

Nourishment for the Journey

Ruminations on Matthew 5.21-37

This remnant of the Sermon on the Mount needs to be understood in light of the rest of the sermon, and the purposes that Matthew has already alluded to, which we have talked about in the past two Sundays. But even that will not perhaps shake our uneasiness with the harshness of these passages until we recognize the wider Greek cultural and philosophical context in which Jesus talks about these ideas, along with Hebrew spirituality and the Jewish history associated with Gehenna.

Thus far in his sermon, Jesus has told of the vision of the world he wants us to create in what is known as the Beatitudes. Then he has encouraged us to commit ourselves to this vision, and has identified the entirety of the commitment we need to make in order to make this happen. Now he is explaining how far-reaching our transformation of spirit needs to be in order to live by that vision.

We need to remember that Jesus has just said that he has come to fulfill the law, not take away from it; and that fulfilling it means that we all need to live in accordance to its spirit, rather than its letter. We are not to misinterpret it for our own purposes, but are to dedicate ourselves fully to living by God's ways. Anything less will not be enough to bring about the vision of the egalitarian world he has spoken of in the Beatitudes.

The problem, however, is that most people interpret his words from a rule, act, or principle-based ethic that essentially keeps the human systems we have in place, and would have us to myopically apply these rules, acts, or principles to our lives as viewed within these systems that we have created for ourselves. Of course, from what we discussed in the Beatitudes section, this is to misinterpret Jesus' purposes; for he wants us to totally obliterate the systems we have now, and replace them with the system that God would have us to adopt – one governed by love, peace, and justice; equitably, and fully, provided for all.

Jesus was not an act or rule utilitarian or consequentialist who determined goodness based on outcomes, nor a deontologist who determined goodness based on purity of motive and deed in accordance with ethical principles. He was a virtue-ethicist, in the heritage of Aristotle, who synthesized cultivating virtues in our character with Hebrew prophetic social accountability and wisdom literature spirituality.

This is the context in which we need to interpret Jesus' words if we are to understand his meaning, and avoid the misinterpretations of countless Christians throughout the ages on this text.

In a series of "you have heard that it was said,...but I say to you" passages, Jesus takes a well-known Jewish law and shows how its traditional interpretation by scholars of his day, and those who preceded him, have underestimated its truth and undermined its application. He was not a traditionalist. Traditions too often substitute 'the way we've always done it' for truth and goodness -- the things with which he is most concerned. He is essentially trashing the traditions the people have learned, and that have made most of them 'comfortable,' and has upped the ante in making them even more rigorously interpreted; setting a higher standard for what makes us genuinely ethical.

Every faithful Jew in his day accepted as undeniable truth that we aren't to murder each other. Jesus is not refuting this, but rather he is telling us that if we think we are just and good simply because we don't murder each other, then we've missed the whole spirit of the Law. It is not only obedience to the rule of not murdering others, or the act of not murdering them, that makes us virtuous; to be virtuous requires a complete attitudinal shift and spiritual framework.

It's not a very high bar to claim that we are moral if all we have to do is not murder others. We need to eliminate the attitude, and the thoughts and feelings, we have towards someone that might eventually lead to the idea of hurting them. Anger is the root vice that people have when they want to murder someone.

It is that root vice of anger, specifically an anger that would wish them ill, that needs to be eliminated. If this is done, then the act of murder will never arise.

Some may object that Jesus himself was angry with those in power for their oppression of others; as if this contradicted his condemnation of the anger that wishes others ill. It doesn't. He did not wish his opponents ill; he wished them well – 'well' meaning that they changed their ways and participated in the blessing of living in right relationship with God and their fellow beings. He most certainly was angry, indeed, irate with those who victimized others for their own gain. So irate that he compared their souls to the loathsome, filthy, rotting, and fiery place known as Gehenna. But never did he wish anyone to end up there. He wanted them to be reformed in character and spirit. He wanted them to change their evil ways and adopt God's ways. And he did not justify violence or harm against those who were evil; for that would make himself evil; having the same attitudes they had.

