

Today's passage is part of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew pictures Jesus as the New Moses bringing God's law to the people at the mountain.

Matthew 5:21-37 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Concerning Anger

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, [a] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult [b] a brother or sister, [c] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell [d] of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister[e] has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,[f] and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court[g] 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.

Concerning Adultery

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. [h] 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.

Concerning Divorce

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.

Concerning Oaths

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.

Footnotes:

Matthew 5:22 Gk a brother; other ancient authorities add without cause

Matthew 5:22 Gk say Raca to (an obscure term of abuse)

Matthew 5:22 Gk a brother

Matthew 5:22 Gk Gehenna

Matthew 5:23 Gk your brother

Matthew 5:24 Gk your brother

Matthew 5:25 Gk lacks to court

Matthew 5:29 Gk Gehenna

Matthew 5:30 Gk Gehenna

Matthew 5:37

I was looking at Scout Merit Badges and one thing I noticed is that they have been revised and updated over time. The Computer badge of 1967 was revised in 2014 to become the Digital Technology badge. Just think of the changes in technology over that span of time. American Cultures was revised as our sense of diversity developed. And Handicapped Awareness became Handicap Awareness as we became sensitive to the notion that people are more than their disability. And Skiing become Snow Sports to add things like snowboarding and snow shoeing to alpine and cross country skiing. While some of the things have been changed and updated, the core values of the oath and laws have remained quite constant.

Even our Constitution changes with the amendment process. The two latest are the 26th and 27th amendments. Anyone know what they are? The 26th is easier - it was the 18year old vote. But the 27th? I don't remember hearing of it. It was supposed to be a part of the Bill of Rights, but didn't get enough votes. It was rediscovered and ratified in 1992. It prevents pay raises for legislators from going into effect until after the next election for Congress.

While it is hard to change the Constitution, its interpretation by the judiciary branch must also keep up with the times, sometimes dealing with issues that were not even possible when the constitution was ratified. How does the Constitution deal with digital technology when no such thing was thought of by the authors? As the judiciary interprets the law they, too, must remain true to core values as they apply the law to ever new situations.

Times change and we adjust to keep current with things. But while we adjust, we must remain true to our core values.

It is the same with our scripture. And that has always been the case. With each new situation the Hebrew people found themselves in, they had to understand just what The Torah required of them. A wandering people, a state with a king, exiles and refugees were all parts of their history. And each new situation required new interpretations. It was not rigid law but law that was flexible by necessities imposed by new situations.

We can see some of that in the passage of scripture as Jesus, acting as an interpreter of the law, attempts to get to the heart of the law and to apply it to the situations of his time. Jesus' interpretation of the law will dispel another myth that the OT was more legalistic, rigorous and judgmental and the New Testament is more loving, kind and forgiving. **Jesus doesn't reduce the moral standards; he increases them.**

Jesus' interpretation of the law of God is more rigorous than the original, but in harmony with the original intent, and given to us that we might have a blessed life. Take the cases of murder and adultery. It is not just the deed that is a violation of God's law, but also the state of our inner disposition that comes into play. Murder is wrong, but so is an angry inner disposition.

Jesus is not speaking righteous prophetic anger, which is a gift of God. Nor is it anger at some wrong or hurtful deed, but our self-justified self-indulgent anger at someone for a slight, a word or act that hurt us. Anger at the person and not the deed is what is being condemned. In our world how can we not be angry sometimes? Of course people get angry. Unjust situations often make us angry not to mention many personal issues.

The key word is "at"; when we start directing our anger **at** someone we can do more damage to our soul than the people we are angry with. And Jesus continues if we find ourselves angry with someone; we are called to make an attempt to bridge the gap that has formed because of our anger. For Jesus this is so important that he essentially says, "Leave church, forget your offering, and go and be reconciled, then come back."

Because the law is concerned not just with our behavior, but also our inner disposition, anger is a soul killer. That is why Jesus calls us to go the extra mile to deal with anger. In keeping with this, Jesus reminds us we are not to use words of derision toward other people. Those things that come out of our mouth reveal our inner disposition.

How can we live this way? It seems nearly or totally impossible. The key is to regard the other person as a child of God. As such they are worthy of the respect that status requires.

