

Kingdom Demands

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[0 : 00] I don't believe our gospel reading today is one that many ministers would choose as their favorite passage to preach on.

And one of the problems is that Jesus touches on some very sensitive, perhaps the most sensitive and complex and controversial issues known to humankind.

But perhaps too, an even greater problem is that this passage is made up of some rapid fire commands of Jesus that Jesus makes to his disciples.

At first glance, it looks as if Jesus is bringing in a get tough policy. He looks as if he's cracking down and tightening up, saying, if you thought the rules were rigid before, just wait until I get through tightening them up.

But that doesn't fit with what we know about Jesus' life and teaching. Jesus here was attacking what might be called loophole theology.

[1 : 19] He was zeroing in on the way that some religious people of his day had twisted the intent of the law for their own purposes.

He was addressing a situation in which people were very cleverly using the letter of the law to do whatever they wished and covering themselves so that they would be blameless.

Their approach to God's law was distorted. Distorted into a way of looking after number one.

Play the system for all it's worth. Take full advantage of the rules. Stay away a thinking. Stay away a thinking.

Stay away a thinking.

[3 : 18] Stay away a thinking.

thinking. And he warns the people and the disciples of his day, and his warning still packs a punch for us too.

Jesus said he came to fulfill the law. To fulfill the law. He came to fulfill the law in its original intent. To establish health and wholeness amongst God's people. But over time it had been twisted and used for self-gain.

In verses 21 to 22 Jesus says, you know you shouldn't kill but you think nothing of your anger.

[4 : 39] You know you shouldn't kill but you think nothing of your anger. And there are two distinct words for anger in the Greek. The first one means a quick anger that disappears very quickly.

But the second is an anger that's nursed. It's nursed over a period of time and it's more like a grudge. And it's that second word that Jesus uses.

He says you insult one another. You demean your brother. You belittle your sister. You gossip. You spread rumors. You encourage your anger.

You hold it against one another. And then you say, I haven't killed anyone. I am blameless before God.

Words, as we all know from painful experience, have the power to hurt. Do you remember from school that taunt, sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me.

[5 : 55] But that is not true. Because there are many people in psychiatric hospitals today because a hurtful name or a word is lodged in their psyche like a bullet in the spine.

Resentment and hard words kill people more swiftly than cigarettes or alcohol. They are more dangerous than we recognize.

But I say to you, says Jesus, if you want to be judged whether or not you're faithful to God's law, then you will find that insulting, hurting, bearing false witness, demeaning or ignoring your neighbor will be just as damning as killing them.

Because killing them, you just finish the job that you began with your anger. Because in killing them, you finish the job that you began with your anger.

Perhaps it is impossible never to nurse a grudge or impossible never to say hard words. But it is possible to get right or at least to try and get right with those that we have hurt.

[7 : 40] To make friends again with our brothers and sisters as soon as possible, says Jesus. It's sometimes impossible to keep our temper, but it is not impossible to make amends for having lost it.

So if you are bringing your gift to the altar, says Jesus in verses 23 to 26, and you remember that your brother or sister has anything against you, leave it at the altar.

Leave it at the altar. Is Jesus saying that he doesn't want to talk with a disciple who does not want to talk with his brother or sister?

Jesus has made it clear elsewhere in chapter 6, verse 12, that if we will not forgive people who have failed us, our failures will not be forgiven us.

And that's not the only havoc you wreck with your loophole theology.

[9 : 06] Look at the way that you treat your women, says Jesus. Look at the way you respond to your wives. You know you are not supposed to commit adultery.

So when you decide you're tired of your wife and you want someone else, you say, I'll get rid of her and marry someone else. But I'll do it under the law.

So you give her a nice inscribed certificate of divorce as required by the law. And then say, that's the end of my responsibility.

Now I stand blameless before God. But I say to you that you are wrong, says Jesus.

If you want to be judged by the law of God, then you have to remember that the law was given so that you could live together in love and care.

[10 : 07] And if you think you found a nice loophole for adultery, think again. You may have found a technicality that God isn't impressed.

You have put yourselves at odds with what God has intended for you. All over the world today, marriage is in danger.

