

What a Gospel text, right? This is a day that just about every preacher I know dreads. These are not the feel-good texts that are easy to share. There are no “blessed are the poor” comments here. There are no wondrous miracles or healings. There’s not really any promise of hope or indication that things are going to get better. Instead, it’s Jesus talking about the law—and not just talking about the law as it is, but about the law as he says it *should* be...harsher, more extreme, with less grace.

So, let’s just dive in, shall we? No need to dance around the edges, let’s just get right to it. There are four times that Jesus says, “You have heard it said...” and he references the laws of Moses from the Old Testament before he turns that well-known guidance on its head.

First, Jesus talks about murder: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’” That’s not enough, he says. If you are even so much as *angry* with or insult someone, you must make amends. Relationships can be damaged by much less than murder.

Then Jesus moves on: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” Jesus comments that it’s not just one’s actions that are risky here, but rather the simple intention. Even if you would never actually commit adultery, the way you think about other people matters and you should do everything in your power to keep yourself from those thoughts, even plucking your eyes out or cutting off your hands. So extreme, right? Or is it hyperbole? Surely even removing limbs won’t keep us from sin.

Next Jesus gets into divorce: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” This is the one that usually gets us the most. After all, most of us know of people who have gotten divorced and it was the best decision for all parties involved. Sometimes divorce is the best option when someone’s physical, mental, or emotional health is at stake.

But Jesus states the divorce is only permissible on the grounds of unchastity. There isn’t time here to do a deep dive on divorce in the ancient world but let me summarize it by saying that divorce today is a totally different thing. Jesus stating that unchastity is the only reason for a divorce is actually *protecting* women who could previously be divorced for any reason their husband might think up...and women in general and *especially* divorced women were incredible vulnerable and had few resources when they were on their own.

Of course, marriage is a serious commitment and should not be considered or embarked upon without an intention to live out the promises made, and it *certainly* should not be ended with the casualness we sometimes witness. However, I tend to think that Jesus cares more about *people*, more about their safety and well-being than the longevity of a harmful and unhealthy marriage.

Finally, Jesus gets to his last comment: “You have heard it said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’” He makes the assertion that you should not swear by *anything*. You should be so honest in your life, letting your “yes” mean “yes” and your “no” mean “no,” that you don’t need to resort to swearing by this or that or the other thing. After all, it won’t do anything. It won’t change the color of a hair on your head and it won’t make your word any more or less trustworthy.

In each case, Jesus’ adaptation or interpretation of the law comes off as just harsh and extreme. It is requiring people to go further, to take things more seriously than was expected before. It’s easy to hear his words and think, “Whoa, Jesus! Take a breath! No need to cut off hands or pluck out eyes! No need to throw me in jail if I try to offer a gift to God while I’m in an argument with a friend! Can’t you just relax a little bit?”

But what if it’s not just about being extra harsh? What if Jesus is getting at something else entirely? What if this is hyperbole meant to get our attention?

For Jesus, righteousness is not about simply following the letter of the law, it’s about a changed way of life. The law is not meant to just curb out poorer instincts and impulses, it is also meant to guide us in the way God would want us to go—to encourage us to live more harmoniously in community with the rest of God’s creation. It’s what the last couple weeks of gospel passages have been leading up to.

In today’s first reading from Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts the people on God’s behalf to “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” (Deut. 30:19b) In other words, God is calling us to choose life, to choose a way of living that reflects God’s intention for humanity. This *can*, of course, mean following the prescribed face-value meaning of the law given to us, checking off tasks as they are completed and strenuously working to avoid breaking any rules. But if our law abiding is perfunctory or simply for show or following the letter of the law instead of the *spirit* of it...it’s meaningless.

Instead, Jesus is calling us to broaden our scope, broaden our understanding and really *live into* that God-given intention.

This is a *lot* harder. It’s relatively simple to read a rule and then follow it as best as you can. It’s much more difficult to try and discern *why* the rule was written, what *harm* the rule is trying to prevent, or what *good* the rule is trying to encourage. Trying to live into God’s *intention* for humanity is way tougher than trying to abide by the letter of the law. It takes thoughtfulness. It takes discernment. It takes *listening*: listening to God’s Word, listening for God’s spirit, and listening to each other.

So if we revisit these statements again, we can see what Jesus is getting at. It's not just that we don't actively kill one another, but it is God's intention that we live in loving community with each other. It's not just that we don't cheat on our spouse, but that we seek to give every person dignity and avoid objectification. It's not just that we try to keep our life-long commitment to a spouse, but that we honor our spouse in every way we can. And it's not just that we don't swear falsely, or lie, but that we try and make our word unimpeachable.

Yes, it's much harder to live this way. It's much harder to discern how God is calling us to live than to follow a list of rules...but it serves a much better purpose. Instead of just ensuring our own righteousness, it serves the larger community. Living this way can help establish and maintain deeper connections and restored relationships. It is a more holistic approach to discipleship. It's not about our individual holiness—it's about what we can do to bring about God's reign in our world, piece by piece.

This is what Jesus calls us to—courageous, bold actions that put our neighbor and the community first.

Amen.