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## “Perfect?”

A SERMON on Matt. 5:17-48 and Deut. 30:15-20 for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A  
Preached 12 February 2023 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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In an untitled poem, poet and retired English professor Philip Appleman writes,

*O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,  
gimme a break before I die:  
grant me wisdom, will, & wit,  
purity, probity, pluck, & grit.  
Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, kind,  
gimme great abs & a steel-trap mind,  
and forgive, Ye Gods, some humble advice—  
these little blessings would suffice  
to beget an earthy paradise:  
make the bad people good—  
and the good people nice;  
and before our world goes over the brink,  
teach the believers how to think.<sup>1</sup>*

“Teach the believers how to think.” Even for us who are not agnostics (or perhaps outright atheists) like Appleman, I know that many of us resonate strongly with his plea here: his humble advice to “[the] Gods” that this world would be quite a bit closer to paradise if only people of religious faith and belief would learn to think. That has, after all, become one of the hallmarks of our ‘brand’, if you will, in the Christian marketplace, that we are a church where you *don’t* have to check your brain at the door.

And so, as people with a thinking person’s faith, always open to questions and doubts and new insights, many of us chafe a bit, I think, at what Jesus has to say in what we’ve heard from Matthew this morning. “Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished,” Jesus says. “Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.”

Really, Jesus? Really? We can’t get around *any* of it—not one letter, not one *stroke* of a letter? Nary a “jot” or a “tittle,” as the old King James Version had you saying?

We just aren’t comfortable with that sort of grand, sweeping pronouncement in our faith tradition, are we, my friends? Such unqualified, un-nuanced—blind, even, we might think—valorization of the whole of “the law” and all of “the commandments”? That’s treading way too far into the land of all of those *other* kinds of Christians, those believers whom both we and Mr. Appleman wish would be a little more thinking and discerning. After all, aren’t there a lot of things in the (*quote-unquote*) “law”—the religious and legal codes we find in the first five books of the Bible that are foundational to the Jewish tradition and thus to Jesus’ own sense of identity... isn’t there a lot of it that’s rather arcane and primitive, or just simply irrelevant in modern times?

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Appleman, “O Karma, Dharma, pudding and pie,” in Garrison Keillor, *Good Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 12. Previously published in Philip Appleman, *New and Selected Poems, 1956-1996* (University of Arkansas Press, 1996).

Commandments about temple sacrifices, for example? And what about the parts that seem, to us at least, to be outright contrary to the sort of mercy, justice, and love we ascribe to God, at least in as much as we know God through the person-and-work of Jesus? You know, for example, commandments that seem to condone slavery, or the ones that place women into a status and role we simply can no longer abide? When we think about these troublesome things that are lurking among the pages of “the law”, hearing Jesus’ words today feels a little bit like listening to those people who say things like “well, the *Baahhh-bull<sup>2</sup>* says” or “God said it; I believe it; that settles it.”

We, of course, are by no means the first people to wrestle with some discomfort with what Jesus says here about ‘the law’ and the ‘commandments’. In fact, Christians have struggled to pin down the role of “the law” in our theology and faith since our very earliest days. The very first generation of Christians after Jesus’ departure wrestled deep and hard with whether and how to welcome believers in Jesus who weren’t already Jewish—people who didn’t follow “the law” as it had been known to them. And all through the ages, Christians have felt a tension between the promise of God’s salvation that can embrace us no matter what and the sense that, nevertheless, God does actually call forth from us particular behaviours and ways of being in the world. God’s grace does come first, but is God’s “‘forgiveness’ simply God’s blessing in advance on what I am anyway determined to do”?<sup>3</sup> Or is there, in fact, a difference between ‘Love God and do what then seems right,’<sup>4</sup> and ‘Love God and do what then pleases you.’”<sup>5</sup>

All this wrestling and struggle over the centuries, and the reality is we still simply don’t know what to make of Jesus and all this law-and-commandment stuff. There’s got to be at least a little of it that can slide, right? At least one jot, one tittle, one iota, right?

Maybe what Jesus was talking about wasn’t all that stuff that the Old Testament considers “the law,” but just that centerpiece we call the Ten Commandments. Or maybe there’s different levels of “law”, and Jesus was only referring to the most important parts. Or maybe all this talk of law and commandment is simply supposed to convict us of how it’s not possible for any of us on our own to live up to it... and thus convince us of our need for God’s grace.

But what if there is more, my friends? What if there might just be some other purpose, something more positive, more life-giving, to this whole idea of law and commandment than simply arcane rules or the evidence of our own sinfulness?

In January 2007, a US Marine named Phil Klay was deployed to Iraq as part of a logistics unit, the people who managed and enabled things like truck drivers, engineers, postal workers, and—of particular importance—doctors.<sup>6</sup> Mr. Klay remembers a particular day, about midway through this deployment, when a fellow Marine arrived on base severely wounded. “He’d been shot by an enemy sniper, and the medical staff,” Mr. Klay writes, “swarmed around his body working frantically, skillfully, but it wasn’t enough. He died on the table.” Indeed, all of us know that whether they are in war zones or quiet suburbs, emergency rooms or boutique specialists’ offices, many medical professionals work valiantly and nevertheless, despite these best efforts, cannot always stave off death.

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<sup>2</sup> “Bible”, but spoken with a stereotyped accent or “drawl” often associated with people from the American South.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. Jensen, “Theological Reflections I - Matthew 5:17-26” on *GoodPreacher.com*; accessed 8 February 2014 at <https://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=12458>. This essay would have been originally published in an issue of *Lectionary Homiletics*, although which issue is unknown. Due to the change in gospel lection citations between the 1983 *Common Lectionary* and the 1992 *Revised Common Lectionary*, it is presumed this article dates from sometime between 1983 and 1992.

