

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – Talk 2

**The Rev. W. Frank Allen, Rector
St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA**

Practicing a Life Where Faith Matters

Jesus' Core Teaching in the Way of Life

The Sermon on the Mount – Talk Two

The Christian Life is "A Matter of the Heart"

Living our Faith

We are living in a year when we, as a community, are focusing on *Faith Matters*. That is, we are focusing on learning the faith in terms of knowing what it is that Christians believe about God and the trajectory of God's purposes in our lives and in the life of the world. We are learning about how we live our faith in our daily lives: how God is involved in our lives and just the kind of life we are being called to live as followers of Jesus Christ. Finally, we are thinking about how we can take our faith out into the world so that others may know the love and grace and goodness and challenge of the Christian life that we are coming to know. For all of us are called in one way or another to live and sometimes to speak in such a way that others can come to know the grace and love of God in their own lives.

If our *Faith Matters*, then we are paying attention to all three aspects of our theme for the year. We are always learning and re-learning what it means to be a Christian at different times in our lives as we grow and experience God and life itself. We are living out the Christian life in different ways at different times, trying to strike that balance or intersection of what we believe and think with how we are actually living our lives. And, we are growing in sharing our faith with others within our community, but most importantly out there in the world.

It's always a challenge to live as followers of Jesus, as Christians, but we do not live this life on our own. Nor are we left to our own devices or only trial and error to figure out what being a Christian means. We have the presence and power of God very near to us. We have the Gospels and many of Jesus' words to direct our paths. We have others who have walked this path before us who point the way. We have a community that encourages and emboldens us to walk more closely with Christ and to build up our faith.

We do not have to be perfect, but we do have to trust and turn our lives to the living God and to God's good purposes and gifts for our lives, even with the worldly and religious practices that sometimes get in the way. One of the people who walked this path before us and has written beautifully about the Christian life is a Christian educator name Verna Dozier. She once wrote that Christianity and Christians struggle when we move to worshiping Christ and away from

following Christ. In her view, and I agree, we worship best when we follow most closely the teachings and patterns for living that Jesus set forth.

And here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays out the pattern for what following Him is all about. He describes the life that opens the way for God to form us into Jesus' likeness while at the same time showing us who Jesus is and what His character is about. For in the life Jesus calls us to live, we see the life that He was leading and how that formed Him into the person He was and is.

Jesus' teaching has an incredible two-fold purpose in showing us who He is, his character: His connectedness to God, grace, mercy, compassion, love and beauty. It is the character that has been shaped by this particular way of life. This sermon's teaching also offers us a way of life that opens the way for God to form us into being people like Jesus, in our own unique ways.

We will be examining the Sermon on the Mount in four talks. The first talk was on the Character of God's Kingdom. It is a kingdom where God is present and active. It is a kingdom where God is calling individuals and communities just as they are. It is a kingdom where God is calling us live a certain way of life. Talk two will focus on how the Sermon on the Mount is a matter of the heart first and foremost. Talk three will describe the practices that allow us to become like Jesus and be formed by God. The final talk will look at the call to abandonment or giving our lives over to God and God's kingdom purposes before and above all other purposes.

A Matter of the Heart: Matthew 5:21 – 6:4

Last week we explored the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus focuses on the character of God's Kingdom. It is the character that is reflected in Jesus Himself and it the character that Jesus is calling forth in His followers for their lives and for the life of the world.

As we considered, the character of God's kingdom is marked by God's presence and an openness/inclusion to anyone and everyone – especially those who aren't quite the greatest people, but who want to be, who strive to be, who are open to God changing them. The character of God's kingdom requires a holiness of life or a life lived a certain way. It's not anything goes. It's not a life of trial and error only. It is a life that is lived connected to God and one that seeks to follow God's leading, both directly and through the scriptures which are God inspired.

In this talk, we turn to Jesus' teaching that the Christian life or the life of faith as a matter of the heart and not just following the laws that God has shared. In God's view, there is something deeper at work in the laws, something underlying them that speaks to this God who loves us and who wants what's best for us and for those around us.

Jesus finished up last week by speaking to His followers about the quality of their righteousness, of their living in relationship with God. Jesus said that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the religious leaders, who were working so hard on following the 613 laws that they missed following God, then they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. That's because there's a deeper law at work than just following laws. It's not about making a perfect score on the "Torah exam", it's about a law at work that touches our hearts, making us compassionate and merciful.

So in Jesus' Sermon, He gives some examples of how God is calling us to a deeper, heart-based following that looks not only at following the law, but some of what God has in mind undergirding the law.

Concerning Anger

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.

Jesus shows the deeper law of the heart in comparing and contrasting actual murder with emotional or spiritual murder. We know that murder is out as followers of God, but Jesus is stating that as a sin, as an action or activity that disconnects us from God and from one another, anger is no different. Thank God we have a savior who forgives our sins!

