

## *Toward Authenticity*

A Sermon on Matthew 5:21-48 by the Rev. Philip Major

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We seek to be walking, with God beside us, each day of our lives. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus' message is clear: our journey with God is a journey of authenticity. If we want to be walking with God beside us, we should be examining our thoughts, feelings, and actions for authenticity.

Sometimes we hold ourselves in high regard because we have not committed any crimes that would land us in jail. In today's Gospel passage, Jesus gives his disciples a different set of guideposts, guideposts that lead us toward an authentic journey with God.

*Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder'; But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.* Jesus points toward one of our most common mistakes, which is anger. When we are angry we hurt other people and we hurt ourselves. There are times when we distract ourselves from this mistake, by arguing that, though we are angry with this or that person, we haven't assaulted them with a violent weapon. Jesus knows the likely result of anger is that, even if we haven't physically assaulted someone, we have likely hurt them with words or actions.

Jesus' disciples should move in the opposite direction, which is to cultivate calmness in ourselves. To be calm is the opposite of anger, and it is the opposite of being anxious. To be calm does not mean we do not care. The calm person brings a gift of stability and thoughtfulness. If we are actually seeking to make our journey a journey with God, we will cultivate calmness in ourselves.

*Jesus said, "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."* This is harsh judgment about equally harsh behavior. Jesus is pointing toward the sin of cruelty. Jesus argues against the movement toward cruelty in contemporary politics, in which judges and politicians taunt and show cruel disregard for the victims of their legislation and judgments.

Jesus encourages us to move in the direction of compassion. If we take delight in insulting others, we reveal we don't understand or care about them. If we are moving toward an authentic journey with God, we will cultivate compassion in our lives.

*Jesus said, "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.* Jesus is pointing toward the urgency and importance of reconciliation.

In order to be reconciled with our enemies, with our family members, with our husbands and wives, we have to practice. Reconciliation first requires that we be curious about what is important for others. Authenticity is required; fake curiosity is not going to get us any closer to reconciliation. Reconciliation requires us to ask questions and seek answers with an open mind. Reconciliation means we must be willing to be changed by the answers we hear. If we are seeking to make our journey a journey with God, we will practice reconciliation.

*"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.* While acknowledging one of the most common examples, Jesus is pointing toward an entire category of mistakes motivated by greed. Lust is just one form of greed.

The guidepost for Jesus' disciples leads us away from greed and lust, towards gratitude and generosity. Just as lust is the end result of our greed, generosity is the end result of our gratitude. If we are seeking to be generous, we must cultivate gratitude in our hearts. If we are seeking to have an authentic journey with God, we will cultivate gratitude and generosity in ourselves.

*Jesus said, "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... Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."* Jesus is pointing toward the way people use words in clever ways to defeat their opponents.

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals recently ruled that a law that prohibited perpetrators of domestic violence from possessing firearms is unconstitutional. As a result of a clever argument, based on a contorted reading of the second amendment of the Constitution, many people convicted of domestic violence will obtain deadly weapons. Many women and children will die at the hands of their estranged family members.

The spiritual realm and the practical realm of life are not separate. Our spiritual strength or failings have clear practical, physical results. Jesus is warning us against the results of a sinful, that is deeply mistaken, way of behaving in the world. In our reliance on these clever arguments in the courtrooms of our nation, in our workplaces, and in our marriages, we are sometimes defeating our opponents, and we are often defeating ourselves.

The guidepost for Jesus' disciples leads us away from defeating our opponents with clever words, and toward the opposite direction. The opposite direction is to listen to our opponents in an attempt to understand and accommodate their needs. If we are seeking to make our journey a journey with God, we will seek to understand and accommodate our opponents.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.* Of all of Jesus' sayings in the fifth chapter, this is the one most in need of an entire sermon unto itself. Two things seem most important. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is especially concerned for those who are vulnerable to oppression and violence. This is not an injunction for the weak to suffer at the hands of the strong.

The quote from Exodus 21, 'An eye for an eye', indicates that Jesus' primary concern is about our passion to seek revenge for wrongs we have suffered. As with all of the other directions in this part of the Sermon on the Mount, our tendency to seek revenge hurts other people but it also hurts us. We might feel we are justified when we achieve some sort of revenge against those who have hurt us.

Jesus is concerned with our actual our well-being. Revenge does not actually help us. When we achieve revenge, we might feel better about the hurts that have been inflicted against us, but the hurts have not actually been healed. Jesus points to the fact that our injuries are healed when we are able to move in the opposite direction, which is in the direction of forgiveness. If we are seeking to make our journey a journey with God, we will respond to the injuries we have received by working toward relationships of forgiveness.

Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* This last guidepost for Jesus' disciples leads us away from selfishness and toward Jesus' posture of love. Love means acting for the benefit of the other even when it does not help your own self-interest. Jesus gave us the ultimate example of love.

Jesus concludes this portion of the sermon with a simple idea, *"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."* This might leave some of us feeling pretty discouraged. We have just received a long, difficult set of directions. We are to love, practice forgiveness, be generous, and act with compassion. We are instructed to cultivate calmness, seek reconciliation, and accommodate our opponents.

It might help to know that one of the few things that has changed dramatically since Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount is the definition of the word 'perfect'. Jesus is saying, "Be whole. Be authentic. Be wholehearted as you journey, day by day, with God. Seek wholeness in your life, as your heavenly Father intends you to live in wholeness."

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, we receive seven guideposts for those seeking a deeper, authentic relationship with God. We are asked to do more than merely to avoid the most egregious transgressions. We are to cultivate calmness, compassion, and generosity in ourselves. We are asked to understand and accommodate those who are working against us. We are to practice reconciliation and forgiveness with our loved ones and with our opponents. We seek wholeness in our lives by seeking to love one another.