

Lies, sex, and murder

Matthew 5:17-37

February 13, 2011

I'm a rules guy. When I open the box, the first thing I do is read the instructions. And then I follow the instructions! It works!

When I get a new game, the first thing I do is read the rules, and then I know how to play. And then I have to teach all the other people who don't like reading rules how to play!

When I find myself in a new situation or when I am presented with a new task, I want to know the rules. I want to know what is expected. That's the way I was raised. My parents set clear rules and high expectations for me, and I did what they expected because I wanted to please them.

That's how I knew I was OK, because of the approval I won from them by following the rules. I am still doing the same thing: doing my best to follow the rules, doing my best to meet expectations, so I can feel OK. I'm a rules guy.

The Pharisees were rules guys. They valued rules, they valued the Law, because the Law told them how to live, because following the Law gave their lives value and meaning. You need to understand that they never viewed the Law as restrictive or confining. The Law was a precious gift, the path to a good and full life.

Would you think a rule commanding you to eat good food -- every day! -- was confining? Burdensome? That's how the Pharisees felt about Torah, the Jewish Law. It was not a burden, but a blessing. Torah and the volumes of case law, Mishnah, that they added to Torah, set rules for every aspect of their lives, so they always knew what to do, always knew what they were supposed to do.

And when you do what you are supposed to do, then you know you're OK. Look at me! Let me tell you about myself. I have never committed murder. I have never committed adultery. I do not tell lies. I am a good person!

That what the Pharisees said. Look at us! We keep the Law, all of it, even to the smallest detail. We are good people! And that's where they ran afoul of Jesus: justifying themselves, setting themselves apart.

Jesus criticized them, harshly ...

How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You give to God a tenth even of the seasoning herbs, such as mint, dill, and cumin, but you neglect to obey the really important teachings of the Law, such as justice and mercy and honesty. These you should practice, without neglecting the others. Blind guides! You strain a fly out of your drink, but swallow a camel!

How terrible for you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees! You hypocrites! You clean the outside of your cup and plate, while the inside is full of what you have obtained by violence and selfishness. Blind Pharisee! Clean what is inside the cup first, and then the outside will be clean too!

They were rules guys, but somehow, in their diligent efforts to be good rules guys, they missed the point entirely.

Today we read some of Jesus' discussion of the Law from Matthew 5. Here, Jesus is not speaking to teachers or Pharisees, but to his disciples, to his followers, to the large crowd of folks from all walks of life who came to him to hear good news. Many of them were undoubtedly put off by the Pharisees, seeing the rules the Pharisees prescribed -- not just for themselves, but for everybody -- as burdensome and unrealistic and even pretentious. They wanted to know too that they were OK, but the idea of living like a Pharisee was distasteful, if not impossible, to them.

Jesus addresses them, these regular folks from all walks of life, and says:

You will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven only if you are more faithful than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees in doing what God requires ...

Huh? That's a surprise! Remember I told you there would be surprises? Isn't this the same Jesus who said that his yoke was easy and that his burden was light? More faithful than the Pharisees? Obeying every single one of the commandments from the most important to the least?

Remember! Remember what the Law is and what it is for. The goal of the Law is not obedience, but life. The Law is not an end in itself, but a way, a way to life, and Jesus has not come to do away with it, but to fulfill it, to complete it, to make it come true, to make it serve its intended purpose.

You have heard it said “Do not commit murder.”

That’s right, Jesus. Of course. I already told you, I have never done such a thing! I never would do such a thing!

But now I tell you: if you are angry with your brother you will be brought to trial, if you call your brother “You good-for-nothing!” you will be brought before the Council, and if you call your brother a worthless fool you will be in danger of going to the fire of hell ...

Only if you are more faithful. Not just following the rule, but embodying the spirit of the rule. Why not commit murder? Why not take a life? Because life is God’s creation, God’s precious gift. All life. Every life. Don’t take life. Don’t take away from life, by debasing or humiliating or abusing, by action or by word or by thought.

The law is not about you. It’s about him. It’s about your brother. It’s about the way you regard him, the way you treat him. It’s about your relationship. See him as he is, a precious creature made in God’s own image, a child of God. Treat him gently, carefully, even tenderly, because his life matters, because he matters. And if you do not, you are no better than a murderer.

You have heard it said “Do not commit adultery.”

No, of course not! I already told you, Jesus, I have never done such a thing! I never would do such a thing. It’s not right. I keep the rules.

But now I tell you: anyone who looks at a woman and wants to possess her is guilty of committing adultery with her in his heart ...

Uh ...

It’s about being more faithful, not just following the rule, but embodying the spirit and the purpose of the rule. It’s about what you see when you look at a woman. She is a child of God! She is a person made in the image of God!

What do you think Jesus saw when he looked at a woman? A person, a unique human being, a creature made by God -- body and soul. It’s not just about sex. It’s about attitude. It’s about relationship. It’s about honor and respect and dignity and consideration. It’s about seeing, not just a beautiful object you’d like to have if you could, but a person to be treated with gentleness and care and honor, because her life matters, because she matters. And Jesus urges you to do whatever it takes to make sure you remember to treat her that way!

You have heard it said “Do not break your promise, but do what you have vowed to the Lord to do.”

But now I tell you: do not use any vow when you make a promise ... Just say “Yes” or “No” ...

Only if you are more faithful. Why should you have to make a vow? Why should you have to say, “But I promise I will!”? Just let your word be your word. You should not have to make a protest or a vow or a promise.

It’s not just about not telling lies, or not breaking promises. It’s about speaking straightforwardly and simply and honestly. It’s about relationship. It’s about valuing the other person enough, not to use words to hide or confuse or mislead or deflect or obscure or pacify, but to reveal. It’s about valuing the other person enough to reveal your self.

We skipped over one of Jesus’ sayings. Did you notice? We skipped over Jesus’ saying about divorce. But by now, we should better understand his meaning. Jesus is not making new rules or redefining old rules, but focussing attention on their purpose, their purpose in affirming life, their purpose in honoring human relationships .

Jesus doesn’t talk about divorce in order to set new rules or define new conditions for when and where and how divorce is permissible. Jesus wants to affirm marriage, to commend faithfulness, to remind people, to remind us, it’s not just about following the rule, but embodying the spirit of the rule. The relationship between a husband and a wife is a model of the relationship between Christ and the church, between God and God’s people. It’s a living witness to the power of grace and faith and covenant faithfulness to create something that is more than the sum of its parts, to create something lasting and good out of regular, imperfect, unfinished folks like us. It is the relationship, not the rule, that matters.

You will be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven only if you are more faithful ...

It’s not about being good. It’s not about following rules. It’s not keeping the law. It’s about embodying the spirit of the rules, about fulfilling the purpose of the Law. And the spirit of the rules, the purpose of the Law is?

Love. The Law is not about lies and sex and murder. It’s about love, the love that comes from God, the love that is God, the love that is God in us ...