

February 12, 2023
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37

But Even More

When I hear Jesus speaking to his disciples today, I imagine them quickly pulling out notebooks and pens and trying to write everything down. “OK, OK Jesus, just a second. This is new stuff. We aren’t going to have to study this. Just slow down. Can you repeat that last bit again?” All of this is different. All the old rules are being changed. ‘You have heard it said...but I say to you...’ Jesus says. The disciples need to pay attention.

What Jesus is saying isn’t really new, but it is different. Their goodness needs to be better. Their righteousness needs to go farther. He sets some really high standards. Calling names is now like murder. Looking at something you shouldn’t means removing your eye. Swearing an oath might mean your words come from the devil. Jesus’s words seem over the top. He’s not the gentle Jesus, the soft, kind Jesus we would share with our children or our frail sick grandmother. This Jesus demands hard things from his disciples. He challenges them to do better, dig deeper, go

further; to do their best for God instead of the least that they can get away with.

Jesus asks hard things of us. It's one thing to be his fan. It's another to be his disciple. He wants them to put their whole heart into it. Not just a little bit of it. Jesus doesn't want another religion of bare minimums.

God doesn't want a kingdom of those who will do just enough and no more. God wants people committed to a new way of life, a life of love and respect for others. This is what the Law was really about. The Ten Commandments: You shall not lie. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. Honor your parents. Rest on the sabbath. Do not worship other gods. Do not covet your neighbor's house, wife or donkey. It was supposed to bring life to everyone and harmony.

But we made it complicated. After all, we live in the real world with real people. There are always those 'what-if' scenarios; What if pick up a penny on the street? Am I 'stealing' it? What if there is a surprise party and I don't tell the truth Is it lying? What if I hold someone's hand and we aren't married? What if my donkey falls in a ditch and it's the Sabbath and I'm not supposed to any work?" We have questions. And

there have always been people with answers. In Jesus' day, it was the Sadducees, and Pharisees, and Essences, scribes, Levites, lawyers. They all had opinions about what God's rules really meant. Today, we are still trying to figure it out. What is the right thing to do according to God? How do we stay faithful when everything keeps changing. And all of it is accelerated by social media and instant news and big emotions that we just don't know what to do with. How can we be good people? How can we be God's people and live by the right rules?

Jesus says, the rules are still the rules. I'm not getting rid of any of them. I'm here to fulfill them. I'm here to remind you of their purpose; and show you their true meaning. This isn't just about your behavior. It's about your heart. God wants you to care about one another. And laws won't make you do that. Laws are the bare minimum of what God wants. I want you to do more than that. I want you to do better, to BE better. I want you to do more than the law requires. I want you to act with love. Love is what God wants. Love is what God intends. It's about the rule of love, not the love of rules.

Jesus says love is the point of every law and every commandment. Love that is patient and kind, that is not arrogant or boastful or rude, like the apostle Paul writes about. It does not insist on its own way and does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And it always offers its best. Not what it can get away with. Not the bare minimum. God doesn't give us the bare minimum. Or least amount of mercy possible, or the smallest amount of grace. God doesn't buy us cheap to hold onto reserves, or worse to try and make a profit. God's love for us is full and complete and given without anything held back. Jesus teaches us that loving one another isn't about getting the best deal. It isn't a transaction, where you hedge your bets and try to come out ahead. You have heard it said, Jesus tells us, that you shall not murder. And that is the minimum. I say to you don't be angry with anyone. Don't let yourself hate. Hate leads to evil. It leads to destruction of everyone and everything. I want you to do better, to be better. If there is fight or a misunderstanding, fix it immediately. Don't tell yourself, well,

it's not like I murdered anyone; and sticks and stones and all that. Don't settle for that. Don't make excuses. Love does not look for loopholes.

If we follow Jesus, we do the minimum. If we want to be his disciples, we need to be better. We have to work to get an A in loving one another.

An A in caring and understanding. Yes, you could pass with a C, but I want more, says Jesus. I want you to be known for love. For doing the extra credit. For going the extra mile. For giving others our best. That's what love does and love is what matters most to God.

Sometimes we want to do less. My friend Sally once told me a story.

She said that when she got married, she had this idea that each person would do their share, 50/50. Half from me. Half from you. She shared this perspective with someone, and they said to her: "Oh, no Sally.

