

“Beyond Ethical Minimalism”
Matthew 5:21-37
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February 12, 2017

When Ian was younger, he had a saying that was at first quite humorous, and then a bit entertaining, but finally downright irritating, especially to his mother. He would use the saying after being confronted with the reality of something he had not done, like straightening up his room or taking out the trash. “Well,” he would say, “At least no whales died today.” Margaret had a similar saying about food which I will not reference here lest I be hit by a projectile hurled from the balcony!

At least no whales died today... Or sometimes he would put it in the interrogative mood - did any whales die? It could be viewed as a word of perspective – I should have done better, but the world has not ended – or as a kind of ethical minimalism – if I haven’t done the worst, then whatever I have done or not done is not a big deal.

We know how this works. We live in a time of ethical minimalism wherein basic values like honesty and integrity have all but disappeared. Rationalization has become the norm and it’s not just teenagers who engage in this practice. When confronted with the reality of problematic behavior, no one ever seems to take responsibility. Rather, the norm is to try to deny something I have said or done, or to direct attention away from myself by pointing to something someone else has done that is supposedly more offensive. “Yea, I may have lied, cheated, distorted and betrayed, but look at what he did!” Did any whales die?

Jesus is not an ethical minimalist. In last week’s reading from The Sermon on the Mount, he says that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. Not one letter of the law will pass away and anyone who denies the value of the law, religious law, Torah, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Finally, he concludes, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus then illustrates this principle with a series of sayings that follow a formula that goes like this. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times... but I say to you...” In other words, “The old teaching was this... but my teaching is this...” and in every instance, he demands more of his hearers, not less. To be fair, he is really getting at the intent of the law, but in each case, he extends the requirements of the sacred teaching, he moves beyond ethical minimalism.

This may feel oppressive, especially with sayings like the ones on adultery and divorce. This may seem unlike Jesus, heavy on judgment and light on grace. Surely we are not to take literally the words about tearing out eyes and cutting off hands. Surely we need to interpret his words about divorce in the light of the cultural realities of his time. But even if there is room for interpretation, this seems unlike Jesus. We are accustomed to him bringing grace and healing. We think of him as welcoming those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. We think of him as loving everyone. What do we do with this demanding Jesus?

Perhaps we might think of his demands as a kind of love, a way of expressing his belief in us, his confidence that we are capable of more than the bare minimum of ethical conduct. Think of the way coaches talk to basketball players, sometimes yelling. Dana’s father gets upset when Cal yells at the UK players and we try to tell him it’s partly because they couldn’t hear him if he didn’t yell, but mostly because he wants them to get better. Sometimes a gentle word can get through, one can attract more flies with sugar than with vinegar, as Dana’s mother used to say. But often it takes a more forceful word, something short of Bobby Knight abuse, but the direct confrontation of Roy or K or Cal...

The alternative would be for a coach to shrug his/her shoulders and say, “Well, that was bad defense, but it’s probably the best you’re capable of. That was a selfish play, but you’re a selfish player and we’re a selfish team. A half-hearted effort is all I expect of someone like you.” Would any player want to hear this? Do we really want our Lord to expect the minimum of us? Of course not!

So, Jesus loves us so much that he expects us to live up to a high standard. It’s not that we have to attain perfection in order to be loved

by him and God. It's that in response to grace, we are invited to live into our true potential. And Jesus talks about this potential in very specific ways, naming core teachings of faith and expanding their meaning, beginning with a teaching about how we treat other people.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not commit murder...’” he says, “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.” Not committing murder is a petty low standard. It's better than committing murder, but the real calling is to love one another, to treat all people with respect, and when we have differences, not to hold on to and nurse our anger, but to find a way to forgiveness and healing.

In fact, Jesus says that if we have unresolved issues with others, we ought not come before God and act like we are God's holy people offering worship and devotion. We need to resolve our issues with others first to be right with God. 1 John 4:20 goes so far as to say that if we claim to love God but hate our brothers and sisters, we are liars! It is a strong word, but a word which squares with the teaching of Jesus.

So, when it comes to how we relate to others, Jesus extends the minimal standard of simply not committing murder to not holding onto anger, not insulting others, not calling each other names like “fool.” I assume this applies to all forms of communication, including social media like Facebook and Twitter... And part of the wisdom here is that if we deal with our anger early on, there is far less opportunity for it to lead to various forms of destructive behavior, including murder.

Jesus also extends the old teaching about adultery, saying that if a man even looks at a woman with lust, he already has committed adultery with her in his heart. It brings back memories of an interview President Carter did many years ago... The point is not that the feeling is just as bad as acting on it, but that just because we haven't acted doesn't mean we are innocent. None of us is innocent. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, according the Apostle Paul writing to the church at Rome (Romans 3:23).

