

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If 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. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Integrity

1

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines integrity as being honest and fair, or as being complete and whole.¹ If we trace the origin of the word *integrity* we find that it comes from the Latin word *integritas*, which means 'whole.' If you look for words that mean the same thing as *integrity* you would think of *goodness* and *righteousness*. One word derived from the word *integrity* is *integrate*, which means to combine different elements in order to make something whole. When we use the word *integrity* as an adjective to describe people, we're saying that they are whole, that everything about the person works together harmoniously, and that generally means that what they say is what they do, and what they do reflects their beliefs; their *thoughts* match their *deeds*. Expressions like, "He's a man of his word," or "She means what she says" both describe people of integrity. We say what we mean and our actions are *integrated* with our words thoughts.

2

We strive to be people of integrity, don't we? Yet so often we fall short. While we may smile at others and say nice things in front of them, there may be this internal dialogue going on that hardly reflects the smile on our faces or our polite words and demeanor. Perhaps you've seen the movie *Liar, Liar* with Jim Carrey about a man who loses his ability to lie; he is unable to keep his thoughts private, and he loses many friends because of it. While **we** may have the ability to refrain from saying things or doing things that would anger or provoke others, we nonetheless have thoughts that aren't as kind or respectful as the words we say or the things we do. Like cartoon characters, we have those private thought bubbles that betray the way we feel, and some of those feelings nothing to be proud of. We are **too** often **two** faced, saying one thing and thinking or doing another. We are not *integrated*, and if our thoughts are not reflected in our words and actions, people recognize us as frauds, as *disintegrated*. If we are disintegrated, we lack credibility, we are not trustworthy.

3

God created us all to be people of integrity. He programmed, or *integrated* us so that our thoughts and words and actions would all be harmonious, that we would not be disingenuous or deceitful, that we would "say what's on our minds." Of course he also created us to think the best of people so that when we do "say what's on our minds" we do so with the best of intentions; we may disagree with others, we may disapprove of their words or actions, but what we say comes straight from a kind heart, and our words are intended to help others. God created us with a predisposition toward friendship, and we all know that a true friend is one who speaks the truth to us, even when it hurts. God created us to have all the best thoughts, all the best words, and all the best deeds.

4

But our focus shifted from others to ourselves. Our thoughts became centered upon our own desires and needs, not God's and not our neighbors. Fear entered the equation, and our need to take care of ourselves often came at the expense of others. Our words became lies as our actions betrayed our selfish interests. And the Law became necessary for our own survival; today's Old Testament passage says thus – obey the Law and you will live; break it and you will perish. Our selfish behavior needed to be defined, exposed, and curbed, and so God presented Moses with the Commandments, and consequences for breaking God's Law were established. Not everyone followed the Law, but it was well-enough respected and well-enough enforced that people could live in community with some sense of peace and security.

5

Yet this is far from the ideal that God desires for us. I've seen that very cute interfaith logo that spells out the word "coexist" using cultural and religious symbols. It's easy to coexist. All major religions agree on laws to a great extent – they all speak against killing and stealing and committing adultery and lying. Religions can easily coexist if we all abide by the laws that we all respect. Coexistence is a great start, **but it is far less than the kingdom of heaven that Jesus has initiated, because the Law can only control our outward actions. The Law can do nothing about our thought bubbles.** And this is the issue that Jesus is addressing in today's Gospel lesson.

6

The Law is centered on our actions, not our thoughts. Human beings can be, for the most part, law-abiding people - not stealing, not killing, not committing adultery – but we can still harbor the nastiest thoughts about others, still despise others. We can be highly motivated to obey the law simply to insure our own survival and well-being; society imposes severe penalties on those who murder or steal. We can do a great job in obeying laws, even religious law. **But when the Law becomes the focus of our attention, the heart is neglected. And if the heart is neglected, it is soon corrupted, and thus the Law is also corrupted.** We begin to scrutinize the Law in order to make it less cumbersome. We look for ways to interpret the Law in order that our corrupted hearts are not curbed. We start asking questions like, "What does it mean to observe the Sabbath? How much can I do? What is the minimum requirement of this Law?" And what you notice is that God has been left out of our inquiry. And when we leave God out of our inquiry, our all-too-human tendencies come into play, and we start looking for loopholes in the Law, ways to get around the requirements, ways of interpreting it that interfere the least with our own agendas, and we can even convince ourselves that we are righteous because we are able to observe the Laws in ways that we interpret them.

