

Jesus and the Second Commandment

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In a sense, there are two different ways we react to Jesus as His disciples. On the one hand, we look to obey Him. On the other hand, we look to become like Him. Even though these might seem like the same thing, in reality, they aren't. There are a number of things that Jesus and His apostles command us to do that Jesus never did. He never gave of His means on the first day of the week, He never became a member of a local church, and He never participated in the selection of elders and deacons. In fact, a lot of the things that Jesus did, we cannot do. Nobody here has ever offered an animal sacrifice in the temple or participated in the Feast of Booths. Jesus lived and died under the law of Moses, and He was a religiously observant Jew. In the things pertaining only to that law, we follow His word rather than His example.

However, there are many things that Jesus did that He intended to be an example for His people for all time. Even though the law of Moses and the law of Christ are quite different in many ways, the two greatest commandments in both bodies of law are the same. We are first to love God, and second to love our neighbor. As a result, what Jesus taught and practiced about love are no less relevant to us than to His original Jewish audience, nor, indeed, is it any less challenging. Let's look this morning, then, at Jesus and the second commandment.

Loving Our Enemies

Throughout the entirety of our lesson this morning, we're going to be looking at part of what is often called the Sermon on the Plain, which we can find in the sixth chapter of the book of Luke.

The first section of our text is often considered the most overtly challenging, because it contains Jesus' thoughts about loving our enemies. Read with me from Luke 6:27-31. It is a rare Christian indeed who can read this passage without at least a touch of apprehensiveness, for it contains some of the most difficult-to-apply commandments in the entire New Testament. The first two verses here in particular contain a spiritual shotgun blast. We aren't allowed to hate our enemies. We must love them. We can't simply leave them alone and say, "I'm loving them by not strangling them." Instead, it is our responsibility to actively seek out ways to do good to them. When they curse us, we must bless them. When they abuse us, we must pray for them. Our conduct must not distinguish between our enemies and our friends.

At this time, there is not anybody in the world I would consider my personal enemy, but from time to time, there are some people I get mad at. Let me tell you, friends, that it is NOT easy to have this mind toward them! I'm probably not going to actively work against anybody, no matter how angry I am at them, but I am all too capable of wishing them ill and smirking inside when things don't appear to be going their way. What's more, I'm certainly not going to help them!

When I have these problems, it's because I've allowed my life to become about me instead of about God. I'm worried about my plans that they're interfering with, my dignity that they have injured with their words or actions, my beliefs that they are criticizing. It is my own self-centeredness that allows this ungodly attitude to creep into my heart.

Jesus, though, didn't simply preach these things. He lived them. Jesus didn't die on the cross for His friends. He died for His enemies, because everyone who sins is an enemy of God. He died to be a blessing for the very people who were cursing Him, and some of His last words were a prayer for God to forgive them, because they didn't know what they were doing. On one level, the chief priests knew very well what they were doing. They were crucifying Jesus. On another level, though, the level that Jesus was talking about, they didn't. They could understand the fact of crucifixion, but they didn't have the empathy to grasp what it meant to be crucified. Jesus did. Even while He was dying, He saw the world through their eyes, understood their tortured souls, sympathized, and prayed. That is what it means to love our enemies.

Back in Luke 6, Jesus shifts to some specific applications of this principle. If we truly love everyone, even our enemies, we won't resist violence. We won't resist theft. We will lend to everyone who asks, not expecting to see a dime of it back. This too is not among the most popular teachings of Jesus. There are a lot of Christians who have devoted a great deal of ink to explaining that turn the other cheek doesn't actually mean turn the other cheek. However, everything that Jesus says here flows logically and naturally from His command to love everyone, even our enemies. When we learn from Jesus to see the world through the eyes of others, we're much less eager to harm and more eager to help.

Let me give you an illustration, a story my dad told me about a cousin of mine, a Christian who was a farmer in the Missouri hills. One night, he noticed a disturbance in his cornfield, went to see what it was, and found one of the area good-for nothings, a man named Hood, stealing his corn. My cousin knew Hood was a good-for-nothing, but he also knew that he didn't have much money, and that he had a couple of small children at home. It was within my cousin's rights to chase Hood off with a shotgun, but instead, he helped the thief load his truck up with the corn he was stealing.

That, friends, is what turning the other cheek looks like. It's not the path for weaklings. It requires concern even for those who have set themselves against us. It requires a deep humility that is proof against any insult or offense. Most of all, though, it requires faith, that if we put our lives in God's hands, He will take care of us, and we won't need to. This is the path that Christ walked, and it's the path that He calls us to walk too if we truly want to be His disciples.

Jesus makes the principle underlying all of this explicit in the final verse of this context. Here, we see the short sentence commonly known as the Golden Rule. This idea was not entirely foreign to Judaism. The rabbi Hillel, from about the same time as Jesus, is quoted as saying, “Don’t do to others what you don’t want them to do to you.” However, the Jewish version is an instruction to leave others alone, but Jesus’ version is a call to actively do good.

