

Isaiah 58:1-)

Psalm 112:1-10

1 Corinthians 2:1-10

Matthew 5:13-20

THE LAW FULFILLED Sermon for Feb. 16, 2020

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Summary: The law is the cover; the book is the heart.

A few days ago, I was driving into Tops or Hospice, I forget, but it was about four o'clock. I took Gaines Basin Road up to 31, and came to the stop sign, ready to make a left turn. But 31 was very busy that day, and the cars were diabolically spaced so that if there was a break in traffic from the left, somebody was coming from the right. I'm sure you're all familiar with the experience, and how it gets increasingly frustrating the longer you wait, and I must have been waiting there for two or three minutes..

Well, as I'm sitting there, I look to the right and there's a fellow approaching the intersection on foot. He was a very rough-looking guy, tall and skinny, with a haggard unshaven face, and a lighted cigarette dangling from his lip, wearing a stocking cap and just a dirty jacket, and the jacket was open, even though it was very chilly outside.

Junkie, was my first thought, and 'possibly dangerous' was my second thought. I had a sudden vision of him reaching my car as I sat there, climbing in and asking me for money.

And just then, I glanced to the left and right again, and I could see a break in the traffic, in which in a second or two I could actually make my escape and be on my way. But the problem was, the junkie guy was only a couple steps away, and he'd be in the intersection – if not actually in my car – when the opening came. And I was going to be stuck there for who knows how much longer.

So I growled in frustration and glanced back to the right, and what did I see? There was the guy who had stopped in midstep, and was waiting for me to make my escape. He'd obviously recognized my dilemma in an instant, and was simply standing there, in the cold, so that I could continue on my way.

And so I shot through that opening and headed east, but now I was wishing there had been some way I could have waved at the guy, or somehow acknowledged his little gift to me, but it was too late.

And for maybe the millionth time in my life, I relearned that ancient truth: You can't judge a book by its cover.

And I think that's the real message of our gospel passage for today. So let's read it together with that thought in mind.

Matthew 5: 21-37

As you read through all the gospel accounts, one of the things you might be surprised to discover is how little Jesus has to say about what we might call 'contemporary moral issues.' The times in which he lived certainly didn't lack for such issues. Slavery, a fierce patriarchy, infanticide, legal torture, debtors prison, widespread prostitution, child labor....the list could go on and on. The moral condition of the society within which Jesus lived and carried out his ministry would have offered ample opportunity for moral reform and education, if that had been Christ's concern.

But as I say, the surprising thing is how little Jesus has to say about any of those things.

It's surprising in part because for many people that's really what Christianity is all about: teaching us right from wrong, and then encouraging us to apply that understanding to the moral issues of the day. Thus there should be a particularly Christian position, according to this way of thinking, about all the moral issues that occupy us today. A Christian should have a particular position with regard to abortion, say, or with regard to gay and transgender rights, or to preserving the environment. Just so, in earlier generations, there was a particularly Christian position with regard to prohibition, or women's suffrage. Or going back farther, to the issue of slavery and emancipation. And so on and so on.

But what's surprising, as I say, is that when we go back to the actual wellspring of Christianity, to Christ himself, we don't find very much active concern with that kind of issue.

Why is that?

The answer most often given is something along these lines: Jesus didn't address specific moral issues; he instead gave us certain general principles, and our job is to take those principles and apply them to specific situations. Whatever comes out of that is the official "Christian" position.

There are many problems with this way of thinking, not the least of which is crediting Jesus as the source of these principles. Jesus, for example, did not teach us that there is an intrinsic value to every human life: we find that way back in the second book of Genesis, where we learn that God created humanity in His own image. Jesus didn't teach us to love your neighbor as yourself; he was simply quoting and affirming something that had already been taught in the book of Leviticus.

And similarly, I think, for all the so-called 'principles' that Jesus is supposed to have established, and on the basis of which we can arrive at a special 'Christian' point of view with respect to contemporary issues. On examination, all those principles will, I suspect, turn out to be teachings that you can find elsewhere, often more easily than we can find them in the recorded words of our Lord.

