

SERMON “BLESSINGS OR CURSES”

(Matthew 5:21-37 Preached to MPC on February 12th, 2017)

Shortly before our Gospel lesson today, Jesus surprises us when he says: "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill" (5:17). When Jesus said that he had come to fulfill the law, the Greek word was *pleroo* (pronounced plair-OU-oh), which means to fill or to make full. What Jesus was saying was that he had not come to abolish the law, but had instead come to bring those laws to their **intended** purposes—their Godly purposes. Perhaps we can better understand that if we think of these two phrases: The letter of the law. The spirit of the law.

People use those phrases to highlight the fact that we can follow the LETTER of the law but still violate its SPIRIT or intent. In the parable of the Good Samaritan both a priest and Levite pass a badly injured person. You may have wondered “Why might they have done this?” The priest did so because the “law of purification” states in Numbers 19 he must avoid touching a corpse. Touching a dead or dying body, even holding a hand over it, would render the priest ritually impure and could put his temple at risk. For the Levite, it is less clear why he avoids the wounded man as he is not bound by that law to avoid corpse impurity in the same exclusive way.

Jesus answers the lawyer’s question in this parable in Luke 10:25-37 and illustrates the greater need or intent of the law of the first commandment to show mercy and compassion toward our neighbor, rather than violate the letter of the law of purification. In other words, the priest and Levite had obeyed the LETTER of the law in Numbers 19, but had violated the SPIRIT of the first great commandment.

The letter and spirit were a problem in first-century Judaism: Jesus had most of his trouble with scribes and Pharisees, who thought of themselves as experts on Jewish law—and keepers of the law—and enforcers of the law. Jesus was always running afoul of the scribes and Pharisees, who were always accusing him of this violation or that one. They kept trying to trap him, and he kept escaping their traps—so eventually they decided that the only way to stop Jesus would be to kill him.

Furthermore, the scribes and Pharisees were no saints. They kept the law as they understood it, but they made a habit of interpreting it to their own benefit. Just one

example. The law commanded, "Honor your father and your mother", the fifth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:12). But the scribes and Pharisees had devised a tradition called Corban that operated like a tax-avoidance scheme today. Parents would often turn over their property to their grown children with the understanding that their children would take care of them in their old age. But the children would pledge their money to God, and tell their parents, "Sorry, we gave it to God." But they hadn't given it—they had only pledged it—quite a difference Jesus highlighted several situations like that where the scribes and Pharisees had kept the LETTER of the law, at least according to their own interpretations—but had violated the SPIRIT of the law—the INTENT of the law—what God wanted them to do.

But that wasn't just a problem for first century people. It is also a problem for 21st century people. It's a problem for us to observe the SPIRIT of the law. In fact, today, we have another problem as well. I might call it ANTI-LAW—rebellion against rules—rebellion against anyone or anything that might tell us that we can't do something or shouldn't be something.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is trying to deal with people who have immersed themselves in the LETTER of the law without caring about its SPIRIT--its INTENT—the things that God really wanted. Today's gospel text Jesus deals with four laws: Don't murder. Don't commit adultery. Don't divorce. Don't swear or make false vows.

In each case, Jesus traces the bad act back to the feelings or the motivations that prompted the bad action—Jesus calls us to remedy our feelings before they cause us to do something bad. I will try cover each of these four briefly in the time I have.

The first law was DON'T MURDER: Jesus traces murder back to angry feelings. If we weren't angry, we wouldn't commit murder. Sounds simple, doesn't it! In real life, it isn't simple to quell our anger—but it is possible. Jesus never requires the impossible. I should say that Jewish law thought of murder as the intentional and unlawful taking of a human life. Let me repeat that. Jewish law thought of murder as the intentional and unlawful taking of a human life.

Jewish law differentiated between manslaughter and murder—manslaughter being accidental. Of course, we need to be careful not to kill someone by being reckless, but being careless is different than setting out deliberately to kill someone. Jewish law also

differentiated between murder and capital punishment. Jewish law prescribed capital punishment for a number of offenses. Jewish law also differentiated between murder and killing in war. In fact, in the Old Testament, God often told the Israelites to go to war—to kill certain people. What Jesus was talking about was the kind of thing that happens when we let our anger run rampant or out of control! He warned about calling someone “Raca” or empty-headed. He warned about calling someone a fool. There are three problems with that sort of name-calling:

First, that sort of name calling wounds people—hurts them. Second, when we call someone a fool, they might turn around and hurt us—like the man guilty of road rage and a triple stabbing incident on H1 west bound near Kunia last year in August. Third, when we call someone a fool, God might decide to punish us.

