

February 12, 2023  
Matthew 5:21-37

Epiphany 6  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Trust and Compassion”**

“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Throughout my student years, I was blessed by teachers who made a lasting impression on me not only because of the knowledge they imparted but because they genuinely cared for their students and wanted the best for them during their time in the classroom and in the future direction of their lives. In high school, our music teacher Mr. Ernest became a great inspiration for me, always encouraging me to reach goals far beyond what I thought I could achieve. He recognized my talents on the clarinet and encouraged me to also learn the saxophone, and it was Mr. Ernest who suggested I audition for the position of drum major, which I held for three years in our marching band. Mr. Ernest even inspired me to audition for the Central New Jersey Chorus, even though I did not sing in high school chorus.

In university, Dr. William B. Williamson was my professor and mentor in the department of Philosophy and Religion. Dr. Williamson has high expectation and always expected his students to do their very best; if he believed that an essay was a piece of garbage, he would call it that plainly. Dr. Williamson pushed me beyond the limits of what I thought was possible, and allowed me to achieve many goals I never could have imagined.

In seminary, I was blessed with many knowledgeable professors who shared their great knowledge of scripture and Lutheran theology with us. Among these professors was Dr. Lull, who opened us to the writings of such great theologians as Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Soren Kierkegaard, and always reminded us of the importance of proclaiming the radical grace of God that is ours in Jesus Christ. Dr. Foster McCurley, our professor of Old Testament, opened our eyes to see the gracious word of God in both the Old and New Testament, and how our preaching should be centred on proclaiming the promise of God’s steadfast love. Although it has been decades since I have been a student, I remain grateful for the lives of these and other mentors who not only shared their knowledge but proved by their commitment to me and other students that they truly cared for us and wanted us to live up to the fullness of the potential that God has instilled in us.

The people who sat at Jesus' feet to hear his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount know that this was a teacher unlike any they had previously known. The crowds had gathered in Jesus' presence in response to the gracious compassion he showed when he *"went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among them."* (Matthew 4:23). When Jesus sees these crowds, he sits down in the position of a teacher and invites them to listen to his teachings, which begin with a redefinition of "blessed" for those who are poor in spirit, meek, mournful, and persecuted. He calls them to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world," those who will be a blessing for others just as the Son of Man *"came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). He will go on to give them the words of the Lord's Prayer, encouraging them to pray "Our Father" *"so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children"* (Small Catechism), and encourages us to pray in confidence that God will give us all we need out of God's steadfast love for us: *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."* (7:7). When Jesus concludes his teaching, Matthew reports that *"the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes."* (7:28-29). These crowds have experienced the truth of Jesus' identity that is proclaimed in the prologue of the Fourth Gospel: *"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14).

- "For early Christians, the Word was more than a representative essence of the divine. The Word is not an ambassador from heaven. The Word is God and fully represents the will of God in the world. This was not an abstract truth for early Christians, but a *personal* connection between the Divine and the devotee grounded in loving grace." – Thomas B. Slater.

This grace and truth that Jesus embodies and teaches is at the heart of all of his teachings, including his interpretation of the Law of Moses, which he has previously announced that *"I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."* (5:17). Today's Gospel lesson offers Jesus' examples of how his teaching is the fulfillment of the Law as he offers six antitheses, concrete examples ("focal instances") that take up older materials and place them in a new interpretive structure. Each of these six units begins with a juxtaposition of what was said *"to those of ancient times"* (the Israelites at Mt. Sinai) and what is now being said by Jesus to his disciples. *"You have heard"* refers to those who have heard the Scriptures read in the synagogue, a practice Jesus partakes in when he visits his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, where

*“he stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.”* (Luke 4:16-17). After referring to a well-known teaching in the Torah, Jesus’ statement *“but I say to you”* marks a solemn proclamation by Jesus, bringing forth the deeper meaning of the law and how it is to be lived out in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus presents his teaching with the same authority as that by which God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus’ pronouncements do more than deepen and interpret the meaning of the written Law. Jesus does more than give a better interpretation of the old authority; he relocates authority from the written text of Scripture to himself, to God’s presence in his life, teaching, death, and resurrection:

- “And he said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” – 28:18-20.

The fulfillment of the Law brought by the advent of the messianic king does not merely repeat the Law, but radicalizes it: *“Jesus’ teaching deals with the inner springs of human conduct, which Law as such cannot regulate.”* (M. Eugene Boring). Like the prophets of Israel, Jesus declares the unqualified will of God, which sometimes deepens and broadens the Law, affirming the ultimate Will of God. Commitment to the messianic king means more than proper confession; it results in a changed life, a life of repentance. Jesus’ teachings in these antitheses are not new laws, but models for the disciples to adapt to their varied post-Easter experiences. All six antitheses are expressions of the Great Commandment to *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... [and] you shall love your neighbour as yourself.”* (22:37-39). Each of these teachings *“can be understood under a larger paradigm of upholding trust and compassion within human community.”* (Melanie A. Howard).