We know that anger is an emotion and like all emotions, we cannot control them. What we do with our emotions, though, matters. St. Paul writes "Be angry, but don't sin." (Ephesians 4:26). He is acknowledging that we have emotions and that our emotions are an energy to pay attention to and to use in effective ways. Jesus, in His anger at God's Temple being turned from a house of prayer into a den of robbers, turns the tables over to stop the desecration of the Temple. He used Godly anger, the energy, for a thoughtful purpose, much as the prophets did in the Old Testament.

The matter of the heart that Jesus is driving at is not prophetic activity, but that emotion of anger toward someone that we feel and feed. Some of us have been angry at people. Some of us have been angry for a long time. What I've "heard" and experienced, though, is that after a while, you have to remember why you were angry with someone and try and refuel that feeling. Sometimes you have to do that every day to feel that anger. This leads to an acidic stomach, dark thoughts, broken relationships, and no way back for the person who made us so angry.

So, as we work on the passing emotion or energy, what we do with it matters to God, to the person we were angered by, and ultimately to our own souls. It is not murder in a physical sense, but it is in an emotional and spiritual sense as we judge, name call, shun, diminish, and reduce the other person(s) and it will be God's judgement.

So if you think your giving at the altar, your pledge, your very life will be acceptable to God while you nourish your anger and devalue the other person, think again. Remember that our lives are made of whole cloth and cannot be separated. Anger and 'emotional murder' in one part of our lives is connected to the good that we do in another part of our life. Better than giving a gift to God at church is to reconcile with a brother or sister and stay in relationship.

And this is not about simply dismissing the disagreement or feeling or swallowing it. For there to be a relationship of love there is the requirement of truth and honesty. Anger and the feeling of anger are hard to control, for sure, but they may just be the energy we need to do the right things by someone and to have the courage to forgive.

In the same way, we are called to a kingdom where peace and equity and love reign. And when we are accused of something or at enmity with another person(s), we need to deal with it as swiftly as possible. For like a person in a law court who owes someone, we can become imprisoned by our broken relationships and our unwillingness to reconcile with others and make things right.

This is connected to the law and Jesus' call to love our neighbors as ourselves and who among us doesn't want to receive forgiveness and stay in relationship with other people? So, as we are dealing with our anger (and we will all feel anger in this life), we can practice remembering that it is an emotion or energy and continue to live in love.

And we need to always ask ourselves, "What are we angry about?" Why did someone's words or actions have such an effect on me and why do I want to strike out so readily? It's a good question to ask the next time you're angry.

Concerning Adultery

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. 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.

This is another example of how the law is not merely following rules, but a matter of the heart. No adultery is in the "Top Ten (Commandments)" and so has a very important place in living lives that are righteous. Adultery is one of the many sins that break trust. A couple gets married and promises to live by certain boundaries as a matter of trust and as a way to build up trust. The level of trust in a marriage or any relationship allows for both persons to grow, since they are building off of a solid foundation of loving trust. Adultery is one of the hardest sins to overcome in a marriage because it is a break in trust. It diminishes the other person as unworthy of our fullest commitment. It is so hard to overcome, because the act undercuts the very foundation of a marriage and then makes it hard, if not impossible to build and rebuild. You see the matter of the heart? The act of adultery is not just some self-contained sin, it has a profound and negative effect on a relationship.

And as anger is to actual murder, so lust is to adultery or acting on our lust. Of course, one wonders, who can control one's thoughts. Again, thank God we have a savior who forgives us our sins! And yet, we can have a say in our thoughts specifically and overall by what we're paying attention to. In other words, if we are paying attention, in this example to the desire for sex with another person, not our spouse, and if we're looking at pornography or watching movies

and shows where sex is an integral part, why wouldn't we be thinking about these kinds of things?

So Jesus, with the gift of preaching and pushing a point is not saying that we should literally name our bodies to protect us from lust, but rather "Don't look at it; don't touch it; walk away from it!" and St. Paul, in his letter to the Philippians encourages us to think on all good and valuable things and qualities for that will shape our minds and thoughts.

None of us have full control of our thoughts, but what we think about, look at, and touch can lead us astray and lead us off the path of love.

Concerning Divorce

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.

This is a hard teaching in any day and one that we need to pay careful attention to in action and as a matter of the heart.

In Jesus' day, women who were divorced were basically made homeless, unless their father or family of origin took them in. So divorce, and especially the serial divorce that seemed to be problematic even in Jesus' day, was not in keeping with God's intention for people and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Speaking of no divorce is hard in our day when divorce and remarriage have become permissible and acceptable because people can't work things out or when there's violence or abuse. We also have a lot of serial marriage in our own day. And for anyone who's been divorced or is close with people who have been divorced, we know the depth of pain and brokenness that are incredibly hard to overcome. There's almost always a residue of lovelessness.

Jesus, as with all the laws and the call to righteousness that is connected to the heart and our lives with God, is trying to get us to look at the intention rather than the exceptions of this law for marriage. Jesus actually talks about the intention of marriage throughout the Gospels, teaching that God meant for marriage to be a lifelong commitment of love for one another and staying in the marriage "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health" because that's what allows love to grow and change and mature. I pray that God forgives us when we have to divorce and, again, thank God we have a savior.

