

Attitudes and Actions

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 5:21-37

February 16, 2014 Epiphany 6A

Kermit the Frog sang, "It's not that easy being green."

Adolescents say that it's not easy being a teen.

Dieters find that it's not easy being lean.

The invisible man says that it's not easy being seen.

College administrators say it's not that easy being dean.

And the further we get into the Sermon on the Mount, we find something else that's not easy, but I can't make it rhyme with green. It's not that easy to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus. The guy who elsewhere says "My yoke is easy and my burden is light," challenges us in the Sermon on the Mount with some pretty high expectations. The rock star Alice Cooper put it like this. "Drinking beer is easy. Trashing your hotel room is easy. But being a Christian, that's a tough call. That's rebellion."ⁱ Bet you've never heard Kermit the Frog, Jesus, and Alice Cooper quoted in the same sermon.

Last week, we heard Jesus say that he had come to fulfill the law, not to do away with it; and that his followers had to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. We think of Christianity as a religion of grace, not law, so what does Jesus mean?

In the full lectionary passage for today, Matthew 5:21-37, Jesus talks about three things related to the law: murder, adultery, and divorce, and then adds on about making pledges or oaths. On each topic, he begins, "You have heard it said..." and then goes on to say "But *I* say to you..." And in each case he does two things. He goes from action to attitude, and he intensifies the law—he makes it tougher. He calls for us to coordinate our actions and our attitudes; to deal with the attitudes that can lead to bad actions. To coordinate our actions and attitudes is to have integrity; to be an integrated person. That's what Jesus wants for us. Throughout his ministry, he saved his most negative scoldings for hypocrites—play-actors, literally—who presented a pious face to the world but inside were corrupt and callous. He called them broods of serpents, whitewashed tombs, and a bunch of other bad names. At any rate, this larger section of lectionary text, verses 21-37, has too much meat to cover in one sermon, so I

picked one example of the list to focus in on—the first one, on murder and the anger that leads up to it.

To understand this passage, let's hear it in paraphrase, from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

"This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

"Or say you're out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don't lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you're likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won't get out without a stiff fine."

So Jesus begins talking about murder. We all know that murder is a crime wherever it is committed. It's wrong, right? Although we love to watch television shows about it, *CSI*, *NCIS*, *NCISLA*, *Law & Order*, etc., etc., etc., and read detective stories about it, we know that murder is a sinful and wrong and criminal act. We know that it's the first of the "do nots" in the Ten Commandments. And a certain smugness comes in. We don't have to worry, we've never murdered anyone, so we're good, right? But then Jesus takes it a BIG step forward. Why do we murder? Murder, he says, grows out of anger. If you get so angry at someone that murderous thoughts enter your head, you're guilty of murder. What? Wait a minute, Jesus. You've never had people cut you off in traffic. You never had sassy kids that got on your last nerve. You've never had a fellow employee ruin your project at work. Anger can't be a sin, because we all do it, right?

Jesus wasn't against anger. Jesus got exasperated at his disciples. Jesus got angry at conditions and people that wore

down the poor and oppressed. Jesus got angry at the money changers in the temple.

And psychologists tell us that it's okay to be angry. If we take our anger and suppress it, turn it inwards, it often turns into depression. No, it's what we do with our anger that's the problem. Anger, properly expressed, can lead to discussion that leads to change. It's *staying* angry that leads to problems. It's brooding on it, cherishing it, fanning its flames, that leads to rage.

Steve Goodier, in his blog "Life Support System," has an article called "Danger Zone," where he notes that in spelling as well as in life, there's only one letter different between danger and anger. He notes that holding on to your anger can cause physical health issues. We end up hurting ourselves rather than the person we're angry at. He offers these four steps that can help move us out of the danger zone when we feel as if our hostility is running the show.

Control it. Uncontrolled anger will take over.

Talk it out. Don't keep it in and let it fester.

Act on it. Do what needs to be done to resolve the situation.

Helplessness will only provoke more anger and, eventually, despair.

End it. Just as there is a starting point for anger, there must be an ending. Make a decision not to prolong destructive hostility. It can help to remember that for every minute we're angry, we lose sixty seconds of happiness and sixty seconds of peace. The sooner we get out of the danger zone, the sooner we can get back to truly living."

And Jesus gave his own solution to the anger problem—reconciliation. If you come to bring an offering to the altar and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you—interesting, isn't it, that he doesn't say that you have something against your brother or sister—go and make things right with the person you've offended, and then come back to make your offering. If we transform our hearts so that we are considerate for other people's feelings, and if we take positive steps toward making things right, then we're living as citizens in

God's kingdom. We're doing our part. Abraham Lincoln knew this passage well when he said that the best way to destroy an enemy is to make him (or her) a friend.

So Jesus calls for an inward law that transforms the outward law. Rather than letting outward problems escalate to where violence might happen, be the peacemaker that was lifted up in the beatitudes.

Let me close with this challenge from Delmer Chilton: "That is the call of today's text on all of us. Do it now. Live by kingdom values now. Straighten out your life now. Make peace with others now. The kingdom of God is here, now. The spirit of God is giving you strength for whatever changes you need to make, now. The love of Christ is forgiving you and inviting you to forgive others, now. Now. Now. Now."ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ (preachingtip.com, 6 Epiphany Year A)

ⁱⁱ (lectionarylab.com for Feb. 16, 2014)