And again we ask, Why is that?

The answer, I believe, is one that we've offered from this pulpit in many ways and in many contexts. The answer is that Jesus was concerned not so much with what people do as with what they **are**.

Our gospel passage from Matthew today, like the passages of the last several weeks, come from what we call the Sermon on the Mount, which runs through chapters 5-7 in Matthew. And near the end of that sermon in Chapter, Jesus makes this point explicit:

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. 16 You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? 17 Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that

does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Therefore by their fruits you will know them. (15-20).

The gospel passage for this week anticipates the long list of prohibitions Sheryl read for us last week:

Thou shalt not murder; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not swear falsely; and the list goes on – and in response to each of them, Jesus really says, look under the cover, and you'll discover the real causes for concern. The cover here is not – like my considerate junkie – a physical cover, but it is the cover of our behavior, and Jesus is ever and always telling us to look beneath the cover of mere behavior, to discover that true quality of the individual.

That rule extends even to worship and acts of devout obedience. Immediately after telling us about the good and bad trees, Jesus adds this for emphasis:

Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³ And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, (22-23)

And there are two reasons, I suggest, for why Jesus was focused on the inner rather than the outer, on who we are rather than what we do.

The first is pretty obvious: the world would be a much better place if its human inhabitants were free of anger, covetousness, hypocrisy, and so on. The behavior that most moral systems are focused on prohibiting wouldn't really need to be prohibited anymore. Were there no anger, there would be no vengeful murder; were there no covetousness, there would be no adultery; were people truthful through and through, we would not have to worry about perjury or false witness, and so on and so on.

A society that directs all its effort to eliminating or mandating certain behaviors might in fact be a totalitarian nightmare, especially when it has at its disposal the surveillance and retribution abilities made possible by modern technology. The frightful news coming out of Communist China and North Korea about the use of those technologies to eliminate any trace of dissent or independent thought is a healthy reminder that sometimes the cure can be much worse than the problem.

In a world filled with people of the character Jesus teaches us about, the heinous activities that society seeks to suppress with all its judicial power would simply dry up and fall away, like leaves that have lost their source of nutriment. In Christ's image, make the tree good, and you don't need to worry about the fruit.

In fact, such a society would be one about which we might be tempted to use the adjective *heavenly*. It would be a heavenly place to live, like heaven on earth, you might almost say.

And that brings us to the second, and I think, far more important reason why Jesus is almost exclusively focused on the inner rather than the outer.

For the sad fact is that, in the world we in fact inhabit, not everyone has anything approaching that sort of heavenly character, if I may use that expression. In our world, this world, hatred and covetousness and envy and arrogance and hypocrisy are still, if not the norm, then at least of powerful presence, not only in society, but in each of our own hearts, if we're honest with ourselves.

And therefore in this world, the qualities of character that Jesus recommends will often result in victimization and material loss and worldly tragedy. That's simply reality, our human reality, and all of us can testify to it. And Jesus, facing the cross, knew that better than anyone.

And that's why the second reason is so much more important.

The conditions for most of the sorts of behavior that our moral world considers grievous and despicable will not exist in heaven: that's why Jesus is not concerned with reforming them. There will be no advantage to murder, adultery, or financial skullduggery in heaven; the rewards of gaining control over others will not exist; attempts at intimidation and coercion will be regarded with the heavenly equivalent of bemusement. Jesus barely mentions things like that, because his concern is preparing us for a life spent under conditions entirely different from those to which we have been accustomed.

Jesus is preparing us, not to thrive or to find reward or peace in this world, but rather in the world to come.

And so this morning, Father, we pray for the perseverance to maintain our faith in love and charity and humility. We pray for the courage we need to face the hostility and rejection of the world without the world's own armor of hatred

and covetousness and pride. We pray for the peace of those who lead their lives in the confident expectation of a better place. We pray for the help of Christ, whose own perseverance and courage and peace opened the door to heaven for all of us, and we ask these things in his name.