As I have said, surely we are not to take literally the calling to pluck out our eye and cut off our hand. Even the idea of a literal hell is suspect. As Franciscan Richard Rohr puts it, what kind of God is so petty as to punish those who don't like him? In this view, he says, God is smaller than most of our friends. Hell is a condition of separation from God, self-chosen, but this condition exists. In fact, it begins in this life when we live apart from God and God's ways. Some of us are living in Hell right now. As Catherine of Sienna put it, it is Heaven all the way to Heaven and it is Hell all the way to Hell. So, while we might not take this teaching literally, we should take it seriously.

The point is not to avoid adultery because God has made an arbitrary rule that we are not to break and Jesus has made the rule even more strict. The point is that God has made us for love, not just lust. Lust is a hunger that is never satisfied while love is a gift that fills us completely. So, Jesus points us in the direction of the more fulfilling path. He expects more of us and he wants more for us.

Now, when it comes to his teaching on divorce, we are faced with a decision. Do we take his teaching literally, as is, or do we interpret in light of its context, a context where men can divorce their wives, and often for little reason, anything displeasing, like a bad meal, or a more attractive woman, but women cannot divorce their husbands?

As a child of divorced parents, a biblical student who knows a good bit about first-century realities and a believer in the overarching grace and compassion of God, I am strongly inclined to interpret this passage. Some couples grow so far apart, even if there is no unchastity, that they and their children are better off if they divorce. It may not be ideal, but it is the best possibility in the real world.

But as we interpret, we need to keep a couple of things in mind. First, we have created room for interpretation on a direct word from Jesus on this subject for reasons that make sense, but we need to keep this in mind on other subjects. It is not fair to pick and choose passages to be interpreted in light of historical evidence and present realities.

Second, as with the previous teaching, while we may not be required to take this teaching literally, we should take it seriously. Jesus

is calling us to value marriage highly, to value matters of loyalty highly, to value relationships as a kind of covenant. Again, he is not extending an arbitrary standard. He is assuming that enduring, loving relationships are God's intent because they bring us a deep sense of fulfillment. We should want to pursue such relationships for their own intrinsic value, not just because we might receive some punishment if we don't.

Finally, in our reading today, Jesus talks about swearing, as in swearing oaths, not using profanity, and he says that we should not just not swear falsely, as the old teaching required; we shouldn't swear at all. Our yes should be yes and our no should be no, our word should be enough. Well, what to say about this one...

We live in a time of contracts because no one's word is good and then we surround ourselves with lawyers to get us out of these contracts. We live in a time of alternative truth where not only are there different versions of truth, but repeated denials of what everyone knows is true. In such a time, what do we do with Jesus' teaching? It is very much needed, that much is clear, but what difference does it make?

I suppose all we can do is strive for honesty and integrity in our own journey and trust that if we all do this, together we can make a difference. I know my bias here comes from experience with people who have been fundamentally dishonest, but I have always had this passionate feeling, that Dana and I have tried to share with our children, that we can deal with almost anything in life as long as we are honest. But if we are not honest, we have no idea what we are dealing with and thus it is impossible to move forward.

Perhaps this is what Jesus has in mind here. Not swearing falsely is a low standard. If our word means anything, if we are honest people and live lives of integrity, we don't need to swear at all. If we are not honest, what good will swearing do?

Amy Butler preached an unusual sermon at the Riverside Church in New York City a couple of weeks ago. Rather than preparing a message and presenting it as usual, she decided to read the whole Sermon on the Mount as found in Matthew 5-7. After the service,

during the coffee hour they have, she said several people came up to her and said they didn't like parts of her sermon. In fact, they disagreed with some of it. "Three chapters," she said, "Read from the Bible. The words of Jesus."

Some parts of the Sermon on the Mount are difficult to hear. There are lovely words of blessing and assurance, but there are also demanding words of challenge like those we find in today's reading from Matthew. But we don't get to pick and choose which words apply to us. They all apply. And the good news is they are all spoken in love, designed to help us be the people God intends for us to be. But none of us is there completely and our cultural values are certainly not there.

Thus, at times God's word hits us the wrong way, it irritates us, it is living and active, according to the author of Hebrews, sharper than any two-edged sword (4:12). But the ultimate purpose is to make us better, to bring us greater joy and a deeper sense of fulfillment. This is Jesus' intent when he goes beyond ethical minimalism. May we embrace his gifts to us even when we don't like how they feel!