If we want to put this precept into practice, we must appreciate both what someone wants and what he needs. For example, if I were Zoë, I’m quite certain that I would want my parents to buy a 10-pound bag of jellybeans and feed me jellybeans at every meal. Of course, her appreciation for what tastes good and what actually is good for her are two different things, and sometimes what is good tastes bad. Jesus’ love for the Pharisees did not keep Him from telling them the truth they didn’t want to hear. There’s a difference between love and enabling, and the Golden Rule calls us to slice through the layers of self-deception and plain foolishness, to give others what they would ask for if they were making the right decision. They might not appreciate the outcome of our compassion, but it will be what they need.

Sons of the Most High

All of this is spiritually demanding. Many Christians rebel at the thought of allowing a thief to steal corn without putting a few Second Amendment holes in him. We ask, “How can you expect me to go through life doing that?” The answer is simple: because that’s what God did, and it’s what we must do if we want to be sons of the Most High. Let’s spend some time now appreciating what God’s mercy means for us as we prepare to partake of the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus explains the logic here in Luke 6:32-36. Notice that He begins by describing what we would consider to be a decent person. This decent person loves his family and friends and cares for them. He never forgets when someone does him a good turn, and he looks for ways to repay them. He’s even willing to lend money to those who need it, provided they understand that they’re responsible for paying him back. We might think of him as a perfectly just individual. However, Jesus has another term to describe this good man. Jesus calls him a sinner.

What Jesus wants us to understand is that if all we are is just, nothing in our lives proves us to be sons of God. Sure, there are people in the world who are complete slimeballs, but there are also plenty of people who subscribe to these standards of decency who have never entered a church building in their lives. Behaving in a just way makes good, practical sense even for the atheist. It provides benefits in this life without any regard for the life to come. If we believe differently from the atheist, then, we should act differently than the atheist, and that difference doesn’t show up in justice.

Instead, what distinguishes the Christian from the unbeliever is his willingness to show mercy. We don’t love our enemies because we expect to get some earthly reward for doing so, any more than Jesus expected to be let down from the cross because the chief priests saw Him praying for them. We don’t do good in the hopes of impressing others or earning some benefit. Instead, we should be most eager to do good when no one will ever know about it. We don’t lend to people in the expectation of getting our money back. We give, even when we know we’ll never see the money again. People in the world don’t do those things. They don’t turn the other cheek. They don’t go the second mile with the man who forces them to go one. They don’t do them because they have no reason to. There is no earthly repayment for those things. However, the Christian is willing to do them because he expects to be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

As if that were not enough, we have the example of God the Father Himself. God is just, certainly, but He is more than just, and we ourselves are the greatest proof of that. When Jesus tells us that God is kind to ungrateful and evil men, we shouldn’t be thinking only about the worldly, wicked people we know who continue to thrive despite their wickedness. This is not about the tax cheat or the alcoholic. This is about us, because each one of us is ungrateful and evil. God has given us literally everything, and what do we do about it? We sin, over and over again, repeatedly doing the very things that we know God hates. Our neighbor is ungrateful, but we are too. Our neighbor is evil, but we are too.

However, even though we are ungrateful and evil, God is merciful. He doesn’t give us what we deserve, which is a very good thing, because the last thing that I want from God is what I deserve! This is true in every area of our physical lives, but it is particularly true in our spiritual lives. Each one of us willfully chose to separate ourselves from Him through our sin, and what do we get? Not justice, but mercy. God chose to extend to us the offer of eternal life, even though none of us have earned eternal life, even though the cost of that offer was His Son dead on the cross. Every day we live is a testament to His mercy, and for all eternity, our presence in heaven will continue to proclaim it.

The presence of God’s mercy in our lives changes everything. First, once we understand what that mercy means, it makes us want to be like Him and extend the same sort of mercy to others. Second, God’s mercy frees us from the imperatives of this life to be merciful ourselves. The atheist doesn’t want to be merciful because when he’s merciful, he loses, and he’ll never get it back. However, when we love our enemies and do good to them, we don’t have to worry about losing because of that. What is important to us is not our treasure on earth. It’s our treasure in heaven. As we partake of the Lord’s Supper, then, let’s think about what it means to be sons of the Most High. Let’s bear in mind the way that His mercy has transformed our lives, and the sacred obligation that He has placed on us to be merciful ourselves.

Judging and Hypocrisy

The final portion of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Plain that we're going to consider this morning may be found in Luke 6:37-42. I think what we see here is Jesus anticipating resistance in His audience. Sure, we understand what Jesus is saying about loving our enemies and turning the other cheek. Sure, we understand how merciful God has been to us. However, we still don't want to help the thief steal corn from our own cornfield!

In the first two verses of this section, Jesus points out the difficulties with that way of thinking. Here, we see the famous admonition, "Judge not, lest you be judged." This is one of the best illustrations that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. We meet some unbeliever out there who lives in a way that is clearly displeasing to God. However, even though he is not a religious man by any stretch, he knows "Judge not, lest you be judged", and when we try to point out the way that God actually wants him to live, he responds by accusing us of judging him.

In response, we need to figure out what Jesus is saying by looking at the context. His meaning may be a little bit different in the Matthew version of this verse, but here in Luke, it's apparent that He wants us to understand His words in the overall context of His discussion on mercy. The kind of judgment He's forbidding is unmerciful judgment.