Marriage is not 50-50. It's 100-100. You both have to give it your best.

You have to be ready to give 100% for it to work." That's what Jesus is telling us. If we want to follow him, we have to do it with 100% of

ourselves. And 100% with love. It has to be more than the bare

minimum. But are we ready for that? Or are we just trying for a passing grade? Do we want to be good enough compared to others?

Jesus says we have to stop looking for loopholes. That's the first point. Don't try to find short cuts. Don't do as little as possible for God. I'm not just talking about here at church either. I'm talking about aligning ourselves with God. And really following Jesus. Giving one another a break. Offering the benefit of the doubt. Acting with love and mercy before anything else. With friends. With strangers. Even with enemies. Because love is the fulfillment of God's law. The apostle Paul reminds the church at Corinth of that today. Don't fight with each other. Don't try to put yourselves above others. The church is not for quarreling or jealousy or competition. The church is not about us, it's about God. We are not our own building. We are God's building, God's field, growing what God wants.

Don't do the bare minimum. Don't look for the loopholes. Do your best because God does God's best for us. And second, know that things can't stay the same. What was good enough before isn't good enough now.

"You have heard it said," Jesus tells his disciples, "BUT I say to you, things are different." What worked for you, doesn't work now. What

was good for you maybe wasn't good for everyone. Things have to change.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban are in charge. They have taken away all the rights women had. They cannot work anymore. They can't go to school past the 8th grade. They cannot travel alone. They cannot dress how they like. Their skin and hair cannot be visible because the Taliban say it will cause men to sin. They make women responsible for men's feelings and refuse to hold men accountable for themselves. Believe it or not, that would have been close to how things were in Jesus' time. Women were treated the same way. They played a supporting role in the world of men. Only men were educated. Only men could travel alone. Only men could be teachers or rabbis. Only men could go into the temple sanctuary. Notice, even Jesus's words are addressed only to men. And I want to tell Jesus to do better, to be better. Because things need are different.

But for his time, Jesus' words were a challenge. He is telling men that things have to change. They can't treat women like objects. They aren't just body parts. They aren't only mothers and wives for men. They

aren't disposable. Men, do better. Mind your thoughts and your actions.

Be responsible for yourselves. Treat others as you want to be treated.

And those others include women. God's love offers dignity. It offers respect that is bigger than what the old rules account for.

Things have to change. Love is not love, if it's not love for everyone.

It's not love if we have loopholes and allow ourselves to give the bare

minimum. And third, love is love when it's the love of God. God is the

ultimate in love. God is the ultimate in goodness, in faithfulness, in

integrity. That means God's love is the same for everyone. Big or small,

first or last, the greatest or the least, it doesn't matter. God's love is

always the best God has to offer. And it's wrong for us to offer less.

Jesus tells a story about a landowner going on a journey. He leaves his

servants in charge of all of his money. To the first servant, he gives a

million dollars. To the second, \$100,000. To the third, only \$100. The

first two servants do the best they can with it. They take the investment

seriously. It is their master's money after all. But the third servant, the

one with \$100, takes the money and buries it. He hides it. He squirrels it

away. "It's not that much anyway." After some time, the owner returns.

He is proud of the first two servants for all their hard work. But he is furious with the third. “Why didn’t you do your job? Why did you hide what I gave you? Was it not important enough for you?” Listen, Jesus says, this is about integrity. Whoever is faithful in a little will be faithful with much; but whoever is dishonest with a little, will be dishonest with much.

Love is love, no matter what. Love is love no matter the person or the opportunity. The love God has given us is important. It is a big deal. And it matters no matter what the world thinks. Because this is the law. This is the divine rule since the beginning. This is the purpose that God will go to any length to accomplish. To reveal how important and precious we are. For this, Jesus will be condemned by human law. He will be rejected. He will suffer. He will go to the cross. He will surrender his life for our lives. Because the law of God is love. And a bare minimum, just enough, is not enough.

Let us strive to fulfill that law. Let us be the best at loving one another. Let us keep doing better and going further. And give up excuses, and stay away from loopholes, and challenge the way things have always

been. Let our yes to God be yes, and our no to hatred and evil be no. Let us love with the love of Jesus and let it make us more.