Concerning Oaths

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.

The teaching on oaths is a matter of truthfulness. If we invite God to help us be people of truth, then there is no need for us to swear to God or the temple or our bank account or anything or anyone else to prove that we are telling the truth. Jesus is calling us to be totally and graciously honest, sincere and loving.

I know for me, that whenever anyone swears, I immediately assume they are not telling the truth or, in kindness, are stretching the truth for their own benefit. Having grown up with a judge as a father, I learned that whenever I swore that I was telling the truth, he patiently cross examined me until the real truth came out.

Concerning Retaliation

³⁸ *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*

Retaliation, getting even, payback, human justice seem to be hard wired into our humanness. The first time this law comes up in the Old Testament is over what happens when two men fighting damage a fetus or a pregnant woman. It comes up regularly in the Torah and though it sounds hard on our ‘modern’ ears, many scholars believe that this was an improvement from the practices of the cultures around the Jews who might take a life for an eye or a tooth.

But Jesus wants more from His followers.

Like Jesus being unwilling to call a host of angels to protect Him from the cross, Jesus wants to stop the cycle of violence that rules in our world and over our lives. So not only don’t hit back, Jesus says, but also offer the other cheek as well. Don’t just give your shirt but your coat. Don’t walk one mile carrying a load for someone (a reference to the practice that a Roman soldier could ask anyone to carry his load for one mile), but walk with them two. Give freely. Loan freely. Serve one another freely.

These are all exhortations to stop the cycle of violence and do something that changes the situation and that draws us into relationship with the person who has hurt us.

Howard Thurman tells a story about coming home from school when he got into a fight. He told his grandmother that he won the fight. She responded, “no one ever wins a fight.” There’s always some other way.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, “Through violence you murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, or establish truth. Though violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.

I think Dr. King understood Jesus’ call to non-retaliation.

Love for Enemies

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Here is the core of Jesus’ teaching about righteousness and following that is all a matter of the heart and not merely knowing and saying. Jesus commends us to a deeper love that is not merely the love that’s expected or warranted, but to a love for all. It is not the kind of transactional love that so many of us practice. If you love me, then I’ll love you. If you don’t love me, then I won’t love you.

And please, we’re not necessarily talking about a feeling all the time, but a way of being. Open up 1 Corinthians 13 and you’ll see what St. Paul thinks of love. But if we love as an action, it will become a feeling and enter deeply into our souls so that we can love like God loves, the righteous and the unrighteous. This is the higher standard, to have our hearts converted and trained to give people the benefit of the doubt; to love them even when we disagree with them; to love them even when they hurt us or other people.

This is a teaching that we will struggle with all of our lives, but it is the teaching that draws us more deeply into a relationship with God. For God loved and loves us when we are unlovable. God is a God of second and third and fourth and hundredth chances. And so shall we be when we love indiscriminately.

Imagine how exciting the world could be if we got to love everyone and they got to love us. And I’m not saying they love all of our actions or we there’s, but we love them as fellow, beloved children of God.

There is never a moment in Jesus’ ministry when He didn’t love the least, the broken, the misguided, His betrayer, and even His persecutors. “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” is a statement of complete and perfect love. And by the way, the Greek word *perfect* is not about scoring 100 every time. It means complete, whole, right, appropriate and so when we love as Christ loves, we share and experience god’s *perfect* love. Something to work on and to ask God to help us with.

Concerning Almsgiving

6 “Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

² *“So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³ But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

We live, as most societies have lived, in a community where we want to receive and give praise, accolades, honor and deference to persons and people who accomplish public actions. Look at

the number of award shows. Look at the various talent and reality shows that are played out every day and night on our televisions and computers. Look at Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and any number of social media applications that tout our greatness and our accomplishments and our “better than you” moments. There’s something inside us that craves recognition from others. I suspect it has always been so, but our technology has raised it to a perilous place. And it’s perilous because we always try to be more and we will always be people who fall short.

Jesus, God, knows that we need to feel loved and recognized, but we do not pray or share our wealth or our gifts for praise, but with purpose. We are a people called to be in a living relationship with God and public accolades are not helpful and at best a nuisance for our souls.

Instead, Jesus teaches that if we are seeking earthly reward, we may get it, but we won’t receive heavenly. In other words, we have to have a sole focus on pleasing God by our prayer life, by our giving, by how we live as followers of Jesus because that comes from our hearts turned to God and God, knowing our hearts are turned to Him only, will reward us and help us grow to become the child of God He is calling us to be.

So you seem Jesus teaches, it is a matter of the heart and not merely the outward actions. Anger, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, seeking human praise are outward signs that reflect our inner hearts. Love for all and doing the right thing out of love are the signs of a heart turned to God. May God shape our hearts to follow in this way.

Next week, we will tackle the practices of our lives that will open us to God and form us to have a character and live a life like Jesus.

The Rev. W. Frank Allen

Rector, St. David’s (Radnor) Church

Lent 2022