Jesus recognizes this problem in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus says, in the verses leading up to today's text, "I have come not to abolish the Law, but to *fulfill* it." (Matthew 5:17) What does that mean? Jesus cherishes the Law as a means to fulfill the will of the Father, and he *interprets* the law based on the proper intentions of the Father, which, pure and simple, are to love his people. So in situations where laws seem to conflict with one another, follow the law that allows you to love the most. Martin Luther King was arrested for violating laws regarding the use of public space in Birmingham, Alabama. Was he guilty of violating those laws? Yes, but he violated them because he was protesting the great injustice that was being forced upon the African-American community – the unfair laws that continued to deprive people of justice and equality, and as King recognized injustice for one is injustice for all, therefore he was willing to break one law in order to promote a greater Law. Jesus does the same thing; he got himself in a pickle with religious and political leaders for healing on the Sabbath because he was obeying a higher law that entailed loving one's neighbor, which he interpreted to mean *do all you can as soon as you can to alleviate their suffering, to cure their illness*. The lawyers of his day quibbled over the timing – Jesus was healing on the wrong day of the week, but Jesus was being true to the heart of God and to the intent of the Law which was to alleviate suffering and restore people to community, to love others. Jesus acted in accordance with the will of the heart of God, who loves all and desires what is best for all.

And we need to see this intent in today's text when Jesus interprets the Law. On the surface it looks like Jesus is making the Law on the books much stricter (You have heard it said...but I say...). Don't murder, *and don't even be angry with that person, and don't insult him*. Don't commit adultery, *and don't even think about it* because when you think that way you are dehumanizing the person that you are thinking about and seeing them only as an object of your potential pleasure. And regarding divorce, you've heard that it's okay to give your wife a certificate of divorce and go on your merry way. I say don't divorce her – incidentally, I truly believe that Jesus does not condemn divorce in cases where the safety or mental health of the couple is at stake; some marriages were just not meant to last. In this passage, Jesus is concerned about protecting the woman; a man could divorce a woman for burning the bread, and the certificate that he gave her was intended to make it legal for her to remarry. The problem was then, as it is today, divorced women were looked upon with suspicion and even disdain, and men saw this certificate as a loophole to free them from one wife that they might pursue someone else. Jesus is saying to the man, *"Burning the toast is not grounds for divorce; instead of thinking of excuses to leave your wife for a newer, younger model, you need to invest yourself in that relationship."* Regarding making vows, Jesus says, "Don't." Think for a moment about people who have sworn things before you, those who have promised you that they will never do such-and-such again. The fact that they are swearing something before you really indicates that they're prone to break their promise. Jesus says, "Let your yes be yes and your no

be no.” If you are a person of integrity, your word is good enough. To summarize, Jesus is saying, “If your heart is in sync with God’s will, you will stop looking for ways to skirt the Law and start thinking the way God intends you to think and behaving the way God intends you to behave.

9

I wonder how well Jesus would be received in some churches today. How would you react if Jesus said, “The Bible says this, but I say...”??? Some people would be shocked, yet this is precisely what he was saying to his audience! So many people today have turned the Bible into law! Jesus would certainly get an earful from some church members – he might even get run out of some churches! It’s really not surprising that some of his critics believed that he was possessed by demons. There are people today who fall into the same trap that Jesus’ critics fell into in his day: they have made the written word an end in itself and forgotten that the Bible is intended to illuminate the heart of God himself.

10

And so the take home is another one of those introspection exercises that I like to give you– and by the way, you should see that implicit in my prescription is prayer; John Calvin says that in order to know God you need to know yourself, and you need to know yourself to know God. You should be earnestly seeking God’s will. This week I would like you to become more *integrated*. Where do you see dis-integrity in your life? Are you saying one thing to person while thinking another? Are your thoughts less-than-edifying toward others? If you were Jim Carrey in the movie *Liar, Liar*, would you be in trouble? Start the process of integration, of making your words and thoughts more integrated, more in sync. Where you harbor ill will, bad thoughts, pray that God would guide your words and thoughts – you know there’s nothing wrong with criticizing someone in love, with the intent to help them become a better person, but you should pray that you would say the right words in the right way at the right time so as not to hurt if at all possible. Have the best of intentions always. Perhaps this exercise, this introspection and focus on integration will sweeten some soured relationships. Perhaps it lead you to ask for forgiveness. Perhaps it will lead others to ask you for forgiveness. And perhaps it won’t do any of these things. But I guarantee you it will bring you closer to the heart of God, more fully into his presence, closer to the kingdom of heaven, and that is a very nice place to dwell.

ⁱ Merriam Webster online dictionary: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrity>