

***Rule of Law vs. Role of Law***

“You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, Don’t commit murder, and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, ‘You idiot,’ they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, ‘You fool,’ they will be in danger of fiery hell. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. I say to you in all seriousness that you won’t get out of there until you’ve paid the very last penny.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: Don’t make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord. But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it’s God’s throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it’s God’s footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it’s the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can’t turn one hair white or black. Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you that you must not oppose those who want to hurt you. If people slap you on your right cheek, you must turn the left cheek to them as well. When they wish to haul you to court and take your shirt, let them have your coat too. When they force you to go one mile, go with them two. Give to those who ask, and don’t refuse those who wish to borrow from you.

Mt. 5:21-26, 33-42 (C.E.B.)

***You Have Heard it Was Said<sup>1</sup>***

You have heard it was said  
*Charity begins at home*  
Your care  
confined by what you know.

But I say to you  
love is not bound,  
it stretches your will,  
enlarging your soul,  
confounding constraint  
and making you bleed.

For if you care alone for those near,  
what have you learnt  
but to subsist?

You have heard it was said  
*You can’t teach an old dog new tricks*  
Your learning of life dulled by your age.

But I say to you  
the tree grows until its dying day,  
living is learning,  
experience and the new  
knocking on each other,  
making discipleship true.

For if you know only yesterday’s answer,  
where will you meet  
the risen Christ anew?

You have heard it was said  
*A friend in need is a friend indeed*  
Your action spurred by trouble or demand.

But I say to you  
an ally anticipates,  
knows before the alarm  
the urge to empathy,  
the need to act  
and intervene for the good.

For if you wait for the call — hesitant, reserved --  
can the name ‘friend’  
be a true title to you?

You have heard it was said  
*If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it*  
Your imagination held tight by what is.

But I say to you  
a better way there may be  
sight isn’t vision,

<sup>1</sup> A Poem for reading in worship found without an author’s name at [www.PreacherRhetorica.com](http://www.PreacherRhetorica.com)

what's comfortable can be a sham,  
how things are  
excludes too much.  
For if you let what is, be all  
where do you see  
the Kingdom's changing call?

You have heard it was said  
*A little of what you fancy does you good*  
Your cravings directing what you feel whole.

But I say to you  
your fancy is often a fraud,  
indulgent, self-satisfying,  
pretending to control  
a reason that's false,  
to fool your own self.

For if you measure your pleasure  
by only what appeals  
whose will is done?

You have heard it was said  
*Blood is thicker than water*  
Ties of birth determine who's kin.

But I say to you  
kin is belonging  
that's given by God,  
ties that bind  
are as wide as  
sovereign grace.

For if you make your clan sole affinity  
where then is God's plan  
for inclusion that heals?

You have heard it was said  
*Paddle your own canoe*  
All that matters is the self that is you.

But I say to you  
the self so insistent  
was made in the encounter of others,  
their touch and their care,  
made you —you,  
created your space to occupy.

For if you seek just what satisfies you  
where will you be in  
making others other?

You have heard it was said  
*Children should be seen and not heard*  
For they have yet to earn a place in the world.

But I say to you  
now is the time  
to live and respect,  
not tomorrow and not yet,  
joy is for now  
it's not an adult's sole inheritance.

For if you deny the children voices  
how may you know  
the things that you've lost?

You have heard it was said  
*Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*  
For I am the arbiter of what appeals.

But I say to you  
the patterns of life so vast  
is in more than you can see,  
empathy, knowing and delight,  
so much bigger, grander,  
than one take of what's in sight.

For if you see only what suits you now,  
where's the space into which  
your soul may grow?

You have heard it was said  
*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*  
A golden rule that encompasses all.

But I say to you  
that is the meaning of prophets and Law,  
and not a stroke, not a comma,  
of them shall be undone,  
but the grace that I bring  
gives more ...

For if your righteousness gives what you would get  
does it not make a bargain  
of what can only be free?

Here is the notion,  
Here is the action  
In the realm where grace is all:  
Not commonplace, not easy,  
Not 'as was said.'  
Nor what's agreeable,  
Just the enigma of a God  
With an earthly frame  
Calling us on --  
Not to abolish but to fulfil  
And to seek in all things  
The Divine will.

Our text today comes from a larger section of the Sermon on the Mount sometimes referred to as the "Antitheses." Like the poem, each antithesis begins with our common understanding of rules and laws and common proverbs, and then turns each on end.

Jesus doesn't address every law directly. But he focusses in on a few in a way that suggests he intends us to think of the whole. It's as if he is narrowing our focus in a mosaic to see a particular stone or zooming in on a digital picture to see the individual pixels, while keeping the whole picture in mind. He refers to specific laws and rules and traditions as he challenges the assumptions made about the rule of law and the role of the law.

Each rule or law is important on its own merit, and what Jesus says about each is worth considering; but Jesus seems to be addressing the larger picture of what is commonly referred to as the Law of Moses, not just specific cases.

