



First United Church of Oak Park

Not Only, But Also
Matthew 5:21-37
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Before I read this scripture, I want to offer some words of warning. Some of the words we'll hear today have been used to do harm. Folks have used them to exclude people even from the communion table. These words, especially the ones about divorce, sound to us like unfair indictments. It's important to remember that these were words of protection in a society that devalued women. If a man could divorce a woman for any reason at all, he left her vulnerable to a society that gave her no options for making money. For a woman, a divorce could have been a death sentence.

In today's society, sometimes a divorce is a life-giving gift. Vulnerable victims of abuse can find in a divorce freedom from the bondage of a partner who would diminish their life. We've come a long way. So these words don't hold up when taken literally, but when considered in their context, we can interpret what they may be inviting us to do today. So I encourage you not to tune out when you hear something that sounds so awful and let's see if we can't make some meaning that works for us in our context.

Matthew 5:21-37

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. 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.

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.

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.

Not Only, But Also

This is our third week exploring the Sermon on the Mount. So far, Jesus has said some really lovely things. First, with the beatitudes he reminded us that we're blessed when we feel least blessed; like when we're poor, or when we're being persecuted. Then he calls us the salt of the earth and the light of the world; high praise and beautiful metaphors.

Then, he seemingly takes a turn: You have heard it said do not kill, but I say to you not only shouldn't you kill, but also don't even be angry! You have heard it said don't commit adultery, but I say to you don't even look at another person with lust. You have heard it said don't swear falsely, but I say to you live with such integrity that you don't need to swear an oath at all.

It seems like our warm and fuzzy Jesus suddenly became a stickler for laws and morality. What is that about?

Because Jesus and his disciples did some rather unusual things, Jesus has been accused of not following the law. Not only that, but of trying to abolish the law. Unlike me, when I'm accused of something, Jesus doesn't get defensive and say, "I did not!" Instead, Jesus reframes the accusation. He says, the question is not "did I abolish the law or did I obey it," the question is "did I abolish the law or did I fulfill it." Fulfillment is a popular concept for the writer of Matthew and a popular concept in ancient Judaism. In this framework, fulfillment is how something is accomplished. Jesus is saying, what you see as me abolishing the law is actually me showing you how to fulfill the law's purpose.

Using Jesus' four examples from today, the purpose of "do not kill" is to create a peaceful society. The purpose of "Do not commit adultery" is to protect women who had no rights and were very vulnerable in the ancient world. The purpose of do not divorce was to make sure that those same women could survive because divorced women did not have options for making money in that society. The purpose of do not swear falsely was to create a truthful society where people could trust one another. But following the letter of the law wouldn't necessarily guarantee any of those outcomes. You can follow the letter of the law without fulfilling the purpose of the law.

Laws tend to offer us the bare minimum requirements for society to function. Sometimes, laws become out of date or are even created for the wrong reasons; but good laws that have kept up with the needs of the society give us the bare minimum for the survival of the society.

Here in the United States, we have a law against theft. That gives us the bare minimum requirement, but its purpose is to create a society where people can live peaceably with one another and know they will have what they need. However, there are no laws requiring us to do the things that would enable us to fulfill that law's purpose. In order to live peaceably with one another with no need to steal, we first need a sense of gratitude for the things we have so that we feel like what we have is enough for today. We also need to distribute resources evenly and share with others so that no one reaches the point of desperation where they have so little, they feel they have no option but to steal what they need from those who have more than enough.

Of course, there is no law saying you must be grateful for what you have and that you have to work toward an even distribution of earth's resources. You can follow the letter of the law and never feel gratitude or experience the joy of sharing the earth's abundance. You are not required. You will also risk the wellbeing of your soul and you will not see the purpose of the law against theft fulfilled, but you will have obeyed the law.

Simply obeying the law will not lead you to a fulfilling life. If all you ever manage to do is not break the law, the only thing we can say for you is that you won't get thrown in jail. That's fine, but it says nothing about your thriving. You can live half-heartedly and manage to obey the law or you can live wholeheartedly and figure out how to thrive.

Just before this passage, in verse 20, Jesus speaks to the gathered community as a whole, saying unless your righteousness exceeds that of the experts in the law, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Why?

Because it is perfectly legal to invest our money in weapons manufacturers, but if we do, we will never enter the peace of the kingdom of heaven.

Because it is perfectly legal to buy everything in single use plastic containers and destroy the earth, but if we do, we will never see thy kingdom come on earth as we pray every week.

Because it is perfectly legal to acquire as much wealth for ourselves as possible and pretend there is no correlation between our hoarding of resources and the poverty of folks across town, but if we do, we will never see the shared joy of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is asking what it would be like to accomplish what the law in and of itself cannot: actually creating peace, actually protecting the vulnerable, actually building a culture of trust.

At first read, it may have sounded like Jesus wants us to not only obey the law, but also obey a bunch of even harder rules. But what Jesus is actually asking of us is that we not only survive as a society, but that we also thrive!

Here at First United Church of Oak Park, we have good examples of how to go above and beyond the laws of our time to fulfill their purpose rather than just half-heartedly obeying. Not only do we obey the law not to kill, but we also go to Springfield to work on creating a safer community that respects life by responsibly limiting gun sales. Not only do we obey the law against sexual assault, but we also teach our children through "Our Whole Lives" what it means to treat bodies as holy and good and protect bodies that are vulnerable. Not only do we obey the laws against theft, we also share what we have with each other by helping folks dress their children for the cold winters in our Kids' Closet.

This is the good news: Jesus is inviting us not only to survive, but also to thrive. We know how to do this. When I first read the scripture to you today, the call of the text may have felt like an insurmountable task, or it may have just sounded wrong. But I hope by now you can hear the invitation. It is an invitation to wholeheartedly participate in the thriving of our community. You don't have to start from scratch, you can plug into what's already being done. There are so many opportunities for us to live this text: to see the kingdom of heaven realized. We can do this together.

How will you more wholeheartedly join in the work of fulfilling God's purposes here and now? I hope you'll find someone today and have a conversation, perhaps at coffee hour, about how you want to dive in and help our community to not only survive, but also to thrive