

“Attitudes and Grace” – Mat 5:21-37

Well, hot on the heels of last week’s difficult selection from Matthew’s gospel comes an even more challenging text. Have you ever heard someone say – perhaps you have even said it yourself – “how come we don’t hear more sermons based on the Sermon on the Mount?” This morning’s text from Matthew’s gospel is a perfect example of why not many ministers preach on this part of the New Testament, and why even fewer people really want to hear it.

I suspect you already know the answer, or at least some answers, to that question just from hearing the text read. Did you not squirm just a bit from the harshness of the message? Were you perhaps even a bit offended, or a lot offended as many people are? Did you get the very uncomfortable feeling that perhaps you and a lot of other people might just as well give up trying to be devoted followers of Jesus given the harsh and strict challenges and threats made here? If so, you are not alone, and sadly many people hear texts such as this one and are very, very “turned off” by the gospel message.

Even more sad is the realization that a lot of people have been and continue to be driven away from the faith by over-zealous self-appointed “defenders of the orthodoxy” who use texts such as this one to impose harsh burdens upon the people of God – strongly reminiscent of the very actions that Jesus himself went on to lay as charges against the overly-righteous of his day, the Scribes and Pharisees, in a later section of this very same Gospel.

Part of why this text, and others like it, are so uncomfortable lies in the understanding that the message one hears from the text is more a function of one’s view of scripture than of the words themselves. For example, if you have a super-fundamentalist, ultra-literalist view of Scripture, in which every word must be taken as a literal utterance by Jesus and not one word of which can be questioned – not unlike a fundamentalist Muslim view of the Koran – then this is a passage that is likely to cause you to demand that women cover themselves up totally except for a tiny eye-slit, in order to keep from ripping your eyes out and going blind. Fortunately, apparently women are free to ogle the pool boys to their hearts content, as the admonition applies literally only to men gazing lustfully at women.

Also if you’re a vehement literalist when it comes to understanding Scripture you might be happy that heaven is not likely to be crowded with divorcees. It may be a little disconcerting however for such devotees to discover that many of their friends and neighbours aren’t there under these ‘rules’ – I’ve heard it said that the highest rate of divorce in British Columbia is smack in the middle of the “Bible Belt” in the upper end of the Lower Mainland valley!

And as for swearing, as in “I swear by heaven and earth!”, I note that even the church is a bit lax here. In our rites of ordination for both clergy and elder, and also for those joining the church by profession of faith, there are a series of questions asked of the candidates regarding faith and personal conduct. The suggested answers to these questions recommend not letting a simple “yes” be “yes” but add the qualification/imprecation that God’s support will be necessary for the vow (oath) to be successful, which of course raises the question that if one breaks one’s oath in this regard is it now God’s fault?!

It seems clear then that that the messages we get from scripture are coloured and shaped by the filters and lenses of our own experiences and prejudgments. If we approach scripture with a mindset and attitudes of vengeance and punishment, then we will naturally enough hear messages of vengeance and punishment. If we put this understanding together with a recognition that the Gospels were written not by eye-witnesses but by inspired people of faith who were moved to write the story both as they had heard it from others and to convey the importance of the events as they understood them, can we also come to realize that the authors both heard the

stories through the filters and lenses of their own experiences and beliefs and compiled and wrote their books with the same filters and lenses? Take the author of the Gospel according to Matthew for example. Clearly a deeply devout Jew who had become a convert to Christianity, and with a deep and burning passion to convey to all who would read his work that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, Matthew would hear with greater clarity and emphasis those tales related concerning what Jesus had to say about the law and the prophets and how those defined or at least affected the believer's relationship with God. In the same way is it not likely that Matthew would scribe with greater emphasis those utterances that most closely matched life-long conditioning to religious observances?

