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# “CUT IT OUT”

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Matthew 5:21-37



FEBRUARY 16, 2014

So – beloved – we have been talking for a few weeks about who we are. Who we are as Christians, and last week we began talking about the sermon on the mount and we talked about the beatitudes – that list, not of do’s and don’ts, but of the characteristics the disciples should be aware of – the characteristics of what it looks like for those who go beyond the law through grace of God. What the kingdom is like.

Last week’s NT passage finished up with Jesus talking about the importance of the law and how he didn’t come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Now this is extreme Jesus. Jesus is going to tell us how he’s going to accomplish that law and he gives us some new interpretations. Here, Jesus is not contradicting the ancient law, but challenging interpretations of it that are not consistent with the love of God and neighbor.

He does it like this: *“You have heard it said... but I say to you...,”* and then he raises the stakes: If you’re angry with someone you’ve already committed murder. If you so much as look at someone with desire you’ve already committed adultery.

Cut off your hand! Pluck out your eye! And the most extreme suggestion of all (or is it a command?): Leave your offering and go make amends. Go make nice with your brother or sister – remembering that we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ, right? –Go make nice with that person you’re still holding a resentment against.

Now, here’s a challenge: Jerry and Lanny and the finance people are going to shoot me for this, but hear me out. Think for a minute. Think about friends or family members with whom you might need to reconcile. Notice I didn’t say “want to,” but “need to.” Now take out your offering for