

Old Testament Lesson—Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 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, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 5:21-37

*"**You** have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, '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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. "**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. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. "**It** was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. "**Again**, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

You have heard that it was said...but I say unto you...You've heard that it was said...but I say to you.

This is how Jesus teaches and preaches—by taking the conventional wisdom of the day and turning it upside-down. Jesus takes what we know (or what we *think* we know) and totally flips the script.

This is Jesus afflicting the comfortable. It's Jesus being controversial.

No, that's not strong enough. It's not just controversial. No, this is Jesus provoking the ever-living crap out of his audience!

You have heard that it was said...but I say to you...something else. You've heard that it was said...But I say to you something different, something new, something difficult...something hard to hear...something really tough to get your minds around...

You can imagine the eyebrows of those present beginning to furrow at this point.

You've heard it said, do *this*...but I'm telling you that's just the beginning—that's just the bare minimum.

Now their faces look puzzled. Their interest is piqued. They're really listening now...

Yes, you remember the Law of Moses teaches *this*, but I'm going to take it a step further. The lessons you're about to hear are going to challenge you. They may even transform you. And change can be painful...I get it.

Yes, you've heard you should do *that*, but really I think you should do *this* instead...should really do this also...should really do this on top of that. (Yes I know, as if doing what God requires wasn't already hard enough...)

Yes, we know our great ancestor, Moses, gave us these laws to keep us holy—given to us at Mount Sinai as a means of grace. You know these laws well. They're tried and true, yes.

And look, I know I'm just a carpenter's son from a town nobody respects, so let me assure you those laws aren't going away any time soon—in fact, not ever. Not one stroke of it is going anywhere if I have my way.

But the truth is those laws of old haven't sunk deep enough into your hearts—even though we've had them for a thousand years. The truth is you don't want these laws at all. You exploit them and abuse them. You avoid them with loopholes and technicalities.

Listen: the Law of Moses wasn't meant to be some heavy burden on us—wasn't meant to weigh us down or be some painful yoke around our necks.

No, it was given to bring us closer to God. It was given to expand our capacity to love—to love God and our neighbors. The Law hones our spirits and molds our souls to reflect God's grace; and it aims our talents so we can actually be the blessing we're called to be. (Pause)

Friends, at this point I have to step back for a second and speak to something from last Sunday. Pastor Dave preached on the passage that comes right before this last week. And, as I'm sure you realize, these gospel stories are all connected. Matthew is one long, continuous narrative.

And I don't think we can fully grasp what Jesus is saying now, today, without holding together what he's just said. In fact, it may be harmful if we tried to do otherwise.

Remember Christ's words that come immediately before our lesson this morning. Jesus says, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill...For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* (Repeat)

In other words...People of Galilee, I'm about to offer a perspective on God's Law that may seem controversial to you. What I'm about to say might even make you angry. It might sound like I'm abandoning the ways of old—that I no longer think the Law is relevant or applies to our lives today. And I wouldn't blame you for hearing that.

So please understand, people of God, that is not what I hope you hear. That is not my intention. That is not what's in my heart.

In fact, it's the heart that I'm most concerned with. The truth is we're not following the Law strongly enough. We do what we *must* but not what we *should*. The Law's within our *grasp* but not within our *hearts*. No, friends: I'm not here to abolish the Law—not here to get rid of it. I want to cling to it with all my might.

I want to hold onto it tightly. I want God's Law to be so much a part of me—a part of my spirit that I can't help but squeeze every bit of love—every ounce of justice and every molecule of mercy out of it.

Yes, brothers and sisters: I'm here to show you what God's Law, given first to Moses, can really do—can really do when it's brought to fruition—when it's fully realized. And more importantly, I'm here to show you that, together, we can overwhelm this world with love.

Yes, when God's Word is guiding us—when God's Spirit is the air we're breathing, there won't be any darkness that'll be able to stand the Light we're shining.

So make no mistake, Cedar Heights... What Jesus is doing here in the Sermon on the Mount isn't throwing out what came before him. In fact, I'm pretty sure he'd be offended at the accusation. No, this isn't "out with the old, in with the new." It's more like "in with the old AND in with the new."

Friends, I always want to be honest with you. And the honest truth is that Jesus says a lot of things here I'm uncomfortable with.

I've said this many times and I'll say it again: Whenever you come across something in Scripture that really rubs you the wrong way, I'd encourage you to be patient. Pause, and take a step back. And please, try your best to not impose your twenty-first century American values on first-century Palestinian peoples. Don't do it. It's not fair. It's not right. And it's certainly not generous. It's not how you would want to be treated.

And look, we could easily get into the weeds here. So let's not stumble over what's said about anger and lust and divorce; but let's pause, take a step back, and try to notice the gospel in what Jesus is saying to us.

Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis points us in the direction of that gospel message. She writes, "You have heard it said...but I say to you" is about "casting a vision for what could be when most are satisfied with what is." (Repeat)

Friends, this is about what could be—about what's possible. While most are satisfied with what is, Jesus is not. While most are fine with the status quo, Jesus is not.

While most don't or can't see a reasonable path to a better world, Jesus opens our eyes and makes a way out of no way. Jesus sees the Kingdom of God all around us. Jesus affirms our talents and sees our potential—sees the potential in our ministries when we really believe in God's promises.

Siblings in Christ: This is about following through. This is about going a second mile—and maybe even a third—maybe more. It's about not just finishing the race set before us, but about setting new records—knowing it's God who empowers and emboldens us to be justice-seekers, peacemakers, and agents of change.

Yes, you've heard it argued that, "It's too much! The world's too far gone—too consumed by injustice and greed." You've heard it over and over again, "Why bother?"

But I say to you: Nothing will be impossible with God.

You've heard it said, "The Church is dying!" But I say to you—*Jesus* says to you, "Not on my watch! Not as long as I'm the Head of this Body!"

Perhaps the world's taught you you're not worthy—that you're not worth loving or that you're beyond forgiving. Christ says you're a beloved child of God—called and claimed and cradled in grace.

Maybe the world's told you to hang it all up. There's just too much to do. How can we possibly make a difference? But the tradition from which Christ comes teaches us to not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. We're not obligated to complete the work, but neither are we free to abandon it.

The world tells us it's hopeless. But Jesus reminds us, "That's what they used to say about Death and its finality."

Siblings in Christ, hear the good news of the gospel...

You've seen the world fall prey to evil, but Christ proclaims goodness is stronger.

At times, we've given in to hate's temptations, but Christ shows us love is stronger.

At times, we're frightened by darkness, but Christ makes us the light of the world and we are stronger.

We can be broken by death, but the resurrected Christ promises eternal life—and that life is stronger than both sin and death combined.

You've heard that it was said...fill in the blank with whatever weighs you down.

But Christ says to us: However you answered that, however you filled in the blank...

I love you. You are mine. Now go, take my love as far as you can go. I will be with you. Take my love to the darkest, most hopeless places on earth and believe—believe I've made you a new creation. I've already transformed you into the justice-seeker, the peacemaker, and the agent of change you are.

So don't be satisfied with what is. Imagine what could be.

With my love in your heart, you can do anything. With God, all things are possible.

Jesus didn't make this stuff up, folks! So says the Law of Moses.

Amen.