

"Hard Words from Jesus"

April 25, 2021

Are We There Yet? Series

4th Sunday of Easter – In-persona & Livestream

We started our after-Easter journey with Jesus in the Beatitudes - those “oddly upside-down blessings” that sound much different than what the world seems to value. Last week, we considered those small acts of love and kindness that make a difference just like salt and light. And today we keep on going. Jesus offers a tune up if we stay with a road trip theme - a reframing of the Ten Commandments - the Law - focusing on the spirit of the Law rather than making tradition the final word. He takes a step back to a larger view. And if we’re honest, it’s a challenge to hear. So be ready to be uncomfortable. Maybe we’d rather skip over it. Jesus said what?

Are we there yet? Still no, but that’s not a reason to discount what Jesus says. And he takes on a lot of what we know we need to change, but much of what we really don’t want to deal with. Jesus gets into our business – he meddles! - because it’s important to face it. So, we’ll cover a lot of ground, and it may get uncomfortable.

READ Matthew 5: 21-26.

These words make me cringe. **SHOW SLIDE:** nails on a chalkboard. In a time when we’re dealing with many emotions, even righteous anger, we’re confronted with the power of our emotions. We know all too well what can happen when anger is left unchecked.

News of domestic violence and violence perpetrated against certain groups of people is right in front of us. Anger is a contributing factor. I don’t hear Jesus saying that anger is bad. Anger is human emotion, but anger can become dangerous. **SHOW SLIDE:** outline of body. Maybe it’s never led to taking a life, but how often anger can become contempt, and how often it can destroy relationships.

Anger can be fueled by personal stuff or by societal stuff like the economy, jobs, and other struggles. We’ve seen anger rise up during the past year. We’ve seen the blame game played over and over again.

And Jesus is going back to the beginning - at least to the point when God gave Moses the Law to share with God’s people. **SHOW SLIDE:** Ten Commandments.

Love God:

1. No other gods
2. No idols
3. Don’t misuse God’s name.
4. Remember the Sabbath day; keep it holy.

Love neighbor:

5. Honor your father and your mother...
6. Don't murder.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't lie about your neighbor.
10. Don't covet.

We see how the Law is a clear call to love God and love others. From there, the Law had been detailed into 613 commandments. Perhaps it was a way to find some loopholes – sometimes we look for them. Take a look at Deuteronomy and Leviticus for the full list!

And now Jesus is inviting those who hear to consider the deeper implications and motivations of why we do what we do - or why we don't do something. He's offering something new - don't just understand the Law of Moses differently, but live differently because of this new understanding that he offers. He's not undoing it, but rather pulling it all together.

And it's even more personal when Jesus offers this example of how serious anger can be. Don't even go to the altar or table if you're holding a grudge against someone. That's why we offer a prayer of confession before we come to the table - to admit that we need to be forgiven (and need to forgive others). I've had a few people over the years who have stayed away from the Communion table because they felt like they weren't reconciled with someone else. Their heart wasn't right, and so they didn't come to the table.

And when that's happened, it's been a challenge to me to consider my own heart - and the power of anger and the grudges we hold. Jesus calls us to work out our anger and find peace with even our worst enemy. This is a part of Kingdom living - of transforming the world. And it's hard work.

READ Matthew 5: 27-32.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus says that he has come – not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill the Law. He doesn't come to do away with the Law that has led God's people, but seeks to deepen our understanding of the Law. In the process, he offers standards for living in the Kingdom of God.

And perhaps this is one of the most difficult. I've had more than a few people come to my office asking about this passage specifically, especially as it relates to divorce.

Two important things to note here. First, Jesus is concerned with our intentions, our motivation, and our attitude behind our actions. Yes, following God's commands is

important, but why do we follow God's commands? Is it to avoid breaking the law, avoid punishment – or do we act from a place of truly seeking to live a holy life? There's a difference!

Second, it's clear that these expectations have everything to do with how we live in relationship with one another – how we live in community. At the root of this is Jesus' call for healthy relationships because how we live with each other is tied to our relationship with God. The Ten Commandments show us that clearly. How we live together – how we choose to treat one another – has everything to do with how we can nurture our relationship with God.

Scholar Amy Jill Levine notes that Jesus' words here aren't simply an admonishment of divorce, but are especially important for women in Jesus' time. Women didn't have a lot of power and were the most vulnerable in a situation of divorce. Jesus call to accountability the way that men viewed women and thought about women. Perhaps there's a caution about objectification of others here - and not just in action, but even in thought.

Yes, Jesus talks about marriage and divorce as a call to consider how we view one another, especially making sure that men were considering the status of women who were made most vulnerable in divorce. In all of it, we hear the call to see one another as sacred and beloved. **SHOW SLIDE:** Ten Commandments.

Jesus takes on adultery - and goes back to where it starts – with lust. He calls us to consider the deeper issue of loyalty as it concerns relationships. It's not just the act of adultery that's problematic; it's anything that violates the sanctity of marriage and commitment, even our thoughts. And Jesus uses exaggeration to show how serious it is. So, what boundaries will we create to honor one another - and to nurture our closest relationships?

