

## THE RELATIONAL GOD

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
February 16, 2020

Psalm 119:1-8  
Matthew 5:21-37

We continue this morning our contemplation of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus preaches in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's gospel. It is early in his ministry, and Jesus has gone up a mountain in Galilee with his disciples to teach them the central tenets of life in the kingdom of God. In last week's lesson, Jesus warned the disciples that he has not come to abolish the law of Moses, but rather to fulfill it, and that unless their righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, today, Jesus explores what such "exceeding" righteousness entails through a series of statements that compare the moral standards of the past with what Jesus is demanding in the present. Jesus does not contradict or invalidate the Mosaic law, but rather extends, intensifies and even deepens the original teaching.

It may sound trite to say that I think Jesus is being radical in this week's portion of the Sermon on the Mount—after all, isn't Jesus always kind of radical?—but I'm going to say it anyway. The trouble is, we often miss just *how* radical or, maybe more, *in what way* he's being radical.

You see, I've most often heard two nearly opposite interpretations of this passage, each claiming that Jesus is being radical in his approach to the law. In the first interpretation, it's said that Jesus is being radical by urging us to take the law far more seriously than we'd ever imagined. He is, in fact, initiating a new law that both exceeds and supersedes the law of his forebears. Interpreters in this school point to the repeated "You've heard it said..., but I say..." contrasts of this passage to make their point. While this understanding of the Sermon takes the ethical demands of the faith seriously, however, it reduces the Christian life to essentially just a matter of morality. I mean, did Jesus really have to die so that we could have the Ten Commandments on steroids?

The second line of interpretation goes in the opposite direction: it posits that Jesus is radically taking the law to extremes precisely to show us that we have no hope of following the law consistently. It is impossible for human beings to be truly good or righteous. This reading puts a decidedly theological twist not just on this passage, but indeed on the whole of the law, as suddenly the law's chief value is not to guide the Christian life but instead to drive us to Christ for mercy. While this interpretation underscores our dependence on God for forgiveness, it nevertheless empties the law of any significant moral content. Worse, it makes it sound like Jesus didn't really mean what he says. As though we're free to do whatever we want, since God will forgive us anyway. I mean, do we really think Jesus—especially the Jesus of Matthew's gospel—couldn't care less about our observance of law?

Well, then, if I don't care for either of these two interpretations, in what way do I think Jesus is being radical? Well, to tell you the truth, I don't think Jesus' main concern

is with the law at all. Seriously. I think Jesus is talking about God, specifically, the kingdom of God, the kingdom that is coming and, indeed, is made manifest in his life, death, and resurrection. And whenever you're talking about God you're also talking about relationships. Which, of course, points to the problem with the law, or at least our response to it, in the first place. You see, we think the law is about, well, being legal—you know, it's about doing the right thing, staying in the lines, keeping your nose clean. But the law is actually concerned with relationships.

Take the Ten Commandments, for instance: the first four commandments are concerned with our relationship with God: to worship God alone, to not make idols, to not take God's name in vain and so on. The remaining six commandments are concerned with our relationships with each other: to honor our parents, to not murder, to not steal, and so on. Understood this way, the whole law is actually a way of pointing us toward ways to honor those with whom we are in relationship. But, somehow, we forget that, and so get caught up in keeping the law for the law's sake. Which is why Jesus intensifies the law—not to force us to take it more seriously or less seriously, but instead to push us to imagine what it would actually be like to live in a world where we honor each other as persons who are truly blessed and beloved of God.

There is, of course, a legal dimension to the law—it is what holds us accountable for our actions toward each other. But that is a by-product of the law, not its essential character. Law is given to guide us in the way God would have us honor, respect, and care for each other. If we want to stress the legal angle of the law, we can and all-too-often do. We do so, however, at our own peril, as before long our only resort is to count, and accuse, and litigate, and punish, and before you know it we are all cutting off our hands and plucking out our eyes to avoid the weight and fate of the law. In the world of “an eye for an eye,” as Ghandi said, “all become blind.”

Law understood primarily in legal terms, you see, ends up being a moral and all-too-often self-justifying check list: No murder today; check! No adultery; check! But Jesus wants more from us. Actually, Jesus wants more *for* us. He wants us to regard each other as God regards us and thereby to treat each other accordingly. Jesus is getting radical about the law precisely by calling us to look beyond the law to see its goal and end: the life and health of our neighbor! In this way Jesus calls us to envision life in God's kingdom as constituted not by obeying laws but rather by holding the welfare of our neighbors close to our hearts while trusting that they are doing the same for us.

Another way to put this is that our relationships matter to God. That may seem unremarkable, but stop and consider how much that distinguishes the God of the Bible from most of the gods of history. Our God is not like the Unmoved Mover of the philosophers, nor like the disdainful gods of Greek mythology who saw humans as playthings. Nor is our God simply a spiritual guide or the director of divine karma. Rather, our God cares about our relationships—cares deeply and passionately, that is, about how we treat each other because God loves each and all of us so much. God cares that we keep the law for our sake—not for the law's sake.

Thus, more than half the Ten Commandments have to do with how we treat on another. Jesus doesn't just heighten the force of the law, he broadens it:

It's not enough just to refrain from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and that means not speaking hateful words.

It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them.

It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable—in Jesus' culture even more than our own that often meant women and children—are provided for.

It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all.

Do you see what I mean? All the hyperbole in this text about cutting off body parts and burning in hell serves to magnify just how important our relationships are to God. And I suspect this runs contrary to the way most of folks think about God and God's laws much of the time.

If you ask a random person on the street what they think of when they think about God, they would probably say that God seems to them something like an old man, probably with white hair and a white beard, sitting up in heaven looking down at us rather sternly and making sure no one is having too much fun. This popular picture of God is perhaps best caught by the secular hymn, "he knows when you are sleeping; he knows when you're awake; he knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake!"

And I realize the hyperbolic, exaggerated language our Lord uses in this passage can reinforce that picture. But what if God isn't interested in our keeping the law for the law's sake, but rather God cares that we keep the law for our sake; that is, because God loves us. We all make rules for our children, and while they may think at times that we are overbearing tyrants, as they mature they realize that the rules we set—don't play in the street, treat each other well, don't talk meanly to each other—are all intended to care for and protect them and to help them get more from this life than they could otherwise.

Did you notice last week that when Jesus said those who break the law will be least in the kingdom and those who keep the law will be great ... that whether you keep it or break it you're still in the kingdom? So maybe the law isn't the way we earn God's favor or merit a place in God's kingdom. Maybe the law is—as Luther and the other Reformers so often stressed—the precious gift of an adoring parent given to beloved children, urging them to treat each other well.

Since God really does care so much about our relationships, I'd like to propose a thought experiment for us all this morning. First, call to mind one of the relationships in your life that is most important to you. One that is healthy and whole and good and sustains you regularly. Have you got one in mind? Now, think about what makes that a good relationship, about why it's so important to you. Then, either now or during prayers in a few minutes or later in your own time, give thanks to God for that person and the relationship you share.

And then, having done that, call to mind another relationship that is important to you but that has suffered some damage. You don't need to figure out who was to blame for the hurt, but rather hold that person and relationship in prayer. Offer that broken relationship to God as an offering and as an arena of God's help and healing. And think about whether there is any action you can take that would move that relationship to greater health.

These may seem like small things. But there is a very big thing at work here. It is that God delights in us and loves us unconditionally and so desires the best for us in and through our relationships—so much so that God has given us both God's law and God's gospel to heal and restore them. May God continue to guide us as we undertake and celebrate that reconciling work.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.