Sermon on the Mount – Lesson 4
Matthew 5:17-48

Background

- This section of the Sermon is often called "The Antitheses." This implies that Jesus is offering some new interpretation of the Torah (Jewish law or "instructions"). Amy-Jill Levine points out Jesus is not changing the meaning but rather extending the meaning. She likes to call them "The Extensions"
- Jesus begins by saying he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them. By fulfill, Jesus doesn't mean check off items like a to-do list but rather he will draw out the full implications of the law for his day and for today.
- Contrary to those who believe Christianity supersedes or replaces Judaism, Jesus teaches that the covenant and scriptures remain intact.
- Side note: whenever you hear "the Law and the Prophets" in the NT this is referring to two of the three sections of the Jewish Bible called the Tanakh. Essentially, it's a way of saying, "The Jewish scriptures."
- In verse 20, when Jesus says, "exceeding the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees" is Jesus setting a high bar or is he being sarcastic (he often calls the scribes "hypocrites")?
- The sermon begins by telling the disciples and the crowds they are blessed ones. Then Jesus encourages them (and us) to go out and be salt and light, carrying our blessing to the world. Now the sermon shifts to showing us how with six examples from the law that show how the spirit of the law should be applied.
- 1. Anger. Jesus extends the prohibition against murder to even getting angry. Anger is also destructive to the community Jesus is trying to build.
- Some early texts say, "if you are angry *without cause*," signifying that some things, such as suffering, cruelty, injustice ought to make us angry.
- 2. Adultery. Leviticus notes that the punishment for adultery was death for both parties involved. However, there is no evidence this was carried out. The term for lust Jesus uses here is related the commandment forbidding coveting (Ex. 20:17). Lust therefore is a form of greed, the desire to possess something that is not yours to have.
- Can this also be extended to the objectification and sexualization of others, particularly women, in our society today?
- 3. Divorce. The Bible tends to be all over the map on the topic of divorce. It's okay, it's not okay, it's okay in some circumstances. Jesus seems to be pointing to the sanctity of marriage as something to take seriously, but by including "except for

sexual immorality" (Gk. *porneia* which can encompass many things), he acknowledges that some marriages are better if ended. "A marriage that looks like a battlefield is not a marriage sanctioned by God." (A-J Levine).

- In the patriarchal society of Jesus' day, men could seek divorce for little or no reason. This often left ex-wives and children vulnerable without the support of an adult male. This is not the community Jesus is trying to create.
- 4. Oaths. "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes,' or 'No, No.'" If you always keep your word, your reputation for honesty ought to be enough.
- 5. Justice. An accepted norm was a proportional response when someone hurt you. *An eye for an eye* is intended to stop violence from escalating. A quote often attributed to Gandhi says, "An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind," pointing to the spiral of violence we often see in our world. Instead, Jesus is promoting an early form of nonviolent response in order to de-escalate a situation.
- To be slapped on the right cheek would take a backhanded slap (by a right hand) which is seen as dismissive and humiliating. Offering the other cheek shows courage without raising the stakes to more violence.
- If someone sues you for your shirt, walk into court and give them your shirt AND your coat, showing how taking your possessions leaves you vulnerable. In Exodus, those who take a coat as collateral for a loan are instructed to return it at night so the owner has something to cover up with as they sleep.
- If an authority compels you to carry their gear a mile (which was allowed in Roman law, as Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus' cross), demonstrate your own strength and agency by going a second mile. Each of these cases gives the person being humiliated a sense of self-worth and dignity. Doing more than demanded says, "You don't control me. I am still in control of me."
- 6. Love your enemies, "so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Just as God is concerned with the just and unjust alike, so should we.
- What do we do with v.48, "Be perfect"? The sense in Greek is less a command "to be" and rather "to become" or "will be." Moreover, another way to translate perfect is "complete" or even "whole." Think of it this way. Follow Jesus and God's commands and you will become complete, or whole.

Reflection

- Jesus got angry in certain situations. What makes you justifiably angry?
- Which of these "extensions" do you find most challenging? And why?

Summary

In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus' followers will go beyond what is contained in the Torah, or law, in order to create an even more just and peaceful world. At the heart of each of these "extensions" is the principle of love.