

## Meadowbrook Congregational church

### “Higher and Higher”

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#### **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.”* <sup>22</sup>*But 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.* <sup>23</sup>*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,* <sup>24</sup>*leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.* <sup>25</sup>*Come 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.* <sup>26</sup>*Truly 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.”* <sup>28</sup>*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* <sup>29</sup>*If 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.* <sup>30</sup>*And 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.”* <sup>32</sup>*But 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.”* <sup>34</sup>*But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,* <sup>35</sup>*or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.* <sup>36</sup>*And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* <sup>37</sup>*Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

I found an interesting story while surfing the internet the other day. It was about Gary Erickson, the founder of Clif Bars and author of the book *Raising the Bar*. Laura is a big fan of Clif Bars, keeping a few of the cake-like nutrition products in her car at all times for lunch or a snack. Erickson founded his company in his mother’s kitchen with a desire to create a “sports bar” that didn’t taste like dirt. He named the product after his father Clifford. And he has turned it into a quality and well known brand. Laura likes the Chocolate Brownie Almond. I prefer the White Chocolate Chip.

Erickson’s philosophy of business is quite different than most. He describes a “white path,” one in which people play it safe, operate by the rational, book-making decisions that accountants love and do what their common business sense tells them to do. He also describes a “red path,” the road where people follow the values of the heart. They take risks

that ensure that their vision is nurtured. They are more concerned about the culture of their work rather than the bottom line of their balance sheet.

I was fascinated to read that after his chief competitors in the market had been purchased by major corporations, Erickson was prepared to accept a \$120 million offer from Quaker. It was a decision that made sense to everyone financially. It would secure him and his family for life. It would insure the continuation of the Clif Bars against some rather formidable market adversaries. But on the way to the meeting in which he was to sign the papers, Erickson began to have doubts. He took a walk around the block. He called his office and sent the lawyers home. He called off the sale. His reasoning was that he did not feel comfortable making a decision on based on logic and finances. That was too easy. Instead, he was pulled to use passion and integrity as a higher priority.

I recall my freshman year at college and my first history class. My teacher was the venerable head of the department, a man I both feared and respected. On the first day of class he passed out a syllabus detailed the requirements of the course. There were lots of books to read and response papers to the reading. There were quizzes on classroom lectures and tests based on all class material. There was a final research paper. The professor said that if we fulfilled the requirements, we would pass the class and perhaps even get an "A." While all of the students were digesting this syllabus, the professor proceeded to hand out a second one. This paper he said contained what a student must do to not only pass the class but to succeed in learning the material and to allow it to make a difference in their future learning. This syllabus was for students who wanted to do more than meet the class requirements. The second sheet contained the names of several more books to read, several of which were kept under watch at the library desk. There was small group discussion sessions listed. There was an opportunity to write more response papers. There was even an invitation to present a response in class. At first I was angry at this professor, suggesting more work and then making me responsible for choosing whether or not I had to do it. I thought it was a rather devious plan. But wanting to impress the head of the history department, I followed the path outlined in the second syllabus. And I did learn more and I was better prepared for the more difficult classes which followed.

This morning's Scripture lesson continues with Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has moved from the Beatitudes to some rather specific moral teachings. He moves from a discussion about outward behavior to a discussion about the inward motives that determine outward behavior. He spells out in some rather graphic detail how his followers should act in such basic areas of human life such as business, worship, marriage, and community. He is not offering advice or proposing new law; he is simply stating how his followers should act if they really believe that God is in the world. And in doing so he raises the bar on what it means to be a godly person. He takes what is already a very difficult thing to do and makes it even harder. To follow him, we must reach higher and higher.

I think of television chef Emeril Lagasse. Whenever he strays from a regular recipe (which he does quite often) and adds a little extra garlic or cream or butter or liquor, he tells his audience that he is "kicking it up a notch." Essentially that is what Jesus is doing with this lesson we hear this morning. He is raising the bar. He is "kicking it up a notch."

Jesus says that the law tells us we should not murder. But then he tells us that this is not enough. We must reach higher. We also have to treat one another with respect, not letting ourselves fly off the handle with anger that demeans and diminishes others. The gift of reconciliation with others is to be offered before any gift to God. We should be moved more to mercy than retaliation even when we feel entitled to justice.

Jesus says that the law tells us we should not commit adultery. But then he tells us that this is not enough. We must reach higher. We must attempt to eliminate even lustful thoughts of the heart, thoughts that imply we can obtain something just to please ourselves, thoughts which dehumanize another, and thoughts which do not welcome women as equals among Jesus' followers.

Jesus says that the law specifies the process of divorce. But then he tells us that this is not enough. We must reach higher. In Jesus' time, a man could divorce his wife if he found anything objectionable, sending her out of the house and cutting off all financial support by signing a single sheet of paper. We must go beyond the legal process to understand God's intention regarding marriage as a commitment of faith. While we may correctly understand that divorce is the loving and necessary thing to do; we must first understand that the heart of God's law concerning marriage is that it is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for each person.

Jesus says that the law prohibits taking an oath and speaking falsely in God's name. But then he tells us that this is not enough. We must reach higher. We are to be truthful in what we say at all times, not just when we are under oath. We must understand that when we utter God's name we are invoking God's presence. To do so lightly in trivial matters is to seek to use God's power selfishly rather than put oneself in a place to serve God.

In each of these specific teachings Jesus is confirming the value of the law, the truth of the Ten Commandments that God delivered to the people of Israel. Many of those commandments were intended to help us live well together. They were supposed to point toward ways in which we can honor those people with whom we are in relationship.

But somewhere along the way, God's law became less of relational thing and more of a business thing. To use the Clif Bar example it became one of those "white paths" instead of a "red path." Followers of God did not find righteousness and mercy and love in observing the law. Instead they believed the law was about being legal- doing the right thing, coloring inside the lines, and keeping their nose clean. Followers of God were worried about keeping the law but were totally caught up in keeping the law for the law's sake.

Writer Michael Novak says that "the more common vices today are likely to be spiritual: preoccupation, hyperactivity, a failure even to heed the natural rhythms of the body and the sense, distractedness, an instrumentalizing of people and time and activity." Perhaps he is right. We tend to deal with people as they might be able to do good for us. We tend to measure the success of our lives by our own ethical bookkeeping. We create a faith that does not demand more than we are willing to give.

Theologian Frederick Buechner writes that "increasingly, we live our lives from the outside in, rather than from the inside out, taking our cues from the world, taking our cues from others, taking our cues from culture." Jesus offers us another way with words that don't soft-pedal the message. He portrays the life of faith as a "yes" or "no" to God with lives that obey or that disobey.

Jesus does not dismiss the law. Instead he uses the law as a foundation on which to stand. But then he raises the bar. He asks us to reach higher. He asks us to place our heart in the path of God's intention. He tells us that there is nothing in God's dealing with us that is obsessed or limited by the law, rather that God offers infinite love and unconditional mercy, again and again. He asks us to control our angry words and actions, our lustful intentions, and our disrespect for God and others and to open ourselves to the heart of God. He wants us to regard each other as God regards us and thereby to treat each other accordingly. It is hard work. In many cases it is more work than we need to get by in our world. But it is the way of life. It is the way that God calls us to live as children of the Kingdom of God.