

## Faithful and Free

sermon

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Matthew 5:17-48

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Most of you probably know that we have been involved here and there over the summer in helping our daughter's family and grandson with the process of getting him relocated to Knoxville to enter graduate school this fall. Several weeks ago, we accompanied the family on a trip to Ollie's Bargain Outlet in east Knoxville to check out the promise of "good stuff cheap." It sounded like just the place to set up a young man in his first apartment. And it was. We did fine. As we rolled a very full cart up to check out, Nathan's mom stepped away for a moment to check on something as someone acknowledged to the clerk that we were setting Nathan up in an apartment. A broad smile flashed across the clerk's face and he began snapping his fingers and singing "free-e-dom." He was really rocking until he glanced over and realized that Grandmother was standing there observing the whole thing. He immediately wiped the smile off his face, put all fun aside and began speaking to Nathan in solemn, even pious tones. "You know it's really a big step," he assured Nathan. "It's a lot of responsibility."

I thoroughly enjoyed the clerk's about-face in the austere presence of Grandmother, but it also spoke volumes to me about the struggle we have in life and in church with balancing our appreciation of freedom and responsibility. The church over the centuries—nay, over the millennia—has wrestled with Paul's celebration of the freedom we know in Christ over against the seemingly overwhelming reach of Jesus' moral instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. "For freedom Christ has set us free," Paul fairly shouts at us from the epistle to the Galatians. "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. And, by the way, "be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5: 20, 48). In our effort this summer to "speak Christian," how do we strike a healthy (and faithful) balance between freedom and responsibility? How do we take seriously the far reaching nature of the day-to-day task of Christian discipleship while preserving it from slipping over into the joyless drudgery of a new legalism?

**We are called to be faithful.** "Do not think," Jesus said, "that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them." He then moves on to call his followers to a higher righteousness: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God." And then come what many refer to as "the antitheses": "You have heard it said . . . but I say to you. . . ." Six times he quotes from Jewish tradition, and six times he seems to raise the ante. "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a person with lust has already committed adultery in the heart. . . . You have heard it said, 'You shall not swear falsely.' But I say, Do not swear at all. . . . You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. . . I say to you, If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek also. . . . You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Anyone," Fred Craddock insists, "who appeals to faith and freedom in Christ to do less, be less, give less, serve less and love less than our forebears has grossly misunderstood Jesus' message" [Fred Craddock, *Christian Century*, January 31, 1990]. Anyone, who believes that faith in Jesus lowers the bar of conduct, has not looked too closely at who Jesus is and what he says. The teachings of Jesus collected in the Sermon on the Mount, Martin Luther insisted, is "Mosissimus Moses." It is Moses quadrupled. It is Moses multiplied to the highest degree.

Well, not to worry; the church through the ages has arranged to find many ways to manage Jesus. One of those ways has been to legalize what can be legalized in the Sermon, to pay close attention to actions that can be easily measured (adultery, divorce, swearwords and anger) and with some slight degree of embarrassment perhaps, ignore the rest. Others insist that what Jesus is doing here is merely dissociating himself from the external legalism of Judaism and making faith and obedience a matter of the heart. Arguing this, of course, ignores Jesus' statement about his own grounding in the law and prophets; and it reflects an impoverished understanding of the Bible and the Jewish faith. If we take our blinders off when we read Hebrew scriptures, we encounter a faith of the heart, a faith that is seeking to be open and honest before God. And if we take time to familiarize

ourselves with the teachings of rabbinic Judaism, we find many parallels to Jesus' own teaching. The struggle of Judaism, like the struggle of every religious faith, including our own, was and is the struggle to sort through the accumulating debris that gathers over time in an effort to get to the things that matter most.

As Douglas Hare observes, the various factions of first century Judaism shared a high view of scripture as a gift of God. Their differences, as ours, resided at the point of the law's interpretation and application. Despite their undoubted agreement with Jesus' commitment to "every jot and every tittle," many prescriptions in the Mosaic code had already become dead letters by the first century. The majority of death penalty rules had long been put aside and by the century's end, even the practice of animal sacrifice previously so central to the faith would be discontinued (*Matthew: A Bible Commentary*, 48). A literal reading and observance of scripture was hardly the case in the first century, just as it is not the case in our own time. Speaking from within the context of his faith of origin, Jesus joined the effort to faithfully interpret scripture in a new day. With other responsible teachers of the day, he sought to distinguish the deep principles of faith that mattered most, and he also sought to peel back falsehoods and distortions that had accumulated with the passage of time. His mission was not one of abolishing the faith but of aligning himself with efforts to perfect and complete the faith.

**Our faithfulness is lived out in dynamic relationship to God and one another.** To insist that in Jesus nothing had changed, however, would be to misconstrue who Jesus was and what he said and did. The difference reflected in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount resides specifically in who he judged Jesus to be. Jesus, Matthew observes, began his ministry with the bold proclamation, "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). Thus, the teachings gathered by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount seek to interpret life lived in the context of the reign of God. Jesus does not seek to draw up a new law; he seeks to beckon us toward a new way of life. In calling for a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, he is speaking in understandable terms. He is saying, "Consider the standard set by those whom you respect as the most concerned with understanding and obeying God's commands and then think even further." Rather than antitheses challenging the law, he offers trajectories suggesting what faithfulness in the dawning reign of God might look like. Rather than thinking of his words as antitheses set over against the validity of the Jewish law, think of them as creative pointers, designed to startle us out of our half sleepy church existence into the vitality of living in a new age. Rather than antitheses, think of them, Fred Craddock suggests, as "for instances" [*Christian Century*, 1990]. Rather than thinking of them as a cumbersome law designed to hold us in our places and fill us with despair when we fail to measure up, think of them in terms of dynamic relationship—relationship to others, yes—and relationship to God.

Remember the question we asked earlier? How do we take seriously the far reaching nature of the day-to-day task of Christian discipleship while preserving it from slipping over into the joyless drudgery of a new legalism? It is just here—not in a cold, spiritless, thoughtless obedience to yet one more formulation of rigorous law, but in the joyful recognition that our lives flow from the blessing of God. (Remember where the Sermon on the Mount begins? "Blessed are you . . . Blessed are you. . . Blessed are you." If we live in a tick for tack kind of world, we are consumed with keeping score. If we live in an age in which God's reign has dawned, however, we live in an age of eschatological abundance. We live in an age where gracious access to God and the gracious provision of God overflows. We live in the presence of a reality we celebrate every time we come to the Lord's Table. We live immersed in God's love and mercy and we live to pass on God's love and mercy as it has been given to us. We live in the presence of God with God's actions toward us and those around us as our model.

"Love your enemies," Jesus says, "and pray for those who persecute you, 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

"Imitate God in your behavior," Jesus is saying to us. "Live and love freely as God has loved you."

Therein, you see, is real freedom; and that is what it means to be both faithful and free.