

Text: Matthew 5: 21-37

Theme: The King's Directive

Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi during Holy Communion Service on 12/02/2017 at 10.30am

Earlier in this chapter, we heard Jesus tell His disciples that they are the salt of the earth (**v13**) and they are the light of the world (**v14**). This is not a command to become salt and light or even strive to become salt and light. It's important to get the order here right. They are not to be a blessing so that they may win Christ's blessing. He blesses them before they've done anything at all. Now, they are simply to be what His blessing has made them. They are blessed to be a blessing. That's what discipleship is all about. It's simply being the person that Jesus Christ has made you when He called you through to be His disciple.

Now, there are many different ways that even Christians miss the mark, but by far the most popular way is the way that Jesus is pointing out to His disciples this morning. Christians miss the mark by adding things to God's Law that are not there. And we all do this. We add "exceptions" and "technicalities" and "loopholes."

And why do we do this? Because we believe that keeping God's Law, by being good enough, saves us. And yet we know that we cannot meet the impossible standards that God's Law demands of us. And so, we add 'exceptions', and 'technicalities,' and 'loopholes,' in order to make God's Law doable.

Fundamentally, we do not trust that God saves us by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ who has fulfilled the Law's demands, right down to every 'jot and dot' on our behalf.

With six sweeping corrections, He wipes away all of the additions and subtractions that so many have been led to believe are consistent with God's Word.

Six times, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said..." And then says, "But I say to you."

Just to be sure we understand what He is doing here, Jesus is not 'taking the Law to a higher standard.' No, He is showing us how we have taken God's Law to a lower standard.

Jesus appears to out-legalize the legalists. **First, the law against murder.** Jesus says, You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder'... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, if you insult a brother or sister, even if you say 'You fool,' to a brother or sister, you will be judged! (Matthew 5:21-22). Jesus shocks his audience with this. His words absolutely fly in the face of what they have been taught.

We can pat ourselves on the back for not committing murder while we ruin the reputation of a co-worker through our words--we even call it "stabbing someone in the back." The notion that we must reconcile with anyone who has something against us before we can give our gifts to God, stops us in our tracks. There is no easy, private relationship to God in these words. Resentment, alienation, and estrangement from others, prevent me from even giving my gifts to God.

Maybe we're careful to keep our anger hidden inside of us so that no one can see it. We go to church every Sunday and everyone thinks that we are so righteous. But we don't love our neighbour, let alone our enemy. And so, Jesus says, our worship is hypocrisy. It's false religion. It misses the mark.

Second, the law against adultery and divorce. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28). Everyone above a certain age remembers when President Jimmy Carter famously said, in an interview, that he had committed adultery in his heart. He took a lot of flak for that—the late-night talk shows had a field day. But he was trying to speak very earnestly about what his faith had taught him, how it influenced his understanding of his own actions and reactions. How he could not attempt to water down the demands of the law. **Jesus shifts our attention from particular behaviours we must avoid to particular interior orientations we must cultivate.** Kingdom righteousness saturates our whole lives, and promises much more, too. It is the way of blessedness.

The third portion treats the taking of oaths, which is nowhere regarded as a sin in scripture. In fact, oaths are required in certain circumstances—entering into covenants, for example. This takes us closer to the truth of what Jesus is doing here.

Jesus does “not abolish but fulfils” the law (verse 17). No longer do the teachings on murder and adultery apply strictly to acts of murder and adultery. Instead, they become doorways into the examination of many internal dynamics as well as external behaviours of one's life: anger, derision, slander, false generosity, litigiousness, arrogance, lust, temptation, alienation, divorce, and religious speech.

Jesus is pushing us, pushing us to the place where we all are likely to throw our hands up in despair, and say, “Who can do this? Who can uphold these standards?” And, of course, the answer is, No one. Not one of us. It’s impossible.

What we have to understand here is that, in the midst of this family conversation, Jesus is using humour—a very Middle-Eastern brand of humour—to make two very serious points.

The first point he’s making is that the law is an impossible taskmaster. None of us is capable of complete and utter fidelity to it without the grace of God. And this is the Good News—we have that grace. We have that unexpected, revolutionary love of God. We have it, no matter who we are or what we have done. **We have the love of God, through no power of our own, not because of who we are but because of who God is. And we have God to help us with our heart.**

Which brings me to the second point I believe Jesus is trying to make. **Sin—all sin—starts as an inclination of the heart.** We don’t generally get to the point of committing murder, or adultery, without first experiencing a long and meandering journey of the heart from peace to violence, or contentment to restlessness.

Jesus is saying, Pay attention to your heart. Don’t let what starts as, perhaps even understandable anger, or disappointment in your spouse, take you to the place of actions that will cause harm. We have seen an astounding increase in what are being called “emotional affairs,” made far easier by the social networking opportunities we all have on Facebook, text-messaging, Twitter. I don’t think anyone can deny the power of these technologies: if they can be harnessed to overturn a government, you can bet they have the power to wreak havoc in our committed relationships. And it all goes back to the heart.

I think **Jesus is asking, how is your heart?** That’s where it all begins. We open our hearts to a relationship with God, we allow that grace to pour in and saturate our lives, and at the same time we invite God to search us and know us and heal us.

