

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 5: 21-37

How well do you conform? A good part of being deemed a healthy person and a contributing member of society is about conforming. There are appropriate ways to dress in different circumstances; if you follow that code, you look normal and unthreatening. There are proper things to say at a holiday party and things inappropriate. Behave accordingly, and you will get invited back. We conform to a range of acceptable paths deemed fruitful and responsible. The healthy and productive person is, in no small degree, a construction particular to each society or community. Many of us have conformed readily, eating with a fork, dressing in clean clothes, maintaining a domicile, and rooting for the local football team. We have been acclimated and enculturated in such a way that we have followed the rules and have done the expected things at the anticipated times.

So, being a good citizen is a good thing. Being a productive and successful person out in the business world is a good thing. We must acknowledge, however, that doing these things is, to some degree, following a script, a cultural script that tells you what good people look like, or what productive or admirable people look like, and what you should do to be like them. Now you may push back and say that it still requires a lot of personal character, talent, and intellect. Furthermore, you may have gone far beyond what was expected of you in the place you grew up. All that is true and correct. My intent is not to dismiss those aspects altogether.

I emphasize the cultural script because enculturation shapes what we deem as normal and good and also blinds us to things that we accept but which are not good or just. For example, there was a time that it was legal in this country to own slaves. The cultural script allowed one to be a good person while also owning other people or segregating them and limiting their choices or freedoms. Legality, and the enculturated sense that this is permissible and acceptable and legal, even biblical, can leave us desensitized to the fact that we have not treated a brother or sister as equals, have not loved them as we would want to be loved.

Another example that strikes me when we read from the prophets. In the Hebrew Bible (OT), one of the great signs of an unjust society that the prophets mention repeatedly was the loaning of money at interest. The idea is that someone is desperate, can't afford to keep their land and their livelihood, or can't afford food, and thus is pressed to borrow money. So, to charge interest on that money is to capitalize on a brother's or sister's desperation rather than aid them in their

desperation. Now, we might furrow our brows at such a charge because we live in a society where lending at interest is the most normal thing, and we have just accepted that the poorer and more desperate you are, the higher interest rate you must pay, and the better off you are, the less. I know such things are complicated, but you will find no sympathy among the Old Testament prophets nor Jesus himself.

In Jesus' day, there was a cultural script, usually referred to succinctly as the law, the Torah. To be a good person, a good faithful follower of the Lord was to keep the laws and directives of Torah. And our reading this morning invokes the Torah, but especially, it invokes the ten commandments, those central tenets God delivers on Mt. Sinai. As we continue to follow sections of Jesus' sermon on the mount, I have asserted that Jesus is reinterpreting and re-appropriating the tradition in his context. In a context where adherence to the law and tradition are the ideals for a good citizen and a good person of faith, Jesus essentially says that following the law is a low bar. Are we really to congratulate each other for not murdering one another in our anger? Is a man really to feel clear of conscience when he dismisses one of his wives, leaving her vulnerable and desperate to attach herself to another household for survival just because the Torah permitted him to? That is the practice of 'divorce' that Jesus is confronting here, the power a man had to take or dismiss wives, which put them in a very vulnerable and compromised position.

what I am suggesting, and what Jesus seems to be suggesting, is that while following basic law or moral code is a good and appropriate thing, it is not that impressive. For even if you succeed in conforming to the approved patterns, you make good choices, and are successful, what about the heart? That is a move Jesus makes here, to bring focus to the emotion and how one navigates the world inside one's heart and head and body, as well as our ability to connect with another person and feel compassion and care.

In the sermon the mount, Jesus is, in many ways, lowering the bar. He is saying that you don't have to fit all these boxes of clean and pure and of good pedigree to be a citizen of God's kingdom, to be salt and light, and to surpass or transcend the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees. But while he lowers the bar in this way, he also raises the bar in other ways, suggesting that just following the literal and limited directives of Torah is not the true fulfillment of the law, not the embodiment of what God desires of us and for us.

Yes, we could compose a checklist. Have you murdered anyone this week? Have you stolen anything or at least anything anybody would miss or anything you have been caught for? Have you lied or been caught lying? Have you paid your taxes

and honored your debts? If you were to pass this little quiz with flying colors, we might conclude that you are a good citizen or a good Christian or that life has gone favorably for you. Not to reduce your accomplishments or self-control that kept you from wringing someone's neck, which some days is an accomplishment to be applauded, no doubt. But even if you have not murdered or stolen or been derelict in your responsibilities, Jesus is interested in things like...what resentment has grown in the process. What stews below the surface?

