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"Response Ability"

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Matthew 5:17-48 I Corinthians 3:1-9

INTRODUCTION TO DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20

In our reading from Deuteronomy the Lord presents to Israel a choice-to obey God's commands and be blessed or to turn away from God and face destruction.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 5:17-48

In these last 2 weeks Jesus we've seen Jesus move from describing God's blessings and challenging his hearers to be salt and light for others. In today's gospel lesson we will see his prescriptions for dealing with issues his hearers have with themselves-and how to respond to others.

Let's pray. Lord, thank you for caring enough to challenge us with these words. Thank you that you are concerned about how we live our lives and how we treat one another. Thank you for these prescriptions that you have given us. Give us the strength to take our medicine. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Mark Twain once said this about the Bible: "I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don't understand. It's those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me fits." The passage we read this morning certainly fits and might give some of us fits.

Have you ever heard someone say, "There ought to be a law?" Apparently someone decided to make some.

In Lexington, Ky., there is an ordinance forbidding anyone to carry an ice-cream cone in his pocket. In Waterloo, Nebraska barbers are forbidden to eat onions between 7.a.m and 7 p.m. In Massachusetts it is against the law to eat peanuts in church or to use tomatoes in making clam chowder. In Green, N.Y., you cannot eat peanuts and walk backwards on the sidewalks while a concert is on. In Kansas an old law states that you cannot eat snakes on Sunday or rattlesnake meat in public. In Zion, Ill., it is illegal for anyone to give lighted cigars to dogs, cats and other domesticated animals kept as pets. In Carmel, N.Y., a man can't go outside while wearing a jacket and pants that do not match. In Hartford, Conn., you aren't allowed to cross a street while walking on your hands. In Baltimore, it's illegal to take a lion to the movies. In Lynn, Mass., babies may not be given coffee to drink. In Detroit banana peels are not to be thrown in the streets for fear of injury to horses. In Connecticut pickles which, when dropped 12 inches, collapse in its own juice are illegal. They must remain whole and even bounce. In Lehigh Nebr. it is against the law to sell doughnut holes. In Houston, you cannot buy rye bread, goose liver or Limburger cheese on Sunday. In Nicholas County, W. Va., no member of the clergy is allowed to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit during a church service 1

And now you know why I'll never get a call to serve a church in Nicholas County, West Virginia.

Obviously those laws are not ones we are in fear of breaking any time soon. The laws on which Jesus expanded were of greater importance. Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. In each case of law he cites he refuses to stay at the level of outward keeping of the law of God but goes a step farther and a layer deeper to the inward emotions and intentions that motivate our outward actions.

Each of the sections begins with "You have heard that it was said to the men of old.... But I say" The one who "spoke of old" to which Jesus referred was Moses. Jesus was placing himself on the same level as Moses or higher. Some of his hearers would have regarded that as the height of presumption and even heresy. Yet Jesus takes what Moses said and takes it a step further and a layer deeper.

You have heard it said of old, "You shall not murder. But I say Everyone who is angry (and the Greek present tense here means habitually or continually angry) shall be liable to the judgment." Anger, when not dealt with quickly and constructively, has an amazingly negative power of transformation. It goes deeper. It burrows into the soul and corrupts everything it touches. It is not enough to avoid murdering someone; underneath outward violence is an inward anger with which Jesus wants us to deal.

Anger is destructive. It poisons relationships. It often brings violence. We might be able to avoid killing someone, but the underlying anger can lead us to kill their reputations, kill their spirits, or allow our anger to kill something within us. Anger can not only affect our relationships with each other, it can affect our relationship with God. Jesus says it's not enough to give offerings. If we are holding on to a grudge or bitterness between us and another person Jesus says we are to go and make right our relationship before we give to God.

