

# Jesus & the Law

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## **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."

Last week, following a lecture on theological defenses of slavery in the Antebellum South, one of the students asked to see me. She was Jewish, she explained, and she wanted to know how Christians understood the law recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Funny you should ask, I replied. I'm preaching about that next Sunday.

For some reason, the lectionary readings for this week and last split Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in an odd place. The second part of last Sunday's reading defines the relationship of Jesus to the law. Throughout the Gospels, this emerges as a contentious issue. The Jewish leaders are constantly haranguing Jesus about his attitudes toward the law, those standards of behavior in the Hebrew Bible. Their worry, as nearly as I can tell, is that Jesus' radical new ethic of love will make the law obsolete and that they, the keepers of the law, will therefore be rendered marginal. For the Scribes and the Pharisees, there's a lot at stake.

As I read the Gospels, Jesus grows increasingly impatient with these Jewish keepers of the law. When Jesus heals on the Sabbath, for example, the Jewish leaders go after him. But Jesus rebukes them – which, of course, only adds to their suspicions and stokes their anger.

But here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares his understanding of and his relationship to the law. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," Jesus says. "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." The word *fulfill* here means "complete." Jesus has come to complete the law, that is, to be its culmination, its fulfillment.

And what does that mean? Jesus goes on to explain that he's not trying to circumvent or abolish the law; he says, "not one letter, not one stroke of a

letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” But then he adds a rather frightful comment: “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Then he adds: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

What Jesus is demanding here is what the law demands: perfection. Under the terms of the law, we must be perfect. Our righteousness must exceed that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, the keepers of the law.

Then Jesus goes on to make some outrageous statements. What does it take to be perfect? “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.” Whoa! Then he goes on: “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.”

Who among us has not hated? Who among us has not lusted? What Jesus is saying here, I think, is that, under the terms of the law, we are all guilty. Jesus looks on the heart, into our innermost selves. It’s not good enough simply not to kill, he says. If we hate someone, it’s as though we’ve pulled the trigger. Jesus has moved the goalposts here in the Sermon on the Mount. The law judges us, he says, not merely by our actions, but by our disposition, the inner recesses of our heart.

Therefore, we are all guilty.

**S**o how does the Sermon on the Mount alter our relationship with the law? I believe that the coming of Jesus “completes” the law. That is to say that the demands of the law are satisfied in Jesus. No longer are we shackled by the Levitical demands. But it’s a mixed bag, in a way. Although we are freed

from the fetters of the law – and eye for an eye, and all that – we have a new standard of behavior, one far more demanding. Jesus asks us to hew to a higher and much more exacting standard: love.

And that, as I read it, is the message of the entire New Testament. Love trumps law. St. Paul is forever calling us to assume our new status in Christ, freed from the constraints of the law but, at the same time, bound by the commands of love. No wonder the keepers of the law were so upset with Jesus. He upended their tidy system. He disrupted their precious laws.

Martin Luther, the Protestant reformer, said that the law functions like a schoolmaster. It points out our flaws and deficiencies and weaknesses – and points us to Christ.

**T**he final portion of today's Gospel brings the point home even more emphatically. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out, Jesus says. What? He can't be serious! Or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. Once again, whose eye has not wandered? Whose hand has not offended?

Here, I believe, Jesus is simply emphasizing the point and underscoring our new relationship with the law. If we interpreted him literally, the followers of Jesus would be physically maimed. But Jesus is saying that if you truly want to live by the law, you must be willing to go to impossible extremes.

Far better to live according to the ethic of love. It's more difficult, make no mistake about it; it's far more demanding. But it's here that we find our true freedom: freedom in Christ, freedom from the constraints of the law.

No wonder the Scribes and the Pharisees were so enraged. Jesus, in effect, put them out of business. This, I believe, is the scandal of the gospel. Jesus comes bearing good news: freedom for the captives, liberation from the constraints of the law. We are new creatures in Christ – no longer bound by the demands of the law but called instead to the higher ethic of love.

That's the gospel – very good news!

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 13, 2011  
Christ Church  
Middle Haddam, Connecticut