

Sermon Christian community as fulfilment of the laws of God
Mathew 5:13-26
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Jesus tells those who have gathered to listen to him, that they are the light of the world. We can hardly deny that there is much darkness in the world; we have to deal with poverty, with sickness, with the absence of the love of God in people's lives, and I think one of the most hurtful aspect of life in our world, are problem in relationships. We all have to deal with issues like this.

And we, we are the light for this world? We are to be Gods instruments for change?

How can we be a light? By being closely connected to Jesus Christ, the true light of this world. Only our link with him, makes us transfer the light of Jesus to other people. Only in this way, in as far as we are connected with Jesus Christ, we can play a meaningful role in our land, in our families, in our workplace, in our universities and schools.

How can we be such lights?

On the one hand, we are talking about mystical things. It is about how we are spiritually linked with Jesus Christ.

But it is also educational and related to behaviour. We have to learn to live the laws of God as Jesus holds them before us. The question today is, how does Jesus teach us to live the laws of God.

1) Spiritual interpretation

Jesus makes very clear that to look at all the laws of the Bible, and to then try to strictly live by those as we have them, very literally, is not the way to be a light in this world.

Instead, Jesus give us some example for how spiritually read the Word of God, and if that is how He understood Holy Scriptures, we should do the same. He is the light, we follow the light.

If you take all laws of the Old Testament in their most literal sense, you might say, I have never killed someone, so I obey the law that says: 'Thou shalt not murder.' I do what God wants me to do.

But Jesus shows that serving God goes much further. Surely we should not kill people, but the heart of murder is anger, so Jesus speaks to us about anger, and about how to relate well to people.

'Anyone who is angry with his brother shall be subject to judgment'. Anger undermines relationships in the house of God, so Jesus speaks against it. Anger can mess up relationships in your family, with friends, and in society. Do not let it continue too long if you want to be God's light in this world.

So should we decide that it is always wrong to be angry at fellow Christians, or at people in general? Then we would make these words of Jesus into a new law, instead of looking at the intention of his words.

Of course there are sometimes reasons to be angry. Jesus himself was sometimes angry - for instance when he was accused of healing a man on the sabbath, in Mark 3:

He entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.

Jesus was angry, actually in a context where he was accused of not being strict enough about following all the laws. A doctor should not work on the sabbath, was the argument. And indeed, the ten commandments say, work six days, but rest on the sabbath.

Anger is sometimes important. "Those who get angry with cause not only do not sin, but unless they get angry, they do sin.' These are words of one church father who wrote on the gospel of Matthew.

There are moments when anger is a must. Jesus became angry because the religious scholars of Israel used the literal interpretation of the laws of God to stop him being a blessing for a poor sick man.

We should not call people raka, which mean empty head, or fool, because we must never despise other people. But calling someone a fool is not illegal if you only take the words of the laws of Moses literally. Jesus says, look at the intent of those laws. For God it is not acceptable to suggest that his creatures are empty headed or fools. Do not despise other people.

Hilary of Poitiers says that to call someone empty-headed while the Spirit of God lives in him, is a grave mistake against God himself.

But surely some people are fools and empty-headed. They exist. And there are moments where hard words must be used.

David wrote, 'The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God"'

Paul told the Galatians that they were foolish (Gal 3:1).

Jesus himself said nasty words to the Pharisees and scribes, in Matthew 23:15-17:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! [...] Woe to you, blind guides!
[...] You blind fools!

The Pharisees, in their efforts to take every word of the law extremely literal, messed up and forgot about the heart of the law, that is love for God and love for all people. Jesus shows us what the heart of the law is. And people who make the lives of the people hard with pushing their

own laws and morality on others, they are called blind fools, by Jesus himself. As Christians we must be so careful to not be seen as moralists.

So we must be careful to not be as literalistic as the pharisees - even when we read the words of Jesus. The words of Jesus are hyperbole - exaggeration - to bring the message home. Sometimes there is a need for anger and for strong words. But be careful. Our anger and our words must at all times be justified and in accordance with the command of love and the goal of building the community of the church and of society.

