

Scripture Reading for February 16 2020

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (NIV)

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NIV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘*Raca*,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. ²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

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

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.

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.

Sermon: “Life In God’s New Community”

Some of us may have a time-travel fantasy and wish we could have been present listening to Jesus as he preached.¹ But having just heard elements of the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps we’re not so sure! We already have a hard time with some of the 10 Commandments and Jesus seems to have made them a whole lot harder. Elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel Jesus criticizes the Pharisees² for putting a guilty, religious burden on the people, but isn’t Jesus doing the same thing? How are we to understand the Sermon on the Mount as being “good news”? That’s my challenge to try and explain today!

Last week I mentioned that Jesus said, “Don’t think that I have come to abolish the contents of the Old Testament; I haven’t come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”³ In “fulfilling” the Mosaic Law what Jesus is doing is *summarizing* it and *reinterpreting* it since he has God’s authority to do so,⁴ and at the same time he is criticizing his Jewish contemporaries’ understanding of Scripture. That divine authority is implicit when Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said . . .” and then states one of the 10 Commandments before saying, “But I tell you . . .”⁵ and then goes on to give his interpretation of the law. Jesus was, therefore, behaving like a Moses-like figure authorised to interpret the sacred Torah! No Rabbi or scribe ever contrasted his own pronouncements with what God had said to Moses, and that is part of shocking audacity of Jesus and why he was on a collision course with the religious leaders of his day. And that tension is *not* reduced when Jesus publicly declares, “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.”⁶ Some of these religious leaders had a high reputation for ostentatious personal piety and Jesus later calls them “hypocrites.”⁷ But we’re not merely to avoid the charge of hypocrisy, we are called to live lives befitting the new messianic community of God’s people – or, alternatively, as members of the kingdom of God - and so Jesus goes on and presents 6 examples as to what that means in the rest of Matthew 5. You see, it’s *not* about simply adhering to the *letter* of the law but understanding the *spirit* of Law, in other words, God’s *intention* for the law in the first place.

¹ Actually, since we’re tempted by sensationalism, we might have preferred to witness his *miracles* - rather than his sermons!

² See Matt 23.

³ Matt 5:17. “Law or the prophets” (in 5:17) means “Scripture,” i.e., the whole of Old Testament. Matthew reassures his *readers* who might fear that Christians advocate for an abolition of the Torah that this is a misunderstanding. Jesus “commands” do not transgress the law, but radicalize it! Nevertheless, from the Pharisees perspective, Jesus “broke” the law; Matt 12:1-14!

⁴ This divine authority is evident at Jesus’ *baptism* (Matt 3: 1-2,5-17) and his later *transfiguration* (Matt 3:13-17): see also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/The-Baptism-of-Jesus.pdf> .

⁵ See Matt 5:21-22; 27-28; 33-34;38-39; 43-44. (Even if not all of these examples were strictly from the 10 commandments, they were understood to be legal demands or obligations. They were likely chosen as they were topical examples for the times.) The way Matthew presents his material tells us something about how he saw the *identity* of Jesus himself.

⁶ Matt 5:20. The “*exceeding* righteousness of the religious leaders” is *qualitative* not quantitative. Moreover, if your “righteousness” is based on you keeping the letter of the law, you’re *not* really interested in God’s *grace*!

⁷ Matt 15:1-9; 23:23,25–26; all these criticisms are made from within Israel’s understanding of the purpose of the law.

