

## Sermon: But I Say to You

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb 12, 2023)

A conversation I had recently with a young pastor made me cringe. I met him through a mentoring group, which we both participate for better part of the past two years. I like him, he is diligent, hard working, thoughtful and faithful. By all account, he has managed to plant a worshipping community in Barr Haven that is growing and thriving. But he shared with the group a recent spiritual practice he is taking the congregation through—a practice that disturbs me deeply.

He has managed to construct a set of ‘rules of life’, a sort of best practices for contemporary Christian living, and is asking his congregation to practice these rules, one at a time at two-week interval, and report back to him. I pressed him a bit on why he calls them ‘rules of life’, and why not just call them ‘best practices of Christian living’, as these rules were intending to be. He wasn’t able to give me a satisfactory answer, but simply alluding to time-honoured monastic tradition, such as the ‘Rule of Saint Benedict’.

That conversation rubbed me the wrong way. I will admit that I have a tendency to look not so fondly at rules, not to mention the impulse of my younger self to break them. But a deeper issue for me is how one received Scriptural passages like Deuteronomy 30. In verse 15, Moses said to the Israelites,

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.”

The flip side of that life of obedience and corresponding blessings is hearts turned astray, away from the Lord, even bowing down to and serving other gods. That path, the path of the wicked, will surely lead to ever severe curses, with doom and destruction reserved for the unrepentant.

Just so we are clear, Moses, the giver of the Law, gave more than the Ten Commandments carved on two stone tablets to the Israelites. The entire corpus grew from the first ten to eventually encompassing 613

commandments, rules, regulations and ordinances, all attributed to Moses, all acknowledged by the community of faith as to their divine origin. Furthermore, all rules were expected to be followed with equal vigour as if by breaking one, one breaks them all.

Yes, I know, God through Moses implores the community of faith, implores us, to love God and to choose life, as the choice still is in our each individual hand. The irony which Moses was never able to address is whether fear is a suitable motivator to compel people to love. Can loving God be ever true, when the executioner's axe is always ready to fall?

Jesus of Nazareth came to reinterpret the Law, not to abolish it but to fulfill it. He did so not by watering down the Law, or excusing people's inability to follow the Law, Jesus reinterprets the Law by getting beyond the letters of the Law to discern its Spirit—"You have heard that it was said... **but I say to you now**".

One commandment after another, Jesus reinterprets. On the commandment of 'thou shall not kill', the prohibition of the physical act of killing or murdering is no longer sufficient. Even looking or cursing at one's brother or sisters with anger, malice or hatred would be, in the eyes of Jesus, breaking it.

On the commandment of 'thou shall not commit adultery', sexual liaison with someone outside marriage is still prohibited, but anyone who even looks at a woman with lust in his heart would have already committed adultery.

Jesus went on the counsel that 'if your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away', on the ground that it is better for one to lose a body part than for the whole body to sin and go into hell.

Our Scripture reading this morning is only a small part of the Sermon on the Mount preached by Jesus, as his inaugural teaching. When one takes a closer look at those teaching, it is unavoidable to describe it as an intensification of the Law. It is equally unavoidable to conclude that such intensification of the Law in its Spirit is simply not practical nor practicable. If God really is such a wrathful and angry God who demands such an impossible standard of holiness and righteousness, who then could ever attain it? Who then could ever enter into the kingdom of God, without chopping off bits and pieces of one's own body parts? An eye, a hand, the tongue? The short answer is no one, at least not by their own effort.

Martin Luther in his own writing in 1519, captures perfectly such a sentiment. He describes himself as a 'blameless monk' who earnestly seek to understand writing of St. Paul in Romans which talks about the justice of God. Luther understood it in the active sense that God is just, and God punishes sinners and the unjust.

Tried as he might to walk that blameless life, Luther couldn't be sure that God was sufficiently appeased. So raging inwardly, Luther grumbled vehemently against God, saying, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?"

Luther meditated night and day, and the turning point of his 'tower experience' as it purportedly occurred upon a high tower, was Luther's reinterpretation of St. Paul's writing 'The just person lives by faith.' By faith, not by works or by following a set of rules. He began to see the justice of God as God justifying us through faith, and it is entirely a gift of God, it is entirely the grace of God. That revelation somehow set Luther free, as he described that he 'had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates'.

Righteousness and justification by faith, by faith in Jesus Christ who came not only to teach, but to save, and to save us through his own sacrifice on the cross. That is the message of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. What Luther had come to discern, how it impacted him and his spiritual discipline is the heart of the Reformation, which we as Presbyterians hold fast to.

I wish I could've preached this sermon to that young pastor, but it would've been impolite to do so then and there.

I hope, by the Spirit of God, that he already understands what the Good News of Jesus Christ really is, without me having to explain that the loving the Triune God is so much more, so much better than a set of rules, no matter how well it is crafted.

I pray for all our sakes, that no one else ever has to go through what Luther went through, that we shall all love the Lord our God, not out of fear, but with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength.

**In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**