

Walking on the Slippery Slope

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Matthew 5:38-48

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“You have heard it said...

But I say to you ...” (Matthew 5: 38-48)

Rules and laws, guidelines and principles, values and beliefs, each and all may help us figure out what to do in one circumstance or another. But, ultimately, all we’ve really got is the conviction that we have met God in the face of Jesus of Nazareth; in him we place our trust.

My first meeting with two of my future colleagues at the University of Aberdeen was not promising. Eventually we became friends, but at the end of that first meeting I wasn’t sure that was likely.

We were having coffee in the office of our Ph.D. advisor above the entrance to old King’s College. We were talking about all sorts of things. One colleague was an Anglican Deacon, the other a member of an ultra-conservative denomination from the U.S.

We were discussing the issue of biblical authority. I said that given the variety of biblical witnesses spanning hundreds of years and many different cultures, we need to exercise our own discernment in interpreting the Bible.

Some texts touching on moral issues reflected little more than the local cultic perspective of ancient tribes, while others probably provided the best thinking and best wisdom of the human race at that time. But , in either case we have the responsibility to weigh the guidance offered in any particular text against the overall message of the gospel and the needs of our world in our time.

My two new colleagues didn’t like the sound of that. Not one little bit. They were exchanging knowing glances as I spoke. After a longish silence, the Anglican colleague said, “But, surely you see, placing yourself in that position of deciding which biblical texts are authoritative and which are not puts us on the slippery slope. The next step might be simply to reject all such authorities.”

To which I replied, “Welcome to the slippery slope. We’ve always lived there.”

With the hindsight of thirty years, I would now add, “The trick is to figure out how to walk on the slippery slope.”

In spite of their arguments to the contrary, even so-called biblical literalists and Christian Fundamentalist are selective about which texts will guide them. Our Sabbatarian forebears in

Scotland were determined to prevent any kind of frivolity on the Sabbath day in their allegiance to the Ten Commandments, but their literal adherence to the law didn't include actually keeping the seventh day holy; they had already moved the day they observed next door to Sunday.

Even today many people who say that they take the Bible seriously are pretty cavalier about which parts they adhere to.

Just a couple of years ago a Mississippi Presbyterian explained to me that he planned to leave the Presbyterian Church over its lack of seriousness about the Bible. He said that the Bible clearly states that women ought not to speak in church and that women should never teach men about the Bible.

Maybe I was a bit cheeky, but I asked him if he considered it against God's law to eat a cheeseburger, a concern raised by Exodus 23:19, an ordinance against mixing dairy with meat, known to some of us as the Anti-Jimmy Buffett Law prohibiting cheeseburgers in paradise or on earth. .

The man's answer was surprising. "That's in the Old Testament. It doesn't apply to us," he continued, "Any way I'm not an expert in these things. My wife is. You should talk to her. She's the one who has opened my eyes to this whole problem."

"Of women not teaching men?" I asked. He sort of snarled and I took that to mean our conversation was over.

"You have heard it said..... but I say to you."

We've heard these words of Jesus for so long, we hardly notice them. Maybe we should.

Who is this fellow standing on the hillside who seems ready to toss aside generations of legal wisdom? That, I think, should be a question in our minds when we hear Jesus speak, because in every instance here in the Sermon on the Mount he ushers us into a larger, broader world of ethics where long-settled matters are considered anew.

But, notice, he doesn't re-consider these ethical issues in an effort to vanquish the law.

Rather than hollow out the law, the Torah, the deep reality of being, Jesus enlarges it, not as a set of prohibitions but as a living way, as a way of life, with the goal that we may live as fully, as wholly, as completely as the God who created us in his pure love.

And so Jesus goes to the heart of the physical act of murder to speak to the madness of anger that fuels our hatreds and resentments.

And so Jesus challenges us to look within at the adultery we commit in our hearts, as C. S. Lewis once observed, the practice of keeping an entire harem in our heads while looking outwardly righteous.

And so Jesus changes the act of divorce from a mechanism of convenience to an observance that raises up women and gives them protection in his world.

Jesus, in treating these moral issues, reminds me of words from a song by Roseanne Cash, where she says, "We talk about your drinking, but not about your thirst." It's as though Jesus says to us, "let's talk about that thirst of yours."

"You have heard it said.... But I say to you."

I'd like to direct our attention to the dynamic enshrined in Jesus' words, because I am going to say something that may surprise you, although it is something Jesus said many times.

Jesus says:

The kingdom of God is within you.

The reign of God lies within you, and not outside of you.