All six antitheses deal with relations between human beings, not with religious rituals that express humanity’s relation to God. Jesus begins each by noting the minimal requirement of the law before articulating an ethic that exceeds the most basic obligation; *“in each case, this ethic appears to be informed by the values of trust and compassion within community.”* (Howard). Jesus begins his teaching by reminding his audience that *“you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’”* (5:21). Jesus begins with the command of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:18) and then presents a paraphrasing summary of several legal text in the Torah (*“Anyone*

*who kills a human being shall be put to death.*” – Leviticus 24:17). The command is not revoked, but reaffirmed and radicalized. By starting with an example with which most members of his audience would agree, Jesus paves the way for his audience to follow him through a progression of increasingly smaller infractions against others within one’s community:

- “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.” – 5:22).

These words are not to be taken as literally an escalating scale for local courts to the judgment bar of God, but a declaration of the absolute will of God, who wills that there be no hostility between human beings, a teaching Martin Luther affirms in the *Small Catechism* when he writes that “*we are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbours, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.*”

Jesus offers a situational application to guide the disciples in applying Jesus’ radical demands to their “in-between” situation of living as imperfect people in an imperfect world. They are to consider reconciliation to be even more important than worship at the altar, so that “*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.*” (5:23-24). Jesus’ primary concern is that his community of disciples embody the unity that is central to their mission, that they pursue forgiveness and reconciliation so that trust and compassion may be the foundation of the church which is the body of living stones, with Christ as the cornerstone (1 Peter 2).

Jesus next addresses the issue of adultery to teach his followers that the love they share with each other must not be predatory. The Decalogue’s absolute prohibition of “adultery” (*maicheia*) refers specifically to a married woman’s having sexual relations with a man other than her husband; it is distinguished from “fornication” (*porneia*). Again, Jesus does not abolish the Decalogue’s command against adultery, but reaffirms it and radicalizes it with the announcement that “*everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*” (5:28). Not only the physical deed, but the intention of the heart as well makes one guilty before the Law of God. Jesus engages in hyperbole, “*exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally*” (Webster’s Online Dictionary) to emphasize

the seriousness of his teaching. Jesus is not encouraging physical harm, but the need to remove anything that would cause one of his disciples to sin, so that *“we fear and love God, so that we lead pure and decent lives in word and deed, and each of us loves and honours his or her spouse.”* (*Small Catechism*).

Jesus’ third antithesis is one that has caused great distress and misunderstanding in his teaching on divorce and remarriage. Surprisingly, there is no command in the Torah prohibiting divorce. The Law of Moses assumes the legitimacy of divorce; the issue is remarriage. A passage in Deuteronomy allowed the husband to write a “certificate of divorce” (*get*) against his wife (the wife had no such right):

- “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife.” – Deuteronomy 24: 1-2.

Divorce was relatively easy to obtain and frequent in occurrence, which encouraged a lax attitude toward marriage. Against both Law and tradition, Jesus proclaimed an absolute prohibition of divorce as the Will of God. Jesus is exemplifying the tradition in which he functions as a prophet who proclaims the unqualified will of God, without making any adjustments for the demands of practical necessity:

- “To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” – 1 Corinthians 7:10-11.

Such absolute prohibition against divorce is unprecedented in Judaism. In Jesus’ teaching, marriage and family are not a contractual arrangement regulated by law, but a part of the structure of creation itself, the good gift of God to humanity and therefore not at human disposal:

- “[Jesus] ultimately upholds the values of trust and compassion within human community. In this case, by encouraging the continuity of marriage ... Jesus underscores the need for trust and compassion within human relations.” – Howard.

Jesus includes one exception to his absolute prohibition of divorce: “*except on the ground of unchastity*” (5:32), related to his previous teaching against adultery. Despite its legal-sounding form, Jesus is not offering a new law regarding marriage and divorce, as this text has often been interpreted. Jesus’ teaching is rooted in the will of God that “*by the gift of marriage founded human community in a joy that begins now and is brought to perfection in the life to come*” (LBW Marriage Service). Jesus is a teacher who cares for all aspects of his disciples’ lives, including those that involve marriage and family, which God wills to be relationships that are built on trust and compassion and embody the abundant life and love that God desires for all people.

Jesus’ final antithesis is rooted in his identity in the Fourth Gospel as the one who is “*full of grace and truth,*” and who will later in John’s Gospel proclaim that “*if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*” (John 8:31-32). Jesus’ teaching against oaths refers to the widespread use of oaths in daily discourse, which he believed cheapened the value of one’s ordinary word and led to the impression that only oaths demand truthfulness or commitment while statements without oaths do not. Jesus challenges his disciples to be truthful always, to “*let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one*” (5:37). If God’s people are truthful in every statement, legal provisions for oath swearing would be superfluous. “*Jesus instructs his disciples not to engage in such devious oath swearing but to be straightforward in their speech.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Jesus calls upon his followers to “*demonstrate the highest possible level of trustworthiness and integrity, not only in their dealings with other humans, but also in their dealings with God.*” (Howard). All of us have had many teachers, but the teachers we remember, the teachers who truly made a difference in our lives, are those who not only shared knowledge but cared about how our lives were being shaped and how we might live up to our potential as human beings. Jesus is our greatest teacher not only because he speaks as one having the full authority of God, but as one who loves his children and gives his life so that they may share in the fullness of God’s gracious love. Jesus desires that we live as children of the light, reflecting the love of God in both word and deed, living in the trust and compassion that Jesus desires for all of us to enjoy so that we might realize his desire for all of his children, that “*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” (John 10:10).

Amen.