

There many different kinds of laws. If you break them, there are consequences for the transgressor, the victim, and all of society. Laws help keep a society together. They are supposed to maintain a modicum of trust. But if a law is unjust, it will also hurt the community that continues to enforce it. For example, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 made it a crime to escape slavery and/or to harbor fugitive slaves, and the Indian Removal Act of 1830 legalized deportation of Native Americans to the West.

Our law-making history is marked by the prejudices of the men who enacted them. (To this day, they are still almost exclusively men). They passed laws that became the infrastructure for slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II. So, there can be just laws and unjust laws.

And there are other kinds of laws, like scientific laws such as Hubble's law of cosmic expansion, which is actually quite mind-blowing because it describes a universe that is constantly expanding. And of course, there is the law of gravity, which we encounter daily, especially when stepping on ice is involved.

And there are religious laws like the ones Jesus is talking about on the sermon on the mount. Moses called them commandments. To obey them was to choose life, and Jesus is clarifying our relationship to him and to the law of Moses by describing how he has come to fulfill the law. He is pointing to the kind of fulfillment that goes beyond obeying the letter of the law. He is teaching that trust and compassion are what holds a community together, and that all religious laws need to be obeyed with this in mind.

Jesus starts with the most obvious law: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment."

When I was in college I remember a friend of mine was really troubled about this. She was angry, and felt condemned for being angry. She came to me for advice. I didn't know what to say. I wish I had been more familiar with this passage, because I could have reassured her that it's not a sin to be angry, but that it is a sin to hold onto anger and refuse to forgive.

In the fourth century John Chrysostom wrote: “If you refuse to forgive your enemy you harm not him but yourself. ...So as far as a human being can, you must do what Christ the Son of God did, and become a promoter of peace both for yourself and for your neighbor. ... The only good deed he mentions as essential at the time of sacrifice is reconciliation with one's brother or sister. This shows that of all the virtues the most important is love.¹

So, murder doesn't just mean the physical body of another is killed, we can also have a murderous attitude that shows up in how we speak to others, and how we treat them and think about them.

Adultery isn't just something we physically commit: an adulterous disposition leers at others in order to take and selfishly consume them for our own gain.

Then, Jesus gets to the topic of divorce. “The topic of divorce was a particularly fraught one in Jesus' time. Two of the leading teachers of Jesus' time, Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, were famously divided over the issue. The school of Hillel favored a more permissive approach to divorce that allowed for divorce even in the case that a wife ruins her husband's meal. The school of Shammai, however, upheld a much stricter view that only permitted divorce in the most extreme cases.”² While Jesus seems to side with one over the other, he actually bypasses both by upholding the values of trust and compassion in community by encouraging the continuity of marriage, except in those cases where trust has already been broken through infidelity—and here we must extrapolate and say, or through abuse.

Jesus' way of fulfilling the law moves us out of the bind we encounter in Deuteronomy. We might conclude from Deuteronomy that if we obey the law we will come out on top. If we read Deuteronomy and conclude that sin causes suffering, and obedience causes prosperity we are moving into what has been the basis for the Prosperity Gospel, which is proclaimed in many churches today, where keeping the commandments automatically leads to prosperity, such as riches, health, and happiness, and where failure to keep God's commandments causes death, disease, and misery.

¹ Homily on the Treachery of Judas: Bareille, Tillemont 3, 655-656) **John Chrysostom** (c. 347-407)

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-after-epiphany/commentary-on-matthew-521-37-5>

But, If we view sin and suffering as a consequence of our failure to fulfill the law, it has disastrous consequences, because although sometimes our illness can stem from unhealthy habits, to say that sickness is God's punishment for a lack of faith is devastatingly alienating and completely contrary to Jesus' compassion, (not to mention the fact that we know that wicked people get rich just like good people are poor). Of course the poor don't deserve to be poor and no one deserves to get cancer. Cells go crazy. Accidents happen. People suffer.

The command to choose life needs to be understood as choosing what makes life possible for oneself and others in the community as a whole. Take climate change, for example. What impact will our choices and actions have on our children and on our children's children?

What Jesus is teaching us is that the way to live out the law is to adopt the law of love. No one can command another to fall in love or to feel love for another. However, if we look at the way Jesus treats others and how he loves them with compassion and understanding, and we allow ourselves to be counted among the recipients of Jesus' care and concern, then we can begin to see ourselves as the beneficiaries of Jesus' love. As such, we end up craving it because we have experienced that we can't find this kind of grace, love, and compassion in what the world has to offer.

What Jesus is saying is that if we stick with him, we will be able to tap into his way of loving. By staying close to Jesus, we can draw from an inner well of God's goodness and love. God's love has been poured into our hearts, and the art of living well is to remember that we are, in fact, God's beloved. What's more, we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit who strengthens, guides, teaches and inspires us from within—if only we can remain in touch. This isn't a law in the sense of a prescriptive command. It's more like a description of how it works in God's economy—akin to a scientific law which doesn't require things to fall when you drop them because they just do.

God doesn't require us to follow Jesus. But what Jesus is teaching us is that if we do want to remain in his company, we will be living according to higher standard—the standard of love, compassion, and forgiveness. AMEN