I have often heard people justify their "good character" in telling what atrocities they have not committed. "Other people have done 'X', but I would never do that; I wouldn't even think about doing it," I've heard it said. But how does that differentiate you from most people who also haven't done 'X', and really are not even tempted to doing it?

Jesus was repudiating this proclivity of people to think they were good people for not doing heinous acts. He was telling us that we need to be much better people than we are if we are to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. Our whole spirit needs to change – thoughts, feelings, attitudes, perceptions, will, desires, motives, etc.

Again, it is our whole system of looking at the world that needs to be transformed. It is not enough to not murder people. We are convicted under virtue ethics if we have even the thought or feeling of wanting something bad to happen to someone. A truly virtuous person will not have such thoughts or feelings, for their lives are premised on loving others unconditionally, being peaceful and nonviolent oneself and teaching others to be the same, and treating everyone justly, in the way of reconciling and restoring our relationships with them, so that we can live in harmony together. If we don't rid ourselves of the feelings and thoughts of animosity, we will end up killing our relationships, as was Jesus' point, whether we actually kill the persons or not.

The same goes for insulting others. Many who adopt less rigorous ethics that only deal with rules, acts, or principles don't recognize that the attitude or spirit one has towards others needs to change. We may think we are ethical for legalistically living in accordance with the rules, acts, or principles we have defined as right and not living by those we've defined as wrong, but how hard is that? Jesus calls us to a higher standard of cultivating virtues within us that will not only have us to "naturally" act within the confines of those rules, acts, and principles, but will go far above them by transforming our attitudes as well. A virtuous person will not insult others, for it is not having the attitude of seeing the sacred worth of the person. Nor would it reflect well on one's own character to stoop to insulting people when our goal is to lift people up in love rather than tear them down by condescension.

As a virtue ethicist, Jesus recognized that the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes we have with regard to others can just as adversely harm our relationships as actually committing an action of hostility against them. They corrupt our moral souls, and defile our holiness of spirit. Our inner beings decay and rot away with each negative cognition about others.

And it is with this understanding that we see why he referenced "Gehenna" (mistranslated as "hell") in this passage. Gehenna, the trash dump on the south side of Jerusalem in his day, was a place where that which was not worthy of keeping was disposed. Rubbish, even criminals, decayed and/or were incinerated in this area. It was a place of putrid smells and ghastly sights. Earlier in Jewish history, Gehenna was the place where idolatrous Jews sacrificed their children to the god, Molech. Because of this repugnant practice, and the stigma attached to the place because of this history, Gehenna was transformed into a trash dump.

In comparing this place of decay and annihilation with our own spirits when we wish ill towards others, Jesus is making the extraordinary claim that we have rotten souls if we so much are angry or insulting toward others. Our spirit suffers and decays whenever we are antagonistic or hateful toward others. The same attitude we have in despising someone or wishing them harm is the same attitude that murderers have. We are no better than murderers, according to virtue ethics, if we have the same attitudes in us that murderers have. Maybe we don't go as far as they do in acting on that attitude, but the attitude is precisely the same.

We need virtues in our lives, practiced for their own sake, to make us good people. But virtues also improve our relationships with others. After all, we are to live in community with one another; not in isolation. It is easy to be good when no one is around to be angry or frustrated with; but true goodness is revealed when we can maintain our character in the midst of challenging relationships with others. And this is why Jesus said for us to go and reconcile ourselves to our human siblings before we think that any pious ritual of offering a sacrificial gift is going to do any good. We aren't to misbehave and then try to buy people off, or buy God off, in thinking that we're good people when we aren't even in good relationship with others. We need to stop mistreating people, and go and ask for their forgiveness based on our change of conduct and attitude. Offering gifts without changing our behavior is not going to work.

