

Serious Faith

a sermon based on

Matthew 5:21-37

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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David Culver tells about a TV news interview in Florida shortly after Hurricane Andrew had devastated the area. In the midst of the devastation, one house remained on its foundation. The owner was in the yard clearing debris when the reporter asked, “Sir, why is your house the only one still standing. How did you manage to escape the severe damage of the hurricane?”

His answer was telling, “I built the house myself. I also built it according to Florida state building code. When the code called for a 2 x 6 roof trusses, I used 2 x 6 roof trusses. I was told that a house built according to code could withstand a hurricane. I did, and it did. I suppose no one else around here followed the code.”¹

It makes sense. Doesn't it? Follow the rules exactly, and you will be okay. If you're not okay, then it's probably because you didn't follow the rules closely enough. That second part is the part that bothers me. Does it bother you? Anyone who has ever done a construction project knows that building inspectors can be pretty particular about making sure people follow the codes. Are we really to believe none of the other homes were built to code? I suspect some of the older homes were probably built before more informed codes were put in force, and there were probably some builders who got away with some shortcuts. I'm glad for the guy whose house remained. Where, though, is his concern for those who lost everything?

This is the problem that Jesus addresses, this notion that God made up a bunch of rules (i.e. the Law) so that he could decide who was worth saving based on how well they follow the rules. It wasn't the exact theology or teaching of the rabbis, but that's basically how people understood things. It wasn't just then. Today, even people who boast about their faith in Jesus are still consumed with keeping score – at least as it applies to others.

We're offended when a judge shows leniency or a prisoner's sentence is commuted because he's demonstrated a turnaround in his life. We demand harsher penalties so that people will follow the rules. Sometimes it even creeps into our personal relationships.

Someone frustrates us – angers us – and our response is to say, “You fool.” Granted most of us don't speak like that, but it is what we do. When we go back to that passage in which Jesus says, “If you say, ‘You fool,’” we need to consider what exactly he's talking about. He's not talking about momentary anger or a regretful ejaculation – “You fool.” The word he uses is “*Raca*,” a word that as Theodore of Heraclea describes refers to the foolishness of the soul and what is “despicable” to the body.² This isn't just anger. This is contempt. Contempt makes murder an option. How many of us have allowed contempt to creep in or even flourish. According to researcher John Gottman, the number one predictor of divorce is contempt (eye-rolling and name calling).³ You might think it would be adultery, and that's usually what I hear during pre-marital sessions when I ask couples what things would be the greatest threat to their marriage.

I suppose that's a good segue to what Jesus says next, “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.” (Mt 5:27-28) To put this in perspective, we need to consider exactly what he was talking about. In this context, adultery referred to relations between a married woman and a man not her husband. Technically, by the letter of the law a married man could not commit adultery unless the other woman was someone's wife. Doesn't mean it was acceptable, it just wasn't adultery. There are reasons for the distinction, we always know who the mother is, but ... Adultery undermined not only a man's relationship with his wife but his whole family. But it's also interesting to note who Jesus addresses here. Usually it was the woman – think about the woman in John 8 whom everyone was ready to stone. Have you

¹ Edward K Rowell, *Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000) 147.

² Manlio Simonetti, ed., *Matthew 1-13*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 1a (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 103.

³ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/this-behavior-is-the-top-predictor-of-divorce_n_572cc717e4b0bc9cb0468e06 (Accessed February 16, 2020)

ever asked yourself, “If she was caught in the act as the accusers said, where’s the man?” Here though he tells men that adultery is on them, when they abandon their wives and when they start to ponder how they might interfere in another’s marriage.

Jesus goes on to talk about keeping an oath, and says don’t bother. Be truthful all the time.

