

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(September 18, 2016)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Life, the Jesus Way
(Studies in the Sermon on the Mount)

The Spirit of the Law's Letter

(Matthew 5:17-26)

Study #4

Introduction: Gaming the system...

Dr. Peter Fröhlich has been a professor of computer programming at Johns Hopkins University since 2005. Early on in his time there, he put in place a “grading-on-the-curve” policy where the highest grade in any class on a test counted as an “A” (actually, as a 100).

If the highest grade on a given test was, say, 90, that 90 became the baseline and was given a weight of 100. All the other scores were adjusted to that score.

Well, in 2013, all the students in all of his classes decided to “game” the system. They all committed to boycott the final exam. Thus, all the student made a “0”, which made “0” the highest score, which meant that all the students made a “100.”¹

Clearly, that wasn't at all what the good professor had in mind when he put his policy in place.

He had meant to encourage and to be fair-minded. But the students found a loophole. They abided by the policy - but not really - and used the loophole to their advantage.

¹ From www.insidehighered.com.

This practice of looking for loopholes to “obey” a law - *but not really* - is not a 21st century innovation and it's not limited to use in institutions of higher learning.²

People have been trying to “game” God's commands for centuries. And today, as we return to the Sermon on the Mount, we'll watch Jesus take on the loopholers. He's going to bring us all back to the “spirit” of the Law's letter.

Now during today's message, I'm going to wear two hats. First, I'm going to wear the hat of a teacher, and then I'm going to wear the hat of a preacher.

The first part of the message - just like the first part of the passage - will require us all to think, and to think clearly and deeply. The second part of the message, we'll all have to put on our steel-toed boots, because Jesus challenges us. He raises the bar of discipleship really, really high.

Review...

Speaking to a large crowd made up of disciples, Jesus has outlined the blessings that will come to those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are gentle, who have appetites for righteousness, who are merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, and who are persecuted.

Following those Beatitudes, Jesus spoke pointedly and personally to His disciples - and this includes us - about our calling to rejoice when we are opposed for His sake, to be salt and to be light to a world in need.

The last thing we heard Him say last Sunday was that we are to do “**good works**” in such a way that they glorify our heavenly Father. So He now defines and illustrates what true righteous living / good works are all about.

² Designers of online communities are explicitly warned that whenever they create a system for managing a community, someone will try to “game it” to their advantage. These designers are thus advised from the start to think like a bad guy. They should consider what behaviors they are unintentionally encouraging by creating social rules for their community.

He develops this theme of righteous living within the construct of life under the Mosaic Law.

Up to this point Jesus hasn't even mentioned the Law. But there were great reasons to bring up the Law now, when He turns to consider righteous living.

The Righteous Law of Moses (vv. 17-19)

Jesus and the Law (vv. 17-18)

Why bring up the Law?

His audience was Law of Moses-centric

For one thing, everyone He was talking to was Law-of-Moses-centric. They were all Jewish. They had all been raised to know and to love the Law. The Law of Moses was the grid through which they viewed all of life.

For fifteen hundred years, the Law had been the playbook for God's people and Jesus is going to use that playbook to line out for His followers how they are to walk with God.

Besides this, though, Jesus wanted to affirm His own submissive relationship to the Law.

To affirm that He was submissive to the Law

He was the popular, young preacher who had just burst onto the scene at a time of relative unrest in Palestine. The crowds were following Him, but they needed to know where He stood on God's Law.

Was Jesus a revolutionary out to topple the old ways? Was He an anti-Law-of-Moses teacher who was going to tell people, "*Anything goes*" when it came to lifestyle?³

³ One of the accusations His critics actually leveled against Him was that He was an "anything goes" sort of man. (See Matthew 11:19 for the taunt that He was "*a gluttonous man and a drunkard*") This belief that God is not concerned with

If anyone had been hoping that this was Jesus' teaching, they were going to be real disappointed.

He squashed that notion and inserted Himself in a long line of God's people who followed the Law. He has not come to modify or abolish, to dismiss or dismantle the Law.

So that's who Jesus is. As well, by mentioning the Law, He is preparing us for what He is just about to say.

To prepare His audience for what He is about to say about the Law

He is about to interpret the Law for us in a way that was far different from what the teachers of His day were saying about it. He was going to look at the *spirit* of the Law and not just at the *letter*.

So, what does He say about the Law and how He will relate to it? Simple. He came to fulfill it.

