

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
"God's Ways Lead to Life"  
Matthew 5:21-37

A number of years ago a man named Jimmy Carter sent people all over the country scurrying to their Bibles to read the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew.

You might remember, that Carter had just given an interview to Hugh Hefner's Magazine. And in that interview, while saying that he had never committed adultery, the man who would become our 39th President did admit to the sin of lust.

But in the Sermon on the Mount, lust is equivalent to adultery.

As curious Americans got reacquainted with Jesus' sermon in Matthew chapter five, they were in for other shocks as well. While Jesus agreed with the commandment that condemned murder, he put anger and insults on the same level.

Divorce was allowed in the Jewish law, but in this sermon Jesus comes down hard on Jewish men who treated divorce casually. For women of that time, who had no say in the matter, this was good news. But for the men, it was similar to ending "no fault divorce laws." These were difficult words to hear.

So how are these hard sayings of Jesus to be understood today?

As you might guess, a variety of explanations have been offered to help us understand the hard demands of Matthew 5. For example, intentional exaggeration is one suggestion.

So according to that interpretation, Jesus was just using hyperbole to make a point. Like when he warned his disciples to remove the logs from their own eyes, before putting themselves in the place of judgment.

We all understand Jesus did not mean this literally, but that that he was using strong exaggeration to make a point.

It was the same thing when he said,  
"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.  
And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off."  
Clearly that was hyperbole.

But we have to be careful not to understand all of the hard sayings of Jesus in this way. While hyperbole can surprise us and get our attention, We can't write off the Sermon on the Mount as a sermon full of hyperbole.

A second suggestion for how to understand this sermon is sometimes called the theory of the impossible ideal.<sup>1</sup>

In this view, Jesus put forth his demands knowing full well that they could not be obeyed. For example, when he chose to equate adultery and lust, he knew that was an impossible ideal.

And that was the point. According to this view, Jesus raised the standards of obedience high enough that all would fail.

We would all would recognize their sinfulness, and experience the need for forgiveness. The impossible ideal would drive us to our knees, from which God would lift us up.

Granted, it is true that we always live in the need of forgiveness. And it's true that we can't hear the good news of God' love, if we aren't honest about our sin.

But I'm convinced, that when Jesus said, "Don't lust," he really meant it.

He wasn't exaggerating for effect and he wasn't trying to lift up an impossible ideal. He teaching us to go beyond, to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees

...which was only an outer righteousness, a veneer of righteousness,  
...one that others could see from the outside, without knowing the condition of the heart

He was teaching us to obey not just the letter of the law, don't commit adultery,  
He was teaching us to obey the spirit of the law, as well.

Don't lust after someone who is not your husband or wife. Don't covet. Don't wish you were with someone else. Or as the Apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12,

*"Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world,  
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds  
so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature."*

And do you want to know the main reason, I don't believe Jesus or Paul is giving us an impossible ideal? ...laws we can't possibly keep?

It's because at the heart of God's law is his love for sinners.  
And not just God's willingness to forgive when we do sin,  
but also to empower us to follow his ways, so that we experience Life!

That's why Jesus also taught,

*"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*

That's also why in today's first reading, it says,

*"If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments... then you shall Live.. and the LORD will bless you."*

What Jesus is teaching us is not an impossible ideal...  
but rather a pathway to experiencing life.

In your anger, do not sin. Do not insult your brother or sister,  
and your relationships will be blessed.

Do not lust, and your marriage will be blessed, or your life as a single person will be blessed.  
God's ways, are life-giving.  
God's ways, lead to blessing.

That's all true, but there's more.

I think the real genius in the Sermon on the Mount is the way in which it focuses not on rules,  
but on Jesus. The heart of the sermon is the one who sets his Word, over against the rules of  
the Jewish religion.

Like when Jesus said,

*"You have heard it was said to those of ancient times...but I say to you"*

The key to this sermon is not the rules, but Jesus Christ himself.

It was Jesus who healed a blind man on the Sabbath, even though it stirred up trouble.

It was Jesus who ate in the house of Simon the leper,  
though in the eyes of the Pharisees that made him ritually unclean.

It was Jesus who invited himself to dinner with Zacchaeus, because the tax cheat was  
still loved by God.

It was Jesus who broke every man-made rule in the book, in order to do the will of God.

Finally, it was Jesus who was accused by the religious authorities, condemned by Pilate,  
and nailed to the tree by the man-made law-keepers.

Jesus died at the hands of those committed to the old ways,  
Jesus died pointing to the new ways of God's kingdom.  
Freedom from the dead-end teachings of the Pharisees.

Love triumphing over hate.

And Life conquering over death.

With man, following God's ways is impossible.

With will-power or human effort, we will either fail or be filled with pride.

By with God all things are possible.

When we are connected to the True Vine, his life lives within us, and through us.

So let the fruits of the Spirit, give testimony to God's power in your life and mine. Amen

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount* p. 6