

Holy Textures

Meeting Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
Short, easy to use, faith-provoking insights.



Matthew 5:21-37

Why not take Jesus at his word? Take your offering home this week, and carry it to remind you to take safe, practical steps toward reconciliation and peace wherever there is brokenness in your life.



1 Reconciliation, by Josefina de Vasconcellos, in St. Michael's Cathedral, Coventry.

Year A

Epiphany 6

February 16, 2014

Sunday Between February 11 and February 17 Inclusive

Not used if assigned date follows Ash Wednesday.

May be replaced by Transfiguration Sunday if the assigned date is the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

Read the passage at the bottom of this post: [Matthew 5:21-37, The Message](#) or [Matthew 5:21-37, The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#).

Click [here](#) for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this note.

Sermon by the [Rev. Dr. George Hermanson](#), "To be added."

Matthew 5:21-37 is part of [Sermon on the Mount](#). See my post, [Sermon on the Mount, Matthew, Chapters 5, 6, and 7](#), for an short overview of these chapters.

The sermon ends with a teaching from Jesus about a difference between those who are wise and those who are foolish:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell--and great was its fall!

Matthew 7:24-27 (NRSV)

What is the crucial difference between the one who is wise and the one who is foolish?

It has nothing to do with what we usually associate with wisdom: knowledge, many years of experience, perspective, intelligence, insight, etc.

Nor does it have to do with **HEARING** what Jesus has said. Both cases begin - "Everyone who hears these words of mine ..."

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The difference between being either wise or foolish is in **ACTING** or **NOT** acting.

It is not enough for us to hear these words of Jesus; to study them; to be inspired by them; to have hopes / aspirations / dreams based on them. We must **ACT** on them; practice them; live them in our everyday lives.

So whatever passage we read from the Sermon on the Mount, we must hear it with one question in mind:

*What must I **DO** to make this the bedrock of how I live?*

Well this passage, Matthew 5:21-37, provides at least 3 two-hour sermons worth of answers to that question!

In this text Jesus provides his teaching on three of the Ten Commandments:

You shall not commit murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not bear false witness.

Each of these is introduced with the indirect, "You have heard that it was said." Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh (See footnote below.) say this way of indirectly referring to the Ten Commandments was a customary way of showing respect for the power and honour of these 10 Words directly from God. They were never spoken of directly.

Again, Malina and Rohrbaugh comment (Pages 44-45):

The purpose of the Ten Commandments, historically, was to prevent feuding and thereby halt internally generated group annihilation. Honor-shame societies are (conflict) societies; hence challenges (to one's honor) within a group can escalate and actually lead to such annihilation. ...

What the scenes described in these (passages) offer is a way out of the honor-shame impasse that (otherwise) requires taking satisfaction (which may escalate to group self-annihilation). If repentance, reconciliation, generosity, or the intervention of third parties exist, feuding rooting in honor need not mar the social landscape of (the followers of Jesus).

I have added the non-italicized (comments in brackets).

Matthew 5:21-26: You shall not commit murder.

Verse 22, "with a brother or sister." These teachings of Jesus are addressed specifically to his followers who are to treat one another as they would their blood relatives. In fact, Jesus lays down higher standards. But

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the key to remember is that at the time of Jesus one's family was everything, and the provision of this alternate family - the community of followers of Jesus - was a radical disruption of a paramount social foundation.

Verses 23 and 24. Your congregation's treasurer might have a conniption, but whenever I preach on this text, I ask those present to take out their offering (or some other money if they make their offering some other way or some other day) and practice this teaching. That is, hold onto their offering, and instead think about people they are not at peace with. Think about practical steps they could take to seek reconciliation. (And be cautious here, in some situations the only safe, practical step may be to **PRAY** for reconciliation, forgiveness and peace.) I then tell them to take their offering home with them, and carry it in their purse or pocket through the week as they seek reconciliation and peace for a week. Next week, invite testimony of what has happened. Might be the best sermon you'll ever preach. It certainly is in my top ten.

Matthew 5:27-32: You shall not commit adultery.

"Adultery" refers to the action of dishonoring a male of one's community by having sexual relations with his wife. (Malina and Rohrbaugh, page 45.) The punishment for adultery was for both the adulterer and the wife to be put to death, "so you shall purge the evil from Israel." (Deuteronomy 22:22)

But Jesus proposes another way to purge the evil of adultery - tearing out the eye that looks with lust on another man's wife!

Again, Malina and Rohrbaugh offer helpful comment:

The added nuance is the "right" eye. "To pluck out the right eye" means to suffer dishonor (as in 1 Samuel 11:12: But Nahash the Ammonite said to them, "On this condition I will make a treaty with you, namely that I gouge out everyone's right eyes, and thus put disgrace on all Israel.")

Thus the followers of Jesus are urged to practice self-discipline, both in not committing the kind of seeing that leads to dishonouring of others, and in voluntarily dishonouring oneself in the service of restoring the peace of the community.

Verses 31 and 32. "It was said" is **NOT** one of the Ten Commandments, but is a teaching from Moses, Deuteronomy 24:1-4. But here Jesus adds strict limitations on divorce and re-marriage. (The topic of divorce comes up again in Matthew 19:2-12, which is parallel to [Mark 10:1-12](#). As someone who is divorced and happily re-married, my [reflection](#) on this teaching is that while Jesus is right, it is also right that what God has **NOT** joined, no one should force together.)

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Matthew 5:33-37: You shall not bear false witness.

The effect of swearing by Heaven, or the earth, or by Jerusalem, or by one's head is to call on God as a witness to the truth of what one is saying.

And since the most common usage of such swearing was in selling, "I swear by Heaven this camel has only 2,000 miles on it," such use of God's name in vain was a violation of the Third Commandment.

Here Jesus simply teaches that our word be our honour. Without trying to cover false promises by invoking God's name, God's honour.

David Ewart,

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Historical background information in this post is drawn primarily from Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, see link below, pages 43-46.

* [Link to Amazon.com Bibliography for Bruce Malina, Richard Rohrbaugh, et. al.](#), Social Science Commentary on ... The Synoptic Gospels; The Gospel of John; The Book of Acts; The Letters of Paul; The Book of Revelation; and others.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

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³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'

³² But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'

³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,

³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

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Matthew 5:21-37 (The Message)

²¹ "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.'

²² 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.

²³ "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,

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ "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.

²⁶ If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine.

²⁷ "You know the next commandment pretty well, too: 'Don't go to bed with another's spouse.'

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ "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.

³⁰ 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.

³¹ "Remember the Scripture that says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'?

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³² 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.

³³ "And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions.

³⁴⁻³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.

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