

Chris Currie
Sermon: Rapid Intensification
Scripture: Matthew 5:21-37
February 12, 2023
Matthew 5:21-37

Introduction: In Mark's gospel, the climactic verses are found in chapter 8 as discipleship and obedience are characterized as taking up our cross and following Jesus. The emphasis in Matthew's gospel is a little bit different. To be obedient to Jesus in Matthew has to do with following his teaching and following his re-interpretation of Torah. In NT scholar Richard Hays words, in Matthew, 'Jesus becomes the 'one teacher' who supplants all other rabbis.'¹ So with that in mind, hear the Word of the Lord as it comes to us from Matthew's gospel, the fifth chapter, 21st verse.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[a] you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult^[b] a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell^[c] of fire. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court^[d] 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. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin,^[e] 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.^[f] ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin,^[g] 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.^[h]

³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² 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.

³³ "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' ³⁴ But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.^[i]

At least one of the main questions all of the New Testament is trying to answer is this one: what does it mean to be the Christian community in our world? Does it mean that we are the chosen and everyone else is suspect? Does it mean that we are perfect and we are to preserve it on our way toward perfection? Does it mean

¹ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 95.

that we try to maintain stability and comfort and don't exert ourselves or challenge each other or worry too much about the deeper questions of life as long as our immediate needs are taken care of? Does it mean that life is really about the great beyond, eternity, and all this life is about is getting through and passing through. Instead of giving us something stable or easy or a three step application for how we are to live in this world, Jesus takes the existing law, the Torah, and he intensifies it, and calls his community of followers to pursuit with both rigor and mercy. As New Testament scholar Richard Hays points out: 'on the one hand, the community is called to perfection: as a city on a hill, the community is to exemplify a rigorous standard of righteousness exceeding even that of the scribes and Pharisees,' and 'on the other hand, the community is called to interpret the Law's specific commandments to its deeper intent; consequently, following the example of Jesus, the community must receive tax collectors and sinners and deal mercifully with human weakness and failure.'² Rigor and mercy.

Rigor and mercy ask too much of us though. I would prefer a version of checklist Christianity instead. You know, I took care of a, b, c, Jesus, now leave me alone. Theologian John Burgess puts it this way: too often we go looking for comfort in the commandments and use them as a moral checklist looking for a way to congratulate and validate ourselves or our status as Christians... 'no other gods before me.' Fine, I'm a Christian. 'No graven images.' No problems with that one either. 'Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.' 'We assure ourselves that we did not say any curse words today. Keep the Sabbath day holy.' Did we go to church? Did we stay away from the office?' Then we make our way down to the second table, 'Honor your father and mother.' More or less, we do our best. 'Do not kill.' Most of us can say we have never committed murder. 'Do not commit adultery, do not steal, still okay there. 'By the time we get to lying and coveting, we may squirm,' Burgess reminds us, 'but more or less 'we find comfort in believing that we have lived up to the commandments fairly well.'³ In our scripture lesson today, Jesus wants to disabuse us of that notion, and rather than lowering the bar to what is the least possible amount I can do and still be considered okay, Jesus raises the bar and challenges us to live as a community of character and integrity far beyond what the law requires, far beyond our notions of the least amount possible. At the very same time, Jesus' interpretation and intensification of Torah here mean that 'none of

² Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 101.

³ John Burgess, *After Baptism*, 31.

us can get to the end of the day and conclude we're okay' in Burgess words, rather, 'all of us fall short; none of us measures up.'⁴

The point of trying to follow the law of God is not to meet a minimum standard of virtuousness, but rather to see that 'the commandments offer us comfort only to the extent that they direct us to God's forgiveness and Christ's mercy.'⁵ No matter how good we think we are at keeping the commandments, Jesus radicalization of them here in Matthew just shows us how far we still have to go. 'You have heard it said, but I say to you...Jesus takes the traditional understandings of the law and radicalizes them, intensifies them, and helps us to see just how thorough and total God's claim on our lives extends. As Richard Hays reminds us, rather than reading the traditional requirements of the law as rules that fix the normative standards of righteousness, 'Matthew's Jesus sees them as pointers to a more radical righteousness of the heart, intensifying the demand of God far beyond the letter of the Law, so that the teachings do not try to set minimum standards but try to help form a community that tries in its own life to embody the fullness of God's kingdom where members of the community seek to 'put away anger, lust violence, hypocrisy, pride, and materialism,' and replace them or go beyond by 'loving their enemies, keeping their promises, forgiving as freely as they have been forgiven by God, giving alms in secret, and trusting God to provide for their materials needs.'⁶

As we take this all in, loving God and loving neighbor with more rigor than we prefer and more mercy than we prefer, we can start to see how Jesus got himself crucified. It wasn't just because he welcomed all the wrong people or sat at table with sinners and tax collectors, though he did all those things, it wasn't because posed any real political threat to overtake any of the religious factions or the Roman proconsul. In fact, one of the reasons we have this long excursus from Matthew of Jesus take the common teaching and intensifying it and radicalizing it and calling us all to account is because there were many in Jesus own time that thought he was less Lent and more Mardi Gras. In Luke's gospel, Jesus reminds us that John the Baptist was all about fasting and repentance and he was still seen as wayward by the conventional religious establishment: 'For John the Baptist

⁴ John Burgess, *After Baptism*, 33.

⁵ John Burgess, *After Baptism*, 33.

⁶ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 95, 98.

has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He had a demon,' the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' The prevailing wisdom by the religious authorities was not that Jesus was a puritan, he was not much of a religious ascetic at all, but that he was a bit of a hedonist. To receive and hear this teaching, that Jesus has not come to abolish the law and prophets, but to interpret them more radically and intensely than pretty much anyone intended, is much more threatening to those comfortable with a religious apparatus designed to keep us chasing carrots and ticking our boxes and not much beyond. 'Where the Law forbids murder and adultery,' Richard Hays reminds us, 'Jesus calls for the renunciation of anger and lust; where the Law poses regulative limitations on divorce and revenge, Jesus calls his followers to renounce those options all together. Where the Law limits the obligation of love to the neighbor (to the fellow Israelite), Jesus calls for love of enemies.'⁷ Far from being a hedonist, Jesus is telling the world, the religious establishment, his followers, all who listen, that what is asked of us is way deeper, more challenging, subversive, radical, and transformational than even the Pharisees conceived. But what is perhaps most threatening is not the height to which Jesus raises the bar, but the width with which Jesus widens the circle. Tax collectors, sinners, people considered unclean by birth or by disease or by something their parents did or by ethnicity or some ailment or disability, all are declared by Jesus to be objects of our love rather than things to be avoided.

What does it mean to be the church, to be followers of Jesus Christ, to take seriously his teaching here in Matthew's gospel? It means we attempt to follow him with rigor and with mercy, refusing to accept the low bar of chasing carrots, refusing to accept the lowest common denominator, refusing to tighten the circle only around people like us. It may not always lead us onto smooth paths and place us amongst easy lives, it may challenge us every time we try to make the demands of our faith more conventional and cut the gospel down to something more our size, it may also gift us with a grace to those Christ puts amongst us to see them the way he sees them and to risk something of ourselves to see to it that we all flourish as objects of God's love and the fully human beings they are in Jesus Christ. Rigor and mercy, rather than ease and stability. I'm not saying it is everything I

⁷ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 96.

would wish for or prefer, but it is the community Jesus calls us to strive to be, even if we could get by with a whole lot less.