What I believe Jesus is doing, is inviting us to hear the entire law differently. Rather than becoming slaves to the law, doing what it commands simply because the law demands our response, Jesus invites us to freely express the law in the way we live, to reflect the holiness of God by living up to God's expectations for us.



He does that by telling us to keep our focus on the law's essence.

Just north of where we lived when I was in High School, there is a bridge. I have a few pictures of it to show you. The first one is pretty much what people familiar with the bridge think of when I mention it. It is the Deception Pass bridge on the north end of Whidbey Island, Washington.

Have any of you ever been there? If you haven't, maybe you can imagine a bridge you have seen, or a bridge you are more familiar with. This one was built in the 1930s, so maybe imagine another bridge from that era.

The second picture is a common occurrence as well, with fog surrounding the bridge and the pass it traverses. The name of the bridge comes from the waterway below, one that deceived the first English explorers who thought it was a river inlet. It deceived them. What they were actually seeing was the tide meeting itself as it flowed around the island.

The third picture I want to show you is what it looks like from the sidewalk on the bridge.

Notice the railings. When I was in High School, the wire fence between the foot traffic and the cars was not there. Between my fear of heights and the oncoming traffic, it was difficult for me to walk across – although I did on several occasions.

I have driven across that bridge thousands of times. The railings on the bridge are to remind the drivers of the limits, to mark where the edge is. In that sense, it is no different than any other bridge you've encountered.



There are some people who like to walk along the edge, to look at the water below. In my mind, the Law of Moses is about the edge for most people. It's a way to know when we have transgressed or violated the edge of righteousness and holiness.

Some people use the same attitude and ask what is the minimum passing score on a test or what is the minimum required reading for a class? What is enough to get by in life? What is the minimum credit score I

will need to apply for a home loan? I once read a book entitled, *What is the Least I can Do and Still be a Christian?*<sup>2</sup> I even preached a sermon series on that book.

Some people like to live life “on the edge.” They push things to their limits and sometimes exceed the limits. Those who run the fastest or climb the tallest mountains or traverse vast expanses of the ocean have all reminded us that some limits are artificial. Others who live “on the edge” have shown us that there can be dire consequences for crossing over the line.



Jesus suggests there’s a better way to live. He suggests we look for the center line instead of the railings on the bridge, to focus on the one who created us, the one in whose image we were created. By keeping our eyes on the center, we never have to fear going over the edge.

Jesus does that in today’s text by looking at a few of the 613 rules the rabbis had identified in the Law of Moses.

Some of us want to find out what it means when the Law says “thou shalt not kill,” for example. We might begin by asking where the edge is:

What does “kill” mean?  
Is it just murder?  
What about war?  
What about self-defense?  
What if it’s an accident?  
We want to know where the edge is.

Jesus says that instead we ought to remember that everyone is created in the image of God, that to denigrate any human in any way is to violate God’s intentions. Even calling them names violates the intent of the law.

Do you see how he is turning our attention away from the edge and toward the center?

Others want to know about revenge or swearing. Where are those edges?

To them, Jesus gives the same answer. Look at the center of the bridge, not the railings. He says to remember we have all sinned and are worthy of a second chance (Rom. 3:23). Keep your focus there, and there is no need to worry about the edge. Neither murder nor rudeness is possible when we see the image of God on the face of another human being.

If your “yes” always means yes, there is no need to swear or make a “pinky promise.”

By highlighting these particular pebbles in the mosaic, these pixels on the screen, Jesus changes the picture for us. It is no longer about rules and limits. Instead the Law becomes an invitation to seek God’s holiness. The role of the law changes.

Another way of seeing these pieces of the mosaic is to think of them in terms of our various relationships. When we make our relationship with God primary, it sets the pebble within the context of a

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<sup>2</sup> Written by Martin Thielen, Westminster/John Knox, 2011.

picture God is drawing, the picture of God’s incredible love and grace. In that picture, our lives offer an incredible reflection of God’s holiness.

The problem is that too many of us prefer to make the pebbles or pixels of the mosaic about ourselves. We want to determine who and when and how we will relate to others. If they cross us, we want to be free to exclude them from our circle.

When we do that, the mosaic we create is not much more than the randomness of a river bottom or the white snow on a faded old television set. It is more like a black hole that absorbs all reflections of glory.

When St. Augustine read our scripture for today he suggested it could be summed up by saying, “Love God and do what then seems right.” Love God and do what seems right. Too many people today want it to say “Love God and do what pleases you.”<sup>3</sup>

With Valentine’s Day this week, it’s easy to suggest that *love* is the key to maintaining a proper perspective on the law. Some people will even try to excuse their forgetfulness and say it’s the thought that counts, not the deeds.

Jesus seems to know that thoughts are the father of our deeds. If there is love for God in our hearts, there will be deeds to match. When we as individuals and we as a congregation keep the focus on our relationship with Christ, when we look towards the center of the road, we will find that the law is not a burden but a privilege; that we are not in bondage as much as we are freed to love.



When we do so, we not only cross the bridge with confidence, we also arrive at the destination God intends.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> As suggested by Robert W. Jenson at [www.GoodPreacher.com](http://www.GoodPreacher.com)

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