

**“Struggling to Hear Jesus”**  
**Matthew 5:21-37**  
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The Monty Python film “Life of Brian” tells the story of a young Jewish man who is born the same day as - and next door to – Jesus and thus is mistaken for the Messiah. There are many hilarious scenes in the film, provided you are not offended by the irreverence, but in one of these Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount and the crowd is struggling to hear what he is saying. At one point, someone asks what Jesus has said and a man replies, “I think it was, ‘Blessed are the cheesemakers.’” “Ahh, what’s so special about cheesemakers?” a woman asks. Another man replies, “Well, obviously, this is not to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products.”

It is a bit irreverent, but the premise is reasonable. If Jesus is speaking to a crowd of any size outside without any amplification of sound, people will struggle to hear him. Even if he has a deep, resonant voice like James Earl Jones and knows how to project, people far away will struggle to hear him. “Peacemakers” might sound like “cheesemakers” and thus there would be room for misunderstanding.

But the truth is we struggle to hear Jesus to this day, even though we have his words written down for us to process carefully. We don’t have physical distance as an audience does from a speaker, but we have the distance of time and culture, the challenges of translation and interpretation, not to mention a long list of biases that shape our hearing. Brian McLaren has noted fourteen biases that filter the way we process information including confirmation bias (the need to square anything new with what we already believe to be true), complexity bias (the brain’s preference for simplicity) and cash bias (resistance to any idea that might threaten our resources). So, we struggle to hear Jesus to this day for many reasons. Sometimes we just don’t like what he says.

All of this is pertinent as we consider today’s reading from Matthew. In this third in a series of readings from the Sermon on the

Mount, Jesus moves from some nice words of blessing and then a spirited admonition to be salt and light to some challenging words about the character of a faithful life. The mood began to shift toward the end of last week's reading when he said he had come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill these teachings, he had come not do away with the demands of the Pharisees but to call forth a higher level of righteousness. If the crowd heard these words, they must have cringed.

With today's reading, Jesus begins to illustrate what he means with a series of contrast sayings. "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..." he says six times. In each case, he is not doing away with an old teaching but pointing to the underlying purposes of the teaching and thus intensifying it. He is not replacing the Old Testament with the New and thus dismissing the entire Old Testament. He is interpreting each teaching, getting to its essence, and demonstrating what it means for us. But even though we have the words in print, we may still struggle to hear what he is saying for all the reasons I have named and more.

In the first of four contrast sayings included in today's reading, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not commit 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."

On one level, it is easy enough to grasp that he is calling us to go beyond ethical minimalism. Just not committing murder is not a very high standard. It's like Ian's irritating saying of his teenage years, "No whales died." "I forgot to do what you asked, but no whales died." "I didn't kill anyone," is a low standard, and the kind of anger and judgment Jesus names can lead to violence.

So, this counsel may fall in the category of nipping a problem in the bud, but Jesus goes on to talk about leaving a gift for God before the altar and first seeking reconciliation with a brother or sister with whom we have a conflict. If we don't reconcile, we cannot offer our gift. What is he saying?! That unresolved conflicts might lead to murder?

This might be part of the story, but there is more going on here. Jesus seems to be saying that our relationship with God is inextricably linked to our relationship with other people. We cannot pretend to be best buddies with the Divine while running over people left and right in every relationship we have. The Ten Commandments balance our love for God with our love for neighbor, as the first four relate to the vertical dimension of our faith, the last six to the horizontal.

Yet intuitively we already know this. Somewhere deep in our gut we just know that when things are not right with other people, they are not right with God. We can feel it deep down even if we have a gift for compartmentalization. So, what Jesus is saying is that we need to address this feeling when things are not right with other people, we need to overcome the walls of resistance we have built, the arguments we have made as to why we need not bother to seek reconciliation.

It may be with a family member, I have been there and done that, reconciled with one part of the family only to be distanced from another. It may be with a friend or co-worker. It may even be with another church member, a brother or sister in Christ. Human beings have differences which can lead to hard feelings that are difficult to resolve. And in this day of cultural division and ideological absolutism, we seem inclined to part ways with anyone who disagrees with us on any issue.

But Jesus calls us to reconcile, says that until we do, things will not be right in our relationship with God. Simply not committing murder will not be enough to please God. We need to address the underlying issues that lead not just to murder but all human conflict and seek peace with all. If we struggle to hear this message, it's mostly because we just don't want to hear it, but we need to hear it.

In the second of our contrasts today, Jesus says, "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." Then, he goes on to put some teeth in his understanding of the law, saying we should remove any aspect of our being that leads us down the path to destruction. It is heavy stuff from a man who invites all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to draw

near to him and find rest, from a man who forgives a woman caught in adultery, from a man who takes on the gentle image of shepherd.