In an angry world, we have a wonderful opportunity to offer an alternative. But if we are just as short-tempered as the world around us; if we are as quick to take offense, or to claim our rights, or to get mad over the smallest personal issues, what good are we in a world that is looking for answers and finding few? We must be changed on the inside, and that comes from paying attention to the Lord and his teaching about the kind of people he is out to produce... (2)

Next, Jesus moves from murder and anger to adultery. Can I hear you say, "Preach on?" He says it is not enough to avoid adultery; underneath the act is the attitude and habit of lust. Jesus takes the issue further and deeper. He is saying that adultery is not only a sin in the bed; it is a sin in the head. Lust takes what God intended to be a permanent bond of soul-to-soul and makes it into a temporary contact of skin-to-skin. What is intended as holy becomes merely hooking up. The lustful think they are having a little fun; what they are accomplishing is the step-by-step destruction of their capacity for fidelity to one person.

The Greek word for "sin" here as in "causes you to sin" is a word that gives us the English word "scandal". It was used as a bait stick that would spring a trap whenever an animal would touch it. In other words, anything that morally would trap you or cause you to fall into sexual sin should be eliminated. Don't undress a man or a woman in your mind as you look at them. Don't linger at the magazine rack or bring things into your home on television or through your computer that would cause you to fall into sexual sin. In Jewish culture the right eye represented the person's best eye. The right hand represented the person's strongest hand. What Jesus was saying was, "You better give up anything you have to give up to protect your heart, your body, your soul, your purity, and, if married, your marriage."

Can I hear you say, "Move on?" Jesus next saying closely follows his warnings about adultery to divorce. Here Jesus wants his hearers to go beyond the provisional excuse of a certificate that Moses allowed because of their hardness of heart to fight against the inward emotions and attitudes that would move people to not honor their marriage vows. Those who pledge marriage vows pledge more than forsaking all others...they pledge to be there for each other for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in the days of youth and in the days of old age. Not honoring those vows can lead to broken bonds. Should a relationship come to the point of a divorce I believe Jesus is arguing for compassionate, ethical treatment between those divorcing.

Jesus goes on to say that the same goes for all those other oaths and promises you make. He said, "You make vows in the name of Jerusalem, or in the name of Israel, or in the name of Abraham. No more! Don't swear by these." Everyone knew very well that any vow made in one of these names could be broken. They were promises that were kept unless something else, more favorable, came up. We need to let our 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and our 'No' be 'No. It's not enough to avoid making promises you can't keep. If you commit to do something say yes and do it. If you can't commit to do it, say no and find something you can commit to do. The issue here is not only marriage, but your "word." In a marriage relationship, or in business, or in living day-to-day with the people around you, your "word" must stand. **(3)**

Up to this point Jesus has been talking about our responsibilities-how we treat others. Now he moves on to how we are to respond to how others treat us- our response abilities. What do we do when we are hit and what do we do when we are hit up for something we have to power to give?

In the 1st Century, a slap on the cheek was a way of insulting someone. Back then a slave would rather be struck on his back by a whip than slapped on his cheek by his master. You see, there were two things that would make any Jew mad 2,000 years ago; one would be a spit in his face, and the other would be to backhandedly slap him on the cheek. Most people are right handed, and backhanded slap with a right hand would naturally go to someone's right cheek. Jesus was saying, "If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn and let him do the same on your left." It's only an insult. If you insult him back he'll insult you back and you could wind up escalating into murder.

Let me emphasize that Jesus was not dealing with Christian passivism. He was talking about personal revenge, not social justice. In other words, you never get even by trying to get even. I think it is worth noting that Jesus suggested two cheeks, not dozens of them. He was not advocating we become a doormat to people who try to abuse us or walk all over us. Sometimes self-defense is not only warranted and necessary, but it's also instructive for the other person. The other person needs to learn and know that slapping and insulting and attacking are not the way to live either. Forgiveness, and not revenge, should be our first response.

The same is true when it comes to others in need, in need of something as common as a shirt. In Jesus' day if one person took another person to court, and the person did not have the money to pay the judgment, the court could order payment of the lawsuit in clothing. You could take the man's tunic; you could take the man's shirt, but you could not take his coat. The shirt was a type of tunic that was worn as an undergarment. The coat was an outer garment that served as a blanket at night. Jesus goes beyond both the law of the land and the Mosaic Law. He said, "If you lose a lawsuit, but the judgment does not satisfy the plaintiff, and there are still bitter hard feelings, voluntarily give more than the judgment if it will make things right, and thereby you can settle things not only legally, but you can settle things morally.

