

Today we're going to talk about adultery, divorce, integrity, retaliation, and loving people who hate you. So...at least you'll have something to talk about at lunch!

As I've been thinking about these teachings, I've been struck by the power of what Jesus has to say. A friend of mine, who wasn't a fan of much of the Bible, loved discussing the Sermon on the Mount because of the power and intensity of Jesus' teaching. In the 1940s, Gandhi saw a certain type of power in these teachings, and said it was "the sermon which endeared Jesus to me." There is a certain power in the way of living that Jesus teaches.

The power of Jesus' teaching confronts the broken power structures of our world. We see the misuse of power in the recent news stories of assault and abuse. How did we get to a place in which some people use their influence for harm rather than to raise the level of good? The way of Jesus confronts the broken power structures of our world.

The power of Jesus' teaching also calls for transformation. You can't help but hear the life that Jesus outlines and wonder how is it ever possible to follow. Part of the dynamic of Jesus' teaching is that it is **not** possible—unless something were to change in the human condition. Jesus' teaching points to a transformation that will be possible because of His death, and the Holy Spirit at work in all who follow Jesus.

The way of the kingdom calls to an unlikely power. It confronts the broken structures of this world, and calls to a renewal of the human condition. If we follow Jesus, we have the opportunity bring change in a world that desperately needs to be made new.

### **Adultery**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." (Matthew 5:27-30)**

### **"You have heard it said"**

Jesus is quoting the seventh commandment (Ex. 20:14). There are two things that you should know about the law against adultery: 1) it was confined to the sexual act with someone to whom you were not married, and 2) it was so serious that the punishment could be death (cf. Lev. 20:10). Jesus alters the first characteristic and elevates the second.

### **"But I tell you"**

Jesus says it's an internal issue before it's an external act. To look at someone lustfully means to look "in order to desire." Jesus believes that what you desire influences your internal being (heart). To put it another way: what you savor with your eyes, you will worship with your heart.

That is why, for example, pornography is destructive. It changes you. It changes your relationships. You have given your heart to someone and something that God did not give to you. The state of your heart impacts everything you do. The writer of Proverbs put it this way: **"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"** (Prov. 4:23).

Because this matters, Jesus says to deal drastically with desires that are outside of the design of God. That's why He uses dramatic language—gouging out your eye or cutting off your hand. He doesn't mean that you should literally gouge out your eye or cut off your hand. We know that because, even if you did gouge out your eye or cut off your hand, you still won't have dealt with the issue. The problem is **in** you. His point is that you need to deal radically with whatever causes your internal world to fall outside of the design of God. Guard your heart by guarding what you desire.

### **Divorce**

**"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." (verses 31-32)**

This is a difficult to talk about for two reasons: First, we only have a few minutes this morning; we can't unpack everything

that needs to be said. If you want more detail, we have a White Paper on our website about this topic.

Second, and more important, divorce has impacted many of us in this room. You may have been raised in a home of divorced parents. You may have close relatives or friends who have been divorced. You may be divorced yourself. In my experiences with friends and family who have been impacted by divorce, we all long for grace as we face the unique pain that comes from divorce.

### **“You have heard it said”**

Jesus references Deuteronomy 24.1-4. His statement is not a direct quote, but perhaps how the passage was interpreted in His day. Deuteronomy 24.1-4 describes what happens **if** a man divorces his wife (in a patriarchal society, the decision was with the man). The passage hinges on the interpretation of the phrase: “if the man finds something indecent about her.” And how to interpret “indecent” was at the center of debate in Jesus’ day.

In Jesus’ day, there were two schools of thought in Jewish interpretation. One school followed the teaching of a rabbi named Shammai. He interpreted Scripture with what we might today label in a “narrow” sense. The other school followed a rabbi named Hillel. Hillel interpreted the Scriptures in what we might label today in a “broad” sense. Shammai interpreted indecent as something serious, namely an adulterous act. Hillel interpreted indecent as anything that didn’t please the husband. Some of his followers went so far as to say if your wife isn’t a good cook, or if you find another woman more attractive, that is grounds for divorce. All you had to do was give her a certificate of divorce in front of two witnesses, and it was done. They used Deuteronomy 24 as permission to do as they pleased.

### **“But I tell you”**

Jesus’ response in Matthew 5 is a shortened version of His response to this debate in Matthew 19. In Matthew 19, Pharisees come to Jesus to test or trap Him. *“Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?’”* (v. 3). They question Jesus about the divorce debate. From their question, we see that they follow Hillel. Jesus, what side of the debate are you on? *“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate”* (verses 4–6). The Pharisees are pre-occupied with the grounds for divorce. But Jesus is pre-occupied with the dignity of marriage. In essence, Jesus says before we talk about divorce, we need to go back and recapture the beauty of marriage.

His questioners, feeling the pressure, reveal their trap question: What about the certificate of divorce? *“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery”* (verses 7-9).

The interchange is stunning: the Pharisees call the certificate of Moses a command. Jesus says it’s not a command, but a concession. The certificate of divorce in Deuteronomy wasn’t a green light for you to do whatever you please. It was given because the human condition was in need of transformation. Deuteronomy 24 was meant to safeguard the dignity of marriage, but it had been misused as a means for people to do as they wished.

There is a lot more to say, but I want you to see this: Jesus is elevating the conversation. Jesus is restoring the dignity of marriage and the dignity of people. If the pain of divorce has touched you, or if you are struggling in marriage, know that Jesus is for you. Jesus is for your spouse. Jesus is for your marriage. He is your Restorer, not your shame. There is grace for you today with Jesus.

### **Oaths**

*“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”* (verses 33–37)

What is an oath? In Jesus’ day, an oath was a verbal formula used to raise your credibility. An oath was about your integrity. We do similar things today when we say, “You have to believe me...” or “You can count on me to...”

### **“You have heard it said”**

In Jesus’ day, there were two types of oaths: a vow that involved the Lord, and a vow that did not involve the Lord. The first type was serious and binding; the second was not. Distinctions developed in the formulas used. We see some in Matthew 23—distinctions between the temple vs. the gold of the temple; the altar vs. the gift of the altar, and so on. Here is the issue: it reached a point where your formula mattered more than your integrity. And Jesus has a problem with that.

### **“But I tell you”**

The people who follow Jesus shouldn’t need an oath to speak the truth. Your integrity should be enough for people to believe

you. Jesus wasn't the only one to think that society had an integrity problem. The Essenes were Jewish contemporaries of Jesus. They viewed making an oath as "worse than perjury, for...he who cannot be believed without [an oath], is already condemned." The followers of Jesus should model integrity.

Even if you did make an oath, the distinctions aren't valid. Anything you invoke—heaven, earth, Jerusalem—belongs to God. Even the hair on your head, something that you may consider yours, is under God's control. Your integrity should be enough for you to simply say yes or no.

## Retaliation

**"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (verses 38-42)**

### "You have heard it said"

"An eye for an eye" is one of the oldest laws of the world, dating to Babylonian society in the mid-2,000 BC. Jesus is quoting from Exodus 21.22-25, and there are a few things that you should know. First, this was instruction for the judges of Israel (cf. Exodus 19.17-18). You couldn't carry out this law one-on-one with your neighbor. Second, among the Israelites, it doesn't appear to have been carried out literally. Settlement for a wrong was amended to involve a financial payout. Third, the purpose of "an eye for an eye" was both to safeguard your rights and to limit vengeance. In other words, if I injured you, this gave the judge grounds to grant justice for you, and it also prevented you from punishment above and beyond.

The issue that developed over time is that this law was used as grounds for revenge. We can see how that would be because we know the temptation to seek revenge. We've schemed ways to get back at the coworker who made false claims against us. We've dreamed of racing after the car that cut us off. We've plotted revenge at those who spoke and did hurtful things toward us.

### "But I tell you"

But Jesus says to not resist the person who acts in an evil way toward you. "Resist" refers to revenge. Instead of seeking revenge, Jesus offers another way: retaliate with grace. He illustrates the way of grace with three examples from His day.

First, if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the left cheek. To slap someone on the right side of the face, you would have to use your backhand. In Jesus' day, the slap of a

backhand was an added insult. To hit the left side, you would have to use your open hand. To slap with an open hand would be to change the dynamic. The insult is reduced; you are treating me as an equal. You can harm me, but you will do it as my equal.

