

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, February 12, 2017)

Text: **Matthew 5:21-37** (*The Message*)

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

“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.

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: “The Law of LOVE”**

First, there were the Beatitudes... lovely. Meek people, merciful people, those pure in heart and those poor in spirit inheriting the earth, getting mercy, seeing God and receiving the kingdom of heaven.

Then there were powerful images – salt with all its flavor and various meanings and light with its astounding energy and ability to show us the way.

And then... BOOM!

Like any great teacher or speaker, Jesus seems to pull us in at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount which we've been making our way through these last three Sundays, with some pretty "feel-good" ideas about our life as children of God and the way in which we should shine, shine, shine, and then lowers the BOOM with today's text which would seem to lay down the law in no uncertain terms and make sure that what seemed formidable and difficult to achieve already goes even a step further to what would seem nearly impossible to accomplish.

But, wait, what is Jesus really saying here and what is at the HEART of God's words as expressed in the law and the way Christ fulfills it for us in what He's saying in this sermon and in what He's living through us right now?

"Jesus, it seems, knew that the law could be cold-hearted," writes John van de Laar in his essay, "Living By Heart." "He knew that it could be used to demean and oppress. He knew that a law that was left in the realm of letters and court rooms could often accomplish the exact opposite of what it was originally intended for... That's why Jesus moves the law from the realm of the letter to the realm of the heart."

"The law," Mr. van de Laar writes, "is only complete when it is written on our hearts. It can only give us life and bring people together when it is carved into the very core of our being."

As Jesus presents the various laws of which he speaks to the people gathered he uses the ancient teaching method of the rabbis - "You have heard it said... but I say..." Now for me, in the past, this methodology somehow answered a lot of the questions I had about the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament as we were brought up calling it, as I assume were many of you. "That was old, this is new."

And, indeed, so much of what is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures did seem so OLD to me. So many wars, so much killing, so many angry, treacherous people justifying their actions and their rebellions with the idea that God was on their side. I was so happy when the seemingly peace-loving, kind, caring Jesus came along, giving us the God I felt I could relate to, not the one who said THAT, but my God who says THIS! My God who cares deeply for humanity and abhors war, murder and judging others for their missteps.

But let's look again at this text before us today. Aren't these NEW verses in the Greek testament the same verses that often been used as a hammer over so many heads; words of our loving Christ employed to split families and heap shame on those already steeped in it so that Christianity feels like a hot poker that many in our modern world don't even want to touch?

Although Eugene Petersen's version of this part of Jesus' sermon that Dave read so beautifully for us today is at least somewhat more palatable than many of the older translations, we must still deal with what Jesus is really getting at in these passages. No matter how much we may want to run from teachings that seem to set up an impossible set of rules:

- those that appear to negate the seemingly unavoidable and absolutely human impulses of anger and lust;

- those that seem to tell us that divorcees are basically doomed to commit adultery;

- those that would have us cut off our hands and gouge out our eyes so at least our dismembered corpses will make it to heaven,

we have to wonder where our kind, loving, non-judgmental Jesus got to and whether this is a God we want to follow.

We can take some comfort in the fact that pretty much every human being who has encountered these verses has struggled with them. Certainly the commentators and pastors and bloggers that I've read on this text will often admit to how challenging these verses can be to preach on and to delve into.

But as with all the teachings of Jesus and the way of our God, I think we are called to go deeper, to look beneath the literal translation of these ancient words and feel where God is guiding us in our Christian lives.

First, I do believe that Jesus was challenging his listeners to adopt a new way of thinking about the old laws and the ways in which they had been interpreted and adapted over the years. Don't be caught in old ways of thinking, he was telling them. Understand that God is continually speaking and giving new and vital meaning to God's laws and ways. Just as now, I believe Jesus is speaking to us in our day and in our time, reinterpreting the laws, giving us the tools, the intellect, the insight and the discernment to know what God is calling out for us NOW.

Jesus is teaching us to look beyond the letter of the law and the "way things have always been done" and go deeper into WHY a law has been created, a rule given or a commandment set in stone. It's not about God wanting to hurt us, it's about helping us to be the very best we can be and knowing in as deep a way as possible that God loves us. God is LOVE and against this there is no law. Jesus asks us to dig deeper and to see the consequences our actions have on others. Jesus asks us to uphold our own relationships in as high regard as God does. To treat one another right not just because some law tells us to, but because we know each person to be a child of God in the same way God knows us to be.

"Jesus speaks the radical message of the complete law," Mr. Van de Laar writes elsewhere in "Living By Heart," calling us not just to ensure that we uphold the letter of the legal code, but that we uphold the dignity and humanity of our companions in this world. We cannot just avoid physically killing. We must also avoid destroying the dignity and reputation of another. If we seek life and wholeness, we will refuse to degrade another with our angry words – be they insults, gossip or manipulative "back-stabbing". Rather, we will do everything we can to recognize the humanity of the other, and seek to be reconciled if at all possible. We cannot just avoid the betrayal of adultery. We must also avoid the betrayal of another person's humanity by objectifying them and making them nothing more than an object of our own pleasure and satisfaction. We must also avoid the betrayal of treating another like property...to be discarded when we're finished with them."

