

**The Gospel of Matthew: Jesus - Giver of the
New Law 2.
Feb 15, 2025
Nelson Cathedral.**

OT Deut 30:15-20
NT 1 Cor 3:1-9
Gospel Matthew 5:21-37 (38-48)

Introduction.

There was a father who had to go away from his young family for a few days on business. Anxious that his wife should be properly looked after in his absence, he had a word with the oldest son, who was nine.

When I'm away" he said, "I want you to think what I would normally do around the house, and you do it for me".

On his return, he asked his wife what the son had done. Well, she said, it was strange. Straight after breakfast he made himself another cup of coffee,

went in to the living room, put on some loud music, and read the newspaper for half an hour.

At the heart of Jesus' teaching and example is the understanding that followers of Jesus will do their best to imitate God, to imitate Jesus. This view is summed up in those famous words from Chapter 5 vs 48, 'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

This is the life-long journey of transformation. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, this transformation begins in our hearts as we turn to Christ, it ripples out to our mind, then body, and its effects are noticed in who we are: what we do, what we say, how we react, and most importantly how we treat others.

The life and words of Jesus are a revolution of the heart; a command, a promise and a statement of hope that shows us how to be fully human as God

intended, as we serve God whole heartedly in the midst of the rough and tumble of this world.

Old Testament.

Last week Nigel set the scene for today's verses and reminded us what God's law had become. The 10 commandments that God gave his people, which Moses summarized as 'loving God and walking in his ways' and reflected in the words of the prophets, had been turned into an impossible number of specific rules and regulations.

And so, as we come to Jesus' words, we can hear his critique, not of the law itself, but of the impossible obedience to rules and regulations that people had made.

Jesus does this by doing something unique, he says six times in chapter 5, "You have heard that it was said...", but then cuts to the very intent, not just by giving a better interpretation, but by relocating the authority of the Law to himself by saying six

times, "But I say to you...". Literally he says, 'Amen, I say to you...' as he affirms what God has said in the Torah and critiques its later interpretation.

As he does so, there is one image Jesus uses that we also need to unpack. The word 'hell' in the NRSV comes up a lot in this passage as the place for judgement and punishment. For us, it might feel like an abstract image, but when Jesus spoke, he referred Ge-hen-na ('guh' ("give"), "hen" ("hen"), and 'na' a soft "uh" sound), the valley just outside Jerusalem which was the smoldering rubbish-tip of ancient Jerusalem, with all its sights and smells. The choice that both Moses and Jesus presented is that between God's way and fulness of life, or turning from God to the place of judgement, death and fire.

Jesus' "New Law".

So let's look at the the examples Jesus gave, which sound very familiar because they focus on Commandments 5 to 10 that deal with how people treat each other. These are real-life issues and even for us cut close-to-home in 2026.

1. True disciples not only avoid murder – relatively straight forward - but are transformed, so that they do not strip away the personhood and identity of others through anger or insult, and they continually produced reconciliation in broken relationships - that is much harder (21-26).

To stress the importance of avoiding anger and insult, Jesus used an exaggeration: if you have travelled the three days from Galilee to Jerusalem to bringing a sacrifice to the Temple, you should leave that animal, return home to make things right, and then return to Jerusalem.

Put that in our context – if you have driven three hours to Westport or even three days to Invercargill -turn around and head home and sort things out. It is that serious.

Paul echoes such words as he addresses the jealousy and quarrelling in the Church in Corinth, even accusing them of being spiritual infants. 'You are behaving according to human inclinations', Paul says.

The antidote to anger is reconcilliation which Jesus says is a greater priority than even attending worship. So Jesus was saying, make sure that there is no hostility among you in your everyday life - Don't even think, "I wish you were dead", or "you moron". We are to submit all your thoughts to God's judgement – that is challenging stuff.

2. Jesus then talks of our closest of human relationships – the exclusive nature of marriage. Unfaithfulness Jesus says, begins in the heart and mind, pointing to the lustful imagination that lies behind the action of adultery (27-30).

Now for us in an age of the television, internet, and pornography, these words are the opposite of thinking, that fantasy does not hurt anyone. Jesus illustrates this with a deliberate exaggeration that God's intent of single-hearted devotion, requires single-eyed and single-handed commitment.

He then challenges the Jewish divorce laws which in some quarters were very liberal (31-33) and disadvantaged the woman. Even if a wife displeases her husband, he could divorce her. But Jesus said no, marriage is God's plan for humanity and not something

under human control, so divorce for the wrong reasons is a serious situation.

3. In verses 33-37 Jesus states that true disciples do not need to give oaths in order to confirm their trustworthiness, because their faithful lives repeatedly confirm the reliability of their words. Here Jesus points to the integrity of character and truthfulness of heart in his followers, so that whatever they say is believable and dependable.
4. If we were to read on Jesus tackles the issue of retaliation, an issue just as real now, especially as racial tension and segregation occurs. If someone causes harm, you have the right to retaliate and take revenge.

But Jesus rejects the principle of retaliation all together, saying we are to love even our enemies and what's more, pray for those who persecute you. This was Jesus' example on

the cross when he said, "Father forgive them they don't know what they do" (43-47).

Application.

Now if you are anything like me you will be thinking, "This way of life is impossible'. You are right, for us it is impossible in our own strength, but we can look at 3 layers of application to see what Jesus is saying to us.

1. The first level points us UPWARDS because these statements tell us about God. This is a reminder to us that God is perfect and Holy, in contrast to our world. Jesus then says why we should live this way – because it is God's way.
2. The second level points INWARD as these words outline the blueprint for Jesus' life, he is the one who has lived this life even in the midst of this messy world.

This life is impossible for us to live, but Jesus has, and so if we accept Jesus into our life, then God sees not the failings in us, but the perfection of Jesus. To be perfect as God is perfect is impossible this side of eternity, but in showing us God's standards, Jesus also provides the way for us to be perfect in God's eyes through him.

As a result as Paul says, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), and so we can live out what is already true of us in Christ.

Yes we can focus our failings which is a very human thing to do, but in Jesus we find forgiveness and hope so we can start again as the Holy Spirit leads us on this life-long journey of transformation.

3. The third level points us OUTWARD, as we follow this way of life by embodying what Jesus did for us, to live a life of grace.

It is the Spirit of Jesus lives in us,

- enabling us to recognise God at work
- and empowering us to reflect God's character in the world so we can be **wonderful news** to the world,

Conclusion.

Let's return to the image of the pebble thrown into a pond. As you go back to your seat after Communion, I would invite you to take a pebble and carry it with you through Lent as a reminder of the transformed life Jesus offers.

The words of Jesus are not meant to condemn us by pointing us to an impossible standard, but instead they point to God's grace whereby through Jesus we are made perfect in God's eyes - a command, a promise and a statement of hope..

In these words Jesus is unveiling a whole new way of being human. As NT Wright states 'no wonder it looks strange'. But Jesus pioneered it and invites us to follow.

'Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' is the goal that shapes our lives within our messy world, so that bit-by-bit, we will discover the new way of being human through continual growing obedience, as we are transformed into the image of Jesus the Son of God.

Amen