

Living both sides of the coin
Menno Mennonite Church,
February 16, 2020

Purpose: To place some of the hard sayings of Jesus into the context of God's grace

Message: As followers of Christ we are called to be doers of the word, even while we trust in God's grace for those times where we fail to live up to the best of our intentions.

Scripture: Matthew 5:19-29 [I will read], Romans 10:5-15 (Secondary- first reading)

Synopsis: Jesus says some hard things in the Sermon on the Mount. Some things that, given our option, we would rather avoid. We want to take these commands to be pure in heart and loving of others as seriously as we may. But what do we do with these extraordinary demands to pluck out our eyes and disfigure ourselves lest we find ourselves in hell. Perhaps, though, Jesus is saying something that we don't often expect him to say. Perhaps even while he is saying "do this" he knows all the time that the doing is so hard and so demanding that we cannot of our own power accomplish it. That is where grace comes in. Maybe he is making these demands to point to the world of grace that is available to us even when we fail to live our highest ideals.

(Mat 5:19-29 NRS) 17

19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of 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.

20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds
that of the scribes and Pharisees,
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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.

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.

There are times where the Bible and our daily lives fail to connect. I think many of us are likely familiar with that moment. Sooner or later, you are going to come across some story, some notion or reported interaction which is so thoroughly disconnected with life as we know it. The question of “yeah, but what does that have to do with real life” is likely to surface. Because sometimes there exists the whole interpretative gulf that exists between the world of that day and age and the world of today. Sometimes it takes some doing to reconcile the two and make the equivalences between the world back then and the world of today.

But this text today is not one of them. We might struggle to understand the notions and the suggestions that Jesus is laying out for us, but there is little doubt that the world he is speaking of and the violence within it is alive and well, and perhaps even more starkly so than then. Which is why these are such sensitive words to us here and now, even when we have grown up with them ringing in our ears from little up. We don't have the usual explanations of culture and applicability to soften these demands and make them more reasonable. There is not a whole lot of wiggle room here. I remember worrying about this as a kid. Because back then, as I will confess to today, that these are not always the easiest words to follow precisely. The day is yet young, and I can think of moments in which I have thought less than kind thoughts to my brothers and sisters, be it on the radio, in conversation, or where-ever. It is no challenge to me to contemplate my life of adulterous thoughts by this definition where it come to that. I need not strain nor resort to some spreadsheet somewhere to catalog those offenses that still need reconciliation in my life. Yet, and let me be clear in this, I am in no way commending the practice of self-mutilation as a spiritual practice. Here I stand before you with eyes intact and hands still attached, sinful though I am. This yields the very relevant question: how do we take the Bible seriously, even when we are not prepared to take it literally, at least not in this case or to this degree. When we talk about the hard sayings of Jesus, this right here is what we are talking about.

Our most common response to these words is rather simple—we avoid them. We don't like what they have to say, so we stay as far away from them as we possibly can. Jesus is setting up for us an ethic of righteousness that far exceeds anything else out there, in his time or our time. We hear these words as commands calling us to new faithfulness and new ways of being in the world, even as we are fairly certain that our efforts, noble as they may be, will not equal the letter of the law in these regards. We are given to constructing the Kingdom of God in the

way we would best imagine it: as a club into which we can gain entry if we follow enough rules and meet enough demands. We read these words legally with right and wrong, black and white in mind because quite simply that is how we think. We like to earn what we deserve. But here the bar that is being set here is so impossible high, not one of us will see the inside of the kingdom if all God is after is rote memorization and fanatical performance of the difficult laws. We make ourselves the object of faith and life, not the God who wants to change us from the inside out, working God's will in our lives, and less our own. Maybe the point here is less what God demands that we do, and more about the way that God works in our midst. As sincere as we may be in wanting to follow these words, as well we should be, perhaps we miss the point when we make our righteousness solely about our ability to follow the rules.

When I was a child, our summer days were filled with notes and lists. After we had reached a reasonable age and with both of our parents working, my brother and I were left on our own, with daily lists of chores to be done around the house waiting in our cereal bowls lest they be—er—misplaced. The commands were simple enough—sweep the house, mow the lawn, weed the garden—the normal household chores that just needed to happen. But they never quite remained that way. Being thoroughly human, by which I mean lazy, the who of us were always looking for the way to satisfy the demands of the list with as little actual effort on our part as humanly possible, something at which we excelled. So we took up the legal profession at an early age, parsing the note in the most exacting way that we could find. The command to “sweep” was met with sweeping the kitchen briefly with a broom, not the whole house with the vacuum as was asked for, or going after the carpet with a broom. Mowing the lawn was translated into a section or two of the lawn, enough to say that mowing had occurred, but not anywhere close to the whole task prescribed us. We obeyed the commands just as far we had to and no further, choosing to argue instead the finer points of faithfulness to the meaning of the note then the actual spirit of what was being asked of us to do—to get the work done. The more literal we could possibly be with the note, the less we would actually have to do; an art my brother and I excelled at much to the frustration of our parents.