Anger, insults, and mistreatment of others needs to be rectified if we are to be in right relationship with them. And this requires a change in behavior, and in attitude. For what person is likely to forgive us if we stop a particular action that offends or hurts them, if we continue to have an attitude toward them that they really don't matter to us? I've heard men say, "I've never hit my wife!" Well, good; but have you insulted her, demeaned her, blown her off when she wanted to talk with you, or treated her as though she doesn't matter as much as you do? We can tell when someone's attitude towards us is condescending, confrontational, controlling, or dismissive. They don't have to 'do' anything. Their vibe is readily apparent. Even our pets can pick up these signals with people.

And so, once again, Jesus gives a real-life example, and a well-known law, to show us how we think we are better than we are. He refers to the law against committing adultery. But again, not simply for the act itself, but rather for the attitudes behind the act. Many may boast that they've never committed adultery; but how many can boast that they've never had lust for another person other than their spouse?

Jesus' point is that when we lust for someone else, we are violating the virtue of faithfulness to our marital covenant and spouse; whether or not we actually commit the act of adultery. There is physical adultery; and then there is emotional adultery – wanting someone else whether we act on it or not.

Wanting another has several ethical ramifications. It means you are not respecting your covenant with your spouse in that your desires are for another; that you are not affirming the sacred worth of your spouse just as they are; that you are disrespecting the person who you desire in either treating them as an object of your desire rather than the sacred person they are, or are inviting them to participate in breaching your covenant with your spouse. It also means disrespecting the other person's spouse or significant other, and their covenant, if they have one.

Jesus is trying to get us to see that the divisions we have in society are not simply structural, which many are, but also a result of our attitudes towards others in not seeing them as beings of sacred worth in which God has created us all to be. Indeed, the structural and systemic injustices would not arise if it were not for us having less than loving, peaceful, and just attitudes towards others.

Because Jesus' point is fundamentally a spiritual one, about how we perceive others and the world around us, it becomes all the harder to live up to being truly ethical. Most of us can get through life without acting heinously towards others or doing abominable things. But whether we can rid ourselves of the very thoughts, desires, feelings, and perceptions that are the initiators for those much later actions is much

more difficult. And his point is that if we fail in having the wrong attitude towards others, it undermines the whole ethical way of being just, as acting wrongly would do.

We might think of it in terms of what our bodies need to flourish and survive. All of our parts may be working fine, except one; but if that one is vital to our living, then we can't think that we can get by without missing that one part. Whether it be our stomach, liver, kidneys, intestines, skin, lungs, heart, or brain, we can't expect to flourish in health if one of these is not right. Failure in one of these organs results in a whole system failure, and death. Just as our bodily organs are necessary for our physical health, so are our ethical attitudes necessary for our spiritual health. Having a bad attitude towards someone will ruin our spirit just as surely as murdering them.

For this reason, Jesus makes the analogy of getting rid of any part that is unnecessary for our spiritual and ethical health that will not deprive us of our physical health. It sounds drastic to tear out an eye or cut off a hand if it causes you to sin; and most certainly he is using hyperbole to get us to think about the bigger point. Who hasn't sinned with our eyes or hands at some point; and yet if we all rid ourselves of them whenever we sin, then the whole society would be sightless and lacking any hands. I don't think he really wants us to lop them off. He rather shocks us with this imagery so as to get us to think about what we really need to change (i.e., the internal attitude, not the physical eye or hand) so that we don't sin. Those attitudes, negative feelings, hatefulness, condescension, and ill will towards others DO need to be extricated from our characters if we are to be virtuous persons; for we can't have any one of them without ruining our spiritual health.

It is obvious that the standards Jesus sets for us are much more rigorous than what society in general sets for us. Many people may justify ill-will towards someone, thinking it is a solitary act, rule, or principle that is broken one time – which if you are a utilitarian or deontologist might not seem so bad. But the fact that you allow this evil thought into your consciousness, and worse yet to dwell on it, reveals a whole system failure in your character. To have ill will is evil; pure and simple. And you can't expect to let evil into your life without it becoming your master. In virtue ethics, you can't be a little or a lot virtuous. It is all or nothing; you either are, or you aren't.

