

Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 5:21-37

### **Your Love is My Command**

One of my all time favourite movies is “The Princess Bride.” It’s a fairy tale, about Princess Buttercup and her servant who silently loved her. The servant’s name is Westly. Princess Buttercup ends up engaged to the evil Prince Humperdink, and this forced marriage is scheduled to take place in the grand Cathedral. Often people like to ask in jest Have you ever began a wedding with the scene from “The Princess Bride?” I can’t say that I have but if you have seen the movie you know what I’m talking about. The scene begins with magnificent organ music. All the people are in the pews, dressed in regal splendor. The bride and groom arrive at the altar.

Then the camera zooms in on the bishop, and, as the music concludes, the bishop opens his mouth and says, “Mawage. Mawage is what bwings us togever today. And wove...twue wove...will follow wherever you go.” Then the bishop says to the groom, “Do you have da wing?”

This is only one of my many favourite moments in the movie. If you haven’t seen it you should. In the end, Princess Buttercup does not marry Prince Humperdink and as the movie unfolds, Buttercup looks back on the early days, when she mistreated her servant, Westly. She comes to recognize that every time she ordered him around his response was the same. “As you wish.” He would say.

He was her servant. So that’s all he could say to her. But Buttercup finally realizes that, whenever Westly said to her, “As you wish,” he was really saying to her, “I love you.” She eventually grasps the truth. Whenever Westly said “as you wish,” she had to understand not ONLY to what Westly SAID, but what he MEANT. What he meant was, “I love you.”

The meaning behind the statement is one of the primary subject matters of the life of Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear Jesus preaching his famous “Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is already in progress. In the section we hear today Jesus is asking us not only to listen to what God said, but to also ponder what God meant.

Jesus constantly invites us to go deeper in our understanding of God’s call in our lives. He wants us to understand how much God loves us, and how radically our lives can change if we put God’s intentions into practice.

As we listen to Jesus today, we realize that he is inaugurating a new kind of faith community, a new kind of HUMAN community. And in that community, we are not just called to AVOID certain things. We are called to be a community which enables each member to live out the glorious dream that God has for all of God’s children.

In this section of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus quotes a series of commandments which were spoken by God through Moses or the prophets.

We know these laws and we have heard them before.

Most of us know that according to scripture God said: “keep holy the Sabbath. Do not have other gods before me. Honour your father and mother. Don’t steal. Don’t kill. Don’t commit adultery. Don’t covet what your neighbour has. Tell the truth.”

The ancient people, God’s chosen people, wrote down what God said. But perhaps some people missed what God meant. Sometimes, people tried to reduce God’s commandments to the “minimum daily requirement.” Even today, people want black and white instructions: “Just tell me what to avoid so that I can be defined as a good person!”

Then and now, people sometimes look at the words God spoke, and they try to figure out how they can ‘get around’ their meaning. How can I rob the word of God of its power? How can I reduce its challenge and still tell myself that I am fulfilling God’s plan?

For instance, people sometimes say to themselves:

+ OK. God said, “Keep holy the Sabbath.” But what did God mean by “keeping it holy?” Yes, back in the book of Genesis, God rested on the Sabbath...

But... our schedule today is so busy. I work during the week. Surely God won’t mind if I buy groceries on the Sabbath, or shop for a birthday gift. Doesn’t God want us to feed our families and be generous? Sure, God rested on the Sabbath, but my boss wants this report on Monday, and I have my computer at home on Sunday. So surely God won’t mind if I slip away from my family and work from home.

We live in a culture where sport for many has become their actual religion – most are more faithful to skiing, hiking, soccer or exercising than to church. So if we go to five soccer games on Sunday, isn’t that a holy Sabbath, since we’ve spent it with family, doing something healthy? You see the point. I might even agree or argue the point myself at times.

Sometimes, people say:

+ OK – God said, “do not kill.” That’s what God said. But is the word “kill” the same as “murder” or “execute,” or “self-defence?” Did God select a specific word to leave us some loopholes?

God said don’t kill, but he didn’t say anything about using weapons of mass destruction as a deterrent. God doesn’t get specific about using force to defend yourself. God said “don’t kill,” but maybe we can ‘end someone’s life’ and call it ‘euthanasia’ and still be OK... or we can kill the child in the womb and tell ourselves that it’s not really a child so therefore ending that heartbeat isn’t really killing so we are OK....

You see the point. What was God saying?

Sometimes, people say:

+ OK – God said “do not commit adultery.” But when God said ‘adultery’ doesn’t God mean “thou shall not actually touch someone else?” Adultery means actually doing something with someone else, right? So, if I stare at someone who is not my spouse, and obsess about them, or click on internet images, I am OK with God, right? After I, I didn’t actually touch anyone... And maybe God left a loophole- what if my current spouse is awful, and I’ve finally found someone who loves me for who I am... it’s OK to get close to them, Right? Doesn’t God want me to be happy? God won’t judge me, would he? You get the idea.