<sup>4</sup> A sentiment attributed to Augustine, theological giant of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Christian church whose work greatly influenced the theology of the Protestant Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>5</sup> Jensen, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> This story and all of the quotes therefrom in this and the following three paragraphs are from: Phil Klay “What We’re Fighting For,” *The New York Times*, 12 February 2017, SR1.

What came next was what really struck Mr. Kay, though: “Normally,” he writes, “there’d be a moment of silence, of prayer, but the team got word that the man who killed this young Marine, the insurgent sniper, would be arriving a few minutes later.” Apparently, others in the same squadron had “engaged the sniper in firefight, shot him a couple of times, patched him up, bandaged him and called for a casualty evacuation to save the life of the man who’d killed their friend.”

The sniper lived, stabilized by the medics and strengthened by blood donations from other nearby Marines. He was sent by helicopter to a hospital for follow-up care, accompanied by a Navy nurse who later reflected on the strangeness of watching over the unconscious body, keeping tabs on vitals, including “a heartbeat that was steady and strong thanks to the gift of blood from the Americans this insurgent would have liked to kill.”

As Mr. Klay shared this story some 10 years later as part of an opinion piece in *The New York Times*, he makes a point of telling his readers that “This wasn’t just a couple of Marines and sailors making the right decision. These weren’t acts of exceptional moral courage ... This was standard policy,” according to Mr. Klay, “part of tradition stretching back to the Revolutionary War, when George Washington ordered every soldier in the Continental Army to sign a copy of rules intended to limit harm to civilians and ensure that their conduct respected what he called ‘the rights of humanity,’ so that their restraint ‘justly secured to us the attachment of all good men.’”

In other words, there was a sense there that these servicemembers needed to live into a better version of themselves. A bit like what Michelle Obama is remembered for saying in one of the political convention speeches some number of years ago: “when they go low, we go high.”

Especially as I hear Jesus’ words in today’s passage together with the witness offered by the Deuteronomy passage, I wonder if there isn’t something of this same sort going on. “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.” All the laws, the commandments, the prophesies, might they be all a gracious gift from a God who loves the people, a gift by which God is trying to help lead toward those things that are already in-and-of-themselves life-giving and blessing-bestowing, rather than those things that are already death-dealing. What if all the stuff we hear about “law” and “commandment” isn’t really at all about obeying some set of rules we have to follow in order to avoid punishment? What if the things that God commands aren’t just there to limit our behaviours—to put boundaries around the bad—but instead to create something positive, something good. Perhaps God commands things in order to create good, to make us better in our humanity and better as we seek to be formed more and more into the likeness of Christ.

That does seem to be what Jesus himself is getting at, after all. Remember, by this point in the story, Jesus has already been going around “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.”<sup>7</sup> Now, he’s started to teach his followers about how they might start living into that kingdom *now*. As one theologian puts it, Jesus is “creat[ing] a people capable of living in accordance with the new order” while in the midst of the old one.<sup>8</sup> In other words, what are the paths of life and patterns of behaviour through which we can start to experience something of that kingdom of heaven here and now?

When Jesus tells his listeners that to enter the kingdom of heaven our righteousness needs to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, that’s not a criticism of them. They *were*, in fact, quite righteous. It’s just that Jesus wants his followers to press *even further*. “You have to lift your leg high to run with the big dogs,” a teacher of mine used to say.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 4:23, NRSV.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 67.

At its root, the law is supposed to be about relationships, not rules. With murder and anger, it's not enough simply to not kill people, Jesus says, but we should be treating each other with respect, not anger, and we should be seeking reconciliation in our broken relationships. That's where something life-giving is found. In some of the verses that we skipped over in today's reading, we hear pieces about adultery, divorce, and swearing oaths. These teachings of Jesus, too, are all about broadening things from rules to relationships. As one writer puts it, "It is not enough to avoid physically committing adultery. We should also not objectify other persons by seeing them as a means to satisfy our physical desires by lusting after them. [And] It is not enough to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. We should not treat people as disposable and should make sure that the most vulnerable—in this culture that often meant women and children—are provided for. [And] It is not enough to keep ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all of our dealings so that we don't need to make oaths at all."<sup>9</sup>

All this stuff about law and commandment, its not about checking off boxes on the rule sheet to be considered righteous. It's about relationship: taking relationship seriously, seeking reconciliation, honouring the divine image in the other.

What if every time we come across a commandment or law or admonition—to pray or to repent or to forgive—rather than picking it apart in skepticism, what if we took it and actually tried to live into it, or even go beyond it, pressing to the next level of what dwelling in kingdom of heaven might look like right here, right now? What if rather than always asking whether a commandment should be dropped, or a law ignored, our first question was to get at what's deeper behind it, and then live beyond it? What if our call is actually to be the best Christians we can be—not the best people we can be, who just also happen to be Christian—but to be ones striving to be the best at being actively, faithfully, intentionally *Christian*. Doing actual prayer practice, committing to coming to worship every week, practicing Sabbath, committing to honesty in our dealings and purity in our behaviours. In following such a path, we put ourselves in that place where we are most open to God, and God's presence with us, and God's plan for us, and God's strength with in us.

Perhaps then, my friends, we will encounter the true wisdom of God, and the true likeness of Christ—the one who lived into the new order amidst the old even to the point of death on a cross. Perhaps then, my friends, pressing deeper and seeking the beyond, perhaps *then* we will find out what it truly and actually means to be “believers that think.”

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<sup>9</sup> David Lose, “The Relational God”, Dear Working Preacher (blog), *WorkingPreacher.org*, 11 February 2014, accessed 15 February 2014 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3071>.