

# The Good, the Bad and the Justly

(Matthew 5: 17-20)

(Wildwood Mennonite Church. January 20, 2019)

- G - One time there was a vegan who was called by a medical clinic to come and see his doctor. Nervous as to why the doctor was calling him, the vegan decided to stop at McDonalds for a Happy Meal. He went to the counter and said, "Give me a cheese burger, but hold the cheese. I'm a vegan!" The clerk punched the order into the till...
- K - Wait a second. That doesn't make any sense.
- G - What's wrong?
- K - If the guy in your story is a vegan, he wouldn't be eating a cheeseburger.
- G - Yeah, but he said "hold the cheese".
- K - So?
- G - Vegans don't eat cheese.
- K - They don't eat meat either.
- G - He's a vegan, not a vegetarian.
- K - Vegans don't eat anything derived from an animal. No meat. No milk. No cheese.
- G - Oh, so no cheeseburger, no hamburger. How about a ranch chicken wrap?
- K - As long as he ordered the wrap without chicken. He can still have the french fries or the apple slices. And he can order a bagel.
- G - A bagel. How is that a happy meal? So why would he even bother going to McDonalds?
- K - He could have a salad?
- G - A salad? He is going to the doctor's and wants to be happy. Not healthy. Wait, I know. He is a vegan, but he sometimes has cheeseburgers without cheese.
- K - So he is not a vegan.
- G - He is a vegan most of the time.
- K - So he is what-a-be-vegan.
- G - Huh?
- K - You're saying that he is a vegan only when it suits him to be a vegan. Today, in your story, he wants a cheeseburger so he has no trouble eating meat. But tomorrow he will probably be morally against eating meat again.
- G - Right.
- K - You can't have it both ways. If he is morally against eating products derived from animals, then he should always be against it. Not when it suits him.

- G - But being a vegan is a choice, right? So today he chooses to eat a cheeseburger.
- K - Wait a second. This is a story. If you are inventing a character who is a vegan but has no trouble ignoring his beliefs, why are you making the character a vegan?
- G - Because I thought of a really cool song about cheese.
- K - A song about cheese?
- G - It is a song about this vegan seeing cheese everywhere haunting him in his house, and because he is trapped in his house, he goes crazy.
- K - Why can't he leave the house?
- G - That's the best part I haven't got to yet. His doctor is calling him in to tell him that he has agoraphobia.
- K - What?
- G - Agoraphobia. The fear of going outside.
- K - But he is at McDonald's now.
- G - Yeah, but he doesn't know that he is agoraphobic yet.
- K - If he had agoraphobia he would never leave the house in the first place.
- G - The doctor hasn't told him yet.
- K - No. You don't suddenly learn that you are agoraphobic. You would show the symptoms of agoraphobia first, and then be diagnosed.
- G - But it's a mental condition.
- K - But it's not a choice. It's not like deciding to be a vegan. That is a choice. And yes, you can decide if and when you want to be a vegan. But agoraphobia is a mental condition. If your character had agoraphobia, he wouldn't be driving to McDonalds for a Happy Meal on his way to the medical clinic. He would already be too scared to leave his house.
- G - Well that's kind of a sad story. Who wants to listen to that?
- K - At least it is a story that makes sense. If you are going to use words, then at least make sure you use them in the right context.
- G - Well, fine. Then I'm not going to tell you the rest of the story.

Over the last weeks, our Sunday School class has spent a lot of time considering the audience of New Testament writers. For example, when you compare the Gospel of Matthew with the Gospel of Luke, Matthew has far more references to the Old Testament than Luke. The reason is that the Gospel of Matthew was intended for a Jewish audience. A Jewish reader would be familiar with what we call the Old Testament because this was their scripture. So when Matthew interjects an Old Testament verse into the account of Jesus' life, a Jewish listener would recognize it from their scripture and make the connection with Jesus.

The Book of Luke, in comparison, does not spend time quoting Old Testament text because this book was intended for a Gentile audience. It was intended for people who knew little or nothing about the Old Testament. People who spoke Greek. People who knew more about Roman law and Greek philosophy than they did about the ten commandments and the prophets. So when Luke recounts the parable of the tax collector or how Pilate declares Jesus' innocence, this has special resonance with the Greek-speaking audience.

Last week in Sunday School we talked about the Book of James. Whereas most of the letters in the New Testament act as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, the Book of James is more of a sequel to the Book of Matthew. Like Matthew, the intended audience for the writer of James are Jewish Christians. The exact author and time of writing are not agreed upon by scholars, but the content of the letter suits the type of church that would have started in Jerusalem. We hear references to this group of Jewish Christians in the Book of Acts where Peter and Paul disagree over which, if any, of the Jewish laws should remain as part of the newly formed Christian church.

