

Psalm 119:1-8
Matthew 5:21-37

“Good People”

R.P.C.
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In the portion of scripture just prior to our text, Jesus said, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). Then he adds, “...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (5:20).

Now wait a minute ... I thought Jesus had “issues” with the scribes and Pharisees, and here he is holding them up as an example to emulate? What gives? These are pretty clear statements coming from the lips of Jesus; they stand as a kind of prelude to what we shared today, beginning in verse 21.

I mean, let’s say that we are all here today because we want to become better people.... We are here to learn to be good, to increase our ability to become more ... well, more righteous. After all, isn’t that one of the main functions of religion – be it Christianity or any other faith – to make us better than we would have been if we had not gotten up on this February morning and gone to church. Let’s agree that we are at least “on the way” toward goodness because at least WE made the effort to get up and come here.

Yet, the trouble with being “good Christians” is that, in the past, such “good people” were the very ones who caused Jesus the most trouble. It was the ‘good people’ like the scribes and Pharisees - the people who never cheated on their taxes or their spouses; the people who could quote the scriptures backward and forwards; the people who took pride in ‘living by the book’ and kept themselves ritually clean – these are the very same ‘good people’ who eventually lead the cry to “Crucify him! Crucify him!”

Why, we wonder? Well, one reason was because of the way Jesus lived. Shortly, after saying that he did not want to abolish the law... he seemed to do just that!

Jesus must have kept the ‘good people’ of his day rather confused. “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (9:9-13). That’s what the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus’ disciples. They were being critical of the behavior of their master from Nazareth. After all, it was a clear violation of the Torah – the law; to mix with such outcasts and morally unclean people was to defile one’s own spiritual cleanliness – why a person could not even enter the temple after mixing with such people. “I haven’t come for you good people,” Jesus retorted, “I’ve come to seek and save the lost ... the bad.”

“The Pharisees fast, why don’t you and your followers?” they asked him. “Doesn’t the wedding party begin when the bridegroom arrives?” countered Jesus (9:15-19). In other words, forget the rules about fasting ... life is meant to be enjoyed!

“Look!” the good people said to Jesus, “Your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath!” (12:1-4) Of all things they were passing through a field of grain, and being hungry, they dared to take some of the grain in their hands and ate it - on the Sabbath no less! “Have you not read as to what the great king David did” replied Jesus. “When he and those who were with him were hungry, they went to the temple and ate the bread of the Presence, taking it right from the altar!” “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.”

“Master, heal my daughter” begged the Cannanite woman. “Well, I’m only supposed to minister to those of the House of Israel,” replied Jesus. “But what harm could there be in healing another person in need?” – And because of her faith, he healed the woman’s daughter.

“Rabbi, Moses said a man could get out of a marriage by giving his wife a certificate of divorce.” “Ah, but it was because of your ‘hardness of heart’ that Moses made that statement,” said Jesus. “It was a dumb law – which by the way, you use too freely – but it’s a necessary law because of your broken relationships - and it certainly doesn’t protect the woman.” “Sometimes you have to break a rule to do the right thing – so I say to you – stay married!”

“You have heard it said of old but I say to you...” “You have heard it was said to those of ancient times ... but I say to you...” That’s our Jesus ... pushing, challenging all of our old, comfortable patterns and ways – sometimes upsetting even the good people - maybe especially the good people.

It is possible to be good – to be s-o-o righteous – that you are wrong. A person can be s-o-o religious that he or she misses the point of faith. As the Apostle Paul warned us, “the law kills.” Dry, dead, ‘dotting the “I” and crossing the “T” legalism’ can just suck the life out religion until it is cold and calculating – leaving only a posturing, ugly thing.

Mark Twain described such a legalistic person when he described someone as “a good man in the very worst sense of the word.” So the law and the legalist can take life away. Like the newspaper account a few years ago about a man who was 109 years old being forced to move from his house for an interstate expansion. The “right of eminent domain” says he had to move ... the law is right. But where is the compassion? Maybe this contemporary instance fits Paul’s complaint that “the law kills.”

Yet, maybe this legalism is not our problem with the text for today. The argument that laws and regulations can't save us, while interesting sermon material, has become conventional wisdom. Most of us are more in danger of antinomianism, that is, no rules, no laws. We have now moved from the awareness of just obeying a few rules makes a person right, to the opposite conviction that living with no rules is OK, because, after all, I have my personal rights. In the fight between legalistic scribes and Pharisees on one hand and the rule-breaking tax collectors and harlots on the other hand, we know, (at least in secret) whose side we are really on.

It's no big deal to us that Jesus abrogated religious laws about how to keep the Sabbath holy, the sort of company we keep, the sanctity for the bond of marriage – it's no big deal because we never seriously keep those laws anymore.

Yet Jesus warns us, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets... Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches other to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.... unless your righteousness exceeds those of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven..."

