

We're all familiar with rules. When we were still in our onesies trying to do a furniture walk, we knew, even then, that there were some things that were "no-no's." In fact, "no" is one of the first words a toddler learns. It's usually said by a mother whose child is painting the wall with strawberry jam or is on the floor eating the dog's food.

"No" is a word that establishes boundaries. In fact, when the child goes to elementary school and learns how to read, the rules get even more extensive, and are usually posted on the classroom wall. Of course, the child soon learns that there are also exceptions and loopholes in the rules, as well as various interpretations. A rule like "No chewing gum," for example, can be legally interpreted by a fifth grader to mean, "I can have gum in my mouth as long as I don't chew it." By the time children get to high school, they have the legal acuity of lawyers who know the rules, and all the ways to get around them. Even after graduation, when a young adult goes to the workplace, there will be rules or codes of conduct that need to be followed.

That doesn't mean the rules aren't important; however, it's just that the rules *alone* aren't enough. An ethical person not only understands and obeys the rules, he or she also *knows -- and embraces -- the purpose* behind the rules. So, you might say that when Jesus wanted to lay out the ethical agenda for God's world, he didn't ditch the rules that were long ago written down by God on tablets of stone and handed to Moses. Instead, he "fulfilled" those rules by embodying them and teaching them with authority. For Jesus, the rules were still important, but the **principles behind the rules were even more important**. It wasn't just about what was written in stone; it was about the character and law of God written on the hearts of God's people.

One could easily argue that the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day knew the law backwards and forwards, and, as the self-appointed legal conscience of Israel,

they were bound and determined to make sure everyone obeyed the commandments. The scribes acted as lawyers for the law of Moses, and the Pharisees believed that God's kingdom would come only when all the people of Israel obeyed God's law perfectly.

The problem with that approach, however, is that focusing on the rules alone imposes limits on obedience, since we only have to comply with the rules and nothing more. A Pharisee evaluated himself and others based on their compliance to the law, not on the basis of their compassion toward others, or the needs of the community.

This is why Jesus drops a bombshell, something we heard last week in verse twenty, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." If the people thought the scribes and Pharisees, had it all together because they obeyed the law to the letter, then they were missing the point. And that was because the law points us to something bigger, according to Jesus. It points us to the way of living as the community of God's new world.

So, Jesus establishes a pattern in His Sermon on the Mount that directs us to the stated law of Moses "You have heard that it was said ..." and the compassionate, community-building intention behind it "... but I say to you ..." The law of Moses was designed to show Israel how to live together in a world of human authority; Jesus takes it a step further by discussing what it means to live in a world of divine authority, i.e. God's world, the kingdom of God.

In other words, our Lord takes the old law and radicalizes it, shaking it down to the roots of the law's intent (that's what "radical" means -- the base word "radix" means "root"). Jesus is rooted in the law, but he calls his disciples to live a life with a much deeper rootedness than the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with what people did or did not do, how devoted they

were to following religious obligations and practices. Jesus, however, was more concerned with what was inside an individual's heart, and how that would translate into their relationships with others as a sign of God's new world.

In his instructions to his newly called disciples, and to the crowds of people who were listening to him preach his sermon on the mount, he is trying to help them understand that God expects them, and us, to live on a much higher plane than the lost people of the world. As we witnessed in last week's Gospel, discipleship is all about being salt and light in the world, and in our narrative for today Jesus is trying to teach those gathered before him a lesson on how to be perfected in God's love!

In other words, Jesus was trying to correct misperceptions that distorted the purpose of God's commandments, which were established to create a covenant of how the people were to treat God and one another. They weren't meant to be a burden, something to hold over another individual, and they were defiantly not to be used to justify hurting others, or as a way of keeping track of a person's good deeds. Jesus' preaching to the crowd was meant to help guide them back to an understanding of the original purpose and intent of the law.

Look at the *first* of his statements: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" "Do not murder" was one of the original Ten Commandments; a law set in stone. Murder destroys the human-ness of another, thus the law of Moses minces no words. Murder is something to be avoided, which most of us are able to do. How many times have we heard people say something like, "Well, what I did was bad, but at least I didn't kill anyone!"

