

**Matthew 5:21-37**  
***“You have heard that it was said...”***

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“You have heard that it was said, but I say to you...”

With this one line, it seems Jesus is wanting to set some records straight this morning. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit murder,’ but I say to you, ‘If you are angry with a brother or sister, the wicked deed is as good as done.’”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I say to you, ‘If you so much as look at a woman with lust in your eyes, you’ve already gone and done it.’”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate,’ but I say to you, ‘Unless she, or you, has been unfaithful, you should stick it out. Because if you don’t, you’ll just be opening the door to adultery, and I just told you what I think about that.’”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘When you make a promise, be sure there are witnesses on hand who can vouch for you later on,’ but I say to you, ‘When you make a promise, remember God is looking on. So make sure you say what you mean, and mean what you say.’”

“You have heard that it was said, but I say to you...” It’s a line we’ve all heard before, and one we’re hearing a lot lately in our national political debates. “You have heard what my colleague across the way said, but I say to you...” The danger in using a line like this is that it sounds an awful lot like you’re just trying to pick a fight, to get me to jump into the ring with you so you can show everybody who’s right and who’s wrong.

The person who says, “You’ve heard it said, but I say to you,” is obviously questioning the truth, and trying to get us to question it, too. To make us think that what we’ve heard before—and from whomever we heard it—it was a bald-faced lie. “But thank God I’ve come along. Listen to me. Come on over to my side, and I’ll tell you what really is true.”

Except who's to say what really is true? When the argument goes that it's a simple choice between open borders or closed borders, between being for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment or being against personal freedom, between believing in the rights of women to choose or believing that all abortions are criminal, between supporting gay rights or saying homosexuality is a sin, when too many issues have become only two-sided, who's to say what the truth is really?

At the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington last week, Arthur Brooks, the former president of the American Enterprise Institute, and author of the recent book, *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*, said this: "Moral courage is not standing up to people with whom you disagree. Moral courage is standing up to the people with whom you agree, on behalf of those with whom you disagree."

In other words, when you hear someone say, "You have heard that it was said, but I say to you," the trick is not to figure out which side you want to be on—to figure out which side is right. The trick is to figure out a third side. It is to stand up with the decency of compassion and kindness to the people with whom you agree, on behalf of those with whom you disagree, and to declare, "This, what I'm doing over here by listening, by trying to understand the other side, by putting mercy and compassion first, this is right, this is decent, this is truth-making."

I don't wonder if this is what Jesus is trying to do in our reading today. He is on the Mount of Beatitudes delivering his *Sermon on the Mount* to his disciples. Down below from where they sit, at the bottom of the mountain, is a large crowd of people who have been following them all over hill and dale, and who might have followed them up the mountain, too. Except this crowd of people probably didn't have the strength of mind or body to do so. For Matthew tells us in earlier verses that this is a crowd of sick, needy people. They have come from Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, and from the desert region beyond the Jordan. Think about that. What are sick people doing hanging out together at the bottom of a mountain?

Wouldn't it make more sense for them to be back in Galilee and Jerusalem where they could be seen by a doctor, to be back home in bed getting taken care of by family? Yes, I suppose it would. The whole reason this crowd has come together at the bottom of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, however, is because no doctor or family member wants to see them, and they're hoping Jesus will.

We don't know precisely what the people in the crowd are sick and in need of. Matthew says only that they are demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics, and other people who are afflicted with various diseases and pains. Judging from what Jesus has to say in the part of his sermon we've heard, we might determine that they are mostly sick with disappointment and the feeling of having failed at life so many times, and that what they need is a second chance.

Maybe they have murdered a brother or sister. If not literally, then in other ways. They have said regrettable things that now cannot be taken back. They have fought about family matters so many times—about who deserves to get what when mom and dad die—and they've gone to bed angry with one another every night. They have torn down the very ones who spent a lifetime building them up. They are sick from having destroyed the spirit of family and community, and most of all they are sick from knowing what they have heard about those who murder, that God shall judge them with the harshest of judgements. They think, that's me, and there is no way out of it.