I think this is the precisely the inclination that Jesus is speaking to here. We like the law—we like our rules clear, and the more precise they can be the better off we are. The Pharisees were doers of the law, and I think we prefer to be as well. Through centuries of observance of Torah, of the Jewish laws, there were myriad ways to parse, spin and compare the

meaning of the law. My personal favorite was that of the pre-time telling age, you needed to know when the sabbath began and ended. So it was decided that you could hold 2 strings—a white and black string at arm's length and when you were no longer able to discern between them, then the sun had truly set, and the clock was running or up on the Sabbath. The law becomes a least common denominator, and not the life giving guide for life and living. I think that when Jesus is expanding the law in so many ways, he is illustrating how the letter of the law can be observed while the spirit of the law remains completely unfulfilled. Take for example the injunction around murder and violence against another person. If “do not murder” is the law, we know that there is a whole world of mischief that can occur between good relations and do not murder. Jesus in expanding the definition of violence down to the mere insulting of the person, Jesus is calling us to live a righteousness of real incarnation of the intent of the law—to embody the ways of God—then just that of legalistic meaning. The righteousness that God desires, he says, is not the mere fulfillment of the letter of the law, which does the job but gives no life, but the spirit and truth of the ways that God sets out for us. These rules and callings are expansive exactly because they are so impossible to observe—they are calling us to a way of life where there is always more to be done, greater civility to be achieved, not just the way of following more rules.

We do the text a disservice when we react in our two extremes—ignore that it is there, or become so fixated on the demands of the law that we miss the grace of God that the law contains. What Jesus is setting up here is not still more impossible rules to win God's love—it's we who do that. It is the grace-filled invitation to a life of living the whole of God's love for all of God's creation. Often, we see law and grace as polar opposites, which simply cannot exist in the same space at the same time. They kind of annihilate each other in our minds like matter and anti-matter. One demands obedience, one heals disobedience. Martin Luther famously suggested that we should “Sin boldly, that grace might abound.” I think law and grace are actually two sides of the same coin—one calling us to faithful trying, and the other healing our failures in God's love providing a context for the spirit of the law. We need grace filled law keeping in order to even come close to the way of the kingdom that Jesus is actually talking about here. Because we are going to fail. We are going to not get it. We are going to fall short. We are going to sin.

Jesus is expanding the law not just to be something to be practiced in fear lest we screw up and land ourselves in damnation, but to be lived in life, born up by hope. Jesus is teaching here by way of contrast and shock the full meaning of what it is to be a follower of Christ. It means that we are called to live Christ fully, to love even those who hate us without reservation, to know the power of our words and not just our weapons, to seek peace with all those we offend, to harness the power of our thoughts fully and truly to the glory of God and not just the flesh that we see before us. It means to live all of life fully in the light of God's love. It means to embrace the grace-filled reading that all places and all times belong to God, even those in which we fail, even those which cause us to stumble. For even there, God meets us and calls us to arise, take up our cross yet again and walk on.

Not that this makes sense. Not that this is easy. No one with an ounce of integrity can stand up here and say that Jesus' teachings are natural to us in our world in the way that we live and the world we inhabit. Nobody can say that the way of the kingdom is a natural result of the progress of the human soul. It is just too contradictory, just too hard to be anything else than Jesus inviting us not into a better version of our own world, controlled by our own power to behave rightly. We are called into the both-and of God's love, living in obedience and grace. God's love is extravagant, risky, an offense to common sense; and God's children love like that. We are called to do what we do not because it works well in the world, not because it makes us safe, and not because it will make us good—only God's grace can do that. We are called to love and live as we do simply because that is the image of God in which we are formed, and the kingdom of God to which we owe our allegiance. There is no other justification. There is no other reality. There is no other promise.

My friends, I wish sometimes I could protect you from the hard sayings of Jesus. It might make us feel better. But it would never be true; it would never call us to the new life in the new world that is coming into being all around us.

May we live both sides of the coin—faith and grace—and discover all that God has in store.