Adultery is both personal and relational. It matters in our relationship with others. It matters in our relationship with God. God is Creator, and God invites us to give him all of ourselves - physical, emotional, and spiritual. God calls us to celebrate sexuality as a good gift and honor it in our lives. God is concerned with our motivations, our intentions, and our attitudes.

Bishop Will Willimon says, "How countercultural it is for the church to assert that all of life, even our sexual life, is to be lived for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor." It's not about just doing the right thing; it's about doing the right thing for the right reason – because we love and serve a God who saves us in Jesus Christ.

READ Matthew 5: 33-37.

I remember my dad doing a lot of business based on a handshake and another person's word. Sometimes it drove me crazy because it doesn't leave a lot of room

when there's an issue. Maybe you had that experience as a kid with making promises. **SHOW SLIDE:** pinky swear (Snooze God).

Even today when I think of how my dad interacted with neighbors and businesspeople, I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable with that arrangement. We hear too much about people breaking promises and telling everything except the truth. We might even say that on our own, we have a propensity for telling lies and accepting dishonesty. How many times have we fallen for half-truths or the "spin" that gets put on a story? Today there are even news segments dedicated to verifying facts because there's so much to sift through. **SHOW SLIDE:** Ten Commandments.

The commandments include not bearing false witness against your neighbor, and Jesus talks about oaths - swearing to honor a promise we make to another person. And it need not be a major business deal or a lifelong commitment. We should do what we say we'll do - so much so that an oath isn't even necessary.

When we say we'll pray for someone, do we follow through? I experienced the power of that when one of our members came back to church after a long illness and met someone who was new to them and who had been praying for them - and really doing it! It was powerful to witness.

We lie when we don't honor the oath we make. Breaking an agreement is the action, but underneath that is an issue of character. Who are we? When we're not honest and trustworthy, how do we expect to build community with each other?

We can't expect others to be honest with us if we're not honest. And when we can't trust each other, there's nothing to build on. When there's no one we feel we can trust, it's a lonely place. Trust is foundational in every relationship - and even in the Body of Christ. I'm grateful for the level of trust we have here because it allows us to love and serve God more faithfully.

READ Matthew 5: 38-48.

In reading all of these passages, it's a gut punch. Jesus calls out our desire for revenge because sometimes we believe it will make us happy. We've felt it, haven't we? *If I could just get back at that person, I would feel so good!*

He talks about retributive justice - only allowing for as much as has been done to us. That's the old way, but what about the way of love? What about "turning the other cheek?" I wonder if it was a way to stop the cycle - so off-putting, catching someone off-guard - that people didn't know how to respond. **SHOW SLIDE:** fist and outstretched hand.

It's also important to know that love requires accountability. There's some tension here. Community requires accountability. We have to hold each other accountable for those things that aren't loving.

And then he pushes this Kingdom perspective even further with a call to love enemies. It's not enough to love those who are easiest to love. In the Kingdom of God, love for enemies is a value and an expectation. Maybe we cringe at that, but it's there. And there's no getting around it. Our faith is personal, but it's also social - and not just with those we want to care about.

SHOW SLIDE: *What's hard, it seems, is living up to the words spoken by Jesus Christ, who preached naught but love and mercy and justice and humility.* Steven Weber. It's a beautiful Kingdom ideal, and we know how difficult it is.

And we can't get around it by saying that Jesus is just exaggerating. We don't get to dismiss his stringency as impossible and then move on. We can't just think that this is only for the most faithful of Christians who finally get there.

Maybe you've read that and thought that it didn't apply to us, but it always applies to us! Jesus calls people to live this way as a witness to God's work in the world. And it does mean that we go another way - God's way. **SHOW SLIDE:** Highway exit signs.

Pastor James Harnish says, "when we take Jesus' words seriously we're sure to run head-on into something that disturbs our assumptions, disrupts our conscience, or destroys our overconfidence in our own goodness." All we need to do is read Jesus' words and it will remind us that we're always working for the Kingdom of God.

SHOW MEDIA – *Love - No Exceptions.*

These are hard words because Jesus insists that our desires and motivations be as faithful as our actions - and he calls out what we think is best for us - when it's not. These are hard words, but not bad news for us.

It's Good News with a promise that we can live more righteous lives than we do with God's help. We can have better relationships with God's help. God wants that for us - fullness of health and life and salvation. And as followers of Jesus, we're called to share the joy of life with God - being clear that we don't do this alone. The Holy Spirit is our promised Advocate and Helper. And we live together, encouraging one another as a community of healing, strengthening love. Reading these words again, we know we need each other – and we need God's help.

We need God's help to repent, to turn back to God, and to live more holy, more healthy lives. Jesus' words guide us in how we act, but it's not just a moral code or a guide to ethics. He offers us nothing less than the Kingdom of God, and we have the opportunity to live in the Kingdom. Jesus reveals God's desire for us – don't just act based on whatever the world's expectations are, but act out of who you are because you are God's beloved child.

Hard words, but hopeful words. God will help us. May we be open to God's help. Thanks be to God! Amen.