

Echoes from the Mountain: The Sermon on the Mount

“This, Not That!”

Text: Matthew 5:21-48

2.12.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“How do you characterize the link between the heart, the choices that we make, and the kind of life that it produces?” (Luke 6:43-45)

“How do you understand Jesus’ admonition to ‘leave the altar’ (5:23) and pursue reconciliation? What do you think that says about our tendency to separate our relationship with God from our relationships with our near ones? Can you think of a time when God has interrupted your worship with an appeal toward reconciliation?”

“You have heard it said, but I say to you...”

“Would you say that your expressions of anger are typically the appropriate response or simply your default reaction? Would you say that you ‘get’ angry or that you ‘are’ angry?”

“Who or what gets the second glance, in your life? Have you ever considered the healing properties of confession: not just to be forgiven, but to be healed?” (James 5:16)

“What if the answer was not to look for the ‘exception’ clause, but to love/forgive exceptionally? What if divorce was permissible, but not mandatory? How might you provide encouragement and support for someone struggling to keep their marriage covenant?”

“Would you consider your words (conversations) an authentic representation of your heart? Is what you are presenting, “representing” you well? How promising are your promises? Are people able to trust your word?”

“Have you ever actually wounded another pre-emptively in order to protect yourself? How is my adversarial response simply continuing to fuel the disorder and chaos?

Are your tendencies toward fleeing or fighting? Where do you run when you discover the pain is ‘inside’ of you?”

“Who is your enemy? How might a courageous, costly, and creative act of grace help to turn an enemy into a neighbor?”

Teaching Notes...

Jesus has come, not only announcing, but embodying the reality of the Kingdom [God's desires, God's dreams for his good world], now among us, now available to us, as a present experience. He is going to present it to people as "*the way things are*"--- truth--- and allow them to decide, but he is not going to be apologetic, he is not going to attempt to alter his presentation in ways that seek to make it more palatable to those who disagree.

So, the central issue for anyone listening was not their anger management issues, their marital status, their sexual preference, or their distaste for those they would consider 'enemies'. It's Jesus. It was the Kingdom and whether or not they were willing to learn to trust it, or cling to their own self-explanatory version of life. It's only once you have apprenticed yourself to Jesus that these teachings can be properly heard as something more than a new morality.

Jesus knows that our good intentions are no match for a disorderly heart.

Jesus is adamant that in order to address the issue of "*humanity behaving badly*", we can't start with their behavior. To be certain, the goodness of Kingdom is "actionable", ("*Those who do the...*" 5:19), but he knows that obedience for obedience' sake provides the best cover for a disorderly heart.

Jesus is always taking us "upstream" in order to address the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23: "*headwaters*").

"heart" (referenced over 900x) the heart is best understood as the "**center**" of our being. It's essentially "**who we are**": the "*inner man, the seat of desires*".

In the Story, there is always a direct link between our hearts, the choices that we make, and the kind of life that we experience. They are inextricably linked [Luke 6:43-45].

When Jesus says, "*You have heard it said, but I say to you..*", he is not simply offering a new spin on the law or a revised code of ethics. He is saying that the law has never really been about compliance and dutiful accommodation, but about rightly responding to God and to others in ways that bring to bear the goodness and rightness of the Kingdom in all of our relationships.

In the text, these statements each represent our response in the most significant inter-personal relationships that we have as human beings [**anger, sexual misconduct, divorce, truthful communication, retaliation, enemies**].

In each statement, he **quotes the Scripture** (validating/valuing); **counters the quotation with a challenge** to its interpretation; **probes beyond the limits** of the 'legislation' itself to the intent of the Kingdom.

All of these statements reveal our propensities toward self-righteousness; our capacity for attempting to meet the "minimum daily requirements" of the Law, while avoiding the messy realities of our hearts. I call it, "righteousness on a technicality" (e.g. when you say things like, "*Now, when you say adultery, do you mean...*", or, "*Who is my neighbor?*" it's a pretty reliable indicator that your heart is not yet beating in rhythm with Christ's.)

“You must not murder...”

To be certain, there is much about our world that should anger us. There are times when anger is the appropriate response (e.g. when you're watching a documentary on human trafficking, but not when your (2) year old spills her juice!)

Anger is our default response to the interruption of the self-directed life. If left unchecked and unaddressed, leads to contempt. If in anger, I have ill-will toward you, in contempt, you're not worthy of my time. You don't matter.

