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Mathew 5: excerpts
Beyond the Law

You have heard that it was said, You shall not murder; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, You fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire.

These are not exactly welcoming or inviting words for a church! If Jesus were on an evangelism or church growth committee he would not succeed. These words follow the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, which turn the world upside down – where the meek inherit the earth instead of being rejected and belittled, where those who mourn are comforted instead of being abandoned or pitied, where those who hunger for righteousness are satisfied, not ignored or silenced. We learn from the Gospel narratives and especially from Matthew 5 what a radical revolutionary Jesus was. Jesus takes the law and pushes it beyond words and actions. Overthrowing the status quo, he challenges the common, ordinary life and perspective, reciting a list of *You have heard that it was said... but I say to you*, the first of which is *you have heard that it was said, you shall not murder but I say to you that if you are angry, if you say, You fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

Powerful, impossible words! *Do not murder* is easy and quite doable. Most of us will manage to go through life without murdering another. But most of us will not be able to refrain from calling another a fool. Jesus quotes the law and goes beyond it toward its heart and core. Everyone knows that taking another life is not a loving act! But what about killing one's spirit – calling someone names, belittling, abusing and insulting? What about disrespect, scorn, destructive anger? Unkind words and acts can kill another's spirit, destroy dignity and damage the soul. It seems according to Jesus, all insult, injury, intimidation, damaging another's heart and spirit is just as murderous. So Jesus nudges us beyond just "*do not murder*" to seeing another as human with dignity and honor, and acting toward them with love and grace.

You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Now I am going to reword this, since the law at that time was addressed to the male head of household. Today these words would read – *everyone who looks at another lustfully has committed adultery in their heart.* Again, powerful, impossible words! Again, Jesus quotes the law but goes beyond it. The law does not go far enough. Everyone knows adultery is not the most helpful, loving or constructive behavior. But what about those who look at others as objects and do not see the human, the person? Or those who undress others with their eyes, who use and abuse others, who exploit for their own gain, manipulate, violate, coerce and oppress?

Jesus makes it clear that the law is fine but does not go far enough to the heart and core, its fulfillment. Adultery does not mean sexual infidelity only. Unfaithful behavior has other forms as well – emotional, spiritual, a battering of spirit and heart, betrayal of trust, neglect, rejection

and abandonment. Besides, *do not commit* adultery addressed to male heads of household who were free to marry as many wives as he wished... what would *do not commit* adultery mean to a man who could marry 35 wives of his own and have at his disposal his servants and slaves as well? Surely there is more to adultery than sexual infidelity. In addition, who does not look at another at least once in a while with lust or envy, with desire even to manipulate and to use? Human lust for money, sex, power is alive and well. Again, Jesus nudges us beyond just *do not commit adultery* to seeing the other as human with dignity and honor, and acting toward them with love and grace.

You have heard that it was said, whoever divorces his wife let him give a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that all who divorce their wives, except on the ground of un-chastity, make them adulterers, and all who marry divorced women commit adultery. Powerful and impossible words and on the surface outdated for today! And, I don't know if I can reword this statement to fit 21st century. At that time divorce was permitted largely on the initiative of the husband. When a man divorced his wife he wrote her a certificate of divorce which read something like this – *She is not my wife, I am not her husband.* And with that the woman was sent to her father's house. This procedure was enacted by Moses. So divorce was easy, carried out by men generally, and was destructive and insulting, discarding and objectifying to a woman.

For, if divorce, like any other act, is destructive and damaging, even if it's legal, it is unacceptable. According to Jesus, even divorce needs to be done with kindness, love, grace and justice. And even though divorces are usually painful, they are necessary when marriages are on the brink, the covenant is impossible to keep, when there is violence and oppression, when there is no enrichment or love. When marriages are more destructive than enriching, more oppressive than thriving, they are no longer partnerships of love. In that case divorce kindly, justly, as lovingly as possible. Again Jesus nudges us beyond just the law or the status quo to a deeper place where we can see the other as human with dignity and honor, and act toward them with love and grace no matter what the circumstances.

You have heard that it was said, You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to God... but I say to you, do not swear at all, let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No." Powerful and impossible words again! To always say what one means takes much effort, mindfulness and awareness. Who can do it? At the time the security of society demanded that its members speak the truth and keep their promises. The swearing of an oath was an ancient and universal means of impressing this obligation on the responsible parties in an agreement or an investigation. Perjury or violation of an oath was a serious matter, the profanation of the name of God. Yet again according to Jesus *do not swear* does not go far enough. Not only one should keep their vows to God but they should also keep them to one another as they speak honestly, without pretense, with sincerity and truthfulness. Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Again Jesus nudges us beyond the words of the law or the status quo to seeing the self and the other as human with dignity and honor, and acting toward them with love and grace.

You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Again powerful and impossible words! An eye for an eye is easy and simple, even

as a statute of limitations, where the punishment should not exceed the crime. But for Jesus that too is not enough. One has to go beyond the law to its heart and core. Returning violence with violence is not the most loving response. Instead turn the other cheek. Here one has to remember that to be struck on the right cheek means being backhanded. This of course is based on the assumption that most people in the world are right handed! Backhanding at the time and to this day in the Middle East means insult, punishment, abuse and dominance. So Jesus again nudges us beyond the law – offer the other cheek, which means you are not fighting back but taking a higher, nobler road, and making a point. You are not afraid, you will not be bullied but knowing who you are, you commit to non-violence. Jesus never asks of us the easy and the simple. Again Jesus nudges us beyond just the law to seeing ourselves and the other as human with dignity and honor, and acting toward them with love and grace.

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of God; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. Powerful and impossible words! Who can love their enemy? It's easy to love family and friends. But that's not enough. Anyone can do that. At the time society was divided by clear boundaries between neighbors and enemies. Everyone knew and recognized who was their neighbor tribe or their enemy. Today the lines may have blurred a bit but if we're honest we know that many lines still exist and that it's easy to love family and friends. But it takes courage and commitment, a higher and nobler awareness to love the enemy, the rejected, the fallen. I remember counseling a parishioner whose close family friend and godfather of their children was convicted of internet pornography. She was very distraught. Did she know this man, was he the good loving friend she had known, or was he a criminal? I asked her – who is this man to you? Is he defined only by his failures, belligerence, clumsiness, stupidity and broken humanity, or can you see him as a dear friend who has fallen, failed and made a mess? Besides, when would he need a friend more than this moment? A few days later she reported that she and her husband were the only friends this man had. Everyone else, including his family, had rejected and abandoned him. Again, Jesus nudges us to go beyond the law, beyond the ordinary status quo, to seeing ourselves and the other as human with dignity and honor, and acting toward them with amazing love and grace.

These words are not easy to speak or implement in a world where people are often violent, mass murdering, human trafficking, exploiting... Yet, we are called to a better, higher, nobler, more loving and gracious way. And isn't that the point of the law? By doing right, by being kind we become loving and just to one another. For, one can keep the law but if they are hateful and vengeful in their heart they've generally missed the point. For the Hebrews of Jesus' day the covenant was the keeping of the law. For Jesus the covenant was the living of love, the fulfillment, the heart of the law. This perspective at the time and to this day is the revolutionary way of grace, the radical way of peace, the dignified way of love and the elegant way of nonviolence. It is the road less travelled, the path less taken. For, we humans are a fearful bunch. Yet this is the only way for a life of meaning, a journey that is walked in the footsteps of Jesus – a life that can change and transform the world.