And yet while it's clear that we should avoid murdering the body of another, Jesus radicalizes the old commandment and goes down to its root. "But I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment."

Jesus understood that the dehumanizing act of murder has its roots in the dehumanizing of another person through our anger. And not only does anger dehumanize the other, it dehumanizes us, too.

Every time we decide to allow anger to smolder inside of us, we become less than fully human, less than the people God created us to be. Instead of merely avoiding murder, we should embrace reconciliation, which leads to community. It's the difference between following the rules and engaging in a relationship -- the difference between avoiding doing something because it is required and doing something with the heart.

The *second* statement: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery in his heart." Lust, as you may already know, dehumanizes people into objects that we use for our own pleasure. We might be able to avoid the physical act of adultery, and thus obey the law, but we forget that the emotional or psychological attachment of lust is just as destructive.

To help get his point across, Jesus calls us to not only avoid breaking the law, but to avoid breaking the fidelity of marriage that supports community, trust, and love -- the kind of fidelity that Christ himself has with His bride, the church. God's new world is characterized by faithfulness, and when we embrace fidelity in our hearts and in our relationships, we will learn how to embrace it forever.

This faithfulness that Jesus is talking about is so vital, in fact, that Jesus uses a very graphic and extreme illustration to help us understand how important it is.

"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.

³⁰And 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. *"

According to Jesus, it all boils down to a matter of our hearts and where our commitments and loyalties lie.

Perhaps rather than brutally disfiguring, or mutilating our bodies, whenever we fall into temptation and commit an act of sin, we can instead give them over to God for his use. We can ask him to help us see the world the way he does and therefore our eyes are now his eyes. We can allow God to use us to touch others with his love and healing in this world and therefore our hands, become his hands.

The *third* statement which is also connected to this idea of commitment is Jesus' teaching about divorce. The law said that a man could simply give his wife a certificate of divorce and that was that. Sounds easy enough, but it's not unlike the "no-fault divorce" our culture so easily embraces. With the exception of infidelity, however, Jesus says that divorce should be off the table since the root of marriage is faithfulness, community, and love. If our hearts are focused on maintaining the relationship, then our hands will be less apt to sign the dismissal papers.

Finally, in his *fourth* statement we encounter Christ's understanding regarding the law about making vows. Under Jewish law (as in the law courts today), swearing something under oath by sealing it with something like the phrase "so help me, God" is common. If you swear an oath in court, then what you say has to be true, or you are violating the law. The implication, then, is that when one is not under oath, one may not have to be as truthful in what one says. Jesus takes the law and goes to its root. We shouldn't just be truthful under oath; we should be truthful all the time. Telling the truth is the basis of community, after all, Lies and falsehoods can tear a community apart.

In these verses, the ethical pattern for the people of God's world emerges. It is a pattern that goes beyond the letter of the law, to the spirit of the law. It goes beyond what we do with our hands, to who we are in our hearts. It recognizes that external behavior often emerges from an internal temperament. The ethics of God's

world are in some respects the same as the ethical structure of the old Israelite society. Murder is still forbidden, adultery is still forbidden, and so on.

Our take home for today than is that Jesus expects his followers to be more than people who refrain from whore-mongering, murder, and being truthful only when it's convenient or required. No, the people of God's world, God's Kingdom, are to follow an ethical program that requires a purity of intention beyond anything people have ever been taught. One's ethical deeds must come from, and be learned, from a community of love, and come from a pure heart.

Today as we share in the Lord's supper, as we hear once again that our sins are forgiven, let us embrace Christ's call to follow him, and the rules that God has given to us. Let us also remember that through God's grace and mercy, when we slip up, as we often do, we are graciously forgiven and wonderfully loved. And although like a loving parent God may be there telling us no, he does this because of how much he cares for us, and we can trust that our Heavenly Father knows best! Thanks be to God. Amen.