

Aiming in the Right Direction
Matthew 5:21-37
© Stacey Steck
Preached February 13, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

At first reading of this section of the Sermon on the Mount, you might think that Jesus would be a proponent of placing a copy of the Ten Commandments on every courthouse lawn, and in every public school yard, as strenuously as he defends the commandments, and as thoroughly as he intensifies them. Jesus has not come to abolish the law, that is for sure, not with his take on it, and not with his suggestions for how to obey it. But how has he come to fulfill it, as he says about himself, how has he come to fulfill it by making it so difficult? “If you call your brother a fool, you will be liable to the hell of fire?” “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out?” Yes, Jesus was a big fan of the Ten Commandments, maybe too big, and we are left with the nearly impossible task of living up to those incredibly high standards of perfection, and Jesus does use the word “perfect” in the Sermon on the Mount, in next week’s selection. So what are our choices? To go to every length to avoid even being angry, or finding a person of the opposite sex attractive, or stop swearing on our mother’s grave? Or are we to simply look at these high standards, and say, “Ah, Jesus couldn’t really have meant it; he was just trying to make a point,” and admit the sheer impossibility of keeping them, and then thank God because we don’t really have to, because we have Jesus Christ, and his mercy, and whether we succeed or not, we have our bases covered and we have no worries

of visiting the hell of fire, even if we never quite stop calling people fools for their foolishness? So is it option A: Hyper-vigilance of our behavior, both external and internal? Or Option B: An “I’ll do the best I can but I’m not going to worry too much about it” attitude since only Jesus can do it anyway?

Well, the answer is yes. Of course, it’s always “yes.” Have you ever known Jesus to let us take either of two perfectly reasonable options, when there is a divine third way into which he can lead us, to which he can call us? That is the religious genius of Jesus who cuts through the fantasies we create for ourselves about how thoroughly pious we are, or how utterly sinful we are, and casts for us a new vision for our lives, and for the whole human community, and invites us to participate in that vision. The answer is yes.

Yes, the Ten Commandments are important. They always have been to God’s people, whether Jewish or Christian. They are simple, they are elegant, they leave little room for interpretation, right? Either you murder or you don’t. Either you steal, or you don’t. Either you take the Lord’s name in vain, or you don’t. Right? Right. But as true and important as the Ten Commandments are, we all know that we are confronted, perhaps even daily, with choices that require us to discern right from wrong, because there is not an eleventh, or a twelfth, or even a two hundred and twenty-second commandment that makes our decision as crystal clear for us as we might like. There is no simple, elegant, leave-no-room-for-interpretation commandment to address the question, “Should I pick up my dog’s

droppings from my neighbor's lawn, or leave them there to fertilize the grass?" Or to address "How long should I wait at this traffic light that seems to be stuck, before going through it?" These may seem like silly questions compared to "Should I murder that guy because he just cut me off in traffic," but we do face daily and mundane challenges to our behavior for which some guidance is both useful and welcome.

Through the centuries, a great deal has been written about the Ten Commandments, precisely because they are so important. I think it might be helpful if I share a couple of observations about the Ten Commandments that I have found helpful, before moving on to what Jesus does with them in the Sermon on the Mount. The first is this: that we are helped by keeping in mind the difference between obeying the commandments, and keeping the commandments. Between obeying them, and keeping them. What do I mean by that? Well, to keep a commandment is to keep watch over whether you have transgressed a law or not. Have I murdered someone? Yes or no. To keep a commandment is to define all the possible scenarios to which a Commandment might apply, and keep yourself from doing them. For example, is accidentally killing someone murder? Or in the act of self-defense? Or in time of war? Or to prevent a tragedy? There is nothing wrong with asking these questions, and doing one's best to discern God's will in each of them, using Scripture and reason, and wisdom. But by only keeping the commandments, we are less likely to obey them. To obey the Commandment is to

have in mind God's purpose *behind* them, *for* them. In the words of the Lutheran ethicist Paul Lehmann, "They are to be obeyed by pursuing the pathways and patterns of human behavior that the Commandments identify, and by pursuing the prospect of a human future to which the Commandments point." That is a fancy way of saying that obeying the Commandments is not losing sight of the forest for the trees, that the Commandments serve a purpose greater than themselves; they do not exist so we can keep them, but so that we can obey God's wishes for our life together. To obey the commandment to not murder is to live as one who values what murder does not, and seeks life for others when it is threatened, takes responsibility for promoting it. Do not simply keep the commandments; obey God, with the commandments as your guide.

