

**More than we think**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 12, 2017.

*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24*

Jesus addresses the traditional view of the law with a radical reversal, emphasizing a broader interpretation. His view of the commandments is far more than following a set of rules and regulations. We are expected to do far more than observing outward forms and customs by understanding both the spirit and the intent of the law. He challenges us to a deeper understanding of what it means to serve God from our innermost being. Our actions must be rooted in values and beliefs internalized in both our heart and mind.

The basis of determining right from wrong for both Jewish and Christian traditions is the Ten Commandments. Regardless of what you may have heard, the Ten Commandments are still just that. They have not been downgraded to the “ten suggestions.” And, don’t even try to search for loopholes. There aren’t any. Jesus shifts the emphasis of the law to expand beyond its literal understanding, making it far more difficult than we might think. Instead of trying to abolish the law as he was accused, Jesus expands the meaning of what the law intends. The law of loving our neighbor as ourselves fulfills the intent of all other laws. The new law of love is found in the summary of the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. The second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments depend all other laws.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that instead of lowering the standards or evading what is prescribed in the law, he extends their interpretation to their maximal intent. This interpretation exceeds rather than diminishes the impact. Observing the full spirit and intent of the law leaves no room for rationalizing or seeking a way around it. Jesus gives three examples of keeping the right spirit and intent of the commandments against murder, adultery and swearing.

The law against committing murder goes beyond taking a life. We may say with confidence that we have never murdered anyone, but we can kill a person’s spirit through humiliation to what amounts to character assassination. To demean and devalue someone is a form of spiritual murder, often the result of out-of-control anger. It is one thing to let our anger be known and an entirely different thing to let it get out of control, injuring someone’s dignity and self-respect. Once said, an insulting remark, like a knife driven into a person’s soul, is hard to take back. The longer anger simmers the more easily it gets out of hand, causing serious and lasting damage. If you have been the target of someone’s fierce anger you know what it is like. The surest way to heal the painful memory of a deep hurt is to let it go. We have to let go painful memories that eat away at us. As long as we retain our resentment and anger over a past hurt, we block any hope of reconciliation.

The commandment against adultery extends beyond faithfulness in marriage to include trustworthiness in all our personal and working relationships. It is natural to be attracted to someone, but when the attraction becomes twisted, perverted or obsessive, it causes serious harm to all involved. Giving into thoughts and fantasies by making suggestive advances is unacceptable because it crosses the boundary to inappropriate and exploitive behavior. Healthy human relationships are based on trust and mutual respect. If we take our relationships seriously, we don’t treat people as objects or take advantage of them, nor do we say anything demeaning to them.

The use of God’s name in cursing and swearing is asking God to condemn or destroy what God has created. We must never ask God to condemn or destroy anyone or anything. When using God’s name in vain becomes commonplace it is both

offensive to God and it lowers the respect of others. Maintaining a non-violent attitude prevents the sins that lead to poverty, hunger, injustice, racism, political unrest, armed conflict and the systematic destruction of the environment.

Jesus' emphasis on the fullest meaning of the commandments is radical because it gets to the very root of what is right and good over what is evil and destructive. Never try to dismiss the requirements of God's laws or try to seek a way around them. Jesus challenges us to a deeper and more serious commitment to the full meaning and intent of the law. I know that it is difficult to understand the reference to cutting off an offending eye or hand. It is an exaggerated way of saying that it would be better to do that than to have our eye or hand be a cause for sin.

There are exceptional occasions where we might have to go against the law to do what is necessary to accomplish a greater good. Though the law says that it is wrong to steal, if we see someone with a severe mental illness who is threatening someone with a gun, we would not hesitate to take away his weapon. The law of love demands that we do the right thing for the right reason at the right time. It is a noble thing to live by certain principles, but there are times when we have set aside our principles to do the right thing.

Jesus teaches us that to be a whole person in a broken world, we must be conservative and radical, conservative in holding to what we believe and radical in applying it. Mature faith requires mature thinking. In the final analysis, rather than a book of rules, the Bible serves as a guide to make faithful decisions for minds that think and hearts that love.