But this is what he says. How do we understand this teaching? How does it fit with the whole of Jesus' ministry? There seems to be no room for grace. Well, again, part of the message has to do with going beyond ethical minimalism. Simply not committing certain physical acts does not mean we have been loyal to a life partner. There are many forms of betrayal, including betrayal of the heart which may be the most devastating of all. Jesus' perspective may seem harsh on the one committing adultery, but adultery always has a victim or victims. There is no way to make everyone happy here. The ideal is faithfulness.

But there is another nuance to this teaching. In our culture, which we think of as being sophisticated and egalitarian, whom do we blame in situations of betrayal, indiscretion and assault? Often it is the woman who is perceived as the temptress, the one who dressed in an enticing way, the one who brought it on herself. I have even heard this perspective expressed in a situation where a youth minister acted inappropriately toward a youth! It goes back to a misunderstanding of the Genesis account wherein we blame Eve for everything when the only reason Adam didn't betray God first was that he wasn't around when there was an important decision to be made! And the truth is this is all just rationalization to allow boys to be boys and girls to get the blame.

But Jesus says, "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in *his* heart." Jesus does not let the man off the hook, which is a more significant reality in the first century than the twenty-first. So, what we have here may be a word of accountability – Jesus does bring grace *and truth* – but it is also a word of justice. Responsibility matters in relationships, he says, loyalty matters. It's not just about what we do but what is in our hearts and minds, and both parties are equally accountable. We struggle to hear this message partly because it takes a little work to do so and again partly because we don't want to hear it, but we need to hear it.

The third contrast is related to the second and may be the most difficult to understand. It is the teaching about divorce where Jesus

seems to take a rigid stance of judgment. Marriage is intended to be for life, but the law has allowed for divorce under certain circumstances and provided the man gives his wife a certificate of divorce, thus enabling her to live in the community. This allowance is reflected in scripture, Deuteronomy 24:1. If a man finds something objectionable in his wife, he may divorce her. But what qualifies as an objectionable behavior?

Opinions vary in the first century. The more conservative school of thought, associated with a teacher named Shammai, says that only adultery is justification for divorce. The more liberal school, associated with Hillel, says a man may divorce his wife even if she just spoils a dish. In the second century Rabbi Akiba says that if a man finds a more beautiful woman, he may divorce his wife. Really?! But notice – all of these are reasons for which a *man* may divorce his *wife*. Only in rare situations might the woman consider such a thing.

So, this is the context in which Jesus comments on divorce. There is a raging debate, like many in our time, and a consistent bias of favoring men. Divorce has become a cover for selfishness, lust and disloyalty. Understood in context, Jesus' words seem more like an act of advocacy for women than a harsh judgment on divorce. He seems to side with Shammai in saying that only unchastity can be grounds for divorce, though he adds that not only does a woman divorced for any other reason commit adultery but so does the man who marries her, giving more accountability to the man than is customary.

But what are we to make of this teaching that seems so unlike Jesus? Most of us have experienced divorce in our families. It is always a difficult reality, but sometimes it is the best option for two people who are profoundly unhappy. This was the case for my parents who divorced when I was very young. And in contexts of outright abuse, how can we demand that a victim remain in a relationship. Surely there is grace for all who experience this kind of brokenness and disappointment. And as with the teaching on adultery, there is a word of advocacy for whomever might be the more vulnerable party in any conflictual marriage.

But perhaps there is another word we need to hear, a word about the importance of marriage and faithfulness. There is nothing more sacred and joyful than a lifelong relationship of two people committed to

each other. We may struggle to disentangle this message from the weight of Jesus' words, but it is worth the effort we make.

The fourth contrast in today's reading is a word about swearing – not using profanity, though Jesus would counsel against it, but the swearing of oaths. The old teaching was not to swear falsely but to carry out vows made to God. Jesus says we should not swear at all but let our yes be yes and our no be no. We should simply be honest.

It is not a difficult message to understand. It just needs to be inscribed in every fiber of our culture which doesn't seem to have the capacity to understand what words like truth and honesty mean. There was a day when a person's word meant something. In the Hebrew Bible, one's word was sacred. Isaac could not take back the blessing he intended for Esau but was tricked into giving to Jacob because a person's word was irretrievable. We put every agreement into a contract and that only means so much. No one's word means anything. There are many versions of the truth. And we are much the worse as a result.

Jesus would have our yes be yes and our no be no, but there may be another layer to this saying. He criticizes the practice of using oath formulas to mislead people and there is another way people practice such deception today. Some say that God has told them something or that some idea or proposal is God's will. It's rather difficult to argue with that. It is wise to try to discern God's intent, but we need to offer the disclaimer that it is what we discern to be God's will.

All of this points to a larger reality - we need to use more care in our choice of words about everything. Words have tremendous power, but there is much confusion about what we mean when we use words like patriotism and hero, family values and God's will. Jesus argues for straightforward, honest communication. It is a word we need to hear.

Hearing is not the whole story. Once we hear Jesus' words and understand what he is saying, we still have to follow his teaching. But it all begins with hearing and understanding. We may struggle to hear Jesus today through all the noise around us and the biases and filters we all have, but it is worth the effort.