

One or the Other
St. Matthew 5:17-48

Last week we learned the demanding nature of the Beatitudes and the Christian life or The Way. Jesus calls us to “*Take up your cross*” if we are serious about following Him. A right understanding of who we are in relationship to God and others is the root of humility. Not even Jesus said that this was going to be easy.

And Jesus’ challenge becomes more difficult as we move on to a different part of the Sermon on the Mount. Our passage today is often called ‘*the hard sayings of Jesus.*’ They are tough because they require us to walk what we talk. In these instructions we see Jesus’ Jewish origins as He presents the Torah, the Ten Commandments, the Law to us.

You might remember that most of the Ten Commandments are quite specific prohibitions: stealing, adultery, murder and so on. The ninth instructs us not to desire our neighbor’s things. Don’t be like those around you. If we want to be a disciple of Jesus these Ten Commandments are a part of the standard by which we live. The New Life is the polar opposite of how our society lives. In choosing Jesus we adopt a reordering of our desires.

Of course, we are not expected to act alone in providing the power necessary for living the New Life. There is a balance of God’s power and our obedience. Jesus said, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if any- one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also*” (5:38-39).

Last week we learned that we are ‘blessed’ when we are persecuted for Jesus’ sake. Today we hear Jesus saying to us, “*do not resist an evil doer.*” These tough words are difficult to hear. And some who hear them say that they are impossible to fulfill, and only religious fanatics say they are easy to fulfill. Most of us find these commands plausible enough that we are not challenged in believing them. More than assent is required, however. If we cannot believe Jesus with these words, where do we take Him seriously?

Some people say that to live a balanced life there must be a reasonableness or moderation to it. I think that philosophy reeks of selfishness. It sounds like a playbook for making “Living the New Life,” in respectable, civilized way of living, that doesn’t make too many demands, and shows the world that we living good, balanced lives.

Our reaction to God’s requirements must not be a ‘checklist’ of actions necessary for holiness that most of us cannot fulfill. The commandments of Jesus are tough not because they are impossible to complete. Rather, they are tough because they wage war with what we think is best for us. It is helpful to remember that Jesus takes our assumptions, and shakes them vigorously.

This is scary but good for us because most of the time we don’t know what is the best for ourselves, what will make us joyful. We have been taught to stand up for themselves, always thinking we must protect our ego. When someone breaks my boundary physically, emotionally, or financially, sometimes my initial response is revenge. Why? Because I think this action will make me happy. This response is deeply embedded in us..

Please note that God’s command not to murder is followed by the prohibition against being angry at your neighbor (vv 21-22), both before the command to “*turn the other cheek.*’ Jesus also said “*blessed are the humble*” before He shares the lifestyle that lead to blessedness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is all about transforming the way we live.

Some people define morality as an angel and a devil perched on the cartoon character’s shoulders. The angel says one thing and the devil says another. But Jesus displays incredible boldness in that He asks us to bring into alignment what we say and what we do, and we do this not because it will overcome our selfish ways, but because we long to do what is right for God’s glory. This may be why St. Paul wrote that we will be “*transformed by the renewing of your minds*” (Romans 12:2).

The Ten Commandments do not give us impossibly high standards that no one can reach. Instead, they show us that even in our fantasies, impulses, and desires we are self-betrayed. What is essential for our walking in ‘The Way’ is God’s grace. This grace empowers us to be transformed. The Sermon on the Mount displays how our lives can be made new, replacing ‘selfishness and pride’ with God.

God’s plan was never that we should accept and live the New Life alone. It

simply isn't possible. Nor are we asked to do it on our own strength. In St. Matthew's gospel we are told that we have been given a gift, and that gift is the church, a spirit-filled community where together we help each other walk the talk. Alleluia. Amen.