

# THE MOUNTAIN: WHAT WAS SAID

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Saturday, February 15, 2020

Scripture: [Matthew 5:21–37](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

One of the things that so often makes reading and relating to scripture so dang hard is that there is so much of it.

The same is true for the preaching of Jesus, actually. The Sermon on the Mount that we have been reading from for the past few weeks is a good chunk of teaching, and it would take a lot of time to hear it all read out. But it also means we have a decent amount of work to remember from one week to the next how it all fits together.

We have heard blessings, we have heard a call to be salt and light...

Today, you're going to hear a pretty hard edge to Jesus, it will feel like a lot of judgment coming really fast. Hold on. For some or all of us, this will be a rough ride... particularly when many of us have worked really hard to make sure that we think of the life of faith as more than a series of "thou shalt nots..." But in the sweep of his sermon, I think that Jesus is inviting us into a rule of life so much bigger than the ones we have often felt judged and alone in.

## SERMON

Who makes the rules in your life? I mean, really... When you stop to think about it, we as humans have figured out an amazing constellation of communal agreements, rules, and laws... part of the activity of growing up and become mature and independent is learning how to move seamlessly from one to the next. Because you probably slide right in between expectations of your home and your family, your work place, different organizations you belong to... you probably are constantly shifting contexts and frames for being a person in the world. Hopefully not too much, but it is complicated... we have to learn it.

It was not a lot different for Jesus. In fact, Jesus and his disciples who followed after him spend a lot of their time on the rules as they received them from the past, and the rules as they are living them, and well, very interested in what the rules will be when God orders the world more than we do.

A lot of the controversy of Jesus's earthly ministry has to do with how he relates to the "Law of Moses." For most of us, here is where we cut to Charlton Heston holding big (styrofoam) stone tablets... but, in reality, the law of Moses is a lot more than just the 10 commandments. The books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy spend a lot of time laying out the rules attributed to Moses (who they assume is taking dictation from God.)

These Books form the "Law of Moses" that Jewish people, including Jesus and his first disciples, lived under as their own theocracy, then monarchy, and then hold true to and fail to hold true to as religious convictions as they are conquered and freed and conquered and exiled and returned and conquered. To the point we pick up the story: Jesus and his followers, and the schools of religious thinking like the Pharisees that you sometimes hear about are trying to figure out what it will mean to live faithfully according to their law, while also living under a new law... the law of the Roman Empire, by far the most complex and widely spread legal frame work that had ever existed at that time... and also hoping for a new rule to come... God's.

So that's what Jesus is up to here: each time he says, "You have heard it said," he's referring to Jewish law as he and his followers had received it. Each time, he says, "but I say to you..." Sometimes folks call these the "antithesis" part of the sermon.

I said at the beginning that sometimes its hard to remember all the sections of the preacher's sermon. The same is true for Jesus. But just last week, Jesus left us by saying, "I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it..." He is not saying that the law of Moses is null and void. And we need to be careful, as Christians living in a world with another rising of anti-semitism, to be clear that Jesus and Christianity are not some usurping or replacement of Judaism.

In each example today, Jesus takes the law and he pushes it to its extreme, to hyperbole, really, because Jesus is really not aiming for self-harm among his followers... please try as hard as you can to follow Jesus, but also please keep all your bits attached to all the other bits... this is important. He pushes it so that the law might be fulfilled, not in its letter, and I won't even say in its spirit... but in its heart. Elsewhere, someone feeling fancy will try and impress Jesus by how well they know the law and he and Jesus will come up with this definition of the law... love your God with your whole heart, mind, and spirit, and love your neighbor as yourself.

That is a definition that goes beyond the letter of the law... and into its heart.

All of us know in some way or another that a rule or a law without heart is empty.

You might remember this from younger years, ever pull the "Dad, if I do my chores, can I get an extra (fill in the blank?)" We try and get extra credit for just following the letter, when maybe the heart of the law in that example might be going beyond to care for our family.

Let's look at one of these. I have to admit, for me, and I'm assuming for a few of us here today, this section of the sermon is one of those texts of terror which has sometimes filled us with dread, self-doubt, and self-judgment. Jesus has strong things to say about divorce today. And if you've ever known divorce, whether as a heartbreak and sorrow, or whether as a release... we have to say that it is not easy, and Jesus's teaching here can sting. It has, through the years, made a lot of people including me, feel like they were failing and broken not only in life and love, but in spirit.

In Jesus's context, though, this is a statement of human rights: insisting that women, who were without property, earnings, and even agency, could not simply be tossed aside by their husbands. Which was the problem of his time... his teaching is meant to be for justice, not just judgment.

Just as refraining from murder isn't enough, we should even watch our speech with one another to refrain from causing hurt.

Just as refraining from sexual misconduct is not enough, we should challenge those parts of our society that dehumanize one another across boundaries of sexual identity or gender.

*...to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others - Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom*

In black history month, we might wince to hear it, but Jesus can be heard to echo through the ages... "You have heard it said that you shall not lynch, but I say unto you if you redline your neighbor out of your neighborhood, or subject them to heightened policing, or restrict them from access to the polls... you will be liable for..." The rest of that sentence should be a subject of national debate, by the way. We are liable. And, as Jesus says today... we will not be free until we have made reconciliation.

We are coming up to the part of our national cycle of elections that I actually feel like I can participate in: you know, the voting part. The endless stories about other news stories and polls about how people feel about the polls really don't do it for me, and every now and then I look across the pond at a six-week election cycle in Britain and wonder how much better we all might do if we spent less time debating who was going to "do" what.

Church and politics have both gotten a bad name through the centuries, and in the last few decades in particular in our country... they've gotten a worse name when mixed together. I won't ever tell you what party to vote for, or what candidate to vote for... I'm far too flummoxed myself to know for sure, and it's not a preacher's job, besides.

According to this preacher from the mountain this is our work though: strive to be followers of the laws, those we know from our ancestors and our parents, those we have decided on as body (something Jesus quite frankly could never have seen coming!), and strive to follow the laws you know in your heart. But even more, strive to vote, to decide, to live those laws in ways that love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Be uncompromising in those principles, even if you are also imperfect in them.

We all have to make decisions: who we choose to create and shape our laws, what laws and rules we will strive to live by, how we will hold ourselves and others accountable... how we will even rise in conscience when laws and rules fail to do justice. In all these, this sermon invites us to strive for those things which bless the mourning, the poor in spirit, the hungry for righteousness, to be light and salt for them, and to go beyond...

It is an invitation to see the world, what it offers, what it asks of us, through the lense of what we owe one another and God... a law of compassion and fulfillment. May we hear it and live it. Amen.