He’s addressing two things at once, in these instructions. First, he’s addressing the religious leaders and diligent faithful who hear about his mercy and scold him when instead of saying “Get up and walk,” to a paralytic, he says, “Your sins are forgiven.” (Mt. 9:2-5, Mk 2:5-7, Lk 5:20-23) These are the people ready to stone that woman, because it was what the Law commanded. But Jesus is also speaking to the people who are hearing that God’s love isn’t conditional on following the Law exactly and who think that God’s mercy might be an excuse to sin. Sort of like on those road trips when as a kid, I’d smack my brother then say, “I’m sorry,” while the next smack was on the way. We get that that’s not right. Don’t we? Even in his mercy, when Jesus asks the woman, “Has no one condemned you?” when he says, “Neither do I condemn you,” he continues, “from now on do not sin again.” (Jn 8:10-11)

Jesus comes preaching grace. Jesus went to the cross to confirm his commitment to our salvation. He forgives sin, but he doesn’t excuse it. We need to remember that even as we consider Paul’s admonition in Romans when he asks, “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Ro 6:1-2) Every time Jesus addresses the Law, he not only confirms it but gets stricter.

Why is that? Let’s go back to that guy whose home survived Hurricane Andrew when no others in his neighborhood did. Why did he follow the building codes? Was it just because he was supposed to follow the rules? Or, maybe, did he perceive that those building rules weren’t arbitrary and that they were there to keep him safe? The story I read doesn’t say that he was an engineer or an architect. It didn’t matter if he understood why a 2 x 6 was the correct lumber for a roof truss; he trusted that those who set the rules knew what was right.

We live in an age when it’s common to dismiss the Law – the rules – laid out in Scripture. I’m not just referring to those who dismiss faith altogether, but members and leaders in the church. Sometimes, I think it’s because we just don’t understand what sense a how a particular behavior undermines our relationship with God and one another. Sometimes I think it’s that we just don’t see how something that seems good or pleasurable could or should offend God, and so we just dismiss those commands as out of date or irrelevant. The common refrain, “As long as I’m not hurting someone else,” gives us permission. But do we know all of the consequences. Last night, Susan and I were watching “My 600-Pound Life” on television. The young woman (in her twenties) weighed 674 pounds. She weighed 100 pounds when she was five. Why? Because her parents gave her candies and sweets whenever she was upset to keep her happy. Did they think that they were hurting her when they did that?

God’s laws are not arbitrary and we don’t have to understand them if we trust God. In that passage from Deuteronomy earlier we heard, “I set before you today, life and prosperity, death and adversity. ‘If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God... by loving the Lord your God, walking in his way and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live.’” (Deut 30:15-16a). Jesus knew that. Jesus knew that God’s commandments and ordinances were instructions for life. He also knew that it wasn’t enough to just check off that one was following the letter of the Law. So each time Jesus addresses the Law in Scripture he actually makes it stricter, and points to the purpose. So, he offers us a better way. Following the rules isn’t enough. The rules are meant to protect us. Instead, what God wants is a change of heart, a realization that our purpose is to love him and love another, not limited by the minimum.

That guy in the hurricane zone was on the right track. But I'm more impressed by Chris Arai, an electrical engineer from Sonoma County, California. Living in an area prone to wildfires he spent fifteen years making improvements to his property. He put on a metal roof and coated the exterior walls in stucco. He put up solar panels and installed batteries to run the water pump that dispensed water from his swimming pool to the sprinklers he'd installed around the perimeter of his property. None of these things were required by building code, but when the wildfires came last year, his was the only home left standing. Relieved as he was that his home survived, he grieved for his neighbors who'd lost everything.⁴

Chris' goal wasn't to build a house that would meet codes, but to build a home that could withstand the perils of life.

Jesus invites us to do the same. He invites us to engage a serious faith; a faith that trusts God and God's instruction, but that also acknowledges his trust that through his grace we can be so much better. AMEN.

⁴ <https://www.businessinsider.com/california-fire-fireproof-home-sonoma-county-kincade-2020-2#but-for-arai-making-it-through-the-fire-was-bittersweet-as-many-of-his-neighbors-were-forced-to-move-when-their-homes-were-destroyed-im-happy-to-have-survived-it-arai-said-but-you-know-im-very-unhappy-that-i-lost-all-my-neighbors-16> (Accessed February 15, 2020)