

Vicar Lucas Cochran

Sermon for February 12th, 2023

Gospel Reading: Matthew 5:21-37

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Last week we heard from Pastor Tim about the continuation from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and this week is no different. We heard last week from Pastor Tim how Christ did not come to abolish the law of the prophets but rather to fulfill them. Then here during our Gospel reading for this week, we have Christ going through some of those laws and the consequences for them being broken.

We have Christ addressing the issues of their day and age, first looking at the subject of murder, divorce, then adultery, and followed by oaths. This section of passage concerning the Sermon on the Mount is usually called the antitheses and is serving to justify Christ's words about fulfilling the law and not abolishing it by using these specific examples.

These subjects are about very hot topic issues during Christ's era, and all of them have the same major theme, that is about how we interact with one another, being that God does not intend for humans to have conflict with one another.

The first example murder, that seems like a pretty obvious thing to understand, thou shall not commit murder, and those who do are subject to judgement. That is an easy one for us to wrap our heads around today. After all murder has been a very important issue since the time of Cain and Able. But it is the next two categories that are the ones our society might struggle to agree with.

Concerning adultery and divorce, the definition of adultery being not just the physical act but also the emotional act of adultery, and divorce having clear guidelines for how it was supposed to be done in order to avoid the act of adultery.

Now in our day and age these subjects are viewed very differently when it comes to how divorce and adultery are handled. But in Christ's community there were essentially two thoughts on the subject of divorce and why someone could divorce their spouse.

One side said a man could divorce his spouse if they so much as burned dinner, the other claimed that divorce only happened in the most of extreme circumstances which Christ clearly says is only with sexual immorality such as adultery.

Christ seems to draw a clear line in the sand for these three topics that shows that appear to be very black and white.

Murder: don't do it or else.

Divorce and adultery: clear guidelines on how that was supposed to work.

Then concerning oaths, we are not supposed to swear an oath at all. How often today do we hear someone say I swear to God, or on my mother's life I did or did not do something? Oaths in Christ's day and age were how people signed their names in verbal agreements for the most part, essentially notarizing the official agreement between parties. But that does not sound like such a big deal, so why would Christ tell us not to do that if it makes us more trustworthy to use oaths?

Christ tells us that all we need to offer is a simple yes or no for our oath because if we were truly following the law as Christ is suggesting here, then we would not need to swear on something if we were telling the truth.

In my research for my sermon, I even found examples that Christ was possibly highlighting an issue in his community about how openly people would lie, that oaths weren't foolproof. If someone too eagerly fell back on swearing on a stack of Bibles, or promised their first born, it did not mean anything because vows were broken all the time. Christ was telling us that a true oath would not need to be notarized in this fashion, because if you entered into an agreement, it should be your intention to honor your end of the contract, oath or no oath.

These black and white rules that Christ's people were facing during his lifetime I think we can all argue in many cases do not make sense for our day and age. Christ says do not get divorced, but I think we can all think of at least one individual in our lives who is divorced and it's not always for the case of adultery. The reasons for divorce are numerous and can be very private.

These are complex issues for not just Christ's community but for ours as well. In two thousand years we are continuing to make the same mistakes over and over again. Christ himself shows us how complex these issues are when he later in his ministry forgives a prostitute of her sins and sends her on her way to sin no more.

The law says that an adulterer like her should have been killed as judgement but instead Christ himself forgives her.

Christ shows us that he knows the law is very black and white, but the world we live in is filled with not just gray but all the colors of the spectrum. None of us are able to follow the law to its truest form because we can see the complexities in our lives.

We are taught in seminary that there are two purposes of the law, the first is to give order to all of creation, showing us the rules in how creation is supposed to run smoothly, with no one harming another person as the law tries to prevent. The second purpose is to direct us to the gospel of Christ, because none of us are capable of following the law perfectly. Christ being the only one capable of following the law is what he means by fulfilling it, which is why his sacrifice on the cross is so important.

Christ knows that we and all of humanity need forgiveness rather than judgement, because none of us can follow the law to the letter. Which is why throughout his life and ministry you see him forgiving sinners instead of punishing them, just as he does for us.

Christ knows what the law is and what its consequences are, but instead of judging us, he dies for us. Because if following the law was difficult then, I can only imagine that it has gotten even more complicated as society has progressed. And because of his death we are forgiven when we cannot follow the law and are able to seek redemption to do better next time.

But to really drive this point home I would now like to do our call and response portion.

I argue a good example of following the law is like following a piece of music that we know. We know and understand how it is supposed to go, after all we have heard it a million times, it becomes muscle memory. But eventually no matter how practiced we are everyone eventually plays a wrong note or misses a step or verse. Christ shows us that like missing a note on a piece of sheet music no one is immune from making mistakes. But just as every musician is first taught when they have to perform in front of a crowd, that if you miss a note, it's okay, take the time to practice more next time, so that we learn from the mistake and can do better next time. This is because like reading music the law is complicated and eventually everyone is going to make a mistake. But if we do our best to follow their basic theme, to do no harm to one another, I think that is something that we can all instinctively come to know in our hearts like the muscle memory needed to play an instrument or read a sheet of music. Because we feel it when we make a mistake breaking the law, similar to how we know we sing the wrong words to a song.

Sweet Child O' Mine: Guns N' Roses

- She's got a smile that it seems to me
- Reminds me of childhood memories
- Where everything was as fresh as the bright blue sky
- Now and then when I see her face
- She takes me away to that special place
- And if I stare too long, I'd probably break down and cry

A Whole New World from Disney's Aladdin

I can show you the world
Shining, shimmering, splendid
Tell me, princess, now when did you last let your heart decide?
I can open your eyes
Take you wonder by wonder
Over, sideways and under on a magic carpet ride

Sweet Caroline

Hands, touching hands,
Reaching out, touching me, touching you.
Sweet Caroline
Good times never seemed so good
I've been inclined
To believe they never would
But now I . . .