2) The importance to be peacemakers

In this context, Jesus also says, if someone takes you to court over something, settle quickly. Again, see this in the context of anger. Surely there are situations where you need to fight in courts till your last drop. But when it is only your honour at stake, your wounded feelings, just settle. Better than honourably losing a court case and facing to suffer in prison. The suggestion here is in fact that you are actually in the wrong. You will lose your case anyway. Do be careful to not be in the wrong in financial matters, or in any disagreements with others. And if you are in the wrong, make it up as soon as you can. Never be the one doing wrong in relationships.

Jesus uses very strong language to say how bad wrong behaviour to other people is. He speaks of judgement, punishment by the sanhedrin, and of the fire of hell, and being thrown in prison. Interesting that it is not clear whether Jesus talks about judgement of the state or judgement by God.

I think this is purposely done. If in relationships we are good, we do not have to fear God or the legal system of our countries. If we mess up relationships by our words or our behaviour, we have to fear both God and the law of our land.

Nothing hurts us so much as bad relationships. If our relationships are fine, we can stand many problems. If we have hard relationships, we are vulnerable to depression, loneliness, and all sorts of problems.

Jesus is saying, it is not enough to not kill others - the true understanding of such a law is that God wants us to relate well to other people.

Matthew wrote this gospel for the young believers, so that they would know about their Lord Jesus and about how to live. And for this young community, the new church, Jesus underlines that brothers and sisters must live in peace and love together. Do not despise others. Do not let your anger simmer. Do not allow the community to be destroyed by internal problems.

A loving community around a shared love and worship for God - Father Son and Holy Spirit - is the fulfilment of the law.

3) The urgency to be peacemakers

Therefore Jesus makes clear that if people come to worship God - if they bring a sacrifice to the altar - and they remember that someone else has a problem with them, they should first settle the matter before they worship God with their offerings.

You just see a man walk four days from Kapernaum to Jerusalem to sacrifice to God - maybe with the feast of Pascha, Easter - and ouch! ... when he is almost giving his sheep to the priests, he realizes that his mother in law in Kapernaum was angry at him two weeks ago and that the matter has not been resolved. What to do!

Jesus is speaking of someone else who has a problem with me. "someone who has something against me..." It is important to see that Jesus leaves no space for us to say: but the other one offended me first, he should come to me... Jesus puts the responsibility for peacemaking with me - even if i am not necessarily responsible for the problem with that person.

Should I not worship God because someone has something against me? If i ask you straightforward, 'do you know people who have something against you', we can all make our little lists, I think. Should we therefore not have holy eucharist?

If we take the language of Jesus literally, the man should return to Kapernaum, a few days walk, to make up with his mother in law. And I do not think this literal usage of these verses is what Jesus meant. Mind you, if you take them literally, all this is only if a brother has something against you. Not a sister.

We see, Jesus is again using hyperbole. He wants to underline that good relationships with our fellow men, as far as it is in our hands, must be maintained as part of our service and love for God.

When we come to the altar of God, where we are reminded of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ we must always be aware that that our relationship with God - our vertical relationship, if you like, cannot do without having our horizontal relationships worked out well.

When we kneel to receive communion, we focus on God, but we also kneel beside our brothers and sisters.

If you have to do some repair work in relationships, do that as soon as you can. But I will not ask you to do it before taking communion. That sort of interpretation of the words of Jesus is just too extreme, I believe. Because if perfect relationships with all people would be the criterion for taking holy communion, none of us would ever be able to come and kneel. There is always someone who has something against me!

We live in a broken world and we suffer from many broken relationships. This is not to say we can lean back! We are called to be peacemakers, to work for reconciliation, to love our brothers and sisters in church - and all people outside church, with the love God has for us.

Conclusion

So the moment when we come to God for receiving his love in our hands, should also be the moment that focuses our mind and heart on our brothers and sisters. It is not enough to not kill each other - God wants much more from us.

He wants us to respect and love each other. And if we have done things to others that are not right, if we know that others still have a serious problem with us, then we must do something about it. Because God wants his people to be united in love.

And this Christian community, a community around Christ, is truly a great light in our world when among ourselves we have the moral courage to be peacemakers and to repair relationships that have gone sour. Such community the world needs.

Amen