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that those of us who are called into his community of disciples must learn not only to listen to the words God said, but also to take seriously what God meant. When we reduce God's commandments to words alone, we can turn them into a word game. We can manipulate ancient words to rationalize modern unfaithfulness. Or on the flip side we can condemn and reject people because we have taken God's words and places our own interpretations and moralities on them.

I have a lot of people come into my office wrestling with just that. Many churches take the commandments and the laws and they use them as ways to shame, condemn or judge people. When we listen to God's commands, when we listen to Jesus' preaching, we listen not just to the words he used. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what God intended for us to know... and how God intends for us to live.

God knows the human heart better than humans do. God knows that our external behavior flows from our internal thoughts, decisions and feelings. So God wants to change, not only our external appearances, but the interior of our hearts.

Let's face it – many of us have mastered the skill of appearing to be perfectly calm and composed, while inside we are seething with anger, or smoldering with rage. We get good at pretending. But God does not want us to pretend. God wants us to be whole and holy.

So Jesus challenges us as he sits there on the Mount of the Beatitudes – Jesus calls us to pay attention, not only to what God said, but what God meant... what God intended when he spoke to us.

When God said, "Thou shall not kill," God meant it. God meant that we should avoid violence toward others. And God also meant that we must learn how to identify our angers, confess our angers, transform our angers into productive action through the grace of the Spirit.

Think of what our children are learning as they listen to most politicians right now. Our entire world is flooded with anger, with people utterly convinced that they are right about everything, and that anyone who disagrees with their ideas is, by definition, evil.

God has something to say about that kind of self-deception. God said it. Jesus preaches it. And let's be honest: it takes so much energy to be angry. Anger kills our souls. And it wounds the Body of Christ.

When God says, "Don't commit adultery," God is not only talking about who gets touched by whom. God challenges you about what you do with your eyes, and where you go in your thoughts, and what channel you click on your cable. You can use, you can objectify or abuse a human being when you are with them. You can do the same in your mind and heart – and the sin will equally consume you, and wound the body of Christ.

Listen, there is a reason I am a United Church minister. I have followed the rules and the commandments and I have lived just right, well okay not well but I sure tried and when I failed - oh the guilt from myself and from my family and from my church. I grew up in a system that held the letter of the law as just. That meant that a woman was to listen to her husband at all costs - this is one of the reasons I became a domestic violence counsellor - because I don't believe for a minute God meant a man gets to treat a woman any way he sees fit because he is

the head of the house. I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that God calls for mutual respect and understanding. I believe God calls to our marriages the type of relationship that encourages abundant life for both spouses and their families. That is what God meant but many find it convenient to twist the scriptures into a patriarchal power system.

I grew up in a system where when a friend of mine confessed to stealing years after a moment of desperate weakness and even though she had returned the item and been forgiven by the person she stole from the church system felt it was their right to discipline her and shun her and when I didn't shun her I was threatened, removed from my leadership and eventually ex-communicated. Why? because God said 'you shall not steal' and this group of men decided it was up to them to ensure this young woman went through enough pain and shame that she would not commit such evil again. Nothing of the parents who pushed her to a breaking point and forced her into a desperate situation. Nothing of coming alongside a family in their struggles or caring for one another in community. I am convinced that is not what God meant when God said "you shall not steal."

Lets talk about sex - I've always wanted to say that in a sermon. But honestly. I am so weary of the rules and the abuse that happens to people when they do not follow certain sexual rules according to certain churches and denominations and boards and systems. When God says "do not commit adultery," or when God says anything about sex it is always about abuse of. Conversations about sex and sexuality have been damaging people have used scripture to clobber and destroy others while ignore the core tenants of our faith, while putting aside the greatest commandment to love.

When God gives us commandments, God is not imposing rules for the sake of rules. If we pay attention to what God means, we will see that everything God asks of us is for our good, for the good of others, and leads all to freedom.

When God says, "Don't kill, don't steal, don't lust, don't lie, don't cheat, let go of your anger...." What God means is, "I love you. I love you – so let me change your heart as well as your hands, let me change your feelings as well as your behavior, let me change your attitude as well as your action."

This is not easy. That is why the Lord calls us together in the community of the church, so that we can learn together, and encourage each other, and prayerfully focus on Jesus.

God's message leads to life. I pray that, with the Spirit's help, I will become better at listening when God speaks. So that when God speaks to me, my only response is, "As you wish."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from <sup>1</sup> As You Wish A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 6A Matthew 5:21-37 by Michael Renninger © 2020