This brings us to our first example. If you've had a *very* bad day, you might come home and proudly say to yourself, "At least I didn't kill anyone today!" The point being that you felt like murdering someone, your boss maybe, but you didn't and somehow that deserves a reward in itself! Of course, that self restraint is because you knew you wouldn't get away with it and you'd ultimately end up in prison. Jesus says the same thing by stating the 5th commandment, "You shall not murder,"⁸ adding the obvious: "anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." Jesus then goes on say two peculiar claims, "Anyone who says to a brother or sister, '*raca*,' is answerable to the Courts,⁹ and anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of Gehenna,"¹⁰ which was Jerusalem's notorious, smoldering rubbish dump. The word, '*raca*' is a severe word of arrogant contempt, like calling someone an "airhead" or a "moron" (or much worse). It may well be that Matthew's Greek readers wouldn't understand that term and so he reiterates it by talking about the dangers calling someone a worthless "fool."¹¹ Jesus is pointing out the obvious here: murderous thoughts are often preceded by abusive language, which he condemns, together with anger and the desire for revenge. All this is indicative of a hard and unforgiving heart. Any Jew on hearing Jesus would immediately think of the anger in Cain's heart which resulted in him killing his younger brother, Abel.¹² Furthermore, in Jesus' day there was a lot of hatred around; the Jews and Samaritans hated each other, and they both hated the Romans. And *within* Judaism they were different parties who were insulting and attacking each other; the same is true with world-wide Church today, and *within* a denomination or a congregation too. If we are to be the "salt" and "light,"¹³ how on earth are we meant to live together in *community*? How can tensions be defused and prevented from spilling out into violence?¹⁴

Jesus offers the bold alternative of being *reconciled*; take positive steps to *restore* the relationship. How simple and yet how hard, not least because it also involves us 'getting down off our high horse.' Jesus is *not* condemning anger, as such,¹⁵ because such outbursts are a normal human response, but he *is* providing a constructive way of managing it in the context of communal living. Jesus then makes the point: *reconciliation takes precedence over worship*.¹⁶ In other words, if you want to be right with God – which in those days meant going to the Temple and presenting a sacrificial offering – then first be right with one another. There is a comic element here as Jesus is speaking in Galilee and it's a 3-day walk to Jerusalem! So leaving your gift at the altar to go and first be reconciled with your neighbour

⁸ Exod 20:13, 21:13; Deut 5:17, 17:8–13.

⁹ The Sanhedrin was the supreme council and tribunal of the Jews during postexilic times, headed by a High Priest and having religious, civil, and criminal jurisdiction. While in every major city, Jerusalem's Sanhedrin was the most noteworthy.

¹⁰ Matt 5:22. N T Wright puts it like this: "Every time we let our anger smolder inside, we become a little less than fully human. We belittle ourselves as being made in God's image. Of course, sooner or later we could end up in court, and if we allow this thing to take over completely, then we become worthless and worthy of the Jerusalem garbage dump."

¹¹ Having said that, Jesus calls his critics "fools" in Matt 23:17!

¹² Gen 4:1-16.

¹³ Matt 5:13-14. See also: <https://securerusercontent.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Be-The-Church.pdf>

¹⁴ Or resulting in suing your neighbour (Matt 5:25-26). There you may lose all your money to lawyers *and* still lose the case!

¹⁵ Ps 4:4 (LXX) says "in your anger do not sin" and this is reiterated in Eph 4:26-27.

¹⁶ Matt 5:23-24. (The Church has historically taught that confession, penitence, and reconciliation is necessary before receiving the Eucharist. This makes sense in the light of this passage.)

means being on the road for a week! But this in itself stresses the *seriousness* of his point concerning harbouring anger and malice in your heart. St. Paul puts it this way, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”¹⁷ Three quick points: first, the Pharisees thought that being right with God could be achieved through personal holiness,¹⁸ independent from their relationships with others. You hear the same thing from some Christians today; Jesus disagrees. Second, this message correlates with Hosea 6:6 which says, “God’s desires *mercy* not sacrifice,” and which Matthew quotes twice in his gospel.¹⁹ We are therefore to be merciful toward other members of God’s new community. Recall the earlier “be-attitude,” “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”²⁰ And, third, this is entirely consistent with the line in the Lord’s Prayer, “And forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who have sinned against us.”²¹ Reconciliation involves forgiveness *and* peacemaking; this is not easy, I know,²² yet this is the antidote to anger spiraling out of control and eventually leading to murder. Desmond Tutu said. “True reconciliation is based on forgiveness, and forgiveness is based on true confession, and confession is based on penitence, on contrition, on sorrow for what you have done. Only together, hand-in-hand, as God’s family and not as one another’s enemy, can we ever hope to end the vicious cycle of revenge and retribution.” Remember another “be-attitude,” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”²³ To be members of the kingdom of God, then, means we are called to be peacemakers and demonstrate mercy. Notice this doesn’t do away with the 5th commandment, Jesus *radicalises* it by explaining the *spirit* of the law.²⁴

