

**IMPOSSIBLE EXPECTATIONS****MATTHEW 5:17 – 48***by Elaine Poproski*

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>i</sup>

That doesn't sound promising.

The scribes and the Pharisees were two groups of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews who cared the most about the Law. They were experts in it and in all the traditions of interpretation from down through the centuries. They cared deeply – passionately – about the Law and about obeying it. They didn't just blindly follow it; they believed it needed to be interpreted so it could be applied to the contemporary world. They were the experts in that interpretation and ultimately set the standards of righteousness for God's people – righteousness being most simply defined as following or obeying the Law.

The Law was the Torah – the 1<sup>st</sup> five books of the Bible. These are the books that are traditionally ascribed to Moses. For the Pharisees, it wasn't just this written Law that was important; the oral traditions of the people and the teachings of the prophets were just as important. When Jesus refers to the Law and the Prophets, this is what he's talking about: the written Law – the Torah – and the oral teachings and traditions of the people. This was Jesus' scripture. Whenever he or Paul or anyone else in the New Testament talks about Scripture, they're talking about the Law and the Prophets.

Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees...”

No one's righteousness exceeded that of the scribes and the Pharisees. They dedicated everything to understanding and interpreting righteousness. That's one of the things that bugged them so much about Jesus. Jesus was a teacher – a rabbi. People followed him in droves. Jesus knew the law – he was an expert in the law. He should have been one of them. But over and over again he ignored the law. He showed zero respect for years of tradition and scholarship. He threatened, not just the power and position of the scribes and the Pharisees, but the fate of the Jewish people as a whole. How many times in Israel's history had the people experienced disaster because of their failure to remain faithful to the law? Their subjugation to the Romans in Jesus' day was just the latest example.

Despite what the Pharisees and the scribes may have thought, Jesus didn't come to destroy the Law. He wasn't interested in replacing it with something else. He came to fulfill the Law.

That's a weird way to talk about the Law, isn't it? I mean, to fulfill is to bring something to completion or to achieve something. When a contract ends, we might say a person has fulfilled their obligations. So if Jesus came to fulfill the Law, doesn't it stand to reason that what he's saying is that the time of the Law is over, just like a contract, when it's terms are fulfilled, is over? We Christians have tended to understand these words of Jesus in exactly this way – like the time of the Law is over and we're into a new time. That's why we talk about the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old is past and we're in the time of the New. It's why

we aren't bothered by things like mixing fabrics or eating meat from animals with hooves – both of which were prohibitions encoded in the Law.

When something is fulfilled – completed / achieved / brought about – isn't it, by definition, essentially abolished? To abolish something is to put an end to it; it's to do away with something. But Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill. What does that mean when the two words are so closely related and connected?

I think one of the keys to understanding what Jesus meant is to realize that there's a difference between the Law, with a capital *L*, and laws, with a small *l*. Laws, with a small *l*, are rules that are prescribed by an authority. Parents make rules for their children. School boards make rules for students and teachers. Bosses make rules for their workers. The government makes rules for its citizens. Jesus did not say, "I did not come to abolish laws." He said, "I did not come to abolish the Law" with a capital *L*.

The Law, with a capital *L*, is the totality of God's teaching and instruction. It includes rules, but it's something bigger – something more – than rules alone. The Law is God's instruction – God's promise – God's vision of life. Near the end of Deuteronomy, in chapter 30, Moses said this to the people about the Law: "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 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life."<sup>ii</sup> A couple chapters later he said something similar: "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this Law. They are not just idle words for you – they are your life."<sup>iii</sup>

When Jesus said that he came to fulfill the Law, this is what he was talking about. The Law held within it the promise of life – abundant life. In John's gospel, in chapter 10, Jesus said he came that we "might have life and have it abundantly."<sup>iv</sup> In Jesus, the promise of the Law is fulfilled – the promise of abundant life is fulfilled in Jesus.

Back in Matthew 4 we learned that Jesus' message – the thing he was preaching and teaching everywhere he went – his Gospel – his Good News – the thing he was embodying everywhere he went – was this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That kingdom is abundant life. That kingdom – God's kingdom – the kingdom of heaven – is the fulfillment of the Law; it is life.

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17-20. He somehow manages to get at this whole idea of the connection between the Law, righteousness, life, and God's kingdom. Listen to the passage again, this time from *The Message*:

Don't suppose for a minute that I have come to demolish the Scriptures – either God's Law or the Prophets. I'm not here to demolish but to complete. I am going to put it all together, pull it all together in a vast panorama. God's Law is more real and lasting than the stars in the sky and the ground at your feet. Long after stars burn out and earth wears out, God's Law will be alive and working.

Trivialize even the smallest item in God's Law and you will only have trivialized yourself. But take it seriously, show the way for others, and you will find honour in the kingdom. Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matter of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom.