At the end of this passage, Jesus is speaking of swearing oaths. He says,

Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. (Matthew 5:34b-36)

Over time what had developed is a system of oaths that would enable people to look trustworthy, but not to be held accountable to do what they had "promised" to do. Depending on what you swore by, you were more or less obligated to do what you said you would. People would swear by some lesser things, because they reasoned that if they broke their word, then "at least they were not bringing God's name into disrepute." (The Bible Background Commentary, IVP, p. 59) It became a task of the rabbis to sort out and decide which of these various oaths were completely binding.

Jesus, refers indirectly to Isaiah 66:1 ("Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool'") to remind his listeners that all of creation belongs to God. The idea that there may be some parts of the world that God has nothing to do with and so we can swear by them without God being involved is ridiculous.

Jesus here is saying that integrity does not require a promise or an oath at all. The oath or promise imply that there are times when our words cannot be counted on, so we have to add these things to convince another that this time we will be bound by what we say we will do.

To have your yes be yes and your no be no, means that there is no slippage between what you say and what you do. You do not appear to be anything else than who you truly are.

Jesus reveals to us the true heart of God and we can trust that God will always be faithful to Himself and therefore to us. He will, as Paul says at the beginning of Philippians, bring to completion the good work that He began in us. God does not vacillate in His love for us or in His word to us. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthian church says this: **For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, ... was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him.** Jesus is God's word, God's Yes to us! How wonderful to know that He is faithful and can be trusted always to be true to Himself.

An Austrian Army commander was ordered to lay siege to a small village in the Tyrol. His army had met stubborn resistance in that part of the country, but the advantage was clearly his. He knew that it was just a matter of time before he emerged victorious.

His confidence was shaken, however, when one of his prisoners remarked, "You will never take Tyrol, for they have an invincible leader!"

"What's he talking about?" the commander inquired of his staff. "Who is this leader of whom he speaks?" No one seemed to know, so the commander dismissed the comment. paid little attention to it. Being a cautious leader, however, he doubled his preparations for the attack on the village—just in case.

As his army descended through the pass in the Alps, the commander noticed cattle still grazing in the valley and people working in the fields as if nothing were going to happen.

"Either they are not expecting us, or this is a trap!" thought the commander. He continued marching towards the village with colours flying, horns sounding a challenge, and weapons drawn. Although the commotion brought women and children to their doorways, no one panicked. Instead, the people of the village quietly returned to their household chores as if the threatening army meant no harm to them at all.

The commander found it increasingly difficult to maintain order within his troops. Some of the soldiers were answering questions from the children. One old warrior blew a kiss to a little girl standing on a doorstep. "She looks just like my little Lisa," he replied.

All his senses alerted, the commander still found no sign of ambush. When the troops stood in the open square at the centre of the village, facing the town hall, he fully expected the battle to begin. An old white-haired man, apparently, the mayor, emerged from the town hall, followed by ten men in simple peasant clothes. Carrying no weapons, the dignified group stood in the square, unimpressed by the huge armed force before them—the most terrible soldiers in the great and mighty army of Austria.

"Welcome, brother!" said the old man to the commander as he extended his hand. One of the soldiers immediately drew his sword, prepared to strike the man dead if he came any closer. But clearly the old man meant no harm.

"Where are your soldiers?" demanded the commander of the mayor. "Soldiers? We have no soldiers?" replied the old man with a puzzled look, as if the commander had asked, "Where are your elephants?"

"But we have come to take your village!" shouted the commander.

"Well, no one will stop you," replied the old man.

"Are there none here to fight us?" asked the commander.

"No, there is no one here to fight. We have chosen Christ for our leader, and he has taught us another way."

The commander knew no military strategy for this kind of confrontation. After consulting with his lead officers, the commander retreated from the village with his troops, leaving it untouched.

The commander later wrote in his journal, "The village was impossible to take. Had I ordered my men to fire on those smiling men, women, and children, I knew they would not have obeyed me. Even military discipline has its limits. Could I command a soldier to shoot down a child who reminded him of his Lisa? I reported to headquarters that the town had offered unassailable resistance, although this admission damaged my military reputation. But I was right. We had been conquered by these simple folks who followed implicitly the leadership of Jesus Christ."

(Adapted from The Friendly Story Caravan by Anna Pettit Broomell. Copyright © 1962 by Lippincott/Pendle Hill Publishers. Out of print.)

The way of Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) still baffles people today. Yet his teaching hold true. Jesus taught his followers to love their enemies and to pray for them rather than to take up arms. Not many Christians have taken those words seriously. What do you think would happen if we did?

I don't think that Jesus' intention is to weigh us down or condemn us. He is giving us good news about the nature of righteousness. How wonderful to know that God's intention for us is that we become righteous people, not just those that do righteous things sometimes. We are to reflect His very nature and character, to be made new all the way down to the deepest parts of our being! Thank God Jesus came to fulfil the law and provide for us in Himself true righteousness. This is why those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness are blessed and will one day be satisfied--not because they will make themselves righteous, but

because Christ shares with us his true righteousness as we receive and participate in it by faith in him.

The disciple of Jesus Christ is "salt" and "light." It's not that we think we're perfect. But we do say that perfection is what God is aiming for with us – and nothing less. We come to church, not to ask the Holy Spirit to accept our excuses or factor in certain technicalities. We come expecting that the Lord will convert the anger in our heart into love for Him, our neighbour and our enemy – AND NOTHING LESS. We see that if God were to count our sins, none of us can stand- but He has made reconciliation and righteousness possible through the Son. Will you cling to him and ask for the grace to carry on and a heart that sees things from God's perspective?