The second example concerns the 6th commandment, “You shall not commit adultery.”²⁵ Jesus again radicalises the command: “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”²⁶ Jesus is saying that just as murder is preceded by anger, so adultery is preceded by lust. In other words, *actions* are preceded by *thoughts* and *planning*. Again, a good Jew on hearing this teaching would think back to the story of King David and Bathsheba.²⁷ David first *saw* the beautiful Bathsheba, the wife Uriah the Hittite, bathing on the roof of her house and he desired her

¹⁷ Rom 12:18.

¹⁸ This leads to salvation through personal merit and to an attitude of self-righteousness, leading to alienation and division. It is a righteousness based on keeping the letter of the law; the person is not interested in God’s grace.

¹⁹ Matt 9:13; 12:7. In both cases Jesus says this to Pharisees who are criticizing his behaviour.

²⁰ Matt 5:7.

²¹ Luke 11:4 uses “sins” whereas Matt 6:12 uses the word “debts.” See also Matt 18:21-15.

²² For more on forgiveness, see: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Content-of-the-Lord%E2%80%99s-Prayer-Part-2.pdf> .

²³ Matt 5:9.

²⁴ See also Matt 18:15–20.

²⁵ Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18; Matt 5:27. “Adultery” here refers specifically to a married woman having sexual relationships with a man other than her husband. (This is to be distinguished from “fornication” which is illicit sex in general. Adultery was considered a violation of the husband’s exclusive right to his wife and it was an assurance that the children she bore were his own. Both the woman and the man involved were considered to be guilty of adultery, whether or not the man was married. (So understood adultery must involve a *married* woman. For a married man to have an extramarital relationship with an unmarried woman was considered immoral, but not guilty of “adultery” - and likewise for an unmarried woman to have an affair with a married man.)

²⁶ Matt 5:28.

²⁷ See 2 Sam 11.

sexually and quickly committed adultery with her. In the both the story of David and the teaching of Jesus, the *men* are the problem! In a patriarchal society, women (and children) were seen as the property of men and women were therefore *not* regarded as responsible for enticing the covetous, sexual behaviour of men.²⁸ In effect, David was treating Bathsheba as a sex object, rather than a person, and that is *not* what God desires - for love is *not* predatory. Of course we have sexual equality today and so this message is applicable to both men *and* women. And single people, don't think this text is not relevant for you. Don't lust over someone else's boy or girl friend, or instigate an affair. Don't wreck someone else's relationship!

Jesus then gets down to the practical: he says deal with the problem at its origin – with the eyes! By controlling your eyes, you control your heart. It has been said that to glance and to notice is inevitable, unavoidable, and normal – but to look twice and then to fantasize, that is where the problem starts! Imagination is a gift of God – ask any artist – and it enriches our lives. But we must use it responsibly. Now the well-known saying of Jesus, “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away”²⁹ is an obvious exaggeration! But it does connect with King David's lustful temptation as beginning with him *looking* at the nude Bathsheba as she bathed. Jesus says, in effect, take decisive action and cut yourself off from all sources of temptation! Don't feed addictive habits, instead deal with them ruthlessly!³⁰ The writer of Proverbs puts it this way: “He who commits adultery has no sense; he who does it destroys himself.”³¹ It is not just others who get hurt, but the person does too because they lose a little of their own humanity. Instead, have *integrity*. And, as in the as in the previous example of anger and murderous thoughts, developing self-control is vitally important.³² Again, this teaching of Jesus does *not* contradict the law of Moses but *transcends* it by talking about *motivation* or *intent*. We can commit adultery with our *minds*, not just in practice. Recall what Jesus said earlier, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”³³

