



Jesus 'Buts' In – Touchpoint for February 8, 2023

Matthew 5:21-37 (MSG) ²¹⁻²² “You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘idiot!’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘stupid!’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

²³⁻²⁴ “This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

²⁵⁻²⁶ “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine.

²⁷⁻²⁸ “You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. Your heart can be corrupted by lust even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt.

²⁹⁻³⁰ “Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. If you want to live a morally pure life, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump.

³¹⁻³² “Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights?’ Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’ Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure.

³³⁻³⁷ “And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.”

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

From the Revised Standard Version:

“You have heard it said ... but I say to you” ... and again

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Jesus ... is a ... “but-in-ski.”

The passage this week is a continuation of last week’s passage. It is an explaining – an unpacking – of Jesus saying he came to “*fulfill the law.*”

Not “follow it,” but “*fulfill it.*”

You see, here’s what we like to do with the law: Follow it. And use it as a way to show our individual righteousness.

“*Thou shalt not murder.*” I haven’t murdered anyone. So, I must be a good person. Now the fact that I hate each and every one of you is irrelevant. And well, since I haven’t killed any of you ... yet! ... I must be a good person.

It reminds me of when I was young and riding cross-country in the back of our car with my older brother Craig. He would start poking me and teasing me, irritating and annoying me. And I would cry out, “Mom, Craig is poking me!!!”

And she would say, “Craig, don’t touch your brother.”

And then he would simply put his hands a half inch from my face, right in front of my eyes. Like he was going to touch me. And when my mom would yell at him again, he would say, “But you told me not to touch him and I’m not touching him!”

My brother Craig, GREAT at following the law. Not so great at fulfilling it. Though I must say, I did learn a lot from him about how to manipulate institutional systems using their own laws and rules. So having an older brother is a mixed bag.

Or it reminds me of the time I was starting a new church in 1988 in Scottsdale. I was going around the neighborhoods on foot, knocking on doors and inviting people to come and join us.

At one door, a woman about 5’2” answered the door. Why do I mention her height? Because right next to her a Great Dane stuck its head out at the exact same height as her head. Now the Great Dane had a muzzle on, covering its mouth and teeth. I was more than a little taken aback and asked her, “Is your dog safe?” And she said, “He hasn’t bitten anyone in five years.” And I asked, “How long has he had the muzzle on?” And she said, “Five years.”

The muzzle doesn’t give the dog an out. It doesn’t make that dog the answer to the eternal question, “Who’s a good boy?”

The muzzle doesn’t give the dog an out. Following the law doesn’t give us an out in our discipleship. Just because we follow the law doesn’t mean we fulfill it.

Quit looking to the law to give you an out. Quit looking to the law to make you feel righteous. It isn't about you, it's about your relationship to others. Sin is not about chewing gum in church. It goes much deeper than that. And it even goes much further than murdering another. It extends to our attitude towards all who we consider the other. And adultery isn't just about your relationship with your spouse. It's about your whole view of the opposite sex, and how you see them and how you treat them. And it isn't about seeing the court system as the final say, it's about what your relationship is with your neighbor that goes far beyond what any Court can proclaim as right and wrong in treating your neighbor next door or the neighbor on your border.

I don't know how to say this, but the ten commandments are kind of a low bar. Do not murder. Is that a high bar for us? Do not steal. Is that really a high bar for us? Do not take the name of your Lord in vain. Okay that's a high bar – I don't think God ever drove on modern freeways or stubbed a toe.

Karoline Lewis, a professor at Luther Seminary, writes this:

Who you are as a disciple is not just about you, but about you as a disciple in community. We are not disciples for our own sakes, and our own actions, but for the sake of those around us as well. There is an accountability, a responsibility to the other for the sake of the good of the community ... Nothing we do as disciples, as believers, is an autonomous action. It has an effect on those around us.

That's a hard word for us who have grown up in this culture and this country to hear. Our culture and country are based on the individual. We scream about our individual rights... BUT here's the thing (there's that word again) ...

Nowhere in the Bible does it talk about individual RIGHTS... no, it talks about individual and communal RESPONSIBILITIES.

I challenge you, go look in the Bible and see where you find any kind of passage on individual rights. Then go look and see how many passages you can find that speak to your responsibility to your fellow human being. I dare say, it will be eye-opening.

This is the brilliance of Luther's Small Catechism and his explanation of the ten commandments. Listen to his comments on the eighth commandment, about bearing false witness against one's neighbor:

The Eighth Commandment

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

*What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray them, slander them, or hurt their reputation, **BUT** (there's that word again) **defend them, speak well of them, and explain everything in the kindest way.***

Luther has it right. It isn't just about not doing something. It's about your relationship towards the other – the neighbor.

If Christianity is just an isolated, individual thing, then why is Jesus calling us the light of the world and the salt of the earth?

Why is he saying that on Judgment Day, *"I was hungry and you fed ME. I was naked and you clothed ME. I was in prison and you visited ME"*?

These are not isolated, individual acts. They are relational, interdependent acts. And when we try to reduce them to an individual righteousness, we miss the point.

If all you want from Christianity is individual righteousness, you can stop right now. You are forgiven. You are saved. You belong. God has re-membered your sins no more.

You already are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. You are already blessed in your poverty of spirit and your hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Jesus has made these pronouncements before all of this.

So this isn't about Jesus setting up tougher entry requirements. He's talking about the seriousness of treating everyone as being "IN" ... everyone belonging.

Because of the preceding words of Jesus, we can hear these words not as rigid requirements, but as a light to a greater way of being. A light to living from a greater reality than just myself.

If all you want from Christianity is an individual righteousness, then you've missed the point of Christianity.

You see, once you stop trying to save your individual, celestial butt, you can actually hear what Jesus is saying with his communal, earthly 'but.'

This isn't about individual righteousness. You already BELONG. It's about communal responsibility. It's about treating everyone as being "IN." It's about living from a greater reality than just myself.

It's not about following the law. It's about what it means to fulfill it.

In the night in which he was betrayed, Jesus doesn't claim his individual rights as the Son of God, but rather he lives out his communal responsibility. He humbles himself, even to death on the cross.

"Take and eat. This is me for you. Take and drink. This is me poured out for you. You are no longer an individual. You are re-membered to me. You are a part of the body of Christ."

This is the community in which we all live and move and have our being. We already BELONG. Because as St. Paul says, "Christ is all and in all."

And so, because of Christ, who is all and in all, we move beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

Because of Christ, we can hear these words not as rigid requirements, but as a light to a greater way of being. A light to living from a greater reality than just myself.

"You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..."

It's always good when Jesus "buts" in to our individual lives.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be Still, know that I am God

Lamb of God

(Salt of the Sound)

Lamb of God, have mercy on us.

Lamb of God (hear our prayer),

Lamb of God, Grant us peace (hear us pray).

This we pray.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come O Lord and Set Us Free

(John L. Bell, The Wild Goose Collection)

Come, O Lord and set us free. Give/Bring your people peace.

Come, O Lord and set us free. Come Lord Jesus, Come.

1. And take our guilt away. Give us your pardon Lord.

2. Free from our self-obsession. Free from each fond possession.

3. Free to affirm each other...as sister and as brother

Reshape the world you made. Let what your hand created...be always celebrated.

The Meal

Our Father

(Taize Reflections)

Benediction

May God Keep and Bless You

(Marty Haugen)

May God keep and bless you, and nothing distress you.

May God guard and guide you and friends walk beside you.

May God's arms surround you and fear not confound you.

May God's light shine through you and night not subdue you.

As you sleep and wake may your prayers arise as love songs for God,

Whose love never dies, whose love never dies.