

"Seeking a Better Righteousness" – Matthew 5:17-37 – February 16, 2020

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If you were to go out and poll a few dozen random people and ask them to tell you what they think God is like or to get an image of God in their minds and then describe that to you, I imagine you'd probably hear some fairly standard answers. Some people would talk about God's love and that all goodness and love comes from God. Others would tell you about God the creator of everything. Some would say that God is myth to keep people in line or quote the well-known line by Karl Marx, that religion is the opiate of the masses, giving people relief from their sufferings with pleasant illusions. And many people might describe God as the white robed and bearded grandfatherly figure who lives in the sky who enforces a strict moral code, zapping people who don't follow the rules. Pastor David Lose quipped that many folks might envision God as a strict Santa Claus figure who "knows when you are sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake." <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/02/epiphany-6a-on-love-and-law/>

Of course, after hearing today's passages from Deuteronomy and the Sermon on the Mount, it's easy to see how the stern lawgiver image came about. And with the list of rules comes the assumption that we have to follow all the rules to the letter or else be subject to God's displeasure. Often, we like to categorize God as the wrathful God of the Old Testament and the loving God of the New Testament. That Jesus came into the world to satisfy God's wrath, and now everything is all love and flowers and red candy hearts. The problem with that is, there is just the one God.

So then we read the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus seems to get pretty serious about all those rules, those 10 Commandments that God gave to Moses. If you thought following those 10 commandments was bad enough, Jesus pushed them much further. Not only is killing people off limits, now you can't even toss insult their way without upsetting God. Or, not only abstain from adultery, but keep your wandering eyes to yourself or else you had better pluck out your eyeball or, better yet, lop off your hand. When did Jesus get so harsh?

Remember, this Sermon on the Mount is one of the first recorded teachings of Jesus. Pretty serious stuff.

The problem comes when we believe that we have to follow God's law in order to earn God's love. This is analogous to having to be good in order to receive Christmas presents from Santa Claus. If you're not good, Santa will only give you a lump of coal in your stocking. We might use this line every now and again to get our kids to behave. And maybe you even remember hearing that from your own childhood. We may laugh about it now, but we are conditioned to think we have to be good in order to be loved. And that's the problem so many of us have with the concept of grace. We believe we have to earn God's love.

But let's jump back to Deuteronomy. Moses is telling the people that following God's law will lead to life and prosperity. He says, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." Hmmmm. That sounds rather ominous. The alternative is to not follow God's law and.....

But here's the point. God had already chosen Israel to be God's people. God rescued and freed them from slavery in Egypt and promised to be their God and promised to bring them into a land they could call their own. God already loved them. They didn't need to earn their freedom; they didn't need to earn God's love. The law came later, after God had claimed them. And the commandments were not meant to tear them down. They were not harsh commands to hurt or ruin them. The commandments were given out of God's love. The law was a gift.

And from our passage, when Moses said to the people, "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..." it wasn't a harsh threat of destruction. It was more an invitation to live a life of harmony and respect for God and one another. This is the formula for life and prosperity. Be good to one another.

Don't kill your neighbor. Don't covet your neighbor's donkey or spouse. Don't bring false charges against your neighbor. Don't steal from your neighbor.

Don't do these things to earn God's love. Guess what? You already have it. Do these things out of respect for your neighbor. It's not all about you and what you want and what you need. God is trying to build community with these laws. We need each other. We need each other to survive and to prosper. And I'm not talking financial prosperity here. I'm talking about flourishing or thriving. We need one another to grow. Our humanity grows when we treat each other humanely and acknowledge the moral boundaries that exist.

And then we come to what Jesus was talking about in the sermon on the mount. The commandments kept people relatively civil to one another. They kept people from infringing on the basic rights to live and thrive. And when they worked together in community, they could move their community forward.

But Jesus said, that's not enough. There is more to life than simply not getting all up in your neighbor's business. Yes. Keep your hands off their stuff, don't murder them in their sleep. Like we all learned in kindergarten. Keep your hands to yourself. That's what the prohibitions in the 10 Commandments are all about. But there's more. Jesus pushes these laws further than the most basic morality.

He pushes them to the point where we have to recognize not only our neighbor's boundaries, but also our neighbor's well-being. There's a lot of wiggle room in the 10 Commandments. We can follow them completely but still treat our neighbors horribly.

Jesus calls for a better righteousness. Jesus is teaching us how to not only respect our neighbor but also to love our neighbor. The well-being of our neighbor is as important as our own well-being. Why? Because God loves our neighbor in the same way that God's loves us.

Pastor David Lose shares a story told to him by one of his friends named Frank. When Frank was about 8 years old, he had an argument with his sister. It escalated from pushing and shoving until Frank had his sister pinned to the floor. With his fist raised to punch her, their mother came into the room and hollered at him to stop. Frank, with his 8-year-old defiance and fist still raised in the air, stated, "She's my sister, I can do what I want to her." Their mother rushed over and emphatically declared, "She's my daughter. No, you can't."

Through no merit of your own, only by grace, you are beloved and cherished child of God. And so is your neighbor, even when your neighbor is your enemy. God's law was put into place by God, to protect all God's children.

We do not have the right to harm any other person. We do not have the right to discriminate against any other person, to ridicule, to marginalize, to dehumanize, to stereotype...The list is endless. And yes, it seems almost impossible to follow the law, especially as Jesus defines it in the sermon on the mount, which goes further than mere actions, but goes deeper, into the intent that is in our hearts. But this better righteousness is one toward which we can strive. We will fail, and we will fail often. The good news is, God will not love us any less.

God is not a cosmic Santa Clause that puts us on the naughty list every time we mess up. God is a loving and protective parent that wants the best for all God's children. We see that extravagant love in Jesus Christ, God's gift to all humanity. Christ calls us to a better righteousness, not to take anything good away from us, but to teach us how and why to grow in our love for one another.