In a situation like this when you give more than you are asked, you are showing that you regret any wrongdoing on your part; you are showing that you have no bitterness toward the other person, and you are showing that you want to make things right. There are times when you should not see how little you can give, but how much you can give.

The same goes for someone who asks you for help. Remember that Israel was occupied territory controlled by the Roman Empire. The Romans had a law that greatly embittered the Jewish people. By law a Roman soldier could compel a Jew to carry his weapons, or his knapsack, or any burden that he had, one mile. The Pharisees had all of life boiled down to the minimum of what they had to do to get by. But Jesus said, "Don't go just the minimum first mile that you have to go, go the second mile that you don't have to go, because that's where the real blessing of life is found."

The implication here is that the person doing the asking has a real genuine need. If it is a real need, you should meet that need. Now that does not mean that you are required to respond to every foolish or every selfish request. The first mile is the lone mile; the second mile is the love mile. The first mile is the duty mile. The second mile is the smile mile. There is something more important than quitting time. There is something wonderful about someone who goes beyond and above what is asked for, or required, or expected, just as a habit of life.

This last one is probably the hardest one for them and us to hear. Love our enemies? For the first hearers of these words, the enemy was real. They encountered the enemy every day. Some were religious authorities who called followers heretics and heathen and stirred up riots against them. For the early Christians the enemy was Rome who insulted them, injured them, jailed them, and fed them to the lions.

Wherever two or more people gather for any period of time, conflict is sure to come. And so it seems extremely practical to me that Jesus would have said, "If you want to follow me all the way, then we must discover how to love those who do not agree with us. We must, indeed, learn to love our enemy. If Jesus had not expected us to have some enemies, why would he have instructed us to love them?"

Those are our responsibilities that are in part determined by our ability to respond. How can we honor them? Ask God for the strength to not only not murder but also to guard against the anger that lies beneath such drastic actions. Ask God for the strength to make things right with others who might have something against you before you make your offering. Ask God to give you the strength to remain faithful to all your vows. Ask God for the strength to honor the promises you make and give careful consideration before making them. Ask God to give you the strength when someone insults to not respond in kind and if someone sues you and you are at fault go beyond the required restitution to show you are truly sorry. If someone asks you to help them, go above and beyond for what they ask. If someone declares you to be their enemy, love them anyway, any way you can. Eliminate your enemies by making them your friends. Welcome those who are not like you so that you can grow to like them and even love them... even though you will never be like them.

Live according the commandments of old that Moses gave and go a step further and a layer deeper and when you find that you have fallen short of either or both, cry out for the grace of God and call upon the strength you need to ask forgiveness of God and the person you wronged. It's your responsibility and your effectiveness in fulfilling it will be based on your response...ability.

Let's pray. O God, you are just and you treat your people with fairness. We have heard and learned your commandments; how you desire us to love our neighbors; how you called for justice and mercy rather than mere rites and rituals; how in our search for your justice we should show kindness, not a spirit of reprisal. We still have a way to go in our quest of commitment and growth. Help us to learn from children what it means to have faith. May we not be afraid of dependence when it comes to trusting in you. Let us learn from our enemies what it means to forgive. May we not be so sure of ourselves that we condemn others whom you also save. Let us learn from the foreigner what it means to dwell in a strange land, and offer hospitality to the rootless, the homeless and the estranged of this world.

Continue to nourish and sustain us so that we may mature according to your desiring for our lives. We are your agents in bringing others to faith. May our lives be for them an example of the confidence and endurance that come from the assurance of Jesus' love. May our care of and compassion toward them be a constant reminder of your abiding presence, and may our ministry to them be evidence of the fruit of an obedient life.

1. Campus Life, March, 1973
2. TIME'S UP!, JOHN B. JAMISON, C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1992,
3. Sondi Wright, "He Was Full Spectrum," Rolling Stone, March 2005, 52.