

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2
Class Notes 5/2/21

Last week we began looking at a passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:17-48) where rabbi Jesus gives his own commentary on how to read and apply Torah. Jesus affirms the supreme value of Torah, telling his disciples that their righteousness must be greater than that of the Pharisees. Jesus calls Israel to be faithful to the whole of its covenant teaching and in so doing be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

How can one live out the Law and the Prophets faithfully? Jesus addresses some specific laws and I think uses these as examples, illustrations of how to approach the Law in general. The first two examples are murder and adultery, which I am calling crimes of passion, because these are more than private sins. They are public crimes. They affect the life of the whole community. These examples make it clear that Jesus is far from overturning the Law or making it easier for his disciples to follow. Instead, he is intensifying it. He is doing what the rabbis call for at the very beginning of the Mishnah: "Make a fence for the Torah" (*m. Avot* 1:1). That is, create a protective barrier around the specific laws that will make it more difficult for people to come close to breaking them.

Jesus has his own way of putting a fence around the Law, as this whole section of the Sermon demonstrates. "*You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'Thou shalt not kill,' and, 'Whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, everyone who goes on being angry with their brother or sister will be liable to judgment; whoever says 'brainless' to them will be liable to the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court); whoever says 'moron' will be liable to fiery Gehenna.*" (Matt. 5:21-22, my translation).

Jesus uses strong language and extreme examples here to emphasize the seriousness of these laws. Do whatever is necessary to avoid breaking the Law of Moses. Don't let anger and hurt feelings fester in your heart and develop into something worse. The Greek verb here (a present participle) indicates that Jesus is talking about an ongoing action, not a momentary reaction. It would be better translated, "Whoever is remaining angry with" or "goes on being angry with," referring to carrying and nursing a grudge, holding on to the anger and letting it grow. Deal with your anger immediately so that the situation does not deteriorate and lead to anything from verbal abuse to physical violence.

And don't delude yourself into thinking that only sticks and stones can hurt other people. Words can wound deeply and their damaging effect can last a lifetime. We have already seen how the rabbis denounced shaming others in public as one of the most serious offenses you could commit. Jesus here affirms that same idea. So when he goes on to talk about how you react to a slap on the cheek, he is not saying that such public insults don't matter. Here he takes them quite seriously.

Jesus goes on to say that if you have already hurt someone else, do whatever is necessary to make it right. Again, his demands are radical. If you have made the three-day journey from Galilee (where Jesus is teaching) to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice in the Temple and you remember someone you have hurt, better turn around and head back home to mend the relationship before making your offering on the altar (vv. 23-24). Your

relationship to your brother or sister is more important at that moment than your relationship to and worship of God. Indeed, as we saw in our discussion of repentance, Judaism says that until you make restitution with the one you have wronged, you cannot come to God asking for forgiveness. Jesus teaches the same thing in the Lord's prayer. As we saw with Jesus' comments on the "eye for an eye" principle, such restitution is essential. It will help keep how you have wronged someone else from growing into an even bigger conflict that may ultimately lead to violence and even murder.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone looking at a woman for the purpose of coveting her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, for it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna." (Matt. 5:27-29, my translation)

Like anger, lust is a human passion. Although we tend to think of it in sexual terms, and that is clearly the context here, the Greek word in this verse has a more general meaning of "desire" and elsewhere is used to translate the Hebrew word for "covet" in the Ten Commandments (Rom. 13:9). And Jesus is certainly alluding to that commandment here, which explicitly includes a desire for your neighbor's wife. Indeed, the tenth commandment is a kind of foundational principle that addresses the root cause of other sins such as adultery and stealing and bearing false witness and even idolatry. Coveting, the desire to have what does not belong to you, is the beginning of all sorts of evil.

In speaking about your eyes, Jesus may also have in mind the law about *tzitzit*, the decorative tassels which he as an observant Jew wore on the corners of his tunic (Matt. 9:20). Torah commands the Israelites to wear these as a constant visible reminder of God's commandments, "so that you may obey them and not follow the desire of your own heart and your own eyes" (Num. 15:39). As Amy-Jill Levine comments, these are kind of an ancient version of the WWJD bracelets. Torah's remedy for the wandering eye—looking on the *tzitzit* instead—is somewhat less drastic than Jesus'.

So again Jesus is not issuing some new teaching here that stands in opposition to the Law, but rather is simply developing our understanding of the broader teaching in Torah that recognizes the powerful connection between what we look at and the desires of our heart. That is, after all, the primary danger for humans in Torah. Eve "saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was intensely desirable to the eyes" (Gen. 3:6). As soon as the two humans eat, "their eyes were opened," suggesting that they had actually been acting blindly. Their eyes had led them astray.

Rabbi Sacks says that one of the central themes in Genesis is the deceptive nature of what we see, especially in the long story about Joseph and his brothers (*Ethics*, p. 61). Jacob is deceived by the blood on Joseph's coat, Tamar disguises her appearance to deceive Judah, Potipher's wife uses Joseph's robe to deceive her husband, the brothers don't recognize Joseph in Egypt because of how he is dressed, and Joseph has valuables put among the brothers' possessions to falsely imply theft. People go wrong following what their eyes see.