He came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it

[17] "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets;⁴ I did not come to abolish but to fulfill."⁵

morality/righteousness is called "antinomianism." An antinomian (against the Law) holds that what he *does* doesn't matter to God and that God is only concerned with what he *believes*. It would appear that the Apostle Paul was accused of the same thing (see Romans 6) for preaching that eternal life was the free gift of God to anyone who believes in Jesus. Jesus and Paul rejected the charge of antinomianism and repeatedly called God's people to the highest standards of righteousness.
⁴ "Law and the prophets" was a way to refer to the whole of the Old Testament in Jesus' day. (See Matthew 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Romans 3:21.)

⁵ It is possible to view all of Matthew 5:17--7:12 of the Sermon on the Mount as Jesus' interpretation and application of the Law, as the phrase "Law and the prophets" occurs at 5:17 and 7:12, creating what is called an *inclusio*.

[18] “For truly I say to you,⁶ until heaven and earth pass away,⁷ not the smallest letter or stroke⁸ shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”⁹

He came to live Law-fully

His life will be a perfect fulfillment of every command of the Law. He never broke one of God’s commands. His life was completely Law-full. His life was sinless. He never missed the mark of obedience.

He kept the Law of God...

...which didn’t mean that He kept the traditions that had grown up around the Law. He routinely violated “the traditions of the elders” that the Pharisees held so dear.

That offended the Pharisees, who, if anything, were more concerned to keep the traditions than they were concerned to keep the Law itself.

Jesus was perfectly obedient to God’s commands AND He paid no attention to Pharisaic traditions.

He hung around with people who struggled with sin (like me). He didn’t follow the weekly and monthly fasting schedule. He didn’t make hard and fast distinctions between “clean” and “unclean”.

He fulfills Messianic prophecy

Jesus also will “fulfill” every prophecy in the Law and the prophets about the Messiah.

⁶ “*Truly I say to you*” is a formula introducing a solemn saying. Jesus said it 30x in Matthew, 13x in Mark, 6x in Luke, 25x in John.

⁷ The words “*until heaven and earth pass away*” is not so much a technical term as a colorful way of saying that something will last as long as the earth does.

⁸ The “letter and stroke” (“yod” and “tittle”) represent the smallest parts of Hebrew writing. They are comparable to the mark that differentiates our “C” from a “G.”

⁹ This comment about jots and tittles confirms that the written copies of the Old Testament Jesus used were “pointed” (a system that identified vowels), as original versions in Hebrew were not.

The Old Testament has hundreds of predictions concerning the Messiah’s manner and place of birth, His lifestyle, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus will “fulfill” all of that.

And yet, I don’t think that Jesus’ obedience to the Law or His fulfillment of the prophecies are mainly what He has in mind here in the Sermon on the Mount when He speaks of “fulfillment.”

He came to teach the Law fully and authoritatively

I believe that what He means by “fulfilled” is “to fill out.” He is going to authoritatively teach what the Law means and what was God’s original intent in giving the Law.

He is going to affirm that the Law is the inspired Word of God. He is not in any way going to contradict it. But He is going to go below the surface to explain it.¹⁰

And the “*so what*” to Jesus’ take on the Law is this: The Law calls us who follow Jesus to righteous living.¹¹

Jesus’ Disciples and the Law (v. 19)

The importance of righteous living (v. 19)

[19] “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

¹⁰ By expounding the Law here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was not saying that the Law remained in effect for His disciples. In fact, in Mark 7:19 He said that it did not. As Christians, we learn much from the Old Testament, but we are not bound by it. We are bound to obey what is written in the New. Large sections of the Old Testament Law are repeated in the New and to these we submit. But, there are some rather glaring omissions in the New (like the command to tithe and to keep the Sabbath), and we are not bound to obey what is omitted there.

¹¹ I believe that what follows, in the post-Sermon on the Mount chapters (Matthew 8 and following) are to be understood as the Law being properly applied / fulfilled / lived out / taught by Jesus.

Living in obedience to God's commands is what Christian discipleship is all about.¹²

The whole reason I have wanted us to explore and to "own" the Sermon on the Mount together is because in this sermon, Jesus tells us how to live His way, how to please God.

Verse nineteen highlights how important it is to know, to teach, and to obey Jesus' commands. That's not terribly shocking. What the verse also says, though, just might shake up some of your categories.

Rank in the Kingdom (v. 19)

[19] "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

By this verse (and lots of similar verses we find in the New Testament!), we understand that in the kingdom of heaven there will be some who are "great" and some who are "least."

The kingdom Jesus is describing is not the great equalizer. There is rank in the kingdom of heaven, and that ranking is based on how we deal with God's commands.

