy part of the Bible to read, nor on which to preach because it raises an issue that affects many of us and has touched all of us. That issue is divorce. What I want you to know as you hear Jesus' words is what was going on within the culture of his time. In Jesus' day, the husband had sole authority in marital matters. When a husband wanted a divorce he did not have to provide grounds; all he had to do was inform his wife of his decision. It could be with a note on the door or by moving the wife's possessions out of the house. There were no protections for women under the law...civil or religious. It is against this backdrop that Jesus speaks in the scripture we are getting ready to hear.

Let us pray...

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Raise your hand if you are uncomfortable.

Raise your other hand if you are convicted by Jesus' words.

We all are.

In our country, more than 50% of marriages end in divorce.

In our culture, lust is not only common, it is actually a marketing strategy for many of the products we buy and consume.

Anger and insult have become the medium for reporting news and engaging in public discourse.

And here, in this difficult-to-listen-to passage, Jesus addresses all three issues head-on – challenging us to go beyond a conventional interpretation of what God's commands, beyond a simple awareness of God's law to a strict adherence to it.

A couple of months ago, a Yale law school professor named Amy Chua published a book called the *Battle Hymn of a Tiger Mother*. In it, she defended the traditional Chinese high pressure, high expectation parenting style and derided the – in her words – “soft and overly psychological” parenting style of the western world.

Illustrating the point, Chua said the answer to why children like hers who are raised under traditional Chinese parenting are so successful is because they are not permitted to do things such as:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

Her argument is that it is precisely because children are held to so high a standard that they are such high achievers.¹

So you have to ask: in holding up a stricter version of the law and the prophets, is Jesus being a “Tiger Mother?”²

All three things Jesus chooses to address in today’s passage have to do with interpersonal relationships. Clearly, Jesus is calling for those who want to be his followers to do more than what had become culturally acceptable. A loose adherence to God’s commands was not enough. Under that model, relationships were still broken - evidenced by friendships that were rent asunder by anger and bitterness; by men looking upon women as objects; by husbands discarding their wives with attention paid to what was legally required, but without consideration given to the covenantal promises that were made.

With his words in this Sermon on the Mount, it is clear Jesus is not satisfied with this brokenness. In fact, with the perspective of Christian history, we know that Jesus was not satisfied with this brokenness because when words were not enough, Jesus went to the cross in order to reconcile the brokenness once and for all.

And yet, this side of the cross, this side of resurrection, these words still come. What are we to do with this hard-charging call to “right living.”

¹ For what it is worth, David Brooks of the New York Times makes a good counter-argument to Chua’s book in an editorial that can be found here: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/18/opinion/18brooks.html?ref=davidbrooks>

² I am grateful to my friend and colleague, the Rev. Dan Lewis, for making this connection to “Tiger Mothers” in our conversations this week.

What are present day disciples to do with these words that are so hard to hear because they hit too close to home?

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The tension that we feel is between law and grace. Between what we know we should do, and our inability to do it. Between what God demands of us, and how God acts toward us. And like everything else that exists between two poles, there are dangers at the edges. Go too far toward the law, and you have works-righteousness. Go too far the other way, and you get cheap grace.

Over-interpreting grace as something that comes easily and cheaply creates followers of Jesus who don't stand for anything. Over-interpreting law makes for people who consistently feel unworthy and unloved.

In my Bible study this week I heard a story about a woman, a Lutheran, who took the words that Jesus shared today so seriously that she has not taken communion for the last forty years. For four decades she has continually refused to come to the chancel because she did not believe she was worthy to partake in Christ's meal.

You and I know people - indeed, maybe you are people - who have been through the pain of divorce - who have experienced the no-win solution it presents to all involved; the children, the couple, the friends. We know people that have been divorced who rarely darken the door of the church because they feel ashamed; because they feel unworthy.

So let me say with conviction that I do not believe those are the kind of response Jesus intended when he preached about this higher standard in his sermon on the mount.

But, where, then, is the balance between high expectations and impossible ones?

What are we to do with this tension between law and grace?

It is questions like these that call for the theologians; people who make it their business to consider the mind of God through the lens of scripture and the history of the church. Thankfully, we Presbyterians have a few theologians to draw from.

In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin helps guide us. Calvin said that there are three uses for the law; three ways to understand what it means for us that God sets high expectations.

First, the law convicts us of our sin. One of the reasons God issues boundaries for us not to cross is to help us recognize our error when we cross them.

Second, the law teaches us to obey. As much as we might think we are individuals with unlimited freedom and autonomy, God begs to differ. We are created to be in relationship with God, but God - as the Creator - is in charge. As such, the law reminds us of the fact that we depend on, and that we need..not ourselves...but God.

Third, Calvin says the law shows us how to live. God does not give commands, set boundaries, or have expectations for the heck of it. They exist because God has a vision for this world that was created; and a vision to see it through to the world that God intends.

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Jesus wasn't familiar with John Calvin, nor with his *Institutes*, but it is this third use of the law that I think helps us understand why Jesus was being so strict.

It is one thing to be either satisfied or apathetic with the way things are, and to use God's commands to go through the motions with no hope for change. It is quite another to see the law as the pathway for the fulfillment of God's creation; for the perfection of the world that God intends. Do not forget, Jesus was not preaching with the present day in mind - he was preaching with his eye on God's kingdom...a kingdom that Jesus was not willing to sit around and wait for, but one that he expected to break forth at any minute.

This kingdom that Jesus describes demands more from us than being satisfied with broken relationships. It calls us to a deeper commitment to love our neighbor, to view our neighbor, not as an object, but as a person, and to honor the covenants that we make with our spouse.

That's not to say we won't fail at living up to these standards. We will. And when we do, there is grace. But Jesus still calls us to try.

In his sermon, Jesus urges those who follow him - including all who make up the church - to reach for something that seems improbable if not impossible: a world the way God intends it. You don't get there without setting high expectations.

In the words we will use in a few minutes in our Affirmation of Faith, as a church, we have said that Jesus the Christ is **both** our assurance that the ways we fall short of God's high expectations will be forgiven **and** God's mighty claim upon our whole life.

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Do you see it?

It is in between the **both** and the **and** that we find the Good News.

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