Granted, there may be a gradient of goodness, as Aristotle coined, that ranges between the purely evil or vicious person, and the purely good or virtuous person. For instance, a person with a 'weak will' desires to be a good person, but often fails to act on their good will. And a 'strong willed' person, also wants to be a good person, and often, but not always, does what is good; but because of the uneasy and internal struggle of having to decide to do the right thing over the tempting wrong thing, it is not an effortless endeavor.

But both of these people, like the vicious person, who actually wills to do evil, are not virtuous. They are not a maestro of morality like the virtuous person, who has for so long, and in every instance, willed the good such that their goodness has become habitual and effortless; just like a concert pianist who has practiced for decades can play a difficult piece without the music or even thinking about how they need to play it. So, too, is the case for the virtuous person who practices goodness so habitually and pervasively that they don't have to think about doing right or wrong; they simply do the right. It becomes their nature and instinct.

Jesus' point with regard to divorce proceeds from this understanding of spirituality and ethics. For when people marry, they commit themselves to one another for life. Their ability to keep their vows reflects on their own character. 'In sickness and in health,' 'for richer or poorer,' and other such vows remind us that it is not a utilitarian commitment in which we reassess how things are going as we start to see the consequences of our marital choice. Nor is it a secondary or tertiary principle that can be overturned by pointing out how some other principles are not being met in the relationship. Marriage is dishonored, along with our reputation, when we use these as excuses for ending the marriage when we're not willing to work to preserve, protect, and sustain it.

What enduring marriage hasn't had things go wrong, and other principles violated? None that I know of. Rather, marriage is an oath of character; and to fail in not keeping that oath reflects on the lack of ethical effort, moral imagination, and/or spiritual resolve to find a way to keep the marriage viable.

Jesus saw unchastity, and I suspect he'd add abuse and other violations of another's dignity, as an exception to this matter of character. But barring those grave breaches of the marital covenant, we are to find ways to make the marriage work. The covenant is not only with your partner, but with God; and, therefore, a spiritual matter in which you need to honor in order to preserve your own character.

Likewise, others need to honor that covenant; for it is a public commitment, as well as a personal and sacred one. And this is why others would be committing adultery if the marriage was dissolved for anything less than egregious reasons, and another remarried the person.

Whether we agree with how far Jesus takes his examples may need to be informed further by a comparison of his culture with ours. Ultimately, it is for us to decide with our own sense of integrity how to answer this question for ourselves. We have an extra two millennia of the thoughts and experiences of others on the topic to consider. Nevertheless, he said these things within a virtue ethic framework which, given the cultural assumptions of his time, make complete sense in accordance with how we are to behave towards one another. And I know of no better spiritual and ethical system for us to become a good human being and a caring society than the virtue ethic system that Jesus espoused.

We might also wonder about his antipathy towards swearing, not only falsely, but at all. I suspect the issue was one of exaggerating one's proclaimed commitment; a tactic employed by con artists. For Jesus, your word should be true no matter what. There should be no degree of seriousness to one's words. Either one upholds one's word completely, or one doesn't. Even a minor departure from one's intentions is a violation of one's word, and that, of course, is also a violation of one's character. Once again, it is all or nothing. Being "mostly truthful" is not, by definition, being "wholly truthful."

In these verses, we see that Jesus is not content with having us to tweak and modify the ways of human societies that have long traditions of oppressing of others. It is to be a wholesale demolition of human values in favor of the wholesale advocacy of divine values. Societal mores and customs are to be rejected; and sacred virtues are to be practiced individually, implemented communally, and habituated by all until living rightly and justly is no longer a matter of whether we have a weak or strong moral will, but will be inevitably followed because they are engrained in our spirit and character.

Does this contextual understanding of Jesus' words make sense to you? Does it help you to understand who Jesus was and how he thought? Does it change how you see yourself being a Christian and disciples of Christ? Is the self-work you most need to do involve changing your attitudes? How might that work make it easier to act and behave in the ways God would have us to do so? Does this emphasis on your own spirit and character help you to reevaluate how you are in relationship with others, and how you might improve on those relationships by following Christ's ways?