

Grace to you and peace from God our creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We've been reading from the fifth chapter of Matthew for several weeks now, and because of the way Easter falls this year we won't get to the end of the chapter. I think it's pretty important to get there, because without the ending it's much harder to understand what Jesus is up to here. So let me read you those last eleven verses now:

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; <sup>40</sup> and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; <sup>41</sup> and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. <sup>42</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This extended reading gives us an important corrective to two of the most common approaches to the Christian faith. You could call them the conservative and the liberal options, I suppose. The conservative option thinks that our relationship with God, and our general well-being, depend upon our obeying the rules that God has given in the Bible, particularly the Ten Commandments. Remember the fights some years back about displaying the Ten Commandments in public courtrooms and classrooms? Those who were pushing for that believe that obeying those rules is important not only for the personal life of Christians, but for the collective life of the whole country.

The liberal option thinks of Jesus as someone who put an end to all that legalism. God doesn't care about us following rules. God wants us to be free of all that nonsense, to be led by the Spirit and love each other. You don't need a list of commandments to do that. Just do what you know is right and "don't be evil," to borrow a phrase made famous by Google's code of conduct.

Jesus takes both of these approaches to task here in his Sermon on the Mount. To both of them he says, this isn't as simple or straightforward as you'd like to make it. To the liberal approach he says, these commandments absolutely *do* matter, and he makes it clear that he has not come to get rid of them. To the conservative approach he says that merely following the letter of the commandments is not enough, even if it were possible. God's law is not just a checklist of items that you can go down and assume you've made yourself right with God.

Before we look more closely at some of the examples here, I want to touch on three things by way of background. First, more than any of the other Gospels, Matthew thinks of Jesus as a kind of new and better Moses, and the Sermon on the Mount is a parallel to Moses receiving the commandments of God on Mount Sinai. But it is also a commentary on those commandments. In this section Jesus is dealing with the second section of the commandments, the ones that have to do with our relationship to our fellow human beings. He tackles the fifth commandment, do not kill, then goes on to the sixth on adultery, the seventh on bearing false witness, and then, in a roundabout way, the eighth commandment on stealing. Second, the original law of God that is being commented on here was given not as the sum total of everything God intended for the people of Israel to do and to avoid, but as a kind of bare minimum to keep them from tearing each other and their community apart. And third, I'm not going to deal with Jesus' words about divorce here. And

that's because I don't have time to do them justice. We can tackle that in Adult Sunday School sometime if you're interested. Past experience tells me, though, that that is what you heard the loudest in that reading, so let me just say this for now: our assumptions about what marriage and divorce are are so different from the assumptions of Matthew's original audience that it takes a lot of work to apply Jesus' words to our context. Suffice it to say that Jesus is probably not saying what you think he's saying here.

Okay, now let's look at the specifics. Notice how Jesus makes all of the commandments harder. If there is a line that is crossed when we break a commandment, Jesus wants us as far from that line as possible. So, not only don't murder, but don't even start down the road toward murder by being angry at people, or by insulting them. Not only don't commit adultery, but don't look upon anyone but your spouse with desire. Not only don't swear falsely, don't swear at all. This isn't about colorful language, by the way. I'm not even sure where that supposedly Christian scruple comes from exactly, if it's not a misreading of this passage. This is about the second commandment, about not using God's name to make people believe you when you really mean what you say. The point is to be a person of integrity, so that you *always* mean what you say. At least don't involve God in your lying. And then finally, not only don't steal or covet, but make sure you are generous to those in need, especially when you have more than *you* need. A number of early Christian theologians interpreted this to mean that theft happens not only when you take something that belongs to another. It is also theft when you have more than you need and do not share it with those who do not have enough. And as if all this is not hard enough already, Jesus calls us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors. How are you doing with that one in these divisive times? How do you suppose the Ukrainians are doing with it? Or the Christian women of Iran?

What Jesus is getting at in all of this is that the bare-minimum, restraining nature of the God's law does not lead to life as God intended it for us. It just keeps us from destroying each other. It's a stop-gap measure at best. It doesn't heal broken relationships or restore divided communities. It just keeps things from getting worse. What Jesus really wants for us goes well beyond the requirements of the law, and well beyond the dictates of justice and fairness. Justice and fairness are about evening out the damage, not repairing the breach. Healing damaged and broken relationships takes vulnerability and sacrifice.

And that, of course, is where Matthew's gospel is ultimately taking us. God's love for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is God reaching across the unbridgeable chasm that our sin has opened up between us and God and among one another. In Jesus, God refuses to demand justice and fairness, and instead, unfairly and unjustly, takes our sin upon himself, with all its deadly consequences, and gives us in exchange a new life rightly aligned in relationship with God, with our fellow human beings, and with God's good creation. That's what he means when he says "be perfect" here at the end of chapter 5. It means, in one sense, "Grow up. Stop being childish. Be mature," which Paul is also alluding to in our second reading. "Grow up and be who God has made you to be."

But that's a tall order. Who can manage perfection even in this sense? The disciples ask Jesus this much latter in Matthew, and he responds, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." And that's where Matthew is taking us, and, happily, where the liturgical calendar is also taking us. So aren't you glad we got to the end of the chapter?

The only way forward for us is by God's grace, through God's sacrificial love in Jesus, sacrificial love that works its way into our hearts and transforms us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is God's gift of new-life-rightly-aligned that we will dig into in the coming Sundays in Lent that are just around the corner. Consider today's work to be packing for the journey ahead. And as we prepare for that journey, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.