

“Religion that Goes Above and Beyond!”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor
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Scriptures

Matthew 5:17-34

17 “Don't imagine that I have come to annul the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to annul but to fulfill. 18 I swear to you, before the world disappears, not one iota, not one serif, will disappear from the Law, until it's all over. 19 Whoever ignores one of the most trivial of these regulations, and teaches others to do the same, will be called trivial in Heaven's domain. But whoever acts on these regulation and teaches others to do so, will be called great in Heaven's domain. 20 Let me tell you: unless your religion goes beyond that of the scholars and Pharisees, you won't set foot in Heaven's domain.

21 “As you know, our ancestors were told, “Whoever commits murder'; and "whoever kills another will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you: those who are angry with a companion, will be brought before a tribunal. And those who say to a companion, ‘You moron’ will be subject to the sentence of the court. And whoever says, ‘You idiot,’ deserves the fires of hell!...

27 “As you know, we were once told, ‘you are not to commit adultery. 28 But I tell you: those who leer at a woman and desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart...

31 “We once were told, "Whoever divorces his wife should give her a certificate of divorce.' 32 But I tell you: anyone who divorces his wife, (except in the case of infidelity) makes her the victim of adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 "Again, as you know, our ancestors were told, "You must not break an oath,' and ‘Oaths sworn in God's name must be kept.' 34 But I tell you: Don't swear at all... 37 Rather , your response should be simply ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ Anything that goes beyond this is inspired by the evil one.”

Sermon

Murder, adultery, lust, divorce and lies!

So... have I got your attention?

I'm pretty sure Jesus managed to get his listeners' attention.

Sounds like a trailer for the next box office hit!

But the Sermon on the Mount? The Bible? Really?!

Last week I discussed the passage that comes prior to this one, Jesus' famous “Sermon on the Mount.”

(a text by the way, that is at the heart of the scriptures for Mennonites.)

He begins with happy congratulatory promises that we typically call the “Beatitudes.”

Where the poor, the sad, the merciful, the peacemakers, the misunderstood

are to be congratulated since they will, in the end, be comforted, filled and called the children of God.

But Jesus quickly shatters these wonderful musings with the harsh realities of how this new community must actually live out their spirituality in real space and time.

Kaboom! Jesus ruins the moment (and since most of the folks listening to him were probably poor, or misunderstood or oppressed, then, yes, they were most likely having a moment).

"Let me tell you: unless your religion goes beyond that of the scholars and Pharisees, you won't set foot in Heaven's domain."

And if you know anything about the Pharisees then you know that talk like this is no way to capture or especially, keep such a moment. The Pharisees were so concerned about keeping the letter of the law, that they literally had little time for anything else.

Their piety was wrapped up in maintaining their own purity which often meant separating themselves from the rest of society who were, according to them, "unclean."

And now Jesus seems to be suggesting that those who seek to follow him must somehow commit themselves to an even more austere piety.

"Don't imagine that I have come to annul the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to annul but to fulfill. I swear to you, before the world disappears, not one iota, not one serif, will disappear from the Law, until it's all over."

And yet I do not think that Jesus was trying to set up a new, even harder core form of legalism.

Certainly one could understand that as

"religion goes beyond that of the scholars and Pharisees."

Rather, I believe there is another way to consider the meaning of "beyond." Going beyond can also be an encouragement to go deeper in our search for God's truth or to reach higher as we transcend mere legalistic views of defining purity.

So allow me to go a bit deeper not only into the text but into the context of today's text.

In a very unusual fashion Jesus takes the Jewish law, and begins to interpret it like never before.

Now for Rabbis of his day, it was common to sit with your disciples and discuss the finer points of implementing the Law of Moses.

In fact this had been the sacred duty of every teacher since Moses, as situations had constantly changed for God's people. Reasonable adaptations were crucial to keep the law pertinent.

What was so novel about Jesus' approach was the fact that he dispenses with a long list of prior interpretations by various Rabbinical schools of thought and tradition and boldly declares, *"As you know, our ancestors were told... but I tell you ..."*

Jesus simply quotes the teaching and then immediately departs from the traditional exegesis in order to give his own.

Over time (and we are talking maybe a thousand of years) the Law had become overburdened not only with tradition but also with a shallow formalism and a stultifying host of prohibitions, that could determine who were the most pious because they were sure that they were fulfilling the letter of the law.