If you affirm them, embrace them, and obey them, you'll be one of the great ones in the kingdom to come. If you spend your life looking for loopholes, gaming the system, flagrantly disobeying, you'll be "least."

In fact - and here's another category shaker - Jesus says that *entering* "the kingdom of heaven" requires righteous living.

¹² Some have suggested that Jesus is talking about the "imputed" righteousness we receive from God when we are given the free gift of eternal life as the point of faith. It is certainly true that we do receive His righteousness, but I do not think that this is what is in view here. Jesus is calling us to lead righteous lives.

The Righteousness Required for Kingdom Entry (v. 20)

[20] "For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Remember. Jesus is speaking to His disciples. These people belong to God. They are God's redeemed, and He gives them a condition for "entering the kingdom."

For a parallel to what Jesus is saying, think with me about another biblical invitation to the people of God to "enter" something.

Entering the Promised Land (a "for instance")

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, God invited His redeemed people, Israel, to enter the promised land of Canaan.

It was a land flowing with milk and honey. There were great blessings - along with challenges - waiting for them in this land.

All they had to do was trust God for His provision and obey His command to enter. It was theirs for the taking. They refused. (See Numbers 13-14)

They rebelled at a place called Kadesh-barnea. And the story of Israel's refusal to "enter" is one of the most tragic stories in the Bible.

They forfeited all that could have been theirs. By their disobedience and faithlessness, they lost the great inheritance of the land that had been promised to Abraham.

But after their rebellion, God didn't disown them. They continued to be His people. He provided manna for them in the wilderness for forty years. He dealt with them in kindness while disciplining them for their sin.

They were "in" God's family, in relationship to God. But they didn't "enter" the land. They were redeemed, but they didn't enter into all that God had for them.

This, I believe, is what Jesus is saying when He tied entrance into the kingdom of heaven to having a righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees.

That's what I think, and there are lots of people who see it the way I do. But I'll be quick to add that some don't.

Entering into the Kingdom

Was Jesus purposefully holding up a too-high-standard?

Some say that when Jesus speaks of "the kingdom of heaven" He was talking about how to be eternally saved. They say that He was holding up a standard of righteousness that everyone knew they could never achieve, to drive them to a desperate sense of failure and of need for God's grace.

After all, in those days the Pharisees were widely regarded as the most righteous people around. If I knew that I had to be more righteous than the most righteous people around, well, I know I wouldn't stand a chance. (Of course, Jesus will be pointing later in His life that the Pharisees weren't really all that righteous - but they were very highly regarded by the general population.)

So, the idea among some people is that Jesus wanted His audience to see that they could never attain righteousness on their own. Then, seeing that, they would be drawn to flee to God for mercy and grace by faith.

OK.

But if that was Jesus' point, and if He was trying to get people to see their need for grace, why didn't He tell them?

Why didn't He tell them that escape from condemnation is by God's amazing grace through faith in His promise (i.e. - Himself)? He says nothing here about faith or grace or eternal life.

So I don't think that this is what Jesus is saying. In fact, I don't think He's talking about receiving eternal life at all here.

And if He is really saying that our eternal standing before God is based on having a better moral life than the Pharisees, we've got huge problems.

- First, we know that God wants His children to have assurance of their eternal salvation (See 1 John 5:13). But there is no way you can have assurance of your salvation if it is tied to your behavior. (How righteous does your behavior have to be? By how much do you have to beat out the Pharisees? For how long? How many setbacks are you allowed?)
- Second, justification before God is portrayed throughout the New Testament as coming by God's grace through faith, apart from works. To tie the gift of eternal life to righteous living is to violate the clear teachings of Jesus, Paul, Peter, John, and James.

So, if Jesus isn't telling us to be eternally saved by righteous living and He isn't trying to drive us to desperation to turn to God to find mercy and grace, what is He saying?

The POINT is the need for righteous, godly, holy living!
(NOT to be eternally saved, but to enter into the kingdom way of living)¹³

He is telling His disciples what it's going to cost them to "enter" into the blessed life of His kingdom reign.

Just like it would have cost the Jews obedience and faith to enter the wonderful promised land, so it will cost disciples obedience and trust to enter into the life of discipleship now, and to be called "great" in the kingdom of heaven later.¹⁴

¹³ By "righteousness", Matthew's Gospel means ethical kingdom behavior. (Lenski, for one, says this)

¹⁴ Jody Dillow (in *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*) argues that the calls to enter the kingdom are addressed to those who are already born again and are challenges to live out the faith, not invitations to eternal life or to entrance into heaven or to entrance into the Millennial Kingdom.

