A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*A Mirror of the Soul*

Matthew 5.21-37

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Last week, I made a point of saying that we cannot uncouple the Sermon on the Mount from the one who is saying it. I’d like to return to that point as we look at one of the most challenging portions of the sermon on the mount. What does it say? What does it say to us? What does it say about Jesus, the one who is saying it?

The Sermon on the Mount is three chapters long. At the end of it the listeners to it were astonished at Jesus’ teaching, and with good reason. It’s a message of authority. It’s revolutionary, and it’s challenging on every level, no more so than what we read this morning in chapter 5, the antitheses: “You have heard it said, but I say to you…” Jesus makes this move over and over. “You have heard it said, but I say to you…” To even make that move is to claim some kind of authority, especially when what they have heard said are the very laws of God. Anytime someone says, “you have heard the word of God, but I say…”, you’re setting yourself up as equal to the word or even greater. Jesus doesn’t see the need to make an argument for his authority; he just uses it, both to their astonishment and to ours.

The moves he makes follow a pattern. You’ve heard the law, but I say to you. The way of Jesus he is making clear is not just about keeping the law. It’s about what happens in you before you come close to breaking the law. Do not murder, the law says, but the way of God isn’t just about not murdering someone. That’s a good place to start for sure. We’re all in agreement that not murdering someone is a good way to go about your day. I’m not abolishing that law. I’m not here to say it’s ok to murder someone. Let’s be clear on that. But I’m also here to say that not murdering someone is just the outer shell of what God desires for you and your neighbor whom you haven’t murdered . . .yet.

The same thing with adultery. Not committing adultery with someone is just the outer shell of what God desires for you and your relationship with your neighbor with whom you haven’t committed adultery. Same with your relationship with telling the truth and forgiveness, and even your enemies.

Someone recently suggested that the message of the sermon on the mount sounds like something like this: you’ve heard it said, the speed limit is 55 mph, but I say to you, do not even go 45 mph. That way you’re sure to not break the speed limit. I think we’ve all been behind someone who is interpreting the law that way. It’s maddening. But it’s actually probably not the best way to understand the Sermon. Jesus is not saying, you’ve heard it said the speed limit is 55 so you must only go 45. What he’s saying is more like you’ve heard it said the speed limit is 55 mph, but I say to you that at whatever speed, if you are drive impatiently, you are already in danger; if you drive angrily, you’re a menace. If you are always in a hurry, if you are always anxious—whether you’re driving or not, if you live thinking fast is never fast enough for everything you think you must do, then you’re already disordered. You may be on the right side of the law, but your heart is already scrambled.

I do not care for this interpretation, going from preaching to meddling, but it’s spot on.

The law is the last barrier on the road that has the bridge out. The law is orange and white boards, flashing lights. Red Stop sign. Turn Around. Do not go past this point. It comes long, long after warning signs have begun to instruct travelers on this dangerous way to turn around, you’re headed the wrong direction.

The other evening on a rainy night, I was driving home back to Waco on the interstate. In the dark, from a distance we could see that on the oncoming lanes of the highway was a flood of emergency lights. As I came closer, traffic on our side slowed. On the other side, a huge rig had turned over. Police, fire fighters, ambulances... everyone was there and had been there for some time. Traffic was backed up and I imagine had been backed up for a long time. I imagine those drivers had been sitting there still for maybe an hour or more. I thought the line would go on for miles and miles, but then it stopped, no traffic, an empty highway over there. I thought that looked strange. But then, after a few more miles, I saw more police lights and then realized what was going on over there. They had closed the highway to all additional traffic and were rerouting everyone to another road. They were there to say, “don’t go farther. There’s trouble way up there ahead. You can’t see it up there, but it’s there. So, take the long way around; this is the better way.”

What stirs in the human heart stirs long before the wreck or the cliff’s edge. That’s the kind of progression Jesus sees in the human heart. Anger leads to insults leads to anger leads to violence. Even if all anger doesn’t lead to murder, thankfully, Jesus links the two together in a continuum. God’s desire for our lives isn’t just that we not murder; it’s that we are mindful of everything along that spiritual and emotional path. Jesus takes captive everything that kills and destroys the body, the spirit, the relationship, everything that diminishes our brother or sister; every anger we allow to take hold in our hearts. Whether or not it kills someone else, it’s killing us, and he wants to set us free from it.

Adultery is the same way. You see how this works. Every lust doesn’t lead to adultery, but if you can see adultery as the edge of the cliff, you can see how every lust participates in adulterous diminishment of our capacity for true love.

The power of Jesus’ teaching is the way he points to crucial issues around which we must know ourselves. We must turn to the inner work. We should know how anger rises within us and comes to expression. We should watch lust and note how it lures, grips and rushes us along paths we don’t want to go. We should come to understand how we want shortcuts to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. All of this is the work we must do on ourselves if the Sermon on the Mount is to find fulfillment in us. (John Shea, *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels,* 81).

From early on in premarital counseling, I have told couples something like this. Marriage is wonderful, and I’m glad you feel a desire to commit to one another, to make marriage vows to one another. Marriage also takes work as two lives, personalities, perspectives are joined into one. So, there are a few pillars in marriage you need to pay attention to for everything else to work. Usually they get their pens out to write down these gems of instruction for life long happiness. Happiness in marriages comes down usually to a few key questions:

How do you do money?

