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As a child I remember when people after church would joke with the minister, "Wow, Rev., you went from preaching to meddling today in your sermon!" They usually meant you had stepped on some folk's toes or you had really hit everyone hard. In fact, folks seemed to revel in enjoying the sermon really hitting them hard. Pile it on seemed to be the sentiment - - because it was always meant for the person several pews over from me...not me, of course!

Well, in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, it appears Jesus has gone from "preaching to meddling!" That is, he gets very personal and up close with folks. He declares what the Torah says, and then adds, "...but I say to you..."

Note on six occasions in this pericope, Jesus makes such statements: "you have heard that it was said....but I say to you..."

Verse 21:	concerning murder and holding a grudge.
Verse 27:	concerning adultery
Verse 31:	concerning divorce
Verse 33:	concerning swearing falsely
Verse 38:	concerning revenge
Verse 43:	concerning love of neighbor and hatred of the enemy

Each time, Jesus was declaring what the Torah or the tradition had dictated. He went on beyond that to declare his interpretation or understanding. "The tradition says...but there is more..." Jesus was no dummy. He wanted people to know that he was orthodox and held the basic faith as they did. Yet, he saw there was and could be more. He was careful to make sure people knew he was sound theologically, but there was more.

Which is always the case with all of us. We all know the commandments. We know what they say. We all know what they mean. Yet, when we attempt to apply them, there is always more we could do. There is always more we could say. There are always additional actions we could take. For our faith is not simply following a certain set of rules and regulations. We do not check off certain actions to satisfy some external requirements. We cannot just act a certain way because we are dealing with other human beings and no one fits a certain, set pattern. There is always an exception!

So, how do we deal with these admonitions which Jesus is giving us? I think the scriptures give us a clue. It is almost like book ends in this passage. Almost like parenthesis that encase these words of Jesus:

Look at verses 20 and 48:

*Verse 20: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven."*

*Verse 48: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Unless your righteousness exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. That does it. You (and I) have already fallen short. Our righteousness, our right behavior, our actions with one another will never exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. You'll never make it for it is just not possible. So, if you think you will live up to all the laws and traditions that Jesus is describing in this passage, you will not outdo the scribes and Pharisees...for they know how to 'work the system' and will always follow the law better than anyone else.

None of us, not one of us will ever make it. So, Jesus declares what is in the Torah, in the law, but he admonishes folks to take it to a new level.

If you are angry with someone, don't come here to church and act as if everything is fine. First, go to that person and make amends, then come to worship.

Adultery is not simply sexual intercourse between a man and woman not married to each other. Adultery is when you treat someone else as an object for your own pleasure. So, if you lust after someone in your heart, it is the same as committing adultery!

If you are divorced because you would not work at that relationship, you still have a relationship with that person and cannot move on alone in your life...for you have made a long lasting relationship.

If you have to make oaths and promises to impress people, don't waste your breath. Instead, Yes or No is sufficient. Just make up your mind and live with your decision.

Anyone can love a neighbor. It is an obligation and the right thing to do. Yet can you love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you? The drunk whose car slammed into your friend's causing several injuries...the prison escapee who continued to rape... the rich person who embezzled millions from the company for his own personal greed.

In his admonition, Jesus went beyond the letter of the law. He went beyond the requirements. He went beyond the expectation. He declared that if these laws are the basics, what does God really want?

God really wants us to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Anyone can keep some written commandment or law. Anyone can follow the letter of the law and stay within the acceptable norms.

Our calling, however, is to a righteousness not defined by a law or set of words. Our righteousness is about our relationship with another person and with God.

What will it take for us to be in right relationship with someone else? What actions do we need to take? What behavior do we need to change?

You will not find a rule to follow to satisfy the burden you carry with your relative. You will not find a short hand formula of how to handle your boss. You will not find Oprah or Dr. Phil's three step method to improve the gulf between you and your backdoor neighbor.

Righteousness cannot be dished out in neat simple sentences or fix-all equations. It means you have to use your brain, your heart, and your experience to discern what God would have you

do. And your actions may be different than my actions. Your approach will differ from your spouses. Yet, you are attempting to be righteous. Attempting to do whatever is needed to respect that relationship.

And if you want to hide behind some law or some rule - - some tradition, Jesus says NOT! That's what the scribes and Pharisees did...they knew how to work the system to keep their noses clean and to get all the appropriate brownie points.

Jesus is declaring this righteousness is not about accumulation of points or about getting stars in your crown. No, it is about the most important part of life: relationships with one another and consequently with God: keeping those relationships right and appropriate. And a rule will not get you off the hook.

I talked about two bookends and so need to look at the other one: Verse 48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Pretty tall order! But I think we might have a notion of perfection that is not complete.

Here, perfection is not about being without blemish. No, here perfection is about being who we are intended or created to be.

Example: this cup I used with the children earlier is primarily intended to hold a liquid for someone to drink. Now, it can have other purposes...can use it to hold a plant and grow a plant in it; can be used to dig in the ground; can be used to hold your loose change on the kitchen counter; can be used to hold odds and ends on the garage work bench. All kinds of purposes and uses.

It is "perfect" when it is being used to hold a liquid that we drink. It is being used for the primary purpose for which it was created.

Our heavenly Father is perfect...meaning? Seems to me that God, according to scripture, is love. God's perfection is clearest when God loves and cares for God's world and creation. God's perfection is clearest when we experience God's acceptance and grace and forgiveness. We know God most intimately when that is our experience with our heavenly Father.

Our perfection...not 100%...but we are most nearly perfect, most nearly what we were created to be when we love, when we accept, when we are honest, when we are caring, when we are like our heavenly Father.

So, the test is, "was I loving when I did what I did to Johnnie or Sally? Was I perfect as God is perfect in my response to that person I cannot stand? Was I striving to do as Jesus instructed me when I answered my child this morning before church?"

Being perfect - - being what I was created to be - - ain't easy! Yet, it is possible because of our Lord. Who dealt with the very same things with which we deal. And who calls us to exceed the minimum righteousness of the law.

You have heard it said...but I say to you...

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Be who God meant for you to be...like God...full of love and acceptance and grace.

It makes life a whole lot easier...and a lot more fun!