You have heard this said, and you have heard that said. And frankly, the hear-say is all over the map. Hear-say echoes through the halls of antiquity and across the forests of time. You can't walk into a chapel or a sanctuary or a temple anywhere in the world without hearing the moral hear-say.

"You have heard it said":

Truths discretely buried in lies; lies conveniently buried in truth; half-truths hidden in codes and laws and edicts and principles and stories.

Fears that give birth to prohibitions and exclusions handed down from one tribe to another.

Suspensions of people not like us and the so-called "just wars" that have resulted from those suspicions.

Dim hopes glimmer like diamonds in a pile of muck.

You have heard it all.

Some of the things we have heard stick in our minds because the better angels of our souls are convinced by them. Some things stick in our heads for the opposite reason. And the things that stick with us tend to shape what we commonly call our "consciences."

Sometimes, Jimminy Cricket is right, sometimes we should let our conscience be our guide. But sometimes, our consciences are just as misshapen and faulty and fallen as anything that raises its head from the pits of Sheol.

Consciences, like our laws and our principles and our values and our beliefs are all formed right here on earth by human beings. They are the products of our own making, given shape by the places we have lived and the people we have known and the things we have been told and the things we have experienced in our tiny little worlds.

The problem is that our consciences and laws and principles and values and beliefs are so resistant to new insights, even when those new insights come from a Word in the Bible we just hadn't noticed before.

My friend, the Christian ethicist Professor Ismael Garcia, once said that it hardly matters whether people say they get their ethics from the Bible. People mostly get their view of right and wrong from a variety of sources and take that into the Bible to be confirmed. They find in that vast collection of texts we call scripture that which will reinforce their already formed views of right and wrong.

This is logical. This is predictable. And in some ways, this is how it ought to be.

Like magpies we collect all the things we have heard said, all the things we have gathered to help us make decisions between right and wrong, the things we have learned from the Bible, the laws and principles, the experiences and beliefs and values and observations. We have gathered all sorts of ideas about what is right and wrong, and we face the occasion with all of this in mind.

But how do we prevent that "hardening of the categories" that can be the death of listening for God's Word to us in the midst of life? How do we prevent that hardening of the heart that may keep us so tethered to "You have heard it said" that "But I say unto you" just can't break through?

To put it in a slightly different way, how do we cultivate a mind and a heart open to responding to the reign of God that is rising within us? This is vitally important because, as we see all the way through the Bible, we worship a living God who just keeps walking through history.

Just as Peter had to change a lifetime of habits about clean and unclean food, just as Saul had to re-conceive what it means to be right with God, we also are chasing after this living God as he traces out his trajectory of love across history, opening new doors, spanning old chasms. "You have heard it said.... But I say to you."

A few years ago, I was asked to address a national gathering of Christian ethicists. Instead of offering a typical keynote address, however, I decided to try to foster a conversation. The group was just small enough that I asked to dispense with the lectern and the microphone, and to sit facing each other so we could talk. The conversation was rich as we wrestled together with some of the most intractable issues facing our society. But it was also pretty predictable. Until, that is, an ethicist who was running late joined the group. From the moment she joined us, she took hostile shots at anyone she thought might be crossing her ideological barriers.

I remember a woman in the group, a professor of ethics at a Presbyterian college. She described herself as a feminist scholar. She said, however, that her life had been transformed by the recent experience of making common cause on the issue of gun control with a prominent male Evangelical pastor she had opposed for years on the issue of abortion rights. She said that the two of them found that they had so much in common and had become good friends, despite their differences.

Immediately the ethicist who had come late reacted, calling into question the other woman's commitment to feminism, if not her commitment to Christianity.

What I took away from this encounter was the way in which our settled and rigid views can get in the way of our hearing something new that might broaden our perspective. When our understanding of ourselves is so deeply tied to our settled, rigid views, our commitments and beliefs and values, all of which are based on "You have heard it said," that we can't even allow the possibility of another idea, a new insight, or a relationship with someone we might only have seen before as an antagonist, our reactivity has shut down any opportunity for us to respond in the Spirit of Christ.

I wonder what it was like to look out at that crowd gathered around Jesus for the Sermon on the Mount. They came from all walks of life. Some eager to listen, some open to hearing, but others already set in their views come hell or high water. Some hearers would become disciples themselves, inspired by the way Jesus opened the law to them. Others would oppose Jesus till the day he was nailed to the cross.

What was going on in their hearts and minds when this thirty year old rabbi from the sticks said those words, "You have heard it said..... But I say to you"? I wonder too, what's going on in our hearts when we hear him.

Amen.