Second, imagine going to court with someone seeking to harm you. They sue and take your shirt. In that day, there were two garments—the inner (shirt) and the outer garment (coat). A coat kept you warm and was your only protection. The law said that if someone took your coat in a pledge, and you only had a shirt remaining, they had to return the coat by evening. If someone takes your shirt, Jesus says to His audience, give them your coat too. What would happen? You would stroll out of the courtroom naked! It will be evident that your oppressor took more than the law demanded. You can treat me unjustly, but I am free knowing that injustice will be dealt with.

Third, if anyone requires that you go a mile, go two miles. Who was anyone? In that day, Roman soldiers could require anyone to carry their supplies for up to a mile. It had to be humiliating to carry your oppressor's bags. What would happen if, at end of that mile, you said, "let's keep going"? It would shock the soldier and put him in a precarious place with his officer if someone found out that he broke the law. Jesus says don't go a mile with bitterness and resentment, but go two miles with cheerfulness. By doing so, my enemy becomes my neighbor.

By retaliating with grace, Jesus is challenging the power structure. Injustice thrives on power. An eye-for-eye lowers you to their level. But to confront injustice with grace turns an upside down world right-side up.

## Love for Enemies

**"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (verses 43-47)**

### "You have heard it said"

The first part of Jesus' quote is from Leviticus 19.18. The second part is based on a debate in Jesus' day on the identity of your "neighbor." In Jesus' day, this law was interpreted as "love your own people." Moreover, the theory continued, if God commands love of neighbor, then hatred of non-neighbors is allowed.

We see this debate on who is a neighbor in Luke 10. Jesus is asked by a teacher of the law what matters most in living in the

way of God. The teacher responds with Leviticus 19.18, and Jesus agrees with him. But then the teacher poses his intended question: "But who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, making the point that love does not have a restriction.

### **"But I tell you"**

That is what Jesus does in our passage—He redraws the boundary of neighbor to include your enemy. The force of Jesus' teaching becomes clear in verse 47: "*What are you doing more than others?*" Jesus called those who follow Him to more than how the world normally operates—to love and pray for those who seek our harm.

The word, "love" is the Greek word "agape." In this context, agape is "the power to love those whom we do not like and may not like us" (Barclay). This is the "more" that Jesus called His followers to embody. Martin Luther King described it this way: "You love those that you don't like. You love those whose ways are distasteful to you. You love every man because God loves him." King put this into context during the civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. The chief of police was a man named "Bull" Connor who condoned and instigated violence and oppression. King said of Connor, "I can't like Mr. Connor, but Jesus says, 'Love him,' and love is greater than like." That is agape for your enemies.

But why do more? Because that is how our heavenly Father acts toward us. Paul writes to the church in Rome that we were God's enemies but He reconciled us through the sacrifice of Jesus (Romans 5.10). When Jesus was dying on the cross, He prayed for the very people who drove the nails into His hands (cf. Luke 23.34). God loves His enemies, He loves people who want nothing to do with Him, He loves us. We are called to love like God loves.

### **Perfect**

What does Jesus mean by that statement? This is likely synonymous with the calling of the people of God to "be holy as God is

holy." In other words, to live in the same way that God would live if He had your life to live.

Here is another option, equally as challenging. The Greek word for "perfect" refers to reaching a goal, or to a person who has reached maturity. In that sense, a person who is perfect is one who fulfills what they were created to do.

We use perfect in this sense all the time. When you say that you found the perfect place to live, you don't mean that there aren't any issues with the house, but that the house is the right fit for you. When you say that the weather is perfect, you are saying that the weather fit your outdoor plans. "To be perfect is to realize the purpose for which you were created and sent into the world" (cf. Barclay). What is that purpose? You have been created and sent into the world to be salt and light, to give a sense of the goodness of God wherever He has placed you.

Nowhere do we see this way of life put into practice like we do in Jesus' sacrifice of His life for us on the cross. He surrendered to the worst of the world. For two days, His enemies celebrated as if they had won. But the third day changed the course of history. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul described this good news as foolishness in contrast to the way the world operates. But the reality is that, those who choose to follow find the good news of Jesus as an unlikely power (cf. 1 Cor. 1.18).

The way of the kingdom calls to an unlikely power. It confronts the broken structures of this world, and calls to a renewal of the human condition. If we follow Jesus, we have the opportunity bring change in a world that desperately needs to be made new.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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