We receive eternal life as a free gift of God's amazing grace when we place our faith in Jesus, who gave His all for us. But to live as the citizens of the kingdom of heaven we are will cost us everything.¹⁵

Righteous living, obedience, is the threshold we pass through into greatness and blessing, both now and in the future.

In what now follows, Jesus details what that righteous living is going to look like. (And now would be a good time to put on those steel-toed boots...)

Here, He starts taking the text of the Old Testament Law and "filling it out". He explains what God had intended by it from the start.

So this is Jesus' first interpretation and application of one of the commandments found in the Law. (More will follow next Sunday...)

Righteousness. Applied to the Law re: Murder (vv. 21-26)

Remembering the Commandment (v. 21)

[21] "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' (quoting Exodus 20:13) and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'"

The command is clear. No murder allowed. Not "no killing." No murder.¹⁶

It is a statement that one individual does not have the right to take another innocent individual's life. And proving that the commandment doesn't mean, "kill", the punishment for murder under the Old Testament Law was death.

This 6th of the Ten Commandments was given because of the value of human life. No one is allowed to murder someone else.

Everybody knew that. We all know that. Here's where the Sermon on the Mount turns really interesting.

Murder and Anger (v. 22)

Jesus' authoritative take

[22] "But I say to you..."

"But I say to you" was a formula Jesus used often. And every time He used it, He would have shocked His hearers.

He quotes Moses' Law, the most revered document in Israel, and says, *"You've heard Moses. Here is what I say."*

That's way more radical than one of us saying, *"Yeah, the Constitutions says this, but I say..."* because we all know that the US Constitution - while very important - is a human document. And the Constitution has been amended a few times.

But Moses' Law is God's Word. To say that Jesus is speaking with authority is quite the understatement. So what does He say?

[22] "But I say to you that everyone who is angry¹⁷ with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,'¹⁸ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell."

¹⁷ The King James Version reads ***"angry without cause"***. The words ***"without cause"*** do not have good textual evidence and are not included in any of our more modern translations. So, no, Jesus almost certainly did not say, ***"without cause."*** However, since we know that there is such a thing a righteous anger, and since Paul did tell the Ephesians to ***"be angry and do not sin"*** (4:26), the words ***"without cause"*** may reflect the sense that Jesus intends.

¹⁸ The word is "Raca" which can also be translated "imbecile" or "blockhead."

¹⁵ In the New Testament, there are twenty three references to "entering the kingdom, entering into "life", seeking life, or seeking the kingdom. In many of these passages, "entering" is predicated on works. (See especially Mark 10:24).

¹⁶ For all kinds of reasons, anyone can be opposed to capital punishment and they can be opposed to war. But they can't be opposed to either on the basis of the 6th commandment. It doesn't address itself to either.

That is three ways to say much the same thing. It's just that with each statement Jesus increases both intensity and severity.

And this is His interpretation of the 6th Commandment. This is Jesus "filling out" our understanding of **"You shall not murder."**

Anger makes you liable for a trial before a local court. Calling someone a *"blockhead"* sends you to the Sanhedrin, Israel's Supreme Court. And calling your brother, **"You fool"** brings enough guilt to make you liable for hell.

The strictest Pharisee around wouldn't have said anything like any of that. In fact, the Pharisee would have said, *"Don't murder. OK. Check. Anything other than murder is allowed."*

Jesus, though, looked at the intent of, **"You shall not murder."**

Protect the integrity of relationships to avoid escalation

God was not going to be overjoyed if people simply avoided murdering each other.

That would certainly be a step in the right direction, but God was after more than that. He wanted love to flow and for relationships to work. People are God's crowning creation - made in His image and likeness - and the command to not murder protects people and their relationships.

Jesus got that. So He warns us to avoid the anger that so easily escalates into something destructive.

Anger is where things start that so often end in murder. One thing leads to another. We move from mild anger to frustration to resentment to bitterness to rage. Then things get violent. It happens all the time.

Murder is simply the outworking of an internal process that starts with a flash of anger. It is the final act of a play that began with anger.

The Pharisee only deals with the final act and ignores the heart issues that preceded it.

Jesus' strategy is brilliant. He cuts straight to the heart, which is the soul's dashboard.

When you sense anger building, it is a signal that there is a problem. Your goal is not simply to keep from murdering people. We can raise the bar higher than that. Your goal is to love. Your aim is to live in healthy, reconciled relationships.

So stop the process that leads to murder as early as you can. Stop it in its tracks. Don't let anger win the day.