The scribes and the Pharisees were so intent on all the laws (small *l*), that they seem to have forgotten the point of the Law (capital *L*) altogether. They seem to have forgotten that righteousness isn't something that can be quantified or catalogued so much as it is a state of being in sync with God and God's ways. They seem to have forgotten that the Law was never meant to be an instrument of oppression, it wasn't meant to be a rod with which to beat people into submission. The Law was a gift from God, a taste of life in God's kingdom. This is why the next thing Jesus does in this Sermon on the Mount, is to point out some examples of what the Law is supposed to be. He doesn't want any confusion. He doesn't want us under the thumb of the Pharisees and the scribes – those religious leaders who are so passionate about the rules, even at the expense of people. He wants us to understand the gift of abundant life that the Law God gave is truly meant to be. If the Law doesn't liberate us, if the Law doesn't inspire justice, it's not the Law of God – it's not the life-giving Law of God.

Jesus gave all sorts of examples through Matthew 5 (I would argue that all through chapters 6 and 7 we find more examples) of what righteousness looks like – of what the kingdom of God looks like – of the Law, as life, really is. In Matthew 5, the examples all follow the same format. Jesus starts with, "You have heard it said..." and follows up with, "But I say to you..." He's not contradicting what "you have heard said." What he's saying is: "There's more to it;" "You've missed something," "You were so focused on the laws – the rules – that you missed the overarching spirit of the Law."

Each of these examples could support a sermon in its own right. But today what I'm going to do is look at the first three of Jesus' examples. Before I do, though, I want to point out something I think is really important for us to hold onto as we read, not just these three examples, but the entirety of the Sermon on the Mount.

You may remember that last week, when we read Jesus' words from verses 13 – 16, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world..." I pointed out that the *You* Jesus uses here is plural. He's speaking to his disciples as a group – to the community that will become and that is the church. That plural *you* carries us through the entire sermon. It's not that what he says doesn't have anything to do with us as individuals. It absolutely does. But everything he says is heard through the filter of community. As one commentator put it, "Who you are as a disciple is not just about you, but about you as a disciple in community."<sup>v</sup> We can't forget that all of this is about the kingdom of heaven. It's all about the community of Christ. It's all about a community that is marked by justice and love and freedom from oppression.

Jesus begins his examples of how the Law is to be understood, with this one: "You have heard it 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."<sup>vi</sup>

Clearly Jesus isn't suggesting that *You shall not murder* isn't part of the Law. That would be absurd. What he's saying is that it is the anger and the disdain for other people that underlies murder that is problematic (in addition to actually killing someone). What he's saying is that anything we do or say that's motivated by the kind of anger or disdain that allows us to hate or mock another person is as contrary to God's righteousness as is murder. I think we can all agree that murder is destructive. I think we can all easily agree that forcefully taking another person's life is not the nature of God's kingdom. But do we as easily agree that being angry with someone or insulting someone or calling someone a fool is destructive? Because Jesus here seems to be saying that insulting someone is just as bad as murdering them.

I don't know about you, but I would rather be insulted than murdered. I'd rather you call me a fool than stick a knife in my chest. But what if what Jesus was getting at wasn't so much a particular action or behaviour as it was the attitudes underlying those behaviours and actions? I think the issue here has to do with how we see other people. Do we see them as people who are created in God's image? Do we see people who God has declared to be his beloved children? Do I see brothers and sisters? If that's what we see when we look at people, then our behaviour will show it.

We may not murder, but we may be insulting, we may roll our eyes every time someone speaks, we may tear someone down in our conversations with other people. All that happens when we stop seeing people as the image of God, as the beloved children of God. I think what Jesus is saying here is that of course, there's no room for murder in God's kingdom, but neither is there room for any of the attitudes and prejudices that underly murder and any of its less final cousins.

Jesus knew we aren't immune to anger. He knew that until he returns, and God's kingdom is here in full, we will continue to be plagued by sin and that sin will cause us to sometimes treat other people badly. Now, it sounds like Jesus is saying here, "Never get angry," and some of us grew up in homes or surrounded by people who said, "Never get angry." And so we push it all down and now we're in therapy. That's not what Jesus is saying. It's about our attitude; it's about the way we treat people when we are angry. It's all about that basic, underlying question of how we see people when we look at them.

Jesus said this: "When you are offering your gift at the altar [in other words, when you are coming into God's presence], if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

When we come into the presence of God with the bitterness of anger we've let fester, or with those feelings that another person isn't as worthy of God's love because they're stupid or they're a fool or we hate them, we need to step away and deal with it, because those things aren't in God's presence.

Jesus said, “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”<sup>vii</sup>

I love how practical Jesus is. He knows that sometimes the only way we’re motivated to do what’s required is if we can see how it’ll benefit us. Sure, go be reconciled to anyone who has anything against you. But also, if you’re not inclined to do so, let me tell you why it’s the smart choice: If you don’t reconcile, you’ll likely get no mercy, and you could end up broke and in prison.