As the Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier says, "Jesus' law of love draws us into a deeper understanding of our own hearts, and a deeper appreciation of how the other person occupies space in the heart of God."

In his brilliant article "The Law of Love or the Love of Law," Pastoral Therapist Peter Woods muses on how amused he is "by the ironic circles of history."

"The essential teachings of Jesus," he writes, "challenged the way the Pharisees had replaced the essential interiority of a relationship with God and a covenant written on the heart and not in stone with external legalism and ritual observance. The church took the Gospel of those challenges by Jesus and made them into external observance once again!" Rev. Woods says he, "would giggle at the irony if [he] didn't know many whose lives were devastated by that mistake of the Church."

"At first glance," he continues, "it seems that Jesus is making it even more difficult to follow the rules. However, the teachings of Jesus are not intended to create more external laws, thereby deepening our self loathing and despondency about ever making the grade or getting over the ever rising bar! [Rather, Jesus] is showing us the way to transcend our legalism."

Some of you may remember that before I was your Pastor, I was a full time Pastoral Assistant here. And even before that I spent many years toiling away as a Legal Assistant, working with lawyer

after lawyer in many firms and institutions throughout the southland; I kind of fell into the work as a way to support what I like to call my “acting habit” in those days. Working in this field with attorneys of every stripe and kind, one soon realizes that what is going on in a person’s heart or what is really happening in personal relationships is truly at the bottom of the line of consideration where the law is concerned. One only has to listen to what’s going on in our world right now, or watch Judge Judy or one of the many other televised “legal reality” (big quotes) shows that crowd our airwaves to know that a person’s circumstances, emotions, or beliefs carry very little and usually no sway when it comes to making a judgment based on the law. And I imagine most of us would agree that this is probably the way it needs to be in many situations and is perhaps why God created some laws for us in the first place. But, as usual, we humans tend to go to the book, to the law, to the rule, and use it as proof of our rightness or as a “proof-positive” way to get around our wrongness.

Jesus pulls us out of this trap and asks us to consider our own soul as well as our neighbor’s and get to the heart of the matter. Jesus asks us to go further, dig deeper and love harder than we ever thought possible, knowing that it all is truly possible with God. “Hear the Good News!” Rev. Woods writes, “We act best not from fearful conformity, but from compassionate concern and perfect love.”

“Jesus intensifies the law in today’s reading to help us avoid seeing the law as merely drawing moral boundaries and instead alert us to our responsibility to care for those around us,” writes Dr. David Lose in his essay this week, “On Love and Law.” “One can too easily discriminate, injure, neglect, or speak poorly of a neighbor all the while saying, “I have kept the commandment because I have not murdered.” And so Jesus intensifies the law to make us more responsible for our neighbor’s well-being. For by caring for our neighbor we strengthen a community that can best serve as a blessing to the world, God’s constant command and expectation of God’s people.”

“As we grow up, and grow in faith, can we better discern the difference between living by the “letter of the law” and the “heart of the law”?” our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum posed to us this week. “Can we strive to speak with more truth, live with more integrity, and seek reconciliation with neighbors and nations?”

When more than now have we ever needed a law of love in our land? The law of love compels us to welcome the refugee. The law of love insists we go the extra mile for the stranger we meet. The law of love decrees that we stand shoulder to shoulder with every one of God’s children and thwart the voices and the powers that be who would alienate, destroy and try to tear apart the fabric that holds us all together in God’s big blanket of love.

“It’s easy to get caught up in theorizing about God, but within our everyday lives reality is what matters most to the people around us,” says Stephen Mattson writing in Sojourners Magazine. “Theorizing only becomes important once it becomes relevant and practical and applicable to our lives.

When I’m sick, and you bring me a meal, I don’t care whether you’re a Calvinist or Arminian.

When I’m poor, and you give me some food and money, I don’t care if you’re pre-millennial or post-millennial.

When I’m in the hospital, and you send me a get-well basket, I don’t care what your church denomination is.

When you visit my grandparents in the nursing home, I don’t care what style of worship music you listen to.

When you give my friend a lift when their car breaks down, I don’t care if you’re Baptist or Catholic.

When you help my grandmother carry a heavy load of groceries, I don’t care what you believe about evolution.

When you protect my kids from getting hit by a car when they're running across the street, I don't care who your favorite theologian is.

When you grieve alongside me during the death of a family member, I don't care if you tithe or not.

When you love me in deep and meaningful and authentic ways — nothing else really matters...

You may have the most intellectually sound theology, but if it's not delivered with love, respect, and kindness — it's worthless.

The practical application of your love is just as important as the theology behind it. Our faith is evidenced by how we treat others.”

And that is the Law of Love.

Amen.