

“You have heard it said . . .” Matt 5.21

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“You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .” A familiar enough phrase on the lips of Jesus, but do you know the context?

Where was he when he spoke them? [check for responses]

Well if you said “The Sermon on the Mount” you would be right

Chapter 5 of Matthew’s Gospel begins “When he saw the crowds he went up a mountain” and I guess we assume he went up there to have a good vantage point to speak to the crowds – but actually, the text goes on to say “His disciples came to him and he began to teach them.”

And his teaching is extensive – it goes right on through to the end of Chapter 7, and certainly the crowd had come up to eavesdrop, and they were amazed! Why? Because he taught as one who had authority and not as one of their usual teachers of the law.

Now it’s interesting that although parts of the teaching in the Sermon on the Mount appear in a variety of places in the other gospels, Matthew gathers it all together and places it here, on the mountain.

Now Matthew had a purpose in writing his gospel – he wasn’t just jotting down a collection of events and teachings, but was writing his gospel to convince, particularly Jewish readers, that Jesus was in fact the long looked for Messiah.

His account of Jesus teaching on this occasion begins with the familiar ‘Blesseds’ - Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the mourners, and so on, bringing to the mind of his Jewish listeners the beginning of Psalm 119, the long acrostic on the Hebrew alphabet extolling the importance of the Law – the Torah. We heard the beginning of it this morning. Now the Torah came from Moses who had journeyed up a mountain to meet with God, . . . and here is one who, after encouraging his disciples to recognise the importance of their ministry, begins the body of his teaching with the words “You have heard it said” And what had they heard? – one of the ten commandments God had

given to Moses. Matthew's intention is pretty clear - a greater authority than Moses is here.

Well as I said, over the next three chapters Jesus expounds what it means to live a life consistent with God's intention, and it's all about attitude, as we shall see as we explore the first three commandments that Jesus unpacks.

'You have heard it said that you shall not murder' – one of the 10, but Jesus takes it much deeper than just the action itself, and begins to delve into the states of mind that progress in depth and intensity until they culminate if not in the act itself then very certainly to that deep-seated rage and resentment that motivates premeditated murder, or other acts of violence . . . even self-harm.

It starts with anger – anger against a brother or sister - in this instance not one's blood relatives, though they should surely be included, but against someone in the faith community, someone *called* - just like you, someone who is a child of the God you love and serve.

Psychologists and marriage counsellors can tell you how destructive to relationships it can be if things that cause tension and difficulty are not faced, and discussed, and cleared.

It's a counsel of perfection to think that we shouldn't ever get angry – we are flawed human beings and sure as eggs someone close in or family or community of faith will do something that gets up our nose, or under our skin. And it may be about someone else suffering injustice. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians has a practical word as translated by J B Phillips

If you are angry, be sure that it is not out of wounded pride or bad temper. Never go to bed angry—don't give the devil that sort of foothold.

But as Jesus sees it, a flash of anger is just the beginning - it then leads to name-calling (the word he uses is 'Raca' – nobody now is quite sure what it means, but it is certainly not a term of endearment!) And if you let that rage simmer and deepen over time until you cannot help bursting out with "YOU FOOL" you're in danger of winding up in a

hell of your own making. Again, the Greek word translated as hell is Gehenna – the name of a deep ravine just outside the city walls of Jerusalem which had become a fiery rubbish tip.

And it doesn't matter to Jesus whether or not you think you're at fault, he says that if you know, or even think, that someone has something against you it's more important to sort it out than it is to offer your annual thank-offering to God. While it remains unresolved, your thank-offering is rendered meaningless if not profane. Paul said something similar in his letter to the Christians at Corinth about communion. (J B Phillips again)

whoever eats the bread or drinks the wine without due thought is making himself like one of those who allowed the Lord to be put to death without discerning who he was.

And if you have something against someone else then in Chapter 18 Matthew records how Christians should go about sorting things out.

But if you are the one at fault Jesus suggests you bury your pride and defensiveness and do what you can to resolve the issue before it gets so serious the authorities are called in.

The next "You have heard it said" is in relation to the commandment on adultery, along with one on divorce, which Jesus sees as linked.