And just to make sure that we get it, Jesus drives home the importance of living peaceably with each other and of maintaining reconciled relationships with a couple of concrete illustrations.

Wisdom from Jesus re: Reconciliation (vv. 23-24)

[23] "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, [24] leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."¹⁹

Where I am at fault...

The scene is of you, at worship. You are worshiping God. Maybe you're at church or maybe you're at home alone, or maybe you're with your Care Group, praying.

While you are worshiping God, something comes to mind. You remember NOT that someone has wronged you, but that someone has been offended by something you have done to them.

That's an interesting twist.

¹⁹ This example is obviously set in a context of a person living under the Mosaic Law. We can make a shift to our own setting, though, pretty easily.

I would have expected Jesus to say that while worshiping, I remember that someone has wronged me and I need to forgive them.

That's a good story, but He doesn't tell that story. It's the other story. The one where I've caused harm. I've done damage. I hurt somebody.

That's a more helpful story, because I am much more inclined to be aware of wrongs done to me by others than I am to think of wrongs I've done to others.

It's easier for me to look out the window at others than to look in the mirror at myself. I see my own wrong-doing as an exception to the rule. Someone else's wrong is an obvious character flaw.

The last time I went to see my doctor, I was unhappy with something that happened in the office and I said something about it to the staff. I said it in a way that wasn't helpful (to say the least).

About two months later - yes, it took that long - I was reflecting on that visit and on my comment and I realized how wrong I had been. I was wrong in what I said and in how I had said it. I realized that I had been way off base.

I contacted the office and I apologized. I only wish I had realized it sooner.

According to Jesus, I missed by a mile in my timing, but I did well by making the contact. The responsibility for taking the initiative rested with me, the one who had done something that offended someone else.

I leave off worship to work for reconciliation

Jesus says to not delay. As soon as you or I become aware of wrong-doing, we need to deal with it.

If you can sense that a relationship is strained due to your attitudes, words, or actions, you need to take action.

Working to make strained relationships healthy is that important. Relational health demands the hard work of seeking reconciliation.

If it's you who has caused harm, bring the time of worship to an abrupt close. Get in your car and go to your brother.

Make it right. Be reconciled. Lighten the load of your sister who is angry with you. Stop the relational slide with a confession, an apology, a request for forgiveness.

And then, when things are right between you and your friend, go back to worship. Worship is supremely important, always. But reconciliation is supremely urgent.

Taking initiative to take care of a relational fracture due to your failure is to take an exit off of Murder Road.

And then Jesus gives illustration #2.

Wisdom from Jesus re: Restitution (vv. 25-26)

[25] "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison." [26] "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

This is the same story as the first in a different scenario.

Again, I am at fault. My opponent is going to win in court because I was in the wrong. Again, I need to take action. No delays. Make it right.

On the one hand, this is simple wisdom. It's like something Solomon might say in Proverbs. Looking to settle out of court may keep you out of jail.

But Jesus is making the same point here that He just made with the story about interrupting a quiet time to work at reconciliation.

Working hard at relationships is worth it. If it is you, your actions, that have damaged a relationship, you are placing before that other person a cause for anger. And we all know where anger leads. So, love for that other person - the one you have wronged - looks like taking the first step to make things right.

Conclusion:

We started off this morning with a story about the Johns Hopkins Professor whose grading policy was “gamed” by creative students. After the boycotted exam, the incident of the “high score of zero”, the good Professor Fröhlich understandably updated his policy.

He told a reporter, *“I have changed my grading scheme to include ‘If everybody has 0 points that means that everybody gets 0 percent,’”* Fröhlich said, *“I also added a clause stating that I reserve the right to give everybody 0 percent if I get the impression that the students are trying to ‘game’ the system again.”*

The update was probably a good move. Unfortunately, though, I can see the wheels turning in creative students’ minds, trying to find the loophole in the new revised policy...

That’s the problem with rules and policies. We look for ways to get around them.

So, Jesus didn’t update the 6th commandment to do away with loopholes. Instead, He went straight for the heart and filled out **“You shall not murder”** with its deepest meaning: Love.

“You shall not murder” goes far beyond a prohibition of the act. God’s intent by this law was to protect relationships and to promote love. So...

Can you think of anyone who has something against you? Is there anyone who may be harboring anger or resentment or bitterness against you? By your actions have you sent someone down Murder Road?

If so, take the first step toward that person and seek reconciliation. Confess to them what you have done. Ask forgiveness. Set your friend free from anger and help him exit the road that leads to murder. Don’t delay for two months or two weeks or two days. Do it today.