How do you do physical intimacy?

How do you discipline children?

How do you do speak to one another?

That’s it. Most of the rest is just filling in around these pillars. If you do these well, most marriages do well. If you don’t do these well, the cracks show up.

So, I say to these two who are in love,

Money: The starting point is don’t spend more than you make.

Physical Intimacy: The starting point is don’t have it with other people.

Children and discipline: the starting point: Do not murder them.

Speaking to one another: do not bear false witness. Always tell the truth.

They say: that’s it? I say, No, of course not, that’s not it. But that’s a start. The starting point for money is not spending more than you have. Once that’s established, then it’s working together to decide how you’ll make, save, give, spend, enjoy, bless with what money you have. Start with the rule and then work everything else within its guardrails.

Most things work that way. The law, the guardrails set up the framework and everything else within them we grow into. I think that’s what Jesus means when he says he doesn’t abolish the law, but he fulfills it. He fills it with life, with the spirit, and with joy. In Deuteronomy, the law is set before the people as not just rules for life, but the way of life—the way life happens. In Psalm 119, the psalmist begins, “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.” Think of how radical that message is when so often we think that the law is an obstacle to their happiness and true freedom is in no one telling me what to do. That is not the way of Jesus. The law is the starting point; it’s for beginners, it’s necessary to get us started, but then we go further, not beyond it, but within it to discover things like: if I don’t kill my enemy, I may discover what love really costs. In that, I may learn to love Jesus more fully. If I honor the sabbath, I may discover I’m not as important as I think I am, and my neighbor and my family is. The way of Jesus is the path to the law’s whole fulfillment—what God’s law is made for. It is given us to show us the way. It points the way, but Jesus is the way. It points to Life. Jesus is the Life.

Years ago, I was at a monastery a long way from here… Ok, it was in the mountains of Italy. I just like saying that. That I was at a monastery in the mountains of Italy. But the main point is that I wouldn’t be going back there anytime soon. While I was there, I spotted a little copper bowl in their gift shop. They called it a prayer bowl, or a singing bowl. The shopkeeper, a gray headed, joyful, monk noted my interest. He took it down off the shelf, he took the mallet in his hand and by rolling the mallet around the edge of the bowl caused it to make a beautiful sound. It was like the sound of prayer. Maybe this what the golden bowls of incense in Revelation 5 are like. I told him I’d like it. He blessed me, wrapped it up, and I brought it home. Weeks later when I unwrapped it, I held this little bowl and the little mallet, ready for the bowl to sing my prayer.

I took the bowl in one hand and the mallet in the other and ran it around the rim as I remembered the holy man did. Nothing. No sound. So, I did it the other way. Nothing. I did it harder, softer, faster, slower. Nothing. Is this thing broken? Does it need batteries? Need to be charged? There’s no return policy for singing bowls from remote Italy. But I wasn’t going to ask anyone. I thought this should be something that just happens if you’re really holy.

So, I put it on the shelf. But it worried me. Was the bowl saying something about my soul? Does it KNOW something? I took it down again and this time prayed, O Lord help my spirit be yours, I repent of my sins, I give my heart to you. Still nothing. Nothing I did made the bowl sing.

I finally broke down and consulted the oracle of all wisdom. I inquired the source of all modern knowledge: How to use a singing bowl? Enter. There’s a video. In the video, the person made their bowl sound amazing by doing exactly what it looked like I was doing. I didn’t understand.

But then I realized what it was. I saw clearly. It wasn’t my heart. It wasn’t my spirituality or my righteousness. I was holding the mallet by the wrong end. I didn’t need a judge; I needed a teacher. I flipped the mallet over, did it the right way and the bowl came to life.

But actually, it was only then, only once I started with singing bowl 101: hold the mallet the right way, did I even begin to understand that everything else actually does matter. I don’t know if the bowl knows if I’m holy or not, but it knows if I’m uptight and my hand isn’t calm; it knows if I’m trying to go too fast and not breathing in rhythm. It knows. It’s a mirror. If it’s clattering, somewhere inside you’re clattering. Life is a lot like that too. If your outside world is clattering, probably something inside is already knocking around in there.

I don’t know if anyone can ever do the singing bowl perfectly all the time, but even that is part of the point. It’s a way of knowing yourself. The Sermon on the Mount is, too. It’s a mirror before which we see our true selves. A prayer bowl that sings our true selves to life. When we see our true selves in the mirror of Jesus, we know then how much we need grace.

And that reminds me of what I learned over the years to also say to young couples about to get married: It’s about money and intimacy and children and speech. But it’s also about this: about how you forgive. Because true love is forgiving for as long as you can as deeply as you can before they’ve even done the thing you need to forgive.

And what else is closer to the heart of Jesus than that? As we walk more fully in the fullness of his way, we come to understand just how fully we fall short. Even that is a grace, knowing more and more the depths of our Savior’s love for we astonished, imperfect, clattering, beloved people. May His word live within us, come to life within us, that in him our souls may sing.

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