The Torah has quite strict and detailed instructions as to what is to be done in cases of adultery but here Jesus cuts to the heart of the issue by placing it in the lust-filled heart of the beholder. It's not about a natural response to an attractive figure – that's part of the God-given blessing of sexuality - but it's what you do with that initial impulse where the potential problem lies. Recovering sex and love addicts talk about the 3 second rule. Time enough to turn your thoughts to more wholesome things.

And here I rather feel that Jesus was using irony rather than hyperbole in what he says. Just think of the number of times you've heard an expression like 'Ah well, boys will be boy' or 'Well she was asking for it' or 'I couldn't help myself'. To such self-serving excuses, Jesus

responds “Oh, it was your eye’s fault, was it? Well you’d better pluck it out! Oh, your hand led you astray? Well you’d better chop it off then!

You are quite free to question my interpretation but we do face a difficulty when speech is written, as you have no way of knowing the tone of voice. For example, if somebody responded ‘Yeah, right’ to a tweet saying ‘Donald Trump will be a great president,’ you don’t really know whether they mean ‘Yes I agree’ or ‘You’ve got to be joking’

Biblical interpretation is not always clear, which is why an app like Bible Gateway is really great; . . . it allows you to compare many translations of the same passage, and that’s a good starting-point.

But a bit more of the cultural context is needed to be clear about why Jesus links divorce with adultery. At that time and for a very long time, adultery was seen only from a male perspective with little regard for the woman at all. It was about one man being dishonoured because another man had sex with his wife. The law just focused on the suffering of the man. However, Jesus is saying that more is at stake than hurt pride.

Faithfulness and respect need to run much deeper in upholding the honour of both men and women in a truly life-giving and life-affirming way. And those male-focused attitudes were also true of divorce. In Jesus day, a man could divorce his wife for almost any trivial reason. All he needed to do was to declare his intention before a couple of witnesses and give her a certificate. His words and actions would leave her bereft of any security or support.

Jesus is saying that a community where a woman can be disregarded and discarded like any other piece of property does not reflect God’s intention for human relationships. The promises you make in marriage establish a deep and abiding covenant of mutuality and commitment where unbridled lust and self-serving lies have no place; where violence and unfaithfulness are clear signs that the very fabric of that relationship is ripped and shredded. In fact, those vows need to be founded on the same basic transparency and trustworthiness that should be the basis of any commitment you undertake. The need to swear by God, or place your hand on a Bible when taking an oath, may have been intended to

show the serious nature of the promise itself, but in Jesus view anything more than a clear 'yes' or 'no' suggests gradations of honesty, and raise all sorts of opportunities for alternative facts to suit the needs of the occasion. A millionaire I once met on a plane journey home from Australia had made enough money in his trucking business to retire before he was forty, but was back in business again for something meaningful to fill his days. He told me that he had made every deal on a handshake. There was nothing to be gained by turning up with an army of lawyers to build a cast iron contract. If you couldn't trust a person by taking their hand and looking them in the eye, they'd soon have their army of lawyers looking for the loopholes and finding a work-around.

It's always a matter of basic honesty and personal integrity, which is why I see a connection with the commandment not to bear false witness. Now while the focus of that commandment is to uphold justice, law, and order, according to John Calvin, it has an equally important application in everyday life. In this regard, it's about doing nothing by way of gossip, or slur, or slander, to damage another's reputation, or to destroy their good name. He says

Nay, the commandment extends so far as to include that scurrilous affected urbanity, instinct with invective, by which the failings of others, under an appearance of sportiveness, are bitterly assailed, as some are wont to do, who court the praise of wit, though it should call forth a blush, or inflict a bitter pang. By petulance of this description, our brethren are sometimes grievously wounded.

As I said at the beginning, it's all about your attitude. It has never been just about obeying the Letter of the Law but always doing our best to understand the intent and purpose of the lawgiver, and so to live each day that we can come to this table with a clear conscience and a quiet mind.

The Sermon on the Mount contains so much more than can be unpacked in a single sermon, but I expect that Diane may continue the task next week.