Let's see if we can perhaps detect or recognize some of this phenomenon at work in the text we're looking at today. We have in this reading four examples of an expansion on the law, each prefaced with a variation "you have heard it said ... but I tell you ...". The four subjects, as we've noted, include perspectives on anger, adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths. Even in the "you have heard" part there is already an expansion. For example, regarding murder, the subject switches from murder to judgment, and then from judgment to anger, somehow elevating anger to the same level as murder. That elevation escalates with foaming vitriol until the villainous offender is not released until the full penalty is repaid.

The subject then moves to carnal lust, the mere act of looking at a woman being equated with the actual act of adultery. Again, the cultural connections with tribal practices still in force are all too apparent, and images of women completely robed in black and heavily cloistered to prevent priests or ordinary men from sinning come readily to mind. And having touched on adultery, we now move from comments on the law to a challenge to the accepted practice of divorce, condemning not the practice but the women involved. Again, cultural factors seem to shine through clearly, and both injunctions raise questions about why or how Jesus could be so forgiving to divorced women in other contexts? With the venting about women here seeming to be over, the subject returns to one of the commandments with a rather tame by comparison urging not to swear falsely, and indeed to make your 'yes' a simple 'yes' and your 'no' a simple 'no'.

If indeed we were to view this text through filters and lenses of faith that incorporates a broader picture of Jesus, a picture painted by several other Gospel authors and through the letters of devoted apostles who gave their lives bringing the Good News of redemption with God in Christ to Jews and Gentiles alike, if we were to view this text through those eyes, what messages would we hear?

If we view the first part, the instruction about murder, in this way, perhaps we can hear the message that not only the act of murder goes against God's will, but also the disruption in interpersonal relations caused by anger or denigrating also goes against God's will. Does this message not ring in concert with "love one another" as being a supreme call from God?

Or perhaps the understanding that not only the act of destroying a relationship through infidelity is hurtful to both God and people, but the attitude of being willing to ignore both vows and relationships is both a hurtful and potentially destructive attitude.

How do we see the exchange linking divorce and adultery through filters of a faith that hears Jesus himself not condemning a woman divorced multiple times? Perhaps in the same light as the previous ones, recognizing that any disruption in human relations is painful not only to the people involved or affected but also to God; however, recognizing also that in the inevitable reality of our human failure we have a redeemer in Christ who offers us not only the forgiveness that we need but also the strength and peace and healing to move beyond these

events and to be restored to where we can more effectively live out the love of God in Christ we are called to live out.

And it is through the eyes of a broader – and I believe deeper – faith that we hear the final injunction concerning oaths as a reminder that we cannot live the way we want to live, and the way we are called to live, without the help and guidance of God’s Holy Spirit. No matter how strong we think we are, no matter on what basis we swear we will be good (remind you of how we were when we were two years old?!), no matter how deeply we wish we could be who we want to be for Christ, we simply cannot do it on our own. We need God, and we need each other – and that is perhaps the really central message of these four difficult pieces of scriptural text; all four are a reminder that anything that is harmful to our relationship with God or harmful to our relationships with each other goes against what we are called to be as people of God in Christ – and this includes attitudes as well as deeds (perhaps from the deep understanding that our attitudes will eventually form and shape our deeds.)

Using a broader filter of faith with which to read and hear scripture provides another understanding that is crucial here, and that is the recognition that it is not only inappropriate to take tiny pieces of scripture in isolation to use as foundational tenets, it is dangerous to do so. We cannot take this piece of scripture, this small portion of the Gospel according to Matthew, in isolation to frame what we believe. Doing so rejects the broader message of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice, of his reframing the relationship between God and people, of his new covenant sealed in his blood. A message heard and proclaimed so clearly by the apostle Paul, who reassures us that “nothing in heaven nor on earth can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” – no principalities, no powers, not even our own dumb deeds.

Not that this is all “cheap grace” nor does it imply that what we think or do doesn’t matter. It does. We do expect to be called to account not only for our actions but also for our thoughts, and we do repent of both. But by the grace of God – and ONLY by the grace of God, not by any impossible level of purity on our own part – we also rest assured in the promise of being able to stand before God in that judgment made pure and clean and wholesome through the redeeming acts of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. All thanks be to God for our salvation in Christ.