That day at the bottom of the mountain were also adulterers and divorcees. They too know what's been said before about them. About the adulterer, Moses himself, in the original 10 Commandments, right up there alongside "Thou shall not steal and envy," was, "Thou shall not commit adultery." It's pretty straightforward, not a lot of room for interpretation. If you're married, or they're married, then hands off. And if you're the husband and you want a divorce, you better give your wife a certificate to make it official. As the woman, she can't divorce you, even if she wanted to, so if you as the man want to divorce her, be fair and give her a certificate. That way if another man comes along who would like to marry her, she

can show him the certificate, because he deserves to know that she might not be very good at marriage.

Such is the world that the people at the bottom of the mountain are coming out of. It is a world in which one bad move makes you damaged goods forever, a world in which the disabled and mentally ill are pushed to the margins, a world where the meek are considered weak, and truth is a matter of might over right, a world full of judgments, and empty of hope.

“You have heard that it has been said...” Then along comes Jesus: “But I say to you, but I say to you, but I say to you...”

It’s hard to hear Jesus and not think he is trying to pick a fight with the entire Old Testament. Indeed, many Christians have heard these verses from Matthew’s gospel and concluded that this is proof Christianity is meant to replace Judaism. Jesus himself saying, “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you.” Clearly Jesus means for us to see that the Old Testament is just that—old. As Christians, we don’t need to know it. We just need to know the New Testament. But I say to you, few things have sparked more bloodshed and Anti-Semitism throughout history than the arrogance of Christians who think they know. We forget that Jesus himself was a Jew, who studied and loved his scriptures, and that right before he said, “You have heard it said, but I say to you,” he said this: “Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets of old; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Not to abolish but to fulfill. Listen closely this morning and we do not hear Jesus trying to pick any fights. We do not see him getting into the ring to show-off his might, to make others look weak or stupid.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate.’ But I say to you, no man, or woman, should use their marriage in order to exercise power over another person. Let your marriage be a gift to one another, a safe but daring space in which you can discover the power of belonging, forgiveness, and the limitless love of God.”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder.’ But I say to you, if you are angry with a brother or sister, if you throw insults just to make yourself feel better, than you are a murderer, and you will indeed be judged harshly. But I also say to you, there is an altar where you can go to be reconciled. You don’t have to be stuck in judgment and regret. There is an altar of grace and forgiveness where you can go to start again. I can show you how to get there.”

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in 1945 at the hands of the Nazis, said that when Jesus stood on the Mount of Beatitudes with his disciples that day, he was trying not only to help them understand who he was and what he was all about, but in so doing he was also wanting them to understand who they are. That because he came to fulfill, and because he was on their side, and on the side of every person at the bottom of that mountain, they too would be fulfilled.

In his book, *“Barking at the Choir,”* Father Greg Boyle, whose name has become something of a household item in my sermons, tells the story of Ms. June, a woman who works in a job training site in inner city L.A., where former gang members can come and get help with literacy skills and filling out forms.

“On this particular day, Ms. June is working with a homie name Fili. He is filling out a form for a job interview and one of the questions asks for his height, only he doesn’t know how to answer; confined to a wheelchair by gun violence, he is about three feet sitting upright. Ms. June asks him to extend his arms wide. She measures from fingertip to fingertip.

“You’re six feet tall,” she tells him matter-of-factly.”  
Boyle says, “I for one never knew arm span equaled height.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Boyle, Gregory (2017). *“Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship.”* New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 159-60

It would seem that our true height is measured in how wide we can stretch our arms, with generosity and love, and that sometimes, to discover the fullness of who we are, we have to go to the margins, and take a different kind of measurement than what the world takes. I would like to offer that before you leave today, I'd be glad to measure you right where you sit. I'm sure we'll discover that you're all quite tall. Amen.