

Looking at the Law in a New Way

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy told a parable about a man in a boat. The opposite shore had been pointed out to him. He'd been given a pair of oars and left alone. He rowed out a short distance, but the current was strong. There were other boats in the same stream, and most were just drifting along. "Is this the way?" the man asked. "Of course, it is! What do you think? There's no other way." So the rower took his ease.

Suddenly he became aware of a menacing sound—the roar of the rapids! He realized the danger, and with all his might he rowed upstream. "What a fool I was to drift!" he thought to himself. Tolstoy interpreted his parable like this: the current is the tradition of the world which sweeps most people along; the oars are the will of the individual and the opposite shore is God's calling to us. A person can genuinely seek God's will, but often by rowing against the main stream with considerable resolve, determination and hard work.

In first-century Judea, this was the situation facing the Jews who felt they knew all about God's law. Especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, their knowledge of what God required had ballooned to over 6,200 pages of Talmudic rules on every aspect of beliefs, behaviors, diet, customs, ethics and attitudes. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about another way, a better and simpler way, to be in harmony with the will of God. And it would be as difficult as rowing against the current over to the opposite shore. It would require a reorientation of the mind to what God feels is most important in relationship to him and others. In the process it would 'raise the bar' on accountability in thought and action among Jesus' followers.

Jesus was quick to tell us that he didn't come to contradict the law, rather to give us a fresh perspective on God's law, as only God himself could. "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to

accomplish their purpose.” (Matthew 5:17) Instead of governing our lives by constant reference to an encyclopedia of rules, we should look for God’s love in everything. That means we stay away from sin not because of fear of punishment, but because sin is the opposite of God’s love. Our focus must shift from the letter of the law – long lists of dos and don’ts - to actively practising God’s love in the spirit of their original intent. Jesus wants our lives to be more active and complete in the virtues of love for God and love for neighbor. He’s telling us that the state of our souls is just as important as the actions of our bodies.

“You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment!” (Matthew 5:21-22) The law of Moses dealt with the physical actions that people could take against others, such as *rasah* or intentional taking of a human life as described in Jesus’ quotation from Exodus 20:13. And in that law death was the judgment for those convicted of unlawful killing. But Jesus was concerned about that happens *before* that action is taken – the state of the mind, the attitudes of the heart. Jesus extended the reach of the commandment beyond the literal act of murder to the thoughts and feelings that cause people to kill each other in the first place.

Of the two Greek words translated ‘anger’ in the New Testament - *thumos*, a fiery kind of anger that flames up and then dies, and *orge*, a smoldering anger that a person nurtures and keeps alive deliberately over long periods of time – it’s the latter that Jesus condemns. Unless we deal with the problem of evil while it still resides as evil thoughts or feelings in our hearts, it may find expression in the evil works of our hands or words from our mouths. Jesus continues to show the progress of anger in the remainder of verse 22, “If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger

of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.” The Aramaic expression of contempt *raca* (empty-headed one, fool, idiot) is often left untranslated to include any way we can speak in a derisive way to others. The pronouncing of a curse to invoke God’s wrath on someone is the most serious denunciation we can make against another. Our words are something that God takes careful note of, and expressions such as these shouldn’t be coming from the lips of his people.

To illustrate this lesson, Jesus gives two examples where a right spirit must govern the works of our hands and the words of our mouths. “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person then come and offer your sacrifice to God.” (Matthew 5:23-24) Jesus calls on us to reconcile with our brother or sister so that good feelings - Godly feelings - will overcome the evil feelings of our hearts. Once our hearts are right, we’ll no longer be tempted to murder, but will instead be motivated by love, which is the proper response to our neighbor and even to our enemy.

In the second example of settling disputes with another, Jesus sets a timeline because getting along isn’t just a matter of letting things go until a bad situation reaches a crisis point. Don’t let things fester. Get things taken care of before they can only be dealt with by the law for a very practical reason - you might lose. “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.” (Matthew 5:25-26) Pursuing

reconciliation, of restoring relationship is God's way of avoiding the consequences of smoldering anger.

As with all sin, thoughts and actions that break relationship with God and others must be put out of our lives so that healing can take place. The apostle Paul wrote about this, "Don't sin by letting anger control you. Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil." (Ephesians 4:26-27). This was behind the first murder recorded in Scripture, "'Why are you angry?' the Lord asked Cain. 'Why do you look so dejected? You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master.'" (Genesis 4:6-7) Cain didn't, and his brother Abel died as a result.

Paul continues, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Ephesians 4:31-32) If our lives are governed by the presence of God, we'll be producing the fruit of the Spirit more and more, blocking the temptations to act in a selfish, uncontrolled way that many allow themselves to behave in.

Dorotheos of Gaza, a sixth-century teacher, once preached a sermon for the monks in his monastery who were grumbling that they were unable to love God properly because they had to put up with one another's ordinary, irritating presence. No, Dorotheos told them, they were wrong. He asked them to visualize the world as a great circle whose center is God, and themselves around the edge. "Imagine now," he asked them, "that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can't you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to

approach other people without coming near to God?” There’s no question that people can at times be frustrating, irritating, exasperating, and even infuriating. That’s where we need God’s help in making the right choice in dealing with them – family, friends, especially the fellowship of believers in Jesus, the household of God.

Karen was convenor of the local church women’s group whose outreach projects included community lunches, used clothing drives and visits to shut-ins and nursing homes. As she prepared the list of volunteers for the upcoming tea and bake sale, she quietly wished Mabel would have something else to do that day. Relationship between the two women had been strained recently with Mabel’s insistence on doing things a certain way without allowing for creative change that Karen tried to support. But she’d have to deal with these issues, as Mabel informed her that she would be available to help on the day of the tea.

Karen decided that the best way was to talk directly with Mabel at her home while planning the event and duties for participants. She knew she needed help, so along with a prayer for guidance, she went to the meeting along with others on the committee. There were ideas for offering online ordering that needed to be discussed for improving the bake sale, and she hoped that they would be received well. She breathed a note of thanks after showing them to Mabel. The older lady wasn’t against doing things differently, only that her experience with the present format had worked out so well in the past, why change? When properly explained during the meeting, Mabel saw the wisdom in updating their presentation and making it easier for younger women to order and pick up the products they needed.

By following Jesus’ principles of diffusing anger with God’s love, everyone benefited. So can we when we do the same in the coming week. Amen.