You're worthless to me.

In order for anger to be healthy, it has to be aimed at some form of injustice, and harbored just long enough for you to determine a righteous way to respond (setting things right).

“If you are at the altar...” We can't worship God--- celebrating and basking in the unprovoked movement of God toward us (grace)--- while attempting to withhold such grace from another. It's incongruent.

“You must not commit adultery...” (Top 10)

Although we appear perplexed, we all know what Jesus is talking about here! Break it down however you need to, but we all are attempting to negotiate the Law in order that we might not be so liable. We attempt to distract God, momentarily, while we contemplate our response.

Jesus is, here, not speaking about the first glance, but the second gaze. The “desire to desire”. To use another human being as a “visual aid”.

Jesus knew that the purity pledges and the accountability partners, and porn-blocking software are beneficial, but no substitute for the renewed heart.

“A man can divorce his wife...”

Jesus makes this statement from a theology of marriage and sexuality that is woven all throughout the Story: we were created for exclusivity: one God, one covenant spouse.

A man was considered “right” according to the Law if he was willing to give her a “pink slip” and some parting gifts.

Jesus, although refusing to forbid divorce absolutely, makes it clear that it was not God's intent from the beginning. It's the condition of the heart which defines/determines the conditions of the covenant experience. Jesus cites the hardness of the human heart as the culprit in many failed covenant relationships. It's the disruption of a covenant relationship in which no one walks away 'unscathed'.

“You must not break your vows...”

The basic assumption here is that as those apprenticing themselves to Jesus, that we would be so trustworthy that we would no longer need to evoke the names of our dead relatives or promise to penetrate our cornea with a knitting needle in order to be taken seriously [Leviticus 19:12; Exodus 20:7; Proverbs 10:19].

The root issue here is that we often attempt to offer another who we want them to think we are instead of who we really are.

“Let your yes be yes...” It means that you are secure enough in your own identity and character that you will simply say either “yes” or “no” and allow others to decide.

It's paradoxical: we were created to know and be known (intimacy; mutual self-revelation; safe; secure), but we attempt to hide who we are for fear of being known and not loved.

“The punishment must match the injury...”

“eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”... you hurt me, I hurt you”. That sounds right, huh?

The law said that **“injurers should be injured. Just make sure that the response is always proportionate.”** The *‘lex-talionis’* (Latin)... *law of reciprocity*. The equalization was to curb the angry over-reaction of the wounded heart. Therein lies our challenge. It didn't work. It couldn't work. There's no such thing as *“getting even”*. We're going to send a message.

Know that you'll never live free of hurt (being human makes us vulnerable), but you can live free of offense.

I'm convinced that this idea of being “offended” has much more to say about what's going on inside of us than the severity of the wrongs directed at us. When we live out of an *“offense”*, we either become really good at fighting or really good at hiding.

The Kingdom response has the capacity to expose evil for what it is, to interrupt the cycle of revenge and retaliation, and unravel injustice through mercy and forgiveness.

“Love your neighbor and hate your enemy...”

First of all, *“hate your enemies”* is not found in the OT. The love your neighbor posture was actually used by some as an excuse to hate their enemy. They all knew who the enemy was. “Those people” [Leviticus 19:18]

“If you take the 'love your enemy' out of Christianity, you've 'un-Christianed' the Christian faith.” M. Volf

The apprentices of Jesus who have made the most historical impact on the world are those who assumed this posture. It's at the core of the gospel: *“While we were still enemies of God, he loved us... our friendship with God was restored through the death of his son, while we were still his enemies...”* (Romans 5:6,10)

“Perfect and complete...” Is this simply a summary statement from vs. 21-47?

teleios- ‘mature’; ‘complete’; ‘fully developed’: a person who is becoming a fully-functional follower of Jesus. Their conduct is commensurate with what you would anticipate from someone at their stage of growth.

Some scholars argue that the “perfect” is his love for all. A love that is indiscriminate and is complete in its expression. We, as his followers, are to “love completely”, as their Father.

“Are these responses difficult?” If being produced from the heart that is being renewed, I would say that they are becoming increasingly less strained and less of a conscious response (“fruit”: John 15). If attempted from a heart that is hardened and unresponsive to God, I would propose that it is putting it even further out of reach.

This life will be realized incrementally and never apart from a renewed heart, with new affections, new impulses, and a new loving motivation compelling such a response.