This teaching was of special relevance to Jesus' disciples, who were, most likely, all married and had left their families to follow him.³⁴ We also know that Jesus had an entourage of women who followed and supported his ministry.³⁵ The inclusion of women in Jesus' followers mandated a new kind of self-discipline. The disciples must master their sexual desires; else common gossip would undermine all that

²⁸ In the account of David and Bathsheba, God holds *David* accountable – *not* Bathsheba. Notice too that this concerns the 10th commandment: “You shall not covet . . . your neighbour's wife” (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).

²⁹ Matt 5:29-30.

³⁰ Know when you are weak and vulnerable and do not put yourself in social position where you can be tempted.

³¹ Prov 6:32.

³² And Paul says that is one the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives; Gal 5:22-23.

³³ Matt 5:8.

³⁴ I am not doing to address Jesus' teaching on divorce here (Matt 5:31-32); see:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Divorce-Remarriage-and-the-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

³⁵ See Luke 8:1-3.

Jesus stood for. Life in the kingdom of God was to be a “safe space” for everyone,³⁶ and that means to be a *disciple* of Jesus requires *discipline*.

In my last example this morning, Jesus is concerned by those who make oaths using God’s name.³⁷ Throughout the Jewish and non-Jewish world, people made oaths by invoking the name of a deity to *guarantee* the truth of what was said, or to call down a *curse* the one making the oath if what was being affirmed was, in fact, false. In this context, then, to exclaim, “God is my witness” is an oath. Jesus says, don’t swear by holy objects either in heaven or on earth. Neither should we swear “on my mother’s life” or some such phrase. Why is that? That is because people in God’s new community are to be known for being *truthful* rather than for telling lies, since lying violates the 9th commandment.³⁸ If we have a reputation for being truthful and as having integrity, there will be *no need* for oaths. People will believe you when you simply say “yes” and “no.”

As we have seen, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is describing what it means *practically* to be a part of God’s kingdom. Those who want to simply follow a set of rules may find this message as “bad news” and so miss its essential point. Jesus is, however, *not* proclaiming a radically new ethic that is *more* demanding than the 10 Commandments. No, he is simply expounding on the *spirit* of the law to those whose hearts were hardened. This message *is* good news precisely because its intent is to *liberate us from* rule keeping and, if we think about it, we *can* recognize how practicing this lifestyle *does* promote the wellbeing everyone in the Jesus community. Later on in Matthew’s gospel Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”³⁹ For this comforting claim to be consistent with Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, we must recognize that Jesus’ reinterpretation of the law brings *genuine freedom*. That’s surely good news!⁴⁰ Amen. Let us pray.

³⁶ God’s new community was a voluntary society that was to be mixed in its composition in a variety of ways: racially (Jews and non-Jews), theologically (conservative and liberal), and economically (rich and poor, slaves and free).

³⁷ Matt 5:33; “fulfill to the Lord” (NIV) implicitly means God’s name was invoked. Jesus paraphrases Lev 19:12. See also Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11.

³⁸ Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20.

³⁹ Matt 11:28-30. A *yoke* is a wooden bar or frame that joins two animals like oxen or horses so that they can pull a wagon, plow, etc. together. Here it is used figuratively of the restrictions that a teacher or rabbi would place on his followers. The yoke being “easy” or “light” means that the two animals are *balanced* in size and can work effectively and efficiently together. Being “yoked with Messiah Jesus himself” is therefore a powerful image!

⁴⁰ In the kingdom of God, God is - by definition - *king*. Consequently, to live in God’s kingdom today means that in our relationships we are to be forgiving because God is forgiving; We are to be full of mercy, because God is merciful. We are to be pure in heart, because God is pure in heart. We are to be peacemakers in all our relationships because God is a peacemaker and has made peace with us. We are to be loving because God is love. And those who hunger and thirst for such things will be satisfied.