

FIRST LESSON: Deuteronomy 30:15-20
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 5:21-37
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“An Impossible Standard”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Anyone who reads these words of Jesus and is not intimidated, is not living in the same reality I am. Jesus lays out an impossible standard, one that no one can actually reach, and that is because Jesus searches behind wrongful actions and targets the thoughts that precede them. Who among us has had success in controlling their thoughts?

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

The Old Testament is clear in distinguishing murder from other loss of life. Murder is different from war. Murder is different from execution, regardless of our view of the death penalty. And scripture also differentiates between murder, which is intentional, and manslaughter which is not. Even killing in self-defense comes under a different category. What Jesus was talking about was murder—the intentional and willful taking of life. But what he draws our attention to is anger—the causal factor behind many murders.

We have several words for anger in English. We become enraged, furious and even wrathful. We get incensed, riled up, aggravated and provoked. We fume. We are steamed up. We hold grudges. And of course, although this expression is not in the dictionary, we get really pissed off. Greek also has many words for anger, and this one is *orgizomenos*. There is another word, *thumos*, which means a fiery type of quick anger. But *orgizomenos* is smoldering anger. It is carefully nurtured anger. This isn’t the sudden loss of temper that happens to all of us when we are having a really bad day. This is the anger people choose to hold on to until it spreads its poison into all of life. And Jesus also adds to the forbidden list the hostile insults that often spill over from such carefully preserved anger. He specifically names two insults—*raka*, and fool. For some reason our English translations have chosen not to translate *raka*, which is an Aramaic word meaning empty headed or stupid, but do translate fool, which is a Greek word, *moros*, the word we get moron from. Wouldn’t it have been easier to just say don’t call someone a fool or a stupid moron?

We’re used to insults. Some people are better at dealing with it than others. A pastor once found an envelope slipped under his door. Inside was a

piece of paper on which was written in large letters the word, "Fool." On Sunday morning he announced that he had received a letter, but for some reason the person concerned had only signed their name and not said what they wanted.

While no one likes to be on the receiving end of an insult, in cultures where honor is highly valued and shame to be avoided at all costs, public insults can result in murder. Think for a moment about wild west gunfights. Imagine being challenged to a duel in Colonial America or Great Britain. And it is not hard to find the same thing happening today on the streets of Philadelphia where guns take lives over perceived insults. In some worlds there is no such thing as a harmless insult, and that was most definitely the case in Jesus' world. Men in particular felt obliged to defend their public honor. Calling a free man "stupid" or a "moron" definitely constituted "fighting words" in the 1st century. Given what it could lead to it is really not surprising at all that Jesus took such a strong position. And even in situations that don't lead to direct violence words can inflict real damage. Words can wound us emotionally and spiritually. Contemptuous words spoken by a parent to a child can resonate with that child for life. While the potency of a physical blow weakens over time, the same is not true of an abusive word. What we say and how we say it matters.

Jesus moved from talking about murder, anger and insults to broken relationships in general. Using deliberate exaggeration he says that if we are offering our gift at the altar and remember that our brother or sister has something against us, we should go and be reconciled with them before offering our gift. No one would actually do this! No one would wait in line for hours with a lamb to sacrifice, finally get there and say to the priest, "*Sorry, I forgot something! Feed the lamb till I get back, will you?*" Jesus uses an absurd illustration to get his point across. And he adds that if things have gotten so bad that someone is taking us to court, we should go and settle matters quickly. Otherwise, the consequences could be dire.

The alternative to acting out in anger is to seek reconciliation. Situations that we consider irredeemable can be turned around with kindness and patience. Better communication can clear up hurt and misunderstandings. But it is not always possible. Romans 12 says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, **as far as it depends on you**, live at peace with everyone." We are only truly responsible for our side of the street. We can't make another person feel or act a certain way.

Jesus next said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

Now we know that Jesus did not mean for these words to be taken literally regarding gouging out eyes or cutting off hands. Once again, he was

putting things in their most extreme terms in order to make a point. And he put it that strongly because adultery doesn't begin with an act. It begins long before the act ever takes place in the form of thoughts. Infidelity begins small, and when it is small it can be cut off. If we leave it no room to grow and reject it at the onset it is not too difficult. But every time we indulge in a lustful thought for someone other than our spouse, we give it power. Jesus knew this. And his comments here segued right into his next words about divorce.

Divorce was a male prerogative. In very rare situations a well-connected woman might be able to petition the elders to grant her a divorce, but it was extremely rare. A man wasn't even considered guilty of adultery if he cheated on his wife with an unmarried woman. The laws about adultery were all about property rights over women.

Jesus said, "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

Now here is the context to these words. This is NOT about forcing people to remain in unhappy or abusive marriages. **This was a very different world.** And Jesus was speaking about the IDEAL. The ideal is that husbands love their wives. But the ideal was not happening. In this world a man could throw his wife out on the street to starve if he got angry at her for burning the supper. Jesus' teachings protected women from living in constant fear of being homeless. In some cases, a woman had a dowry she could reclaim, or a family of origin who would take her in, but for most there was nothing. And in all circumstances the wife would never be allowed to keep her children. They were the legal property of her husband. There was no such thing as spousal support, nor could she get a job or have a career. A wife rejected in this way could prostitute herself, beg, or starve, and she would never see her children again.

Jesus' last teaching was about swearing oaths. And people at that time swore oaths by EVERYTHING. It had become such a verbal habit that some couldn't manage to say a sentence without swearing to the validity of what they were saying, somewhat like the teenage girls today who say "I swear to God" every few words. Jesus even named some of the most common oaths people swore by: by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem, by the temple, by the gold in the temple and by their own head. They probably even swore by their dear sainted mother's grave. The Rabbis had their hands full deciding which oaths were binding and which were not. In addition, many oaths doubled as curses on the one making the oath, as in, "May the dung of a thousand camels land on my head if this rug I am about to sell you is not the best in the land."

Jesus said, "Enough." Let your yes be yes and your no be no. **Just speak the truth.**

Jesus words are common sense. They are also hard. Sometimes really, really hard. Relationships are challenging, and while we can choose our friends we can't choose our family, or our church family, or our neighbors. We are all going to be dealing with friction to one degree or another in our lives. And we will sometimes fail. There are times we may even get so mad we want to throw

things. I once threw a frying pan at my ex-husband. In my defense I was pregnant at the time, and he was being a jerk. But should I have done it? No. Even worse, I missed.

These impossible standards are there to give us something to aim for. We should strive to improve our God aim as opposed to our frying pan aim. God knows we are not going to succeed all the time. But we may just succeed some of the time. And by God's grace, the times when we do things God's way will become far more frequent than the times we fall back into doing things our way. Amen

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.¹⁶ For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you

to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷ All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.