Sadly, this little tiff was not resolved two thousand years ago. It still exists today, not only between different groups of Christians, but even within ourselves. When we are not threatened by something, all of us are more than happy to believe that we are saved by faith alone. Who needs all those legalistic tomes, right? But the second we feel threatened or, dare I say, the second we want to keep someone out of our group, then suddenly the smallest, insignificant bible verse that justifies our petty belief becomes the most important thing to our faith. The early church used to have all sorts of scripture to justify slavery. More recently, the church had to wean itself off its favourite verses that conveniently prevented women from having the same respect and authority in the church as men. And today the church is trying to decide whether to let go of the few verses that allow some to prevent the LGBTQ community from worshipping as equals. Yet even with the current fad for growing beards and shaving heads, no one seems to

remember Leviticus 19:27; Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. Come on Christians. Rejoice and grow your hair!

All joking aside, this problem with the law is something to consider, especially as today's scripture begins with a verse that is central to the discussion about the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

*Don't think I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them, but to fulfill them.*

Jesus tells his listeners that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. This scripture has been understood two ways. Some argue that by fulfilling the law, Jesus made the law unnecessary. Anyone who accepts the gift of salvation has no need to try and follow the law. This is the message of Paul, and is the message that we hear throughout most of the letters in the New Testament.

By comparison, others believe that even though the law is not necessary for salvation, the law is required for obedience. If we agree that Jesus was sinless, what is sin? Sin is that which was described in the Old Testament. So if we are called to be imitators of Jesus, we need to abide by the same law that Jesus fulfilled. This was the position of Peter and the early church in Jerusalem.

Since that early time, the church has basically sat on the fence over this question. The Catholic church has essentially argued that Jesus expanded the law, but did not replace it. Protestants like Luther, Calvin and Zwingli believed that Jesus only illustrated the true law to Jewish leaders who had confused it with their application of the law. And Anabaptists took the position that the laws are important because Jesus reformed the laws, and that the Old Testament laws could only be justified if they were reaffirmed by Jesus.

But wait a second, I hear you saying, did Jesus not question the law? Yes, Jesus questioned the application or mis-application of the law, but not the spirit of the law. For instance, when Jesus healed on the Sabbath, his argument against his distractors was not that Sabbath restrictions were wrong. But that certain actions superseded the law to do no work on Sabbath. Jesus did not ever reject the law.

So if we need to worry ourselves about the law, how much of it do we need to worry about? In case you haven't bother to count, there are 613 laws. Of these 613 laws, there are 365 negative laws; which coincide with the number of days in the solar calendar. Our anti-clean cut law from Leviticus is one such example.

*Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.*

The remaining 248 are positive laws which in number, relate with the number of bones and organs that were ascribed to our bodies in ancient times. One such instance of these laws is Deuteronomy 25: 11-12;

*If men get into a fight with one another, and the wife of one intervenes to rescue her husband from the grip of his opponent by reaching out and seizing his genitals, you shall cut off her hand; show no pity.*

So again, if we need to worry ourselves about the law, how much of it do we need to worry about? Surely we don't have to stop shaving the sides of our head or, heaven forbid, teach our spouses to not seize the genitals of people with whom we are arguing?

*The truth is, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter of the Law, not even the smallest part of a letter, will be done away with until it is all fulfilled.*

Ok, so no subtlety there. If you were hoping for, "follow the ten commandments and then pick ten of your favourite laws", or "correlate the laws with the calendar year, make a toilet calendar book to keep in your bathroom, and follow one law per day", you are out of luck. Jesus tells his listeners that every law is equally important until heaven and earth pass away.

Worse yet, Jesus says there is no rank to what is most or least important, and no merit badges for getting a few right. Whoever breaks the least significant law and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom.

*That's why whoever breaks the least significant of these commands and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever fills and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

Jesus implies that even if there is a ranking system as to what is most or least important, there is no merit badge for following the most important. Instead, whoever breaks the least significant law and teaches others to do the same will be called the least in the kingdom. Harsh. Imagine having this kind of a system in school; "Hello, children. Here is a quick test. If you get one wrong answer, you will fail the test, and we will let all the other kids call you the dumbest kid in school. Good luck."

You see why so much ink has been spilled over these verses. Thus far the Sermon on the Mount has been pretty inspiring. Jesus started with the beatitudes; blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers. Short, inspirational verses that tip the traditional order of who is important upside-down. Next, Jesus talked about salt and light. You are salt, don't lose your flavour. You are light, don't be hidden. Easy. Think of any advertisement on television for some now miracle drug or life insurance policy that you can order. Happy pictures of healthy senior citizens laughing, playing tennis, looking healthy.