The second law was, DON'T COMMIT ADULTERY: As with murder, the prohibition against adultery was clear in the law. The obvious reference is tied to a married person engaging in sexual acts with someone besides his or her spouse. As with the illustration of murder, Jesus takes this issue beyond the physical realm to the spiritual. To look at another woman or man lustfully constitutes the same betrayal as to engage in the physical act itself.

Jesus traces adultery back to the feeling of lust. If we didn't lust after someone, we wouldn't commit adultery with them. Again, sounds simple! In real life, it isn't simple to dampen our lustful feelings—but it is possible. Jesus never requires the impossible. I don't doubt that we all sometimes see a beautiful or attractive person of the opposite sex and may think for a moment, "Wouldn't that be nice!"

But true lust goes another step. It spends time fanaticizing—and planning—and plotting. The only thing that separates lust from adultery is opportunity. If the opportunity presented itself, the lustful person wouldn't hesitate. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart."

So, if you would commit an offense, whether adultery or murder or anything else, but simply haven't figured out a way to do it, consider yourself guilty. Pray that God will purge your heart of the wicked feelings—and help God by cooperating with the Holy Spirit! I should note that adultery hurts everyone it touches. Adultery breaks up

marriages. It leaves children without the benefit of two parents. It impoverishes husbands, wives, and children alike. Adultery is NOT a victimless offense.

The third law was, DON'T DIVORCE. The actual law said, "Whoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a (certificate) of divorce" (v. 31). This was to protect the woman.

Without the certificate of divorce, the woman was helpless and vulnerable. Of course, she was helpless and vulnerable anyway, but the certificate freed her to marry again.

The sticking point in this text is Jesus' words, "Whoever puts away his wife, except for the cause of sexual immorality, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries her when she is put away commits adultery" (v. 32).

But let's go back to an earlier verse. Jesus said: "Everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (v. 28). Jesus wasn't suggesting that everyone who looks at a woman or man with sexual interest is guilty of adultery. He is instead saying that everyone who entertains that interest to an unhealthy degree by engaging in sexual fantasies has already committed adultery in his or her heart.

He is saying that sin starts, not just with the act, but with the intent. We can't count ourselves innocent just because we have lacked opportunity. I can't know what is in everyone's hearts only God knows— but I suspect that, if anyone who had at some time been guilty of lust were suddenly taken from us, we would find most of the pews of the church empty—and probably the pulpit too.

The Fourth law was "Don't Make False Vows and Don't Swear." Most people when they read the third of the Ten Commandments, "You Shall Not Take the Name of the Lord God in Vain", they think it refers not use God's holy name as part of curse word. That would certainly include that, but Jesus addresses the use of God's name in an oath or promise. Swearing on God's name that you will do something you promised for example, an expression "By God or May God strike me dead if I don't"). If you swore "by God" and then didn't keep your oath or promise you would have used God's name in vain.

Essentially you would have used the trust people have in God to get them to trust you. Jesus said oaths are not necessary for people of integrity when he said, "Let your no be

no and your yes, yes. In other words, truly ethical people don't have or need to swear to God...they just need to keep their word and do what they mean and mean what they say.

The good news is Jesus didn't come to condemn us but to save. The BAD news is that we're all sinners. The GOOD news is that Jesus got along quite well with sinners. The people who gave him the most trouble—the people who crucified him—were people like the scribes and Pharisees who thought themselves immune from sin. The BAD news is that we have been angry with our brothers and sisters. In some cases, we have even called them "Fools" or a lot worse. The GOOD news is that Christ came to deliver us from our anger and foolish words. The BAD news is that we have been guilty of lust. The GOOD news is that Jesus came to teach us how to live faithfully with our husbands and wives in a covenant relationship with God!

The BAD news is that some of us are guilty of divorce. The GOOD news is that Jesus came to toss our past into the garbage heap—and to lead us into new lives and new commitments. The GOOD news is that Jesus came to BLESS us—not to CURSE us.

Friends, even though the scripture text today is difficult for us to hear, let's hear it as a BLESSING text—and not a CURSING text. Let us throw ourselves into the arms of Jesus and ask his blessing—Let us ask the Lord for his continued and steady guidance for whatever remains of our lives so that we can be a blessing to others, not a curse. Amen! Let us pray!