

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, Sixth Sunday After Epiphany,  
February 12, 2017

**Higher Righteousness**  
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys  
February 12, 2017

Mathew 5:21-30

Today's scripture reading continues our look at the Sermon on the Mount and urges us to strive for higher righteousness.

In the verses that I just read and continuing further in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lists six concerns beginning his statements with "*You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ...*". (NIV).

He begins by saying what the Law of the Torah expects a person to do but then states that one must strive to achieve a higher level of righteousness than the Law requires.

To try to discuss all six scenarios in one sermon would require far more time than is available so I am limiting this message to only the first two. In all six situations Jesus stresses following a much higher level of righteousness than the Law requires. He instructs us to look into what underlies each situation and calls for reconciliation, rather than, in the case of our reading to commit murder or adultery.

The first scenario that Jesus refers to is murder. Obviously the righteous will not tolerate murder by anyone but Jesus digs into what might cause someone to murder, and that is anger. Murder might be the result of anger, and often is. Higher righteousness, in the words of Fred Craddock, et al <sup>(1)</sup>, "*... extends beyond the act of murder to the condition of anger that prompts it.*"

What Jesus is doing is putting an ethical standard "*... on top of or in place of the old law ... an ethical standard that goes beyond the boundaries set by civil law.*" <sup>(2)</sup>

In the case of murder, Jesus warns us against unresolved anger and calls out for a concrete act of reconciliation. Walter Bruggemann, et al <sup>(2)</sup> said, "*A wonderful picture is painted of a worship service heading toward the climactic presentation of the offering when suddenly chaos breaks out.*" People "*... begin to move across the sanctuary to be reconciled with estranged fellow members ... Who is right or wrong seems beside the point. At issue is the disrupted relationship and the concrete move toward healing.*"

Murderers are liable to judgment but Jesus says that the anger that can

potentially culminate in murder similarly is liable to judgment, not in civil court but in God's court.

The second scenario in our reading is adultery which is clearly prohibited in the Law of the Torah in the Ten Commandments.

In the culture of Jesus' time, adultery was extramarital sexual intercourse between a man and another man's wife. Adultery was prohibited not for moral reasons but because it was a breach of property laws. Property laws? Yes, property laws. **What property?**

A wife was the property of her husband. She "belonged" to him and if she engaged in adultery his property rights were violated.

If a man had such a relationship with an unmarried woman, no harm, no foul. It would not be a big deal and would not be considered to be adultery. But, if both of them were married, both would be guilty.

Jesus goes beyond the law about adultery and again urges higher righteousness.

He makes no distinction between people being married or not. He condemns any man who looks at a woman as a sexual object, who looks at a woman with lust in his heart.

You can probably recall President Jimmy Carter citing this passage and admitting that he had committed the sin of lust himself.

In the context of Jesus' remarks, his comments against lust were addressed only to men as would have been suggested by the culture of those times. Today, the comments would refer to both sexes and I am sure that Jesus would intend them that way. His point was to underscore wholesome relationships between men and women.

If I had read further in Mark 5, you would see Jesus discussing divorce and the giving of oaths, again in the culture of Biblical times. I don't have time to discuss those two scenarios today but I urge you, if you read further in the scripture, to remember that the discussion of divorce is in the context of a wife being the property of her husband. That hardly applies today and should not of course.

Higher righteousness in all things of life is what Jesus is telling us to strive for.

Our Daily Bread (May 16, 2013) said, *"As we go through life striving to find our way, situations may frustrate us and cause us to respond to others in an un-Christlike way. If so, we might ask God to give us courage to apologize to those we have offended. Our worship, according to Jesus, depends on it."*

*“We honor God when we make reconciliation with others a priority. After we have been reconciled, we can then fully enjoy communion with our Heavenly Father.”*

Let us pray, *“It’s not easy Lord, to swallow our pride and ask others to forgive us. But you want us to seek reconciliation ...”* and higher righteousness. Help us to accomplish your will. In Jesus’ name.

**Amen**

1. Fred Craddock, et al, Preaching Through the Christian Year – Year A, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, 1992
2. Walter Bruggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching – Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995.

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011