And its sexual looseness is one of the main causes of that danger. We are surrounded on all sides by sexual temptation.

But no matter what age we live in, the problem seems to have always been the same. It's always seemed to have been there. Because Luther teaches us, it is impossible, he says, to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts into your heart.

But see to it that you do not let such arrows stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away.

[11 : 23] Do, he says, what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago. I cannot, he said, keep a bird from flying over my head, but I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair and from biting off my nose.

Jesus commanded that we are to really love our partners. Jesus commanded that his disciples really love their wives.

love and even at severe old Christostom saw this. He said, if thou desirest to look and find pleasure, look to thine own wife and love her continually.

today, divorce has touched most of us, one way or another, and we cannot ever call it good, although there are times when it is preferable to other, most, more destructive alternatives.

But it is always a manifestation of our brokenness, and it is never a time to stand smugly before God as one who has followed the letter of the law.

[13 : 01] It is instead a time to stand before God as one who is bruised and broken by a severed relationship. It is a time to ask and to receive God's forgiveness.

It is only in terms of the power of God's forgiveness can we deal with divorce and remarriage, not in terms of who was right and who was wrong, or whether we followed some set of rules exactly.

Verses 31 and 32, we see Jesus' second straight command protecting marriage, his second straight command, and he only gives six here.

His second command to protect marriage. Jesus wants his disciples to love their marriage partners deeply.

But Jesus isn't through yet. He goes on to say, those were exhibit A and exhibit B.

[14 : 19] Would you like another example? You know you aren't supposed to swear falsely, to perjure yourselves, but you found a slick loophole here too.

And what's happened here as with the other examples was that the law designed to encourage truthfulness us, was being cleverly used to foster deceit.

And so Jesus says in effect, just forget the jargon, just forget the fancy double talk, and give your word yes or no.

Someone once observed W.C. Fields reading the Bible. astonished, this person asked, what are you doing?

Looking for loopholes, growled fields. Jesus calls us to keep our word.

[15 : 30] Jesus calls us to love our husbands and wives and families. Jesus calls us to care for our neighbors. and as we struggle to do it, he continues to love and to forgive.

I don't know where all these issues or when all these issues will hit home for you, but when I do, I pray that you will hear that loving, though with a cutting edge, words of Jesus Jesus as he says, you have heard it say, but I say to you, but I say to you, and then however, he may finish that sentence for you, one way or another, he will take you back to that old, old law, I say to you, love one another as I have first loved you.

do you see what's going on here? Jesus wasn't trying to tighten the screws on life.

Instead, in these examples, and he could probably find more for the people of his day and for ours, Jesus was saying return, return to the original purpose of God's law.

don't make a mockery of them. If you know the laws better than others, don't use that knowledge to take advantage of them while protecting your innocence.

[17 : 22] Instead, use your knowledge to serve and to care and to love with wisdom and compassion. Of all the things that Jesus asks of us, one of the easiest, would seem, would be that we should pray.

After all, we can pray privately and we can pray publicly. It doesn't cost any money. No prior knowledge or study is needed.

It's almost too easy. But then, to quote from an old Gilbert and Sullivan line, things are seldom what they seem. Jesus tells us in verse 44, pray for those who persecute you.

Pray for those who persecute you. But I'm not too sure I want to do that. Even at a very low level of persecution that most of us experience, we aren't prone to pray for those who do the persecuting.

But Jesus said, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. the words in 1 Timothy 2 calls us to pray for everyone, even for kings and all who are in high places.

[19 : 05] And I say even because at the time of that letter was written to Timothy, most kings and rulers were hostile to Christians and they persecuted those who believed in Jesus.

These were mostly cruel brutal men who tortured and killed a lot of Christians and insisted that they themselves rather than God was to be worshipped.

So what does Jesus mean when he says, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you? well, often, the only effective way we can love our enemies is to pray for them.

Because often they are so hostile to us, or so separated from us, that the only access to them is through God.

Or when we do have access to them, we find it humanly impossible to do anything because we heartily dislike them. It's hard, if not impossible, to love evil people.

