

SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR SUNDAY – OCTOBER 1, 2023 @ CAPC OAKLAND

Matthew 5:17-32
NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION
UPDATED EDITION

[Jesus continued teaching saying,]

¹⁷ “DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO ABOLISH the Law or the Prophets; I HAVE COME NOT TO ABOLISH but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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, 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. 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 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.

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Matthew is one of four gospels – telling the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and his teachings. Matthew is the only one of the four to include the larger sermon on the mount (Chapters 5 to 7) with which we’re wrestling this fall. The context of the Sermon on the Mount is radically important, without it the teachings can seem like disparate moral teachings, as opposed to a radical reinterpretation and recreation of the world.

Jesus has invited everyone to “repent. Change the Way they live. Because the kingdom of heaven is here.” Those that respond in chapter 4 are fisherman, the sick, the broken, the marginalized - those who are overlooked and unimportant in the Roman Empire and the way of the World – but blessed and included in the Kingdom of Heaven.

DO NOT THINK THAT I HAVE COME TO ABOLISH:: the repetition of this phrase, and the way it’s worded leads to think that some thought that Jesus was coming to abolish the law. Jesus is not trying to start a new religion, but to reform or “improve” the Jewish way.

righteousness:: this word also means justice. Righteousness is the state of being declared right by a judge, innocent, having done the right thing.

the scribes and Pharisees:: they belong to the societal elite, the governing group in alliance with Rome, with a vested interest in maintaining, not reforming, the current, hierarchical, unjust societal structure. Jesus presents their practice as being based on a narrow reading of the scriptures which ignores its implications for wider aspects of human life. (justice, mercy, faith 23:23). Jesus’ teaching upholds the written text but develops these justice implications. The problem with the practice of the scribes and pharisees may be that they do not practice a transformative justice, but one that leaves the status quo of Roman domination intact.

Jesus seems to be saying – they’re not really as righteous as they think they are. So if they’re considered the best, that means that no one is righteous – or justified – by following the law of Moses. Jesus comes not coming to condemn and shame, but to empower and liberate. He’s here to reinterpret the law so that we may experience the grace of being the beloved of God because we are – not because of what we’ve done or earned.

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, 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. ³⁰ 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.

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.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & EXAMEN:

- What engaged you, enraged you, or surprised you in these texts?
- What is the point of marriage? Of divorce? How does the Bible talk about marriage? Where?
- In the ancient world the word divorce meant something more along the lines of abandonment. It was a male-centered world. What then is Jesus saying about how men should treat women? Why?
- What have you heard the Church teach about divorce? What is Jesus saying *here* about divorce?
- What invitation do you hear the Spirit of God speaking to you – *or to us, as a church* – to act, speak, be, or change, through this word of scripture?

divorce: “The law of Moses specified a divorce procedure in Deuteronomy 24:1. If a man found something about his wife *objectionable*, he could write a certificate of divorce and send her out of the house. *Objectionable* was interpreted to mean many things premarriage impropriety (Deuteronomy 22:13-21); adultery (Jeremiah 3:8), or simply disliking (Deuteronomy 22:13 – “*If a man marries a woman, has sexual relations with her and then, having come to dislike her...*”). In this sense the word divorce does not mean exactly what our current word does. In the ancient world, divorce meant more like abandonment. Notice that the law in Deuteronomy assumes a male-dominated world, one where men are in charge and make the decisions about whether or not their wives are welcome in the home. The certificate of divorce that Moses required at least gave a small measure of protection to the woman, for it certified that she had been divorced by her husband and allowed her to be remarried without suspicion of adultery.

But the question for Jesus is, What is the heart of this divorce law? Is it on the side of the law that endorses the male prerogative to rid himself, without any ethical qualm, of his wife whenever he feels like it, so long as he fills out the proper papers? Or is it on the side of the protection for the woman and the valuing of her person reflected in the requirement to provide a certificate?

Jesus’ statement leaves no doubt. There is no divorce procedure a man can follow that will leave him with clean hands. To abandon his wife, with or without a certificate, is, in essence to treat her as worthless and to be guilty of destroying her person. Jesus assumes divorce is – in his day and age - always initiated by men.

Jesus forbids divorce. The main point, however, is that Jesus allows no room for the practice of divorce in a culture where divorce is an assault on the value of persons, an abuse of power, and a trivializing of faithful commitments...Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity, the faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for persons. In Jesus’ day, the customs and practices of divorce were a direct assault on those values.

Today, ironically, a hopelessly broken marriage [*or an abusive one*] can itself sometimes be just such an assault...When a marriage becomes the very arena where people are destroying each other, we should ask how can the safety, nurture, and honor of the marriage partners best be preserved?

- From *Matthew* by Thomas G. Long, Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville, 1997, pp. 59-61