A related way of thinking about the Commandments has to do with thinking about God's purposes for them. Why do we have them? Do they exist simply to restrain our naturally evil tendencies, and to tell us what we can and cannot do? Or do they tell us something about how, and for what, God has created us? For those of you looking for a nifty way to categorize this difference, the same ethicist, Lehmann, says it is between a *prescriptive* view of the Commandments, and a *descriptive* view. If the Commandments are prescriptive, they simply tell us what we should or must do, what we can and cannot do, like murder, adultery, and the rest. If the Commandments are descriptive, they tell us how God has created us, and to what new reality God is calling us. They describe us as God prefers to see

us, and as God has sent Christ to help us become. Perhaps the difference between prescriptive and descriptive can be seen in the difference between the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States, that is, its opening statements, and the collection of laws that follows the preamble. Remember what the Preamble says, “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” The rest of the document goes on to outline rules and limits, but the preamble establishes responsibility, and gives us a guide for how ultimately we are to live together, with justice, tranquility, and all the rest. This difference between prescriptive and descriptive is not to say that the laws themselves are unimportant, that we should not keep them, but rather to say that if that is all we do, we will surely go astray of their original intent, to form that more perfect union, and that we will spend so much time debating the laws, that we will lose sight of the virtues for which they were established, and people will suffer as a result. Of course, it is always risky to make a comparison between the heavenly kingdom and an earthly political realm, but I hope the example was worth the risk.

So, why have I told you all of this? I’ve outlined this because I think this is what lies behind Jesus’ intensification of the Commandments in this famous Sermon on the Mount. The commandment, “Do not murder,” is, for most people,

not too difficult to keep. I don't know what the percentage of professed murderers were Christians when they committed their crimes, but I would hazard a guess that it is quite low. Clearly, the issue does get more complicated when you start asking questions about potential situations, and those questions are good to ask. But murder, generally speaking, is an act of last resort, a measure taken when no other course of action remains, and not an everyday decision, thanks be to God. It is actually something we are not called to think about very often, especially if we only think about it as deeply as the letter of the law, or even the clarifying questions we could ask about it. But if the Commandment is descriptive, rather than prescriptive, there is a lot more we could think about it, as we pursue living into how it describes us and our community, as people who not only don't murder, but who take seriously the possible steps toward murder, and who try to live as people who don't even get unjustly angry, or insult others, or consider ourselves better than others, the three intensifications of the commandment, "You shall not murder," that Jesus proposes. Jesus begins with the fifth commandment to introduce his disciples to something deeper, to remind them of God's intention for God's people, how to obey that commandment, how to live into it.

You see, if our self-analysis of our behavior is never provoked beyond the act of last resort, beyond keeping the Commandments, we will always consider ourselves righteous, and a lot of community destroying behavior will likely take place. We will be able to justify almost anything we do, if we can point to the

extremes and say, “Well, I’ve never murdered anyone or committed adultery or sworn a false oath.” But in the meantime, we will surely have participated in not only simple murder, but genocide, not only simple adultery, but the sexual trafficking of women and children, not only in simply swearing false oaths, but political corruption. The time we spend keeping the Commandments is the time we could be spending obeying them, and working together so that genocide and human trafficking and corruption do not define us just because we haven’t murdered, committed adultery or sworn a false oath personally. Jesus reminds us that the manifestations of murder, adultery, and the swearing of oaths are much broader and deeper than we care to believe, so we can see how all of our actions, not just those of last resort, are distorting the intention of our God, and betraying the vision of human community God has given us in Jesus Christ.

Let me conclude with an example that I hope will bring all this together, and give you an image to take from here tonight as you go forth to obey the Commandments. The story goes that a man was walking through the woods one day and came upon an arrow directly in the center of a target on a tree. He went on a little further and found another, and yet another, and began to marvel at the skill of the archer, especially because to pierce the bull’s-eye of some of the targets, the archer would have had to be extremely precise launching his or her arrows through the dense trees of the forest. Well, the man wanted to meet this incredible archer and so he hurried on ahead until he caught up with her, and was shocked to find

that it was a little girl. After praising her for her skill, he asked her how it was that her arrows could always find the center of the target, especially in so dense a forest, and she replied by showing him. Taking out an arrow, she fired it at a tree, and then promptly went over to it, and carefully painted a perfect target around it.

That is the way that those in Jesus time kept the commandments, focusing more on the success of their endeavor than on aiming at the real target. That is how we live if we only keep the commandments rather than obey them. But in intensifying the commandments, Jesus has taken the paint brush out of our hands and has drawn for us a target at which we are called to aim, a target of righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, because it is an authentic righteousness, and not a self serving one. You see, the point is not so much whether we hit the target, but that we are taking aim at God's target, rather than someone else's. You may remember that the word most commonly used for sin in the New Testament, *hamartia*, has as its root, the idea to miss the mark, to miss the target, as with an arrow or a spear. When we sin, we miss the mark, God's target, God's vision of a human community that lives a divine shalom. But here's the good news of the Gospel: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven for missing the target, if our aim is not yet straight enough, or our equipment is defective, or even if the target seems to be moving on us. But what Jesus wants to say in the Sermon on the Mount is that what is not forgivable is aiming a target other than God's, or worse, deceiving ourselves by drawing our own targets where our random arrows strike.

We can be forgiven missing the target, but we cannot be forgiven for not aiming in the right direction.

The forgiveness offered in Christ for missing the target is a wonderful blessing indeed, but let us not rest content in it. Let us practice until we are skilled enough with the bow to hit the target, and draw ring by ring ever closer to the bulls-eye in the center. Let us repair our faulty equipment, that we may shoot straight, and not hit anyone by accident. And let us rejoice that God has given us eyes to see the moving target, and the wisdom to have a good chance of hitting it, if we will but take aim at it. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” Amen.