The first thing that this teaches us is that whatever else the verse is about, it is not about urging the sinner to repent. If it's God's law that we're talking about, God is the one who is doing the judging, and whether He is just or merciful is up to Him. It is not up to me, and I don't have the right to extend mercy to the sinner if God has not.

Let's say that I have the wrong view on this passage, and I know a man who is an adulterer. On the basis of my wrong view, I decide that I would be judging him if I urge him to repent, so I don't say anything to him. Does that change what the Bible says about adultery? Does it change what will happen if the adulterer goes unrepentantly to the Day of Judgment? Is God going to say to the adulterer, "Well, Matt decided he couldn't judge you, so I decided to give you a pass too?" Not likely. In fact, the only real result that my decision to keep silence has had is that I have deprived the adulterer of an opportunity to repent, making it more likely that he will be condemned. The point is, friends, that I can't refrain from judging in an area where I am not the judge, which includes everything in the Bible.

So, if that's not what the passage is talking about, what is it talking about? It's talking about not judging and not condemning in areas where I do have the right to judge and condemn, in areas where I am in control. When the thief is in my cornfield, he really has two problems. He is violating God's law against theft, and he's in my cornfield. I can't change the law about theft, but the cornfield is in my control. I can judge the thief and chase him out, or I can be merciful and give him some corn to feed his family. If I choose to be merciful, the thief still has God problems because of his larcenous heart, but I have obeyed God with what is in my power to do. I have imitated the Father in being merciful.

From here, Jesus goes on to promise that God will show the same level of mercy to us that we show to others, no matter what that level is. If we are kind to the ungrateful and evil, on the Day of Judgment, He will repay us in kind. He will give us mercy, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing. On the other hand, if we are just and give everyone what they deserve, on the Day of Judgment, God will repay us in kind. He will give us justice, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, and brethren, none of us want to be on the receiving end of God's justice! When we are presented with the opportunity to be merciful, what is at stake is nothing less than the salvation of our own souls.

From here, Jesus moves on to discuss a particular kind of judgment, when we attempt to bind our own spiritual judgments on others. Once again, friends, this is not about black-letter sins in the Bible. This is about the times when I think something is wrong, my brother thinks something is right, and both of us can make a decent Biblical case.

When I ignore the fact that a decent case can be made either way, and I insist that my brother has to follow my beliefs, that creates some spiritual problems. Jesus highlights two of them in particular. The first problem is that just like a blind man is not equipped to be a guide to another blind man, no human being is equipped to be a spiritual guide to another human being. I can certainly teach someone from the Bible, but I lack the wisdom to create a list of spiritual do's and don'ts on my own initiative. If anyone is foolish enough to follow me, we will both be lost together.

Second, if I generate my own list of commandments and get a whole bunch of people to follow me, I'm no longer making disciples of Christ. I'm making disciples of Matt, and not one of my disciples will ever rise spiritually above the level where I am. In a nutshell, this is the problem with every denomination out there. Every one is based on the teaching of some man, and that man cannot lead others to be better than he is. Those who follow Martin Luther will never be better than Luther was, those who follow John Calvin will never be better than Calvin was, and those who follow John Wesley will never be better than Wesley was. What a shame it is, then, when men follow all of these teachers and learn to be their disciples rather than disciples of Christ! Only Jesus is the author of salvation, and no one else can be.

Finally, Jesus tackles one last judging-related problem. This is the problem of being more concerned with someone else's sins, whether those sins are real or imagined, and not concerned enough with our own sins. Jesus' words here remind me of the debate about so-called victimless crimes, like drug use and prostitution, and whether the government should regulate those victimless crimes. Regardless of what we think on that subject, one thing is certain, and that is that there is no such thing as a victimless sin. Every time we sin, whether we injure someone else or not, we always injure ourselves, and one of the evil consequences of sin is that it warps our perspective disastrously.

For instance, let's say that I have fallen prey to the sin of self-righteousness, which is always a danger for every Christian. I have become convinced that I'm some kind of spiritual phenomenon, and that none of my brethren have reached my level of attainment. To put this in Jesus' terms, I've got a log in my eye. Guess what? Because of my log, I'm going to start seeing specks in everybody else's eyes, spiritual problems that they have that only I am equipped to address.

There are two problems here. First, I'm going to see specks where no specks exist, following the well-worn path of, "I know everything, I think this is wrong, so it must in fact be wrong." Second, even if I'm spotting specks that are actually there, my self-righteousness is going to keep me from helping. Let me ask you, brethren: Ever had a run in with a Christian who was on a self-righteous warpath? Ever had him chew you out for not living up to his standards? How did you feel about that? Did you say to yourself, "Boy, I'd better get right out there and fix this thing that my self-righteous brother has a problem with?" Or did you say, "I'll hang before I'll listen to him!" Even if he was right? This is why self-righteousness is ultimately self-defeating, and it's not the only sin like that. The point is, friends, that before we go trying to help others with their spiritual problems, we need to take a good long look at ourselves, what we do, what we say, and who we are. Only after we have removed our own logs can we get to work on others' specks.