

Doing the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus spoke simply and clearly. The key to interpreting Him is to let Him speak for Himself. Many of His sayings are examples and many use metaphors, and these must be unpacked to be followed. But we must not assume He says one thing but means another.

This letter does these things, attempting to unpack His metaphors and expand His examples wherever possible, but chiefly letting Him speak for Himself.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. - Matthew 22:37-40

On these two commandments hang all of Jesus' teachings, too. When asked who one's neighbor was, Jesus told the famous story of the good Samaritan and asked the crowd who the victim's neighbor was. "The Samaritan," they answered, and He merely said, "Go and do likewise." For Jesus, everyone is my neighbor: my friend, my enemy, the stranger, the unnoticed. They may treat me well or badly but I will not change *my* heart from love. No one has that power over me.

No matter the office and no matter the purpose, friend or enemy, any person you have dealings with is a neighbor and sincerely beloved. The costume of a centurion is a *costume*. Disbelieve such things; see only the man. So when they come to arrest you, love them and understand what they are charged to do: Therefore go sweetly. Or here is the slave driver with a pistol leveled at me: Well, let him kill me if he must. What does it matter if he thinks he owns me, is superior to me, or has a right to my life? He is my neighbor and I love him and I will listen and help him even through his anger.

What I do, likewise, is between me and my God, and my God *is* love. My heart has no room for hate, nor my mind for contrivances, nor my soul for judgment. I am full in every way with love for God (or no, I confess that I am not, so Lord, fill me up.) When I love God first I must necessarily love my neighbor second. It is a lie to say to anyone, I love God but I do not love you.

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. - Matthew 7:24

The first aim of the Christian life is to do the sayings of Jesus. Nothing in heaven or earth can dislodge me if I keep them: For anything I stand to lose, I would willingly give up. I will love my God and my neighbor and that, God willing, is final. I will bear good will to those that hurt me; what then can they do to my heart, my soul, or my mind?

Now the sayings Jesus is talking about here are the sayings in His Sermon on the Mount, so let us go through the commands in the whole sermon in order.

Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. - Matthew 5:12

Beware if you are not persecuted! If I do Jesus' sayings, I will find myself in someone's crosshairs. I will be the friend of their enemy, the stumbling block in the way of their authority, and the voice in the wilderness they cannot silence. I will feed the homeless and they will lock me up. I will harbor the immigrant, the outcast, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. I will break the law when justice demands it.

Someone is bound to get angry.

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? - Matthew 5:13

Without love, there is no way to get love: Its first appearance is a miracle. Why love the unloved? After all, I do not love them, so starting to love them is madness, why, doing them a good turn is madness. If love have lost its lovingness, wherewith shall it be salted?

Love flavors the world. Everything else is bland. Only love brings romance and adventure of any kind that lasts. Only love brings purpose. Only love fosters beauty. Only love (and faith and hope with it) endures.

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. - Matthew 5:14

The house churches have sometimes hid, but they hid because they had been seen by vengeful authorities who hate the stateless love of Christ. When I do His work I will be seen, sooner or later, and not always by friendly eyes. Nor shall I fear it. We have the example of Rome, which

converted after persecuting Christians. (And we are still wrestling with the legacy of Rome's conversion.)

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. - Matthew 5:17-18

Loving God and neighbor fulfills the law. But in the fulfillment of the law we are authorized to break a particular law as written whenever it would have us break the fundamental law of love. We are likewise free to break secular law.

Paul taught that we are not under law. The law is a tutor and a friend, and any law that does not inform some part of your worldview is a jot or tittle erased. You must learn from it, not follow verbatim what your translators say, nor otherwise throw it out. But the true law, which is love, must come before the expanded version of the law, which is death without it.

Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. - Matthew 5:21-22a

Jesus makes the external internal. What motivates killing? *That* must be healed. Anger, profit, bloodlust, jingoism, imperialism, all lead to killing, and will surely all be judged.

Do the same with every commandment. The law against covetousness is our example: Why steal or commit adultery? Because of covetousness. Therefore do not commit covetousness. Why bear false witness against a neighbor? Why, to do them harm by the machinery of state punishment. Therefore desire no harm, nor anything contrary to your neighbor's interests.

Be angry at your brother if you must, but do not take it out against him; simply address the problem. Through anger you can explore the nature of a broken relationship. You may rightly be angry at injustice and abuse. Harness your fury and you may indeed find a way through. Do not harbor violent fantasies. You may be able to avoid anger by understanding how and why an abuse occurred, but it is better to be angry than sanctimonious. Jesus himself fashioned a whip.

Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. - Matthew 5:25

Choose the most peaceful way to settle a dispute. Choose mediation before arbitration and arbitration before court. My father was a mediator in no small part because of this saying. Learn to give ground artfully so you can find a place of agreement with those who oppose you. Practice with friends and family so you are ready when a real adversary arises.

Taken spiritually this means to accept criticism and judgment under the law. *Yes, I did wrong.* Now let me love.

But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. - Matthew 5:28

The Greek text says covetousness.

Jesus again makes the external internal. This is important to Him. We cannot inwardly be ravaging wolves, and yet say we love our neighbor. What is inside must comport with the outward declaration of love.

Does this preclude sexual fantasy? Ask yourself what the real people involved would say if they knew what you were imagining. Ask yourself whether you're living up to your own expectations. And ask whether it is best to stir up desire, or perhaps better to let it lie.

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. - Matthew 5:29a

We take it for hyperbole, but it is clear that if a right eye really could cause us to stumble, and nothing else would regulate it, then we must pluck it out and enter life. How much more for habits and desires? (Ownership is nothing more than a habit of use.)

Be careful about applying this to people, though. What you may pluck out is the *habit* of hanging out with them. Do not cut people out of your life, which is then worse than your treatment of enemies. Do not ask it of others. Bear with them instead.

But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery. - Matthew 5:32

A hard teaching. That thing we call divorce has no power — a writ of divorce is a scrap of paper. Notice how much denying divorce cranks up the stakes for who you marry. (Of course, elsewhere He says there will be no marriage in the Kingdom of Heaven.)

We must imagine that really cranking up commitment is the point. There is a commitment to support one another and a commitment to remain *in love* with one another. This commitment exists even without marriage. Now what do you do if one of the two stops doing this? And what about abuse?

The abuser violates marriage bonds as surely as the adulterer and relies on his victim's sweet obedience to get away with it. The abuser is a predator who desecrates the marriage bond in order to control and destroy.

We will always wish we had Jesus' answer, but my answer is this: If adultery is less severe than the circumstances of the marriage, hazard divorce. Sometimes the only choice love has is to leave. Abuse is worse than adultery, so issue a writ of divorce, and pray.

But for divorce just to be with someone new there is no warrant at all. For divorce to escape a hated spouse there is no warrant: The hate must be treated. But a church community must be able to help, or this demand is toothless.

Generalizing from this, knowing that divorce was in the law for the hardness of the people's hearts, we find that law must make all manner of accommodations for the hardness of hearts. Marriage itself accommodates lust and jealousy. The dietary law accommodates the eating of meat. (In the narrative of the Exodus, God makes provision for the people's hunger with manna from heaven, but in their gluttony and hard-heartedness they demanded meat, and God supplied birds for them to catch and eat.) Because the people would not consider giving up their slaves, accommodation was made for slavery.

But I say unto you, Swear not at all. - Matthew 5:34a

Swearing means oathtaking, of course, not vulgar speech. Affirm, but do not swear. Do not swear on the Bible: It contains this very injunction against oathtaking!

Oathtaking is superstitious. If I swear something, what makes me more honest than if I affirm it? Why would I be lying, anyway? If my goal is to convince someone else that I'm not lying, there are better ways than oaths, such as speaking clearly about what I intend to do, or explaining why I do not want to do something else. If I need to convince *myself* not to lie, I need to return to a place of love.

Neither demand an oath from anyone else.

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. - Matthew 5:39

Now "evil" here is not some force of darkness, but precisely the harm presently befalling you, or the one doing it. But you will notice in the scripture plenty of sneaking around in baskets to avoid harm — you may *avoid* harm. Remember: You love your attacker. Your attacker has gone mad.

This is not a call to nonviolence, exactly. It is a reminder that the one you would be using violence against is your beloved.

Further, many sources of anger are extinguished by a constant, calm response. It is possible to look your assailant in the eye and offer assistance, even while he strikes you. Keep a level head, be willing to lose much, and you — and your confused neighbor — may win much.

And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. - Matthew 5:40-41

Compulsion is an unreal thing for the Christian. If I do not do this, you say, you will harm me for it: Well harm me if you must, but there is no connection between my action and yours. Yes, harm me if you must.

Nonetheless, many people are used to compelling instead of asking: and if that is the best you can do, my love, I will do what I can for you, and I will do it freely. And because I do it freely, why would I limit myself to what you tried to compel me to do?

So to us, an attempt to compel is a poorly worded question, to which we strive to answer *yes*, and then some, ignoring the unpleasantness with which the question is asked.

Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away. - Matthew 5:42

Let this be a confession. A man asked me once for money for bus fare. He may have been in earnest. I had a twenty in my pocket. I did not give it to him. I was a fool not to offer it. "Anyone would do the same," you might say — but not Christ.

You may test that requests are in earnest; you may judge whether by giving you will do any good at all, and whether it will do harm to you or the recipient that your recipient cannot wish for. On discovering that you follow this precept, someone might glibly ask for your house — but the request falls short. You might offer a room, or to help with a move, instead.

Give like a father to a son, not as one at gunpoint. A father will reinterpret his son's requests to give him something more appropriate: not the car, but to borrow the keys; not the house, but a room; not his own old coat, but a new coat that fits right. If my son asks for his present the day before his birthday, I will still say no. If my son has his present in his hands the day before his birthday, I may wrestle it away. So give like a father to a son.

It is fine to ask, "Why do you need it? What might serve better than what you asked for?" or any other question that love leads you to.

Has a thief rifled through your chest? Be anxious, for you might have forgotten to leave anything there that would do the thief good.

But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. - Matthew 5:44

When someone hates you, treat it the way you would a toddler's anger. Be firm in your love for them. Remember that they are confused and misled and that they think they must hate. They seek vengeance, they desire to do harm; do they not see that they are hurting their own beloved? So if they do hurt you, or take away what you have, hold tight to your love for them, remembering that they are in the grips of illusion.

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. - Matthew 5:48

Every moment of life is a gift from God, even the moments that are spent denying Him. Those who love Him and those who hate Him, are all sustained by Him moment by moment. This is perfect love. We sometimes wish God were a little less merciful — He was merciful to every tyrant in history. They could have dropped dead miraculously instead.

Show mercy as radical as your Father's. His way is right, not ours.

When thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. - Matthew 6:3

You might not have much to do alms with, if you keep His teachings well, but you will have your own power of action, perfected, and that is something more than money. Money does nothing but buy the effort of others, or pay ransoms like rent.

When you do good for your dearest beloved, you look for no return on it. When your heart is set right it is the same for any good you do. You have your reward: You have done good to one you love.

Make your deeds known if you want to stand like a tower and do them again. If the motive is to make yourself available, publishing your love does no harm. If you believe they will praise your Father in Heaven for it, let them know.

After this manner therefore pray ye: - Matthew 6:9

Having just instructed the hearer not to make vain repetitions, He gives a template. Because it has become too familiar, here it is paraphrased:

*Father, though we do not say your name,
Give us today, this week, this year, exactly what we need,
Hold nothing against us, and help us hold nothing against anyone else,
Please do not test us: yet keep us far from doing evil.
The kingdom is yours, and the power, and the glory, no matter what.*

Amen.

Devise your own variations. He said to pray after His manner, not in His words. He also warned against vain repetitions. Make sure your words have meaning to you when you pray.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal. - Matthew 6:19

Lay up what you will but never let it be treasure to you. The thief is a long lost brother; let him take what he needs. The moth and the rust are known to you when you lay up goods: so there is no heartbreak there. If the monasteries of England had not laid up treasure, the Vikings might never have sacked them. What property you have you must defend at times against someone you love. The bargain is rotten.

Jesus says to lay up treasure in Heaven, and why? For your heart will be where your treasure is. Yes: Lay up treasure in Heaven *because* your heart will follow, and to have your heart aligned with your Father's in Heaven is the greatest mortal good.

The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. - Matthew 6:22

Not as clear as most of Jesus' sayings. Or is it? Is the key to unpacking this that it is meant to be as simple as the rest? What is the eye but that by which we take in the world? If we perceive evil and ugliness, we will be filled with them. If we perceive clearly, without judgment, the body shall be full of light.

We choose to let in frustration, rage, boredom, and many other emotions that stand in judgment of the world. It feels as though the world makes us angry — no, that is the evil of our eye. Scrub your eye clean and the world will no longer trouble you in petty ways.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. - Matthew 6:24

You *cannot* do it. You might make a decent sum of money, even if you do not love it, but you will treat it lightly and have trouble "growing" it. You cannot tell by looking at a bank account whether someone serves Mammon, though a stock portfolio offers clues (what bargains are made with the devil for good dividends?)

No, you cannot prioritize money if you prioritize people, which is to say, serve God. You will be forced to make suboptimal, unprofitable decisions, if you love people. You have to be willing to make stockholders angry.

Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. - Matthew 6:25

Take this as far as you dare. Some really do it, don't you know, and make out fine. Notice that we think most about these things when they are difficult: Being troubled over anything at all is silly. Do not think about styles and fashions (except for fun). Does this mean you should not make dinner ahead and freeze it? Or choose out an outfit the night before? Heaven forbid! Whatever lightens the work is good. This saying was made for man, not man for this saying, and indeed this is the establishment of the permanent sabbath.

Save your thought and your trouble for something more precious than food and raiment. Simplify.

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. - Matthew 6:33

Do it. Righteousness is perfection in love. Establish God's kingdom everywhere your feet tread. You will find that you never have to toil anymore, that the work you do is changed in nature. Drudgery ceases to exist.

Our Father wants to give us good gifts but our evil gets in the way. What you eat, drink, and wear will be taken care of — and so what if it won't?

Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. - Matthew 6:34

Thinking ahead is sometimes helpful, so do it when it is, but most thinking ahead is nothing but a waste of effort that could be spent better today.

There is nothing special about a day as the time window here. Some activities take a week; so don't think about next week. Some take a year; so don't think about next year. This year I will need a snowblower, so let me make sure, even in summer, that I have one working.

But when you can, really stop at the day.

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. - Matthew 7:1-2

You judge when you decide who or what someone is. You judge when you hold something against them. You judge when your first impression comes in as certain fact. You judge when you impute motive (however innocent you think it.) You judge when you medicalize behavior. Find excuses to let people off. Show mercy.

Stop judging. Do not judge even when you would never do the same thing. You must show discernment, but discernment is not judgment. Yet your discernment is a measure whereby you mete. Be sure that it is accurate and honest and forgiving.

You will find it hard, after the flesh, not to judge: Druggies, rapists, abusers, your political opposition, and murderers, simply *deserve it*. Discern, but do not judge. And do not let judgment hide in your discernment. Harbor no contempt. If you find yourself driven to mockery, for instance, then you have surely crossed the line. Abuse is still abuse when it is deserved.

As for being judged, accept judgment sweetly and with gratitude.

Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye. - Matthew 7:6

A hypocrite is an actor, a pretender, not a person who "says one thing and does another." If the point were righteousness, there could be no mistake: you would seek it for yourself first. If you fault your brother (as opposed to offering a loving correction that can actually help) what is the possible motive? Only hypocrisy.

If you would cast the beam out of your eye, take correction gracefully, and encourage it. Use every tool available to you, including mechanical means of recording. Your face, your posture, your tone, and your words, set the course for your entire mind. Think gracefully; speak gracefully; experience grace. When you think you see anger on somebody else's face, consider whether it might be worry or fear.

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. - Matthew 7:7

This is most important taken spiritually. We seek to love God and neighbor ever more deeply: Ask for this. We seek to live the life eternal: Knock. We seek to do Jesus' sayings perfectly: We will find out how.

(But how do I knock? Go! Find out how!)

Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. - Matthew 7:14

The gate is love: To enter it is to put aside hate and jealousy and judgment, loving God and neighbor. The way must be walked carefully, but it is not the moralistic "straight and narrow."

Jesus is not gnostic (He would have said it clearly, if He meant Himself by the gate), yet God *is* love; so if it were Him, it would be love, anyway. If the gate were Jesus, then here we are, entering in by Him, and by His sayings. (The Psalm was familiar, which sings of "the gate of the LORD.")

God's way is love; obedience to God's way, is love. Therefore seek righteousness. Love assiduously. Do His sayings.

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. - Matthew 7:20

Not false prophets only, but philosophies and theories of all kinds, may be tested this way. But be wary; many a wolf has learned to play the long game and stock up as many signs as you care to look for to judge him by. He has white teeth and a nice smile, a perfect wife and a good car, a big church building with lots of congregants and excellent childcare. No suffering is on display, here — indeed, by his fruits you can know him.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. - Matthew 7:21

It is not by professing Jesus for Lord that we enter the kingdom: He says so Himself. It is by doing His father's will. And what is His Father's will? That we love one another. That we walk in righteousness, humbly with Him. That we do His sayings, for He taught His Father's will.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love yourself, and love your neighbor as yourself. Expand your circle of neighbors as far as you find yourself able.

Repay cruelty with kindness. Repay injustice with justice. Repay indifference with care. Repay greed with charity. Repay abuse with love. Commit to your own disadvantage. Bear shame and never heap it. Do not mock.

Behold I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be ye therefore wise as serpents and simple as doves. - Matthew 10:16

The people we love hate us and will abuse us, but we are not called to be fools about it. We are, in short, called to judge situations carefully and steer toward the most loving outcome in each and every one. Do his words.

✠ *Joshua Ellis*

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