Today's verses are like the fine print. The list of side effects that start scrolling across our TV screen. Yes, the kingdom of heaven can be yours for the price of complete adherence to each and every rule in the Old Testament. And by the way, if you screw up once, we take it all away.

But we are not quite done yet. After making it sound virtually impossible to succeed, Jesus summarizes his short lesson by saying,

*I tell you, unless your sense of justice surpasses that of the religious scholars and the Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Throughout his ministry, Jesus argued incessantly with Pharisees and religious scholars. In most cases he told them they were too legalistic. Too focused on the letter of the law. So it is important to note that in this passage, Jesus does not say, unless your knowledge of the law surpasses that of the religious scholars, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. He says unless your sense of justice surpasses that of the scholars. This is important and I will come back to it.

But first, think back to the story I was trying to tell you before Katharine shut me down. The story was completely improbable because I threw together elements which, by definition, could never have co-existed in the storyline I chose. I wanted to tell a story about someone who was having nightmares about not being able to leave his house and being haunted by cheese. I tried to justify his disdain for cheese by making him a vegan, and his fear for going outside by making him agoraphobic, but also wanted a big reveal at a doctor's office and have him stopping for a Happy Meal on the way. The first inconsistency was that if he really was a vegan, he probably would not have chosen to go to McDonalds for a Happy meal. I could sort of justify this by saying he wasn't a very committed vegan, but my real mistake was that if he truly was agoraphobic, he wouldn't be driving around town going to McDonalds and taking himself to a doctor's appointment. I wanted to include elements in my story that were perhaps inconsistent with the storyline.

Likewise, let's start by putting this scripture in context. The Sermon on the Mount is probably the most quoted scripture from Jesus' ministry, but it only exists in its entirety in the Book of Matthew. The Book of Luke has a similar sermon called the Sermon on the Plain, but it is much shorter than the sermon found in Matthew. And most important, this section on the fulfillment on the law only exists in Matthew. Why? Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience. He is writing to Jewish Christians like the early church in Jerusalem, who believed that they still had

to be fully Jewish to be Christian. So it is very true that some part of the early church completely believed that the law was still as important as before.

But before you all leave the church rejoicing that you are off the hook, there is a bit of bad news. There is another famous passage by Jesus that we probably all know off by heart that exists in all three Synoptic gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. Later, near the end of Jesus' ministry, a scribe comes up to Jesus and asks which is the most important commandment. This time Jesus is much more succinct.

*And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."*

So is this a case of Jesus changing his mind in the course of his ministry? Did he get so much flack from his listeners about following the law that Jesus decided to make things a bit easier? No. Jesus does not say, "Do these two things and forget all the rest." Jesus says, "Do these two things because on these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

The difference here is subtle but significant. And it reflects back to today's passage about having a sense of justice that surpasses the religious scholars. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, Jesus argued about Jewish law with scholars. But rather than split hairs over the exact meaning of a Hebrew word and delve deeper into some sort of scholarly exegesis, Jesus basically tells get their head out of the book. Look up and see how your legalistic code is playing out in real life. And rather react by verse, allow yourself to react as the person you are.

Again, in my ill-fated story, my most significant error was to try and make my character agoraphobic. Agoraphobics, by definition, are scared of open space. It is a mental condition, but not one that you choose to be. Either you are agoraphobic or you are not agoraphobic. If he truly was agoraphobic, he never would have left the house in the first place.

But my lesser mistake is the one that is more applicable to us today. I wanted my character to be a vegan so that I could make up a silly cheese song, but I also wanted him to have a cheese burger with no cheese rather than something a vegan would really want. While it is true that I could make my character a non-committed vegan, the fact is, if he is non-committed, he would not have been a vegan. He would have been a guy who sometimes emulated vegans, but wasn't really a vegan.

Likewise with our faith. If we truly want to consider ourselves as Christians, we need to work hard at a sense of justice that reflects the love of God in our actions to our neighbours. We

can't decide one day to be good people, but the next day decide that perhaps it is all right to do some action which we know does not reflect God's love. You can't turn it off and turn it on.

So if it is Sabbath and your child falls in the well, regardless of what the law says, you rescue your child because that is what is most just. Or that is what love commands you to do. We do not have to waste time thumbing through some glossary of proper actions, because that is an action that comes naturally from acting justly.

But if your child is not falling in the well, it does not mean that you can turn off your sense of justice, or your love. It is still Sabbath. There should still be actions that naturally result from your acceptance of God's love and your willingness to love others as yourselves.

See the law through the lens of justice, or, as in our more preferred passage, see the law through the lens of love. If you do — if you really work hard at trying to be just or trying to love each other as you love yourselves — then even if you are not consciously following the law, your actions will reflect the law.