Then Jesus turns to adultery with the same more rigorous interpretation of what it entails. Adultery is not just the betrayal of the spouse. It is more than the breaking of the relationship by a physical act. It is the objectifying of another. It is the denial of the personhood of another and seeing that other as an object for our own selfish needs. When we turn another person to an object, even if it is only in our mind, it is then in violation of Jesus' higher standard of the law. How we see someone else is elevated to the same level as what we do. God meant people to live in relation to people not treat others as objects.

This is not to say that there are not some really physically attractive people. But attractiveness is not a measure of the worth of another or of us. All too often culture turns people into objects in magazines, films, literature, and advertising to name a few areas where adultery occurs according to Jesus. Internet Pornography is an epidemic. But it is just the more visible of the tendency to objectify people and deny their humanity. Some people claim these kinds of things don't really hurt anyone to which Jesus says, "Yes. Yes they do." It reduces them to a disposable and prevents us from seeing them as a Child of God.

Then Jesus starts meddling again as he takes up divorce. In Jesus' day, divorce was a man's prerogative and he could divorce his wife because she displeased him in any way. The pot roast was terrible! Be gone! In this case Jesus says the law is more rigorous than that. Jesus takes the side of the helpless party, the woman whose fate was in another's hand and says, "No. That is wrong. Your wife is not disposable; you can't treat her like something you are able to be done with." This is just one of many instances of Jesus making sure that those who were the most vulnerable, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner, were shown to be under the special protection of God's law.

And in the terms of honesty, Jesus says, "No need to say something like 'Let me tell you the truth, or honestly, or can I be honest with you?' When someone reiterates that they are telling me the truth, what am I to think? Does that mean usually you are not telling me the truth?" Rather, Jesus says, "Let your word be your bond," as the old saying used to go. More than simple honesty is not needed and it is not from God.

Most of this may seem just ho hum now because many of us have lived with it for so long. We have heard it all before. But think about it; when Jesus first said it, many people demanded to know, "Just where do you get off thinking you are the new Moses or something?" Even though the concept of a living Torah did exist, Jesus was not thought to be a teacher of it. And it can be just as vexing as it was then as we move into new areas of application of Jesus' teachings.

It is often difficult for us to apply scripture to new situations even though we have the sense that the Holy Spirit can guide us and lead us into new understandings. In my lifetime, segregation was taught as compatible with God's will and churches that tried to deal with that were too political. The pastor of the first church I joined was fired from his previous position because he believed in integration. The same can be said about the role of women in society and also the church. These once were hot button issues and we were sure we knew God's will. The same can be said about hot button issues of our day like sexual orientation and refugees. But God

raises up new voices and asks us to look again at our sacred traditions and how they might apply in new situation.

One area, to use an old expression, God has laid on my heart is the refugee crisis and I was taking steps on this, working on and understanding this concern before it became even more of a political football. In the past I know our church has sponsored a refugee. One of the people I used to play bridge with was sponsored by our church years ago. And we have long supported Vive, a part of Jericho Road, in the Buffalo area that works with refugees and immigrants. And I believe we are challenged to do something like that again. I know I am extra sensitive to the refugee issue. I am a first generation American as my father was born in Eastern Europe and fled to the United States with his mother when he was about 6.

While I was in Florida for the pastors conference, Carol Newsome of Chandler School of Theology presented lectures on displaced people, refugees and exiles, not so much in our times but in our Bible. She had planned this presentation months ago and it couldn't have been timelier. As we read the bible stories, the characters like Abraham leaving his land for a new home, Jacob and his family living in Egypt due to a famine, the Exodus, those deported by Assyria, and the exiles in Babylon in addition to the domination by foreign powers, we discover that the theme of refugees, exiles and displaced persons of our heritage continues. Not only were many of our families refugees, our religious family heritage is the same. Even our savior Jesus had to flee to Egypt with his family to escape the murderous rage of Herod.

This insight, combined with eating dinner with Rami, a Presbyterian pastor perhaps to be the new pastor of Dunkirk Presbyterian church, who come to us from the Middle East brought out our current issues. He spoke about how hard it is for Christians in war torn Iraq. He expressed his fear for his family and his desire to get his family out. They are Christians and, in this era of hot button immigration issues, he says their plight is being ignored.

It is part of our past; it is part of God's call, and it is something we can do again as we apply our scripture to the current situation. We are called, as Republicans and Democrats, to care for refugees because they are our people our heritage.