In contrast, says Rabbi Sacks, the God of the Bible cannot be seen, only heard. Idolatry makes a false god of what can be seen; Judaism proclaims the one true God who can only

be heard. The first and most important commandment, recited by Jews each day, is the Shema: “Hear, O Israel.” When saying those words, Jews cover their eyes with their hands to shut out for a moment the world of sight in order to be able to listen more fully to God (*Deuteronomy*, p. 77).

So Adam and Eve let what they saw override what they had heard from God (*Ethics*, p. 63). In our day, we have a multi-billion dollar industry whose sole purpose is to get us to follow in their footsteps. Advertising appeals to our eyes in order to stimulate our desires to possess. Jesus says, better to take drastic action to make sure that your eyes don’t lead you astray than to risk not following God’s word. A later rabbinic sermon by Reish Lakish (3rd cent.) will speak about this in remarkably similar terms: “Do not say that only he who commits adultery with his body is to be called an adulterer, but also he who commits adultery with his eyes is called an adulterer, for Scripture speaks of ‘the eye of the adulterer’ (Job 24:15)” (*Leviticus Rabbah* 23:12). There is a close connection between what we see and the desires of our hearts.

In speaking about lust, Jesus is not talking about seeing an attractive woman and noticing her beauty. He is talking about intentionality, a purposeful gaze whose desire is to possess. As with what Jesus said about anger, that desire is something you nurture and feed in your heart. Interestingly, James sees such desire as leading to conflict, war, and murder (James 4:1-2), and certainly adultery has the potential for creating such violence. Again, Jesus says to take extreme measures if necessary to not let such desires grow. Better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand than let it lead you down a path to adultery or other types of sin. Do what you have to do to stay well clear of breaking the Law.

Jesus says if you work on your anger issues and avoid even developing the habit of verbal insults to others, then you are less likely to commit murder. If you are careful about not feeding lustful thoughts, then you are less likely to commit adultery. Those specific laws in Torah tell us something more general about what kind of shape we need to give to our lives, what kind of physical and spiritual disciplines we need to develop. They point us to more general principles about how we should live. I took that same approach in our discussion about how to understand and apply the Sabbath and kosher laws. They have broader implications than simply following a list of rules. They are training in righteousness.

The Hebrew prophets had long ago complained about external observance of the Law without a corresponding inner orientation to its central principles of love, justice, and faithfulness. Jesus is simply echoing their teaching. As we have seen before, Jesus regularly talks about how our inner desires lead to evil actions. So Jesus here is saying, do whatever it takes to get your inner life in order so that you don’t break the Law. Jesus is not saying that external actions don’t really matter. Adultery and murder are still more serious sins than lust and anger. That is why it is so important not to even begin to come close to committing those acts. Jesus is putting a fence around the Law.

b. Oaths and Vows (Matt. 5:33-37)

The next topic Jesus addresses, the issue of oaths, is much more complicated. Part of the complication is that Jesus blurs together two separate actions that the OT talks about,

vows and oaths. They are not the same thing. Jesus will go on to prohibit oaths but says nothing further about vows. So it is not clear if what he says about oaths also applies to vows. Let's look at the difference.

A vow is a solemn promise to God to do something or refrain from doing something, usually with a specific purpose in mind. Jephthah vows that if God will give him victory in battle he will sacrifice whatever comes out of the door of his house (Judges 11:30-31). This turns out to be his daughter, so this story is sometimes read as a strong warning against making rash vows. Other passages caution against making vows and not fulfilling them, as Jesus indicates (Deut. 23:22; Prov. 20:25; Eccl. 5:5).

But the Bible also contains positive examples of vows, especially the Nazirite vow, a strong commitment to living a life of special holiness and purity (Numbers 6). On rare occasion this is a lifetime vow made by the parents (Samson, Samuel), but more often it is for a shorter period of time, sometimes as short as 30 days. Paul seems to have taken such a vow (Acts 18:18) and he later participates in a ceremony in the Temple with four other Jewish Christians who are formally ending their vows (Acts 21:23-26). Paul has already ended his vow in Cenchrea (by cutting his hair), but in Jerusalem he may be offering his hair along with the other sacrifices as a means of releasing himself from the vow (Num. 6:18). He and the Gentile Christians he has brought with him also go through the seven-day purification process that will allow them to worship in the Temple. Note that he does all this to demonstrate to the Jerusalem Christians that he is indeed faithful to the Law. Paul's "gospel" does not do away with Jewish rituals.

(A word of clarification: "nazirite" does not refer to someone from Nazareth. The Hebrew word *nazir* means "dedicated, consecrated." There is a lot of confused Christian discussion on the Internet about whether or not Jesus was a "Nazarite," by which they mean someone who has taken a nazirite vow. They are not the same thing, although sometimes the words are now used interchangeably. Jesus is a Nazarene, but not a Nazirite. As far as we know, Jesus never took a Nazirite vow. He happily drank wine and had no problem touching dead bodies. And despite the many "pictures" you have seen, we know nothing of Jesus' hairstyle.)