Jesus is much more interested in the anger, bitterness, coldness, and self-loathing that festers, as well as the personal growth and peace that might be achieved through an inner spiritual journey. One can conform and do good things and still carry self-defeating beliefs about oneself, as well as anger and ugliness and greed and envy towards others. One can conform and be law-abiding and yet be cold and unyielding towards others in their need.

Jesus is more interested in the unresolved stuff between you and others that is easily obscured as you bring your offerings and sing the hymns. It is the stuff of the heart, not just conformity. It is true connection and reconciliation, not just the clearing of one's conscience by affirming that you have been in the right.

As I said, when Jesus invokes the commandments of "do not murder" and "do not commit adultery," he is clearly referencing and reinterpreting the ten commandments. The ten commandments had a lot to do with how the people were to live not only in relationship to the Lord but also in relationship to each other. You see, the Israelites at that time had lived in slavery, the oppression of slavery had a way of shaping their lives and conduct. It was the heavy thumb that kept them in line. And now they have journeyed through the desert, are anticipating a life together in the land, and God is giving them instructions of how to live as God's people as a community with one another.

Jesus is making similar moves in his sermon on the mount, reinterpreting the law in terms of both how one lives in relationship with the Lord, and how one lives in community, in relationship with one another. But here, Jesus' interpretation is far more intrusive and demanding than the Torah ever stipulated.

"'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."

"'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

He is taking straightforward commandments with measurable metrics and making them far more penetrating and far more difficult to say that one has fulfilled the law. He values and measures the quality of relationships altogether differently. Jesus' standard of community and what it means to love one's neighbor is altogether different and far more exacting. Jesus' standard of what it means to do justice and to have honesty and integrity is far more penetrating.

It makes one wonder, how far does it go? If Jesus were to keep going in his reinterpretation of loving God and loving others to include every angry and impure and selfish thought, how far would it go? And it takes me back to those beatitudes, of how the measure was not purity of body and the absence of anything unclean, but rather, blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Jesus invites any to come, blessed are the poor in spirit and the yearning and the meek. But also, this journey invites you to a truer and fuller and more demanding expression of the kingdom of God, of what it means to love the Lord, and love one's neighbor as oneself. It invites us towards a fuller expression of the people God created us to be and an expression of what Jesus is redeeming us to be.

Now Jesus' interpretation that involves not only relationships but the interior aspects and the unseen aspects; it does two things.

One, it pushes us past what we are capable of. If the Torah is defined in this way, we cannot fulfill it on our own, we cannot be perfect, and we cannot be free of anger, hurt, resentment, guilt, lust, and unkindness. We are not fully aware of the wrongs we have done to others, nor capable of rectifying them before we come to the altar. We are, therefore, pushed into the realm where we must acknowledge that we cannot fulfill the law, and we must rely on the grace of God, not on our own pride, goodness, law-abiding-ness, or gold ribbons.

Second, not only are we pushed into the realm of grace, we are also pushed into a more internal and genuine picture of what it means to love God and love one another. We are invited into a different level of honesty, of humility, of integrity, but also a different level of forgiveness and grace. Yes, it is good that you don't murder someone in your anger, but now, let's talk about your anger and what that is about. Yes, it is good that you don't commit adultery, but let's talk about your lust and your envy and your loneliness. Yes, it is good that you follow the law, but the law permits a great deal of injustice and coldness towards one's brother and sister, let's talk about that.

And so, to the ragtag ragamuffin unclean crowd of people who had experienced a hard time in life, Jesus tells them that they are blessed, and that they are salt and light. But also, that while they don't need to become clean or conforming any longer in the way the Torah prescribed, they are also called to become pure in heart, clean of all that contaminates and degrades the heart and the soul and our relationships, both our relationship with the Lord, and our relationship with one another. And this might be a little overwhelming.

Therefore, how ought we respond to such teaching? Perhaps the way that the psalmist of Psalm 139 does when he realizes that the Lord knows every thought and fiber of his being.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked (or hurtful) way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Concerning Anger

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. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Concerning Adultery

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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.

Concerning Divorce

(Mt 19:9; Mk 10:11–12; Lk 16:18)

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² 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.

Concerning Oaths

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 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 one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.