If we will carefully notice, Jesus takes the commandments which are difficult enough for even a scribe or Pharisee to keep, and INTENSIFIES them: "You know you are forbidden to kill your brother ... But I forbid you to even be angry with your brother. Call him a fool and YOU shall be liable to hell." "You know that you should not commit adultery... But I say that you should not even look at a person lustfully; to do so is to commit adultery in your heart." "Remarry after divorce, and I don't care what you or the law calls it – I call it adultery."

"Somebody hits you on the right cheek ... offer them your left one as well." "Love your neighbor ... invade your enemy?" "No, I say, love your ENEMY and pray for those who persecute you." "Judge not, lest you be judged!" "Enter by the narrow gate..." No wonder Matthew reports that when Jesus finished this sermon, the "crowds were astonished at his teachings." HEY, we are still astonished 2,000 years later!

So, we want to be good??? Then it is not just a matter of keeping the law like the scribes and the Pharisees – we have to go beyond that to do as Jesus commands.

W. D. Davies in his commentary on this text says that the Sermon that Jesus gives here stands as a guardian against every immoral and antinomian understanding of the Gospel. Here we encounter the bracing UN-sentimentality

of Matthew's moral gospel. It challenges us to be good – to be REALLY good, if we would be God's people.

We are probably used to coming to church, and if the lectionary introduces a difficult passage like this one, it only takes about 20 minutes for the preacher to use historical criticism, contextual criticism, and a bit of pop psychology to explain it away. But I can't do that with this text, no matter how much I try to rationalize it.

"You think I have come to help you weasel out of the requirements of the law? You can forget that," says Jesus. "I've come to intensify and deepen the law." All of our 'sweet Jesus' sentimentality and gushy grace crumbles before his searing demands. "You want to be considered good, people? Then obey everything I have commanded you..." And we are astonished.....

There is a certain arrogance in the rule-stressing legalist; but there is an equal arrogance in the rule-ignoring, anything goes attitude of our day. Paul showed us the delusion in thinking that fallible, imperfect human beings like us could ever attain so high a righteousness that we are a shoe-in for salvation. Goodness comes purely as a gift of God's grace, not through even our most determined human efforts.

But likewise our contemporary arrogance is no answer to Jesus' command. The attitude that "I am the measure of all things about me" and that the rules don't apply to me, do us all harm. "Don't bother me with your judgments," some say, "I'm doing the best I can, so what right has Jesus or anyone else to tell me what to do?" Such antinomianism arises not out of an appreciation for the limits of the law, but rather out of appreciation for any limits being put on my ego.

But Jesus refuses to back off any deference to our human frailty. He will not pander our ethical sentimentality. He doesn't pat us on the head and say, "there...there ...I know you are doing the best you can..." He refuses to withdraw one iota, one dot from the law. And we are astonished again ... I mean, how can Jesus knowing our frailty – our propensity to sin – intensify the law – knowing we already have so much trouble obeying it.

About 15 chapters later, Matthew tells of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler ... you probably remember the story.... A rich, successful man comes to Jesus and says, "What must I do to get some of that eternal life?" The guy has been so successful at acquiring everything he wants in life, he now wants what Jesus is selling. So Jesus tells him, "You know what the Good Book says – obey the commands of God – all of them – and you will have eternal life."

But the young man is a regular type A+, high-achiever, righteous type. “No problem,” he replies, “I’ve kept all those commandments since I was a kid:

b. I’ve never cursed, lied, cheated, stolen, fornicated, coveted, blasphemed, or sassed my mama.” “OK. You want to be real good,” replies Jesus, “All you have to do is one teeny, tiny little thing – go sell ALL that you have and give it to the poor.”

Matthew tells us the man slumped down, got really depressed and walked slowly away. He kept all the laws.... But Jesus pushed him with the intensity of an even greater demand.

So the disciples respond with the question that is on all of our minds: “So who can be saved?” And this is where Jesus responds with the Good news – the answer for all of us ‘good people want-ta-be’s’.... “With you it is impossible..... But with God, all things – even the salvation of ‘good people want-ta-be’s’ – is possible. For with God all things are possible.” The law, the intensive righteousness which Jesus demands of you and me, is a means of making us good – but not as if that goodness is the result of our own efforts. Rather, goodness arises out of our being driven into the arms of a merciful, just and loving God – and the commandments, the demands are the means for taking us there.

If God demanded only silly, easy things of us, then in all probability more of us could be ‘good people,’ and could be saved by our own efforts. But then we wouldn’t need a just, loving and forgiving God. Fortunately, God demands intensive, excessive things of us, responding to our failures by intensive, excessive forgiveness.

Martin Luther says that’s why Jesus begins his Sermon with, “Blessed are the poor in spirit....” Because even if we felt ‘rich in spirit’ when he began his sermon, by the time he gets done with addressing our lust, violence, covetousness and sin – everybody looks poor and sick... Thus, we become exactly the sort of people that Jesus, the physician, came to heal and save: not the self-righteous ‘good people’; but the self-aware, self-acknowledging sinners.

The foundation for “goodness” that is distinctly Christian is this: not the mastery of rules and laws and their interpretation, but a relationship with the Living Christ – who both commands us to keep God’s holy law, and more – and gives us grace when we fail. Amen.