

A FENCE AROUND THE LAW

Matthew 5:21-37(38-48)

“You’ve heard it said... but I say to you...if you are angry with your brother or sister you will be liable to judgment... if you even look at another with lust you have committed adultery... if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out” *Good grief, you’ve got to be kidding Jesus! You can’t mean that!* If I were to literally follow everything that Jesus says here in the Gospel what would I have to show for it? First off I don’t suppose I’d have very good eyesight; in fact I wouldn’t be able to see a thing. *You see I had this little problem and I had to pluck out both my eyes.* I hate to think of what other body parts might need to go! Of course even that wouldn’t get me to heaven, cause I’ve yelled at most of my friends and relations. And I’ve been known to say a few things worse than, “*you fool!*” Nor has the name of God only rolled off my tongue in times of prayer. If we take what Jesus says here literally, *we’re in a heap of trouble!!!*

Jesus tells us some very hard things here in the Sermon on the Mount. What was he up to? How are we to relate to these difficult ethical principles? And how are we to put them into practice?

Jesus does two extraordinary things here in the Sermon on the Mount. First, he claims an authority for himself that was unheard of. In Judaism there was no higher authority than Moses and the Law. But Jesus claimed a higher authority, “*You have heard it said... but I say to you...*” In himself he is claiming that there is in essence a New Law, a New Covenant at work.

The second thing Jesus does is to use an ancient Rabbinic technique of extending the Law’s prohibitions called *Building a Fence around the Torah*. It is human nature to give the least that a law requires and to use any loophole we can find to lessen the law’s demands. That’s certainly the case with tax law! To counter this human tendency the Rabbis extended the features of the Law to cover every possible variation or analogy. Thus when the Law forbids the cooking of young animals in their own mother’s milk, the Rabbinic tradition extended this to forbid any dish containing both meat and milk – indeed, any contact between utensils used for meat and those used for milk.

Jesus is building a fence around several laws. And when Jesus builds a fence he builds a wide one!

You have heard that it was said... ‘You shall not murder... 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. Do you see how Jesus builds a wide fence around the Law prohibiting murder? Jesus extends the Law to include all our relationships. It is not just murder, but also our anger at one another. And we are responsible not only for our own actions of hurt and insult to another, but also when someone else has something against us. *When you are offering your gift at the altar and 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.*

Jesus does the same thing with the prohibition against adultery. To even look at someone with lust – to view another not as a human being, but as an object a *thing* to give one pleasure – is already to commit adultery in one's heart. Jesus suggests that the offense is so serious that it is better to pluck out one's eyes than to continue to sin.

Yet again he puts a fence around the Law against false oaths. Jesus says that we should not make an oath at all, but that our speech should simply be *yes, yes* or *no, no*.

The fence Jesus builds around the Torah, around the Law, is all encompassing. Jesus builds such a wide fence around the Law that it includes all of life. It's not enough to refrain from murder. Jesus builds the fence wider, so any violence done to another, even the violence of angry words, is to break the Law. Jesus calls us to follow not merely the letter of the Law, but the spirit of the Law, the intention God has for us and for creation. It is an entirely new perspective, a radical departure from a righteousness based on following the Law. Every part of our behavior, even our thoughts, are significant in our relationship with God. We are to reorient our whole selves and our whole lives to God's intentions for life. We are, as Jesus sums up in verse 48 to "*be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect.*"

There is both good news and bad news in Jesus' radical new ethical demands. Jesus transforms the Law. Now all of life – everything we do and think and say – is within the realm of God's expectation for us to live right. That should probably scare the Hell out of us. For we are not perfect as our Father in Heaven is perfect. We fall so far short it isn't even funny. We not only fail in the Law's demands. We fail much further in applying all our lives to God's perfection. That's the bad news.

The good news has to do with the extraordinary authority Jesus claims for himself in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is the new lawgiver, the new Moses. He brings a new Covenant, an entirely new order to life and law. The authority Jesus claims on the Sermon on the Mount comes because of the sacrifice he made on the mount of Calvary. Through his death and resurrection Jesus opened a new way. He forgives our sins. He invites us to share abundant life with him. He gives us a new start. He overcomes death and brokenness and sin. He sends his Holy Spirit to empower us. Nothing – not even our own shortcomings and sin and failure – can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. The power to live new lives comes from Jesus' triumph on our behalf. He has won for us the victory.

In the light of Jesus' triumph over sin and separation and death we are able to see the extraordinary new ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount not as bad news but as incredibly good news. Jesus invites us to live no longer under the authority of Law but under the authority of his new Covenant, a covenant based not so much on law as on principle. Instead of *thou shalt not murder, thou shall love*. Instead of *thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shall honor all people as people, not as sex-objects*. Instead of *thou shalt not swear falsely, thou shall speak clearly, faithfully and honestly*. Jesus' victory empowers us to live ethical lives based on positive principles instead of laws. Those principles are the good news of Jesus' building a fence not just around the law but surrounding our lives, calling us to live new lives as he has given us new life, and helping us live that new life in him. **Amen.**