

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/12/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, February 12th

Matthew 5:21-37

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But I say to you...

In last week's Gospel lection, Jesus argued how He had not come to abolish *the Law and the Prophets* (what we would consider as the Old Testament) but rather to fulfill it (5:17-20). The Sermon on the Mount continues in this week's Gospel lection with Jesus offering His interpretation of certain Old Testament laws that was radically different than the faulty, often self-serving legalistic interpretations of the religious leaders in His day. It is important to note that Jesus did not contradict Moses and the Pentateuch but addressed faulty interpretation. In doing so, Jesus calls people to an inward change of heart rather than outward compliance to a command.

Matthew 5:21-37 Commentary

Known as the six antitheses (or oppositional statements: "*You have heard it said... but I say to you...*"), this is the largest distinct section of the Sermon on the Mount (5:21-48). Four of them are addressed within this week's Gospel lectionary text.

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

Jesus begins with a commandment that is straightforward and not difficult for most people to follow: "*You shall not murder*" (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). Jesus argues that becoming angry at someone (the ultimate root cause of murder) is subject to judgment. Whereas an insult may end up with one being judged by the Sanhedrin, merely calling someone a fool is judged more harshly by God. Harboring anger is thus judged equally as the physical act of murder.

²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

The alternative to anger is thus to seek reconciliation.

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 lustful intent 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. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

In the second antithesis, the audience would have similarly recognized the seriousness of adultery (Exodus 20:14). Adultery was seen as not only violating another person but also breaking the marriage covenant that reflected the relationship between God and His people (Malachi 2:14). Again, Jesus interprets this commandment as not only an action but also the thought that leads to such action. This idea of purity of heart is specifically expressed in the Tenth Commandment "You shall not covet..." (Exodus 20:17). To reiterate, Jesus is not adding to the Law, merely correctly interpreting it. Verses 29-30 are an example of a hyperbole stressing the importance of fidelity to one's spouse. The right side of the body often represented the more important side. In this case the eye is the medium through which one is tempted to lust and the hand represents the action.

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Deuteronomy 24:1a states, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce..." By Jesus' day, the laws around divorce were so abused that a liberal interpretation of "found some indecency in her" meant that a man was able to divorce his wife for practically any reason - even ruining a meal. In the third antithesis, Jesus is seeking to restore the original interpretation. Jesus argues here that such liberal interpretation is not valid in God's eyes and thus any husband who divorces his wife in such a way makes her commit adultery if she is remarried and so does the new husband.

³³ "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.'³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath 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 take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.

In the fourth antithesis, Jesus argues against invoking God's name or anything else to guarantee the truth of a statement. At the time of Jesus such oaths would have been problematic for two reasons. First, Scripture is clear on the consequences of evoking God's name as an oath and then failing to carry through. Examples include, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Exodus 20:7) and "You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:12). There were also those that were evasive in their oaths and swore by something other than God (such as indicated in the text) and thus the consequences of breaking such oaths were thought to be not as serious. Jesus is arguing for a standard where one's character is sufficient to guarantee their words and thus no oath is needed.

Reflections

Jesus through His antitheses interprets the Law in a way that calls His disciples to a higher behavioral standard. Following a set of rules in a transactional manner is not discipleship. Radical discipleship requires our thoughts to be transformed as well as our behaviors. Through Jesus' antitheses we gain a glimpse of what God's reign looks like. Of course, Jesus had the authority to correctly interpret Scripture in a way which was quite radical from the

"drift" that had occurred in the widely held corrupted interpretations of the religious leaders that existed in His day. Jesus' oppositional statements were in opposition to the interpretation of the Law by the religious elites of Jesus' day, not the Law itself. It is no different in our day. We are faced with the same legalistic moralism at one extreme versus what approaches antinomianism on the other.

God's Law has always cared about the thoughts and intentions of the heart. There is no room in this covenant for outward, technical conformity from people whose hearts are far from their God. The Ten Commandments were given in the first place to govern how God's people were to live in relationship with God and with each other at a time when the prevailing culture of the area was one of honor-shame. God's intention was always radical community.

Application

Jesus' interpretation of God's Law must have seemed completely radical to His disciples when they first heard it. Some of their core understandings were turned upside down. Jesus' teaching has remained consistent across nearly two millennium. However, the context of society and church has radically changed across this same timeframe. If Jesus were to give this sermon to us today, what might He say to us?

You have heard it said that... (Modern interpretation)	But I say to you...

