

**Matthew 5:21-37**

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. <sup>25</sup>Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. <sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. <sup>30</sup>And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. <sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>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. <sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. <sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

*Loving God, anoint us with your Holy Spirit, as we hear your Word this day. Fill us with your truth that we may walk in the ways of God and to the glory of your realm. Amen.*

We are again in Matthew chapter 5 which began with the beatitudes; blessed are the poor in spirit. . . We should keep in mind that these “blessed are” sayings stand behind all of our readings from chapter 5.

Last Sunday our lesson included Jesus’ statement that he didn’t come to abolish the Law, but rather to fulfill it. Jesus went on to say that not one letter, not one stroke of a letter of the Law would be lost. While that may sound severe, Jesus actually understood the Law to be an instrument of freedom.

Consider this passage from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, chapter 30; Moses was about to pass the baton on to Joshua – Moses successor – who would lead the people into the Promised Land. Here’s the passage containing Moses’ speech:

<sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

The Law was actually a gift to the Hebrew people. By loving God and obeying God’s commandments, they were blessed with fruitfulness, abundance, and life. Is that not an extraordinary gift of freedom? Let’s remember how the Law originally came to the people from God through Moses. “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, *out of the house of slavery*” (Deut. 5:6).

Thus the Law was a gift to a liberated people, a freed people, providing the context within which the people experienced a life free from want, fear, and oppression. For those who loved God and believed in God; for those who kept the commandments, the Law was a gift of life in abundance.

Jesus also called the people to keep the Law so that they too would be blessed with life and all the abundance that God desired for them. In our passage for today, Jesus began with the Law as the people knew it (thou shall not murder, for example), but then interpreted it to express God’s *intention* for God’s people.

As I said last week, we can keep the law for the law’s sake without having the least care or concern for others. But the Law came to the Hebrew people as a covenant, which called the people into *relationship* with God and with each other. God’s Law is a law of love, and thus it is a law of relationship.

We fulfill the Law by loving God and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Jesus said that all the Law and the Prophets were fulfilled in this way. We can see this later on when a lawyer tried to test Jesus by asking him which commandment in the Law was the greatest. Jesus replied,

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* Then Jesus added, *On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets* (Matthew 22:37-40). Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter will be lost.

God's Law is a law of love. In this context we can better understand Jesus' interpretation of the commandment against murder. Not only are we not to take a life, but neither are we to use our anger as a weapon, nor insult or defame a sister or brother. This command goes to the very heart of our relationships with others. The Law guides us into right-relationship.

And doesn't Jesus' interpretation of this command against murder sound a little like a commentary on the beatitudes at the beginning of the chapter, especially, *blessed are the pure in heart*? For isn't the pure heart always concerned with nurturing right-relationship?

Jesus continued: if you remember that a brother or sister has something against you when you are offering a gift at the altar, leave the gift and go be reconciled with your sister or brother; then you can make your offering. Does this not sound like commentary on the beatitude, *blessed are the peace makers*?

Jesus was making the point that the intention of God's gift of the Law was to guide our lives to be an expression of what it means to love God, and thus what it means to love our neighbor.

We all know that children need boundaries and limits so they can feel secure, held, and loved. Children with no boundaries act out and become disruptive because they are scared that no one really loves them. Their acting out is their desperate attempt to get attention, and sadly for them, punishment for acting out seems to be better than no attention at all.

In my youth ministry days, I found that the young people could participate easily in an activity if they were given explicit parameters or boundaries. For example, if I just asked them to write a poem, I would be immediately accosted with all kinds of questions. How long does it have to be? What's it supposed to be about? Does it have to rhyme?

But when I gave them a simple format with clear instructions, they composed a whole host of poems. One of the formats I used was a 5 line poem; it was a favorite with the young people. (*move down*)

Line one was a one word title or subject line. Line two was a 2 word description of the title. Line three depicted action using 3 words.

Line four used 4 words to reflect an outcome. And line five was a 1 word summary.

(Using newsprint I filled in the format below for the congregation to see. Completed poem in next column.)

<hr/> <i>Title</i> <hr/>
<hr/> <i>Description</i> <hr/>
<hr/> <i>Action</i> <hr/>
<hr/> <i>Outcome</i> <hr/>
<hr/> <i>Summary</i> <hr/>

As children benefit from boundaries, we adults can also benefit from boundaries designed to nurture our spiritual lives, which is what the Law did in the first century for Jesus and his disciples. My poem reflects how the Law gives us boundaries within which we can be creative, and fruitful, and flourish, and grow in love toward God and our neighbor.

Again, Jesus was not trying to abolish the Law, but rather to interpret the Law to show that it is all about relationship; relationship with God and with our neighbor. The commandments not only call us into relationship, but they guide us into right-relationship with others.

And when we think about right-relationships with our neighbor, we can remember the parable of the Good Samaritan, through which we see that the neighbor is the one who acted with mercy toward the stranger, the one who acted with love toward the stranger. Thus do we not rejoice when we are given a chance to help someone in need: to bring a meal; provide a ride to the market or doctor's office; or pull someone out of a ditch during a snow storm?

Jesus interpreted the Law to help the people understand God's covenantal intention, which was a call to be in right-relationship with God and neighbor, for our God is alive, and continues to be present among us, leading us into the kingdom. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Law  
*Title*

God's Boundaries  
*Description*

Guiding Our Love  
*Action*

Gives Birth to Faithfulness  
*Result*

Relationship  
*Summary*