

Exodus 20:1-17

Matthew 5:21-48

June 27, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

**THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
THINK AGAIN! PART 2**

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Nancy and I served our seminary intern year on the staff of the Williamsburg Presbyterian Church in Williamsburg, Virginia. My job description included working with the Senior High Youth. One afternoon, after we had been at the church for several months, I got a phone call from one of the guys in the youth group. I'll call him Joe. Joe asked if he could come by and talk with me about something. We decided to meet at McDonald's in town after school one day.

After we ordered something to eat and drink, we sat down and started talking. At first it was just checking in — how's school? what sport are you playing right now? Things like that. Then Joe sort of hemmed and hawed and squirmed a little bit and said, "Let me ask you something." I wondered what in the world Joe was getting ready to ask me. In retrospect, forty years later, I wonder if maybe Joe had drawn the short straw in his group of friends and got the job of talking with me. That's kind of how it felt. Anyway, Joe looked at me and asked, "How much can I get away with and still be a good Christian?"

At the time, Joe (and probably his buddies) must have been disappointed that I didn't give him a list of what he could get away with and still be a good Christian. I hope that later in life he came to appreciate the conversation we had that day which, if I remember it correctly, was more along the lines of today's gospel message about how to live as God's people, rather than how much you can get away with and still be considered a good Christian. [Side note: a few years ago, I got an email out of the blue from "Joe." He had come across my name when he was sorting through some high school papers, looked me up, and emailed me to say hello, that he remembered me, and to let me know how he is doing. I Googled him the other day. Joe is a successful businessman in Williamsburg, very active in the community.]

Joe's question at McDonald's that afternoon is a question people of all ages can and do ask all the time. In a sense, that seems to be the question Jesus anticipates in this section of his Sermon on the Mount. You can't help but hear the repetition of "You have heard it said to those of ancient times . . . but I say to you." When I hear Jesus say, "But I say to you . . ." what I hear is "Don't settle . . . don't settle for less than what God has to offer you . . . don't settle for the lowest common denominator . . . don't settle for the kind of life that blends in with the world around you . . . don't settle for being the kind of church that blesses the status quo . . . don't settle for being less than the child of God that you truly are through Jesus Christ the Lord . . . don't settle for 'how much you can get away with and still be a good Christian'."

The margin note in today's bulletin, next to the scripture lessons and sermon, is often attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German Lutheran pastor, theologian, and anti-Nazi dissident who was hanged at the Flossenbürg concentration camp, just two weeks before U. S. soldiers liberated the camp. Actually, it is a summary statement of some of Bonhoeffer's theology from one of his biographers. "Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will." That statement certainly reflects the spirit of Jesus' earlier teachings in his Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. Whoever does one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven." As one person has put it, the kind of life Jesus is laying out for believers in his Sermon on the Mount, and especially in these verses, is not a life focused on checking all the right boxes (or figuring out how much you can get away with and still be a good Christian), but about getting one's heart right with God.

This morning we heard Hope read the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus. In *The Large Catechism*, the great Reformer Martin Luther wrote, "Anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scripture." As I said last week, the Ten Commandments ("you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . .") tell us about what it means to be in relationship with God and in relationship with our neighbors — and the two cannot be separated.

In their book, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, "So to 'know the commandments,' by which Luther claimed one can know the whole Scripture, means that these commands are not self-interpreting. They depend on the practices of a community (church) formed by the worship, in Spirit and in truth, of a trinitarian God . . . So obedience and knowledge of the commandments begin in the Sunday worship of the church, by focusing not on the commandments, but first on the God who says, 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'"¹ That sounds a lot like what we heard last Sunday from the book *Lies My Preacher Told Me*: "The Law is part of the covenant relationship that Israel willingly enters into in grateful response to the prior gracious salvation of God, experienced in the exodus from Egypt. . . The Law is thus a measure of grateful obedience offered back to a gracious God. In this way the Law is a means — a divinely given means — to maintain the relationship with the Lord who saves."²

Last Sunday, I noted that Jesus' words that come just before today's teaching are some of the hardest words in the gospels, if not the entire Bible — "Don't think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill . . . For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17, 20)

Well, it doesn't get any easier this week, does it? In Bible study on Monday night, and again on Wednesday morning, after I had read these teachings of Jesus, I asked the groups, "What do you hear? What jumps out at you?" Folks in both groups immediately

said, “Verse 48!” In case you’ve forgotten, that verse says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48) Oh my, oh my, oh my! Who among us can possibly live up to Jesus’ expectations? Who among us has any hope of living this way?

Well, it might just depend on how we hear and understand the word “perfect.” My guess is, we hear “perfect” as a 10 out of 10 or something that is completely free from faults or defects or keeping the law absolutely by checking all of the right boxes and being found faultless. But, does it change how you hear Jesus’ call when you find out that “perfect” can also mean “whole, complete, mature,” that it has to do with a goal and purpose? Then living according to Jesus’ “But I say to you. . .” becomes a way of life, a striving toward the goal of always living in a right relationship with God, an orientation in life of thankfulness and gratitude, that then leads us to extend the same grace, mercy, and love to other people that God has shown us in Jesus Christ.

What if we take seriously — in our individual Christian lives and especially in our common life together as a community of faith in this congregation — that it is our Lord Jesus Christ who is teaching us how to live, who is telling us that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, who is saying, “Be perfect,” who is calling us to strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness? Then we will remember that Jesus lived this way, and died on the cross, precisely so we can be free to live with and for our God and for our neighbors. In other words, the life Jesus describes — “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you” — has everything to do with what it means to be and live as children of God and nothing to do with how much we can get away with and still be a good Christian.

I can’t resist telling you this story. One day, when I was eight or nine years old, my big brother (who is six years older than I) and I started picking on each other. Pretty soon the tension ratcheted up and I got really mad. That’s when I called David a fool! He stopped and said, “Uh oh, you’re going to hell!” Well, that got my attention, so I said, “What are you talking about? No, I’m not!” David said, “That’s what it says in the Bible.” He actually got out a Bible and read from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (maybe from the King James Version), “But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.” I remember being really scared. I probably started to cry. And I think that’s when our mama got involved . . . (All these years later, I’m kind of impressed that David could quote scripture to his little brother!)

I don’t think Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount to supply big brothers with ammunition to use against their little brothers in sibling rivalries. But maybe the principle is true just the same . . . How will we live together as a community of faith, in obedience to God and with love toward our brothers and sisters and neighbors? How will we bear witness — let our light shine before others — by being different in how we act and live as citizens of God’s kingdom? What will we do with these words of Jesus — “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times . . . but I say to you”?

If we think loving God and loving our neighbor simply means cautiously avoiding sin rather than courageously and actively doing God's will . . . or seeing how much we can get away with and still be a good Christian . . . or setting the bar so low that we are content to satisfy the mere letter of the law rather than honoring and living the spirit of the law . . . well, we have another think coming to us.

And that other think is summed up in the benediction I have quoted before, from the preacher at the Montreat Youth Conference a few years ago:

*Go forth into the world
With compassion and justice in your heart
Give strength to the weak
Give voice to the silent
See one another
Hear one another
Care for one another
And love one another
It's all that easy
And it's all that hard³*

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you for your promises and the hope of your Word. We thank you that you promise to walk with us on your paths of righteousness. Show us your ways, Lord. Show us how to walk in your paths of grace, mercy, integrity, and love. Amen.

NOTES

¹Stanley M. Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 21.

²Brent A. Strawn, *Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), pp. 85-86.

³Bruce Reyes Chow, "BRC Benediction," at www.breyeschow.typepad.com.