

The Jesus Way: Alignment

Matthew 5 :17-20

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
January 21, 2024

I ran across a cartoon recently which showed a car parked in a large parking lot. On its windshield, tucked under a wiper blade, was a parking ticket, and standing next to the car were two men. One appeared to be the car's owner, holding his briefcase and looking as though he had just returned from a business meeting. The other was clearly the parking enforcer who says, "Sorry, sir, but if we didn't ticket cars that are parked more than two hours, there wouldn't be any room for others to park". The parking lot was empty.

It is a funny and all too realistic portrayal of a common moral issue we encounter all the time. When do we follow the letter of the law and when do we look deeper to the purpose or the spirit of the law and its context? In the cartoon, the parking rules were meant to ensure there was a turnover of parking places so more people would be able to park in that lot. However, if the parking lot is completely empty and there are dozens of empty spaces, is it necessary to enforce the rule? Could this be a time for some leniency, some grace?

This tension shows up everywhere in our lives. A student turns in a paper late when the professor said no late papers will be accepted. Yet, the student has been sick. Does that professor take the paper or not? The spouse of a woman in labor runs a red light on the way to the hospital and nearly causes an accident. Ticket or no ticket? There are more subtle ways in which this plays out, as well. There is an unhoused person sitting along State St. asking for money. Do you give him some? There are so many social conventions that tell us he should not be out there or that he will use the money inappropriately, and yet it is obvious that he is hungry and in need of a shower and a place to stay.

And of course, we encounter this in the church and in society, as well. We have all heard arguments condemning homosexuality based on the law in Leviticus 18:22. Yet, rarely do those who hold to the letter of the law look at its purpose or context in ancient times or now. However, they don't hesitate to dismiss other Levitical laws like don't eat shrimp and don't wear fabric made of wool and linen as irrelevant.

As we watch the rise of Christian Nationalism, we see more and more use of biblical laws interpreted literally. How are we, as Christ-followers, supposed to respond in all these cases where enforcing the law or rule to the letter is not obviously the thing to do. And, in some cases, may cause more harm than good.

We are in the midst of a sermon series that looks at "The Jesus Way", what Jesus taught us about living according to his teachings. We're using his Sermon on the Mount as a starting point. Last week, we talked about how the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, called the Beatitudes, sets the stage for all of Jesus's teachings by turning all the societal expectations and assumptions of his day upside down. Today we continue by examining one of the most challenging passages of the gospels. It begins with Matthew 5:17-20, our scripture reading for today, but continues well past that.

Just before this passage, Jesus teaches about the Beatitudes, telling the people who are listening that they are blessed because it is the poor and the merciful and the oppressed and the discouraged who inherit God's kingdom. He then goes on to encourage his listeners to show their light to the world because they are living as examples to others of the Jesus way.

After this, he wants to clarify that he has not come to do away with the law that Jews had lived by for centuries but to fulfill it. This hints at the reality that very early in his ministry some people were already accusing him of breaking the law or abolishing it. When we talk about the law, we are talking about the Ten Commandments and all the other 600 plus laws God passed down to the people through Moses. These laws are part of the covenant that the Jewish people made with God. They promise to follow God's rules and God promises them blessings.

So, Jesus is very clear that he isn't about to change the law in any way. If people disobey the law and teach others to do the same, they will be considered the lowest in the kingdom of heaven (notice, though, that they are still going to be in the kingdom). Those who follow the law and teach others to, as well, will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven. And then Jesus says the sentence that I think is key for us in how we consider the letter of the law vs. the spirit of the law. "I say to you that unless your righteousness is **greater than** the righteousness of the legal experts and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

The Greek word at the heart of this sentence can be translated as right, righteous, and righteousness or just, justice, and justify. Both righteousness and justify mean in alignment with God and God's values (think of justifying words on a page). Jesus acknowledges the righteousness of the legal experts and Pharisees if righteousness means to follow the law. But, he expects something more from those who follow him. He teaches us to both dig deeper into the spirit of the law and, in so doing, to extend it beyond what the law literally says.

As a rule, God's laws for God's people are intended to keep them safe, healthy, and protected from outside influences. Much like the rules we, as parents, make for our children. Yet, they are also intended to teach God's people to align themselves with God's values - peace, reconciliation, justice, kindness, and compassion for the oppressed, among others. With our children we not only tell them not to run into the street or get into a car with strangers, but how to be good people. This is what Jesus is looking for when he says our righteousness must be greater than the righteousness of legal experts and pharisees. For Jesus, living by the letter of the law is less important than that we live in loving relationship with each other, that we are kind, and we are merciful.

So, we look beyond the literal teachings of the law to God's intentions, God's values, and purpose - and that means we always start with love.

Here are a few examples Jesus gives. Notice that each example begins with the words "you have heard it said" and he quotes an element of the law and then "But I say to you..." and he describes what he expects of his followers.

"You have heard it said don't commit murder, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer

your gift.” The law says thou shalt not kill, but Jesus goes to the heart of why we might kill - our anger. We are instructed to deal with feelings that may lead us to harm another or our community.

“You have heard that it was said, *Don’t commit adultery*. But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart.” In other words, it’s not enough to just not commit adultery, but we should not look at another person and objectify them out of our sexual desire.

“It was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a divorce certificate.’ But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” In the historical context where Jesus lived, women who did not have a man to care for them easily became destitute, which could lead to prostitution. Jesus says here that we should not dispose of people or judge them or leave them with no resources. Rather, we should make sure women and children are cared for.

“You have heard that it was said, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well...”. Jesus warns against seeking justice with our fists but by responding with nonviolence in the hope of eventual reconciliation.

You have heard that it was said, *You must love your neighbor* and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you so that you will be acting as children of your Father who is in heaven. If you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Don’t even the tax collectors do the same? Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.”

With every law Jesus addresses, he challenges us to go beyond the literal and align our behavior with the greatest commandment - that we love God, and we love each other. And I believe that is how we respond to literalists, as well.

Ultimately, love is our plumb line to keep us in alignment with God’s kingdom values. In the Jesus way, love is the filter through which we view the law. Love is always the foundation of the law, and love is the glue which holds us as a community together. May it be so. Amen.