

**Sunday Sermon**  
**February 12, 2017**  
**“You Have Heard It Said . . . But”**  
**Matthew 5:21-37**

### Introduction

You may have heard the story of how on a dark night a police officer came upon a man hunched over, desperately searching for something under a bright street lamp. “What's the matter?” the police officer asked. “Have you lost something?” “Yes, I've lost my keys,” the man said. “Will you help me search for them?” After several minutes of looking, the officer stood up straight and said, “We have searched this whole area, and I just do not think they are here. Are you sure this is where you dropped them?” “Oh no,” the man responded, “I dropped them over there,” pointing to a dark alley across the street. “Then why on earth are you looking here?” the officer asked. “Because,” the man said, “the light is better here!”

Does that sound like us when we search for things of significance and meaning in our lives? We look in the wrong places for the wrong reasons?

This is our third week of looking at Jesus’ great sermon recorded in Matthew’s gospel at the beginning of his ministry. Jesus first offers blessings for those for whom life has been more a curse than a blessing.

Then last week, we saw how Jesus transitioned in his teaching from blessings to indicative statements about who we are as disciples of Christ and citizens of the kingdom. “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world,” Jesus said.

In our text today, Jesus makes another transition in his sermon. He moves to some rather stringent moral teachings. Or as the members at my first church in the mountains of East Tennessee would say, “He’s quit preaching and gone to meddling.”

### I

As you saw and heard in the verses, Jesus switches to a series of sharp antitheses, sets of contrasts framed as, “You have heard it said of old . . . but I say to you.”

You have heard it said do not murder, but I say you also must not destroy others with your words, slaying others with anger and hatred.

You have heard it said do not commit adultery. But I say you also must not objectify others by treating them as a means to satisfy your physical desires by lusting after them.

You have heard it said, to follow the letter of the law regarding divorce. But I say you must not treat people as disposable beings, and especially you should care for the vulnerable, who were in that day and still are in many places today women and children.

You have heard it said keep yourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. But I say you must speak and act truthfully in all of your dealings so that you do not need to make oaths at all. (1)

Jesus takes laws from the Hebrew Scriptures, already difficult to obey, and ratchets them up 100 degrees into even tougher demands. Why is Jesus putting something before us that seems impossible to achieve?

Some scholars contend that Jesus says these things knowing no human being can do all of them. He says them in order to show us what miserable, weak sinners we are, to remove any presumption of our righteousness and drive us into the hands of a loving, compassionate God.

We may think, “Well, I may not be a saint, but at least I have not committed murder.” But when Jesus gets through saying that even to think impure thoughts is as bad as committing impure acts, we all fail the test.

Does Jesus raise the bar too high? Is he pushing an unrealistic standard that makes us doomed to fail? Or could it be that Jesus believes in us more than we believe in ourselves? Is it possible that we are more capable of faithful discipleship than we think? (2)

## II

Our relationships matter to God, Jesus is saying. To be righteous, he is saying, means being in right relationship with God, and then with that relationship comes right relationships with others.

Leo Tolstoy, the great writer, once said, “If you are not happy with your life, you can change it in one of two ways: either improve the conditions in which you live, or improve your inner spiritual state. The first one [improving your conditions] is not always possible,” he says, “but the second is, because that is often up to the choices we make and the pattern we live our life.” (3) Jesus is saying here if we are reconciled with a God of justice and love, then that will carry into our spiritual state and our relationships with others.

In the 3rd century, two hundred years after Jesus, a young priest took as his ministry the comfort of Christians who were being persecuted under the reign of Claudius, the emperor of Rome. The priest made friends with children and visited the widows and orphans of Christians who had been executed because of their faith. The priest’s name was Valentine. He often ended his kind and helpful letters to others with the words “Your Valentine.”

Then the Romans imprisoned him because he refused to worship their gods. Children, whom he had helped, would go to his cell window and toss notes through the bars, expressing their love for him. These notes and his notes back to them were the first valentines.

Because he befriended those persecuted by Rome, Valentine was accused of treason, and he was executed on February 14, in the year 269.

Valentine lost his life because of his love for Christ and his persistence in the Christian way. But really he did not lose his life; he found it. He found the true meaning of being righteous and being blessed.

### III

Jesus knows we make compromises and allow ourselves excuses for not only thinking wrongly but acting wrongly toward others. Relationship with God brings us to relationship with others that would otherwise not be possible, with our sisters, brothers, neighbors, spouses, even our enemies.

This week, I read an article about last summer's trial of Dylan Roof, the self-avowed white supremacist, who killed nine people at a Bible study at Emmanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston. The article was about how funds from Presbyterian Disaster Assistance were put with funds from other sources and used during the trial to provide spiritual support for the survivors of the shootings and for the family members of those killed.

Eric Skidmore, a Presbyterian pastor, shared about how they set up a room on the floor below the courtroom. They created an altar, and each morning before the proceedings, family members gathered for prayer and scripture. Most days, he says, the group would break into singing, and the sound of 80 people singing hymns would flow out through the courthouse.

The days were long, grueling, filled with graphic pictures and painful testimonies. It would have been easy to speak words of anger and hatred. And yet, another pastor said, "We watched people make incredible decisions and stands of faith," including the words they chose to say to Dylan Roof at the end.

"It was more than a trial," he said, "it was a chance to see God and God's goodness" in the midst of tragedy, a chance "to be part of something better" than the rule of hatred.(4)

### Conclusion

How is it possible for frail, finite sinners like you and me to live up to the standards Jesus gives in this part of his great sermon? It is not. We cannot do it on our own efforts. But here is the thing: Jesus commands us to do good, and then he lovingly enables us to do what he commands.

Could it be that Jesus believes in us more than we believe in ourselves? Is it possible that we are more capable than we think?

You have heard it said, we have said, it cannot be done.

But Jesus says by God's grace, you can do it. (5)

### Notes:

1. David Lose, "The Relational God," *Dear Working Preacher*, 2014, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=3071>.

2. William H. Willimon, "Jesus Raises the Bar" in *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 39, No.1, Year A, January, February, March 2011, pp.29-31.
3. Russ Levenson, "*Living Happily Ever After*," *Day 1*, 2017, [http://day1.org/7658-russ\\_levenson\\_living\\_happily\\_ever\\_after](http://day1.org/7658-russ_levenson_living_happily_ever_after).
4. Leslie Scanlon, "Providing Spiritual Support for Victims' Families in Charleston," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 30, 2017, <https://pres-outlook.org/2017/01/providing-spiritual-support-victims-families-charleston/>.
5. Willimon, "Jesus Raises the Bar."