But the Laws of Moses were originally intended to set folks free, free from bondage and free to worship God as God desired. And through this freedom they were to bring blessings to all the nations. But over time this blessing had turned into a curse as purity codes began to uphold the status quo and to oppress the weak.

Jesus breaks with centuries of "how it has always been," with a new way of interpreting the Law. His focus was not just on the mere letter of the Law but on the original true intention of the God's Law.

Jesus demands, audaciously I might add, that we must go beyond, go deeper and in the end, transcend the dead and dying formalism of the Pharisees.

The original motivation of God is love. God's intention then is to inspire great love as a response. And how appropriate since we will all be celebrating Valentines day this coming weekend!

But the love standard goes beyond both religious legalisms and our limited cultural understandings. Yes the standard is love but how do we get there as God's people?

And this is likely the most troubling part since Jesus makes it all too practical in daily application.

"As you know, our ancestors were told, 'You must not kill' and 'Whoever kills will be subject to judgment. But I tell you: those who are angry with a companion...'"

We know that intense emotions such as; anger, fear, jealousy, hatred and greed are what push us over the edge to commit murder. And in order to get soldiers to kill we devalue and dehumanize the enemy. "Unless your religion goes beyond..."

"As you know, we once were told, 'You are not to commit adultery!' but I tell you: 'Those who leer at a woman and desire her...'"

Wow, uh, talk about feeling uncomfortable...

certainly Jesus doesn't mean to include beer and car commercials?

And yet if I objectify another, make them a thing or a mere object to fulfill my desires rather than seeing them as another human being, indeed I have committed a greater evil.

"Unless your religion goes beyond..."

"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."

Likely no portion of Jesus' discourse is more indicative

of the realities of Jesus' day than his comments here on divorce.

In our modern context Jesus' comments seem far from liberating and though Jesus' teaching seem quite provincial by our standards, he was light years ahead of his time.

Women in his society were considered the property of men, who could simply be let go by their husbands at anytime for any reason.

Jesus was actually advocating that women should have some rights and limiting the rightful cause for to divorce to only infidelity, a standard to which men should also be held accountable.

More pernicious was the fact that no fault divorce (at least for men) was forcing an increasing number of women and children into poverty.

For us today, rather than debate the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage, we should be talking about the quality of our relationships.

Do I respect and honor my partner as an equal?

Is our relationship based upon mutuality and healthy forms of communication?

"unless your religion goes beyond..."

"Again, as you know, our ancestors were told, 'You must not break an oath... but I tell you: Don't swear at all. Don't invoke heaven... or earth...'"

Now I don't think Jesus was talking about cussing or the use of certain swear words here. Instead I wonder if he is trying to challenge us on each and every word we choose and the ways we use words to hurt others?

What does it really mean to use "God's name in vain?" Is putting God singularly on my side of an issue or of a battle vanity? Does my language make God out to be my exclusive domain? I may be completely culturally appropriate by not using certain demeaning labels but does my language and more importantly my actions put barriers up for those who are different than me? And when I do this, I put limits on the One who created both them and me! I have devalued and thus made profane that which is Holy!

One more interesting observation as I close this morning (well at least I think that it is interesting). In Jesus' day it was the Pharisees who were actually trying to take the God's scriptures the most seriously. They were hardcore and no one surpassed them. Like Jesus said they would never ignore even one seemingly insignificant mark among the written word.

But in their intense search for and maintenance of religious purity they actually were guilty of, to use a more colloquial term of our day, "missing the entire forest because of the trees!"

Jesus was making it pretty clear that purity is not based upon merely keeping written laws of tradition but on the purity of one's heart. For from the heart, he would also say later, flow both bitterness and compassion.

In the end, it's really about relationships. The purity of our hearts will be most clearly expressed in the ways we treat each other. Indeed our "righteousness" or literally our "rightness" with God must surpass the standard of whatever is considered the status quo.

But we do this, not by adding more rules, or as usually is the case, by excluding even more of those folks who are different than me, but by creating communities of folks who engage seriously in what is ultimately the "Spirit" behind God's expectations?

And of course Jesus did actually boil it all down for us into an easily memorizable formula toward the end of Matthews story:

Matt 22:37 He said to him, " "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Before there ever was any law, there was only God.
And God is LOVE!

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