Jesus’ second example of how the Law is to be understood reads this way:

“You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.”<sup>viii</sup>

This one is also pretty extreme. I mean, not the initial *You have heard it said, but I say to you* part, but the part that comes next – the part about cutting off hands and gouging out eyes. It would be easy to get distracted by the gore of Jesus’ words here, but that would be to miss the point. I think Jesus uses the extreme to get at how awful what he’s talking about actually is. And it’s not just the adultery that’s so awful; looking at someone with lust is just as awful. That’s because lust is about seeing another person as an object to possess or a tool with which to gratify one’s own desires. In that, there’s no room for the image of God – the beloved child of God – that the person is. We’re not talking here about finding someone attractive or being drawn to another person; we’re talking about seeing a person’s body as a thing devoid of the person who inhabits it. I don’t think it’s that hard to understand how objectifying a person might be destructive to community. I don’t think it’s that hard to understand how dehumanising a person might be contrary to God’s way – to the character of God’s kingdom.

The third example Jesus gives is pretty short, but it’s full of meaning. It reads this way: “You have heard it said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”<sup>ix</sup>

People have sometimes been so caught up in the small-*l*-laws, the rules, the details of this, that all sorts of damage has been done to people. This is a great example of a rule that has been used to oppress.

It might sound strange to our ears for Jesus to go from talking about crimes like murder and adultery to the much less sensational topic of divorce. But in Jesus’ day, this was a hot-button topic, and, I’d argue, even though we’re overly familiar with divorce in our day and age, it continues to destroy people and communities.

It's important to note that in Jesus' day, while men could divorce their wives, women couldn't usually divorce their husbands. It's also important to remember that most Jewish women were dependent on their husbands for basic life security – things like food and shelter. In Jesus' day, there were those for whom divorce was only permitted in extreme cases. However, there was an equally persuasive school of thought that allowed for divorce for almost any reason. For instance, a man could divorce his wife if she burned his dinner. Many women and children were left destitute because of this way of thinking. These husbands clearly didn't see their wives as the image of God or as beloved children of God. They used conveniently misinterpreted words of Moses to harm others in a way that was completely contrary to God and the ways of his kingdom.

I need to pause here to make a comment on all this. When Jesus was speaking, it was about liberating people, it was about freedom, it was about life. That was what he was saying about how to understand the Law. But we, like the Pharisees and the scribes, turned around the Law as a way to oppress people. I don't think it's possible to count the number of people who have remained in marriages that are harmful, where their life is in danger, where they are abused, because religious leaders have said, "Jesus said, 'don't get divorced.'" The Law was never meant to oppress. The Law was about life.

Here's the thing: people mattered to Jesus. Jesus loved people. He talked to people everyone else avoided. He befriended people whose reputations made others stay far away. He surrounded himself with people who had little to no standing or influence in society. He listened to people others tried to silence. When Jesus looked at a person, he didn't see an object to be possessed or used. When Jesus looked at a person, he didn't see some people as having more worth than others. In every single person Jesus saw, he saw his Father's image; he saw his own brothers and sisters, equally loved by God. And when Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he's talking about a kingdom in which everyone sees everyone else just like Jesus sees us.

Imagine that for a moment. Think about how Jesus saw people. Think about how Jesus interacted with people. Now imagine that all of us – all of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven – looked at all the other citizens of God's kingdom that same way. Imagine, in our little church, if everyone all the time saw each other as Jesus sees us. That would change the world.

When we read the Sermon on the Mount, it's easy to get overwhelmed. It reads as a whole series of near impossible demands, many of which carry devastating consequences for those who fail to meet them. Sometimes we're tempted to water down the demands. Sometimes we throw up our hands in defeat. Sometimes we work and work and work, doing everything we can to achieve the perfection Jesus seems to demand, only to eventually burnout or give up.

I think as long as we read the Sermon on the Mount this way – as a series of demands and commands – it can't help but be read as impossible expectations. But what if we were to focus less on the individual commands, and more on the overarching value of loving people like Jesus loves people? I think if we love people like Jesus loves them, we won't murder them; we won't insult them. I think if we love people like Jesus loves them, we won't cheat on them; we won't lust after them. I think if we love people like Jesus loves them, we won't throw them away or toss them aside when they're of no more use to us.

As we read through the Sermon on the Mount over the coming weeks, let us remember that when Jesus was asked which commandment was the most important, he said this: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>x</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 5:20.

<sup>ii</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19-20.

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 32:46 – 47.

<sup>iv</sup> John 10:10.

<sup>v</sup> Karoline Lewis. “[Commentary on Matthew 5:21-37.](#)” *Working Preacher*. 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 5:21 – 22.

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 5:23 – 26.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 5:27 – 30.

<sup>ix</sup> Matthew 5:31 – 32.

<sup>x</sup> Matthew 22:37 – 40.