[20 : 26] So, often, the only realistic possibility is prayer. But Jesus connects the command to pray to the command to love.

Jesus connects the command to pray to the command to love. in the Lord's prayer, we pray the line as we forgive those who sin against us.

Jesus taught us this prayer. It is constantly before us. So, we must pray for our enemies. It is probably the highest test of our faith.

And we remember too, Jesus' example to us on the cross, when he prayed for his enemies. There's some sort of chemistry, for want of a better word, present in prayer, that can only be described as miraculous.

Because more than psychological forces are at work when we pray for our enemies, wills. Because slowly but surely, real spiritual power is built into our wills.

[22 : 02] Until surprisingly for the disciples and surprisingly for our enemies, something like actual love for other people comes flowing, or probably more like dripping through.

But another loophole is practiced here. It's sometimes said that it is agape love commanded by Jesus that is talked about here, not eros love.

Agape love means that you wish well, wish the person well, but not as in eros to like or feel affection for the person.

And because differences, this difference is seen by the disciples, the disciples feel as if they're allowed to continue to dislike their enemies, to feel absolutely no affection for them at all. And yet by a kind of steel, cool stoicism towards the enemy, they believe they're actually keeping Jesus' commands.

[23 : 17] But while agape is much, much more than eros, it is not less than eros. It's not true that eros is a hot thing and agape a cold thing.

We really can't be satisfied that we have kept Jesus' command to love when we treat our enemies with coldness and distance.

We are to pray and then to pray some more until we're able to feel something of God's own agape love for his problem people.

And it's true that a miracle is required here, but God is good at miracles. It's said you can love without liking, but it does not ring true.

Disciples who allow God's own powerful agape love to affect them will find themselves with warm feelings, not just steel wills.

[24 : 32] Lordonia is asking this Knowledge wills oi are you s love to put love and love?

many people measuring the commandments of God by their own weakness rather than by the power given to them by God think that we have been commanded to do impossibilities and say that it is enough for our powers if we do not hate our enemies but that to love them is a command surpassing the possibilities of a human being.

But David did David did this to Saul and to Absalom and Stephen prayed for his enemies who stoned him.

So why does Jesus ask us to pray for our enemies? Why when it was clear then and is so clear now that some people are evil?

Why when they knew then that Christians were being torn apart by lions when we read now of terrorist bombings or senseless slaughter why does he ask us to pray for them all?

[26 : 11] Now Jesus tells us in verse 45 so that you may be children of your heavenly father so you may be children of your father in heaven and in one sense he means that this is one of the things that we do if we want God to be pleased with us as his children but in another sense we get a clue from what Jesus says in verse 48 and he says be perfect therefore as your heavenly father is perfect perfect and we know that God prays for all these people and if we want to be like God as a child of his as a child would want to be like his or her parent then we need to pray for them too so why would God want to lead us to pray for them?

and in 1 Timothy 2 we read again God says God desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth God desires everyone to be saved they are all God's children and God's desire for mercy and forgiveness is far wider and deeper than you or I can ever comprehend and I think there's a favorite Bible passage of many of us is that story of God that Jesus tells in Luke 15 where God seeks out the lost sheep where God seeks out the lost coin where God seeks out the lost son Jesus shows us a God who searches out those who are straying seeks the lost and waits with patient love for his rebellious children and there is something wonderfully consoling about that picture especially when I feel I'm now mature enough to see myself among the straying and the lost and the rebellious but by asking us to pray even for those most repugnant to us

Jesus is asking us to join him to join him to be part of this of his incredible mercy to join him to be part of his incredible mercy in searching in seeking and waiting for the lost of this world and so I ask you today to search your own hearts to find those nearby or far away for whom you have the hardest time praying make a list then add one a day or even one a week and add them to your prayers don't add them all at once because it's too easy to slide over them and you wouldn't give them too much attention just add one a day or one a week and then with a special focus on them give special attention to them and then we can pray that both they and you will be reconciled to God God who is the father of us all and who knows the results only God but I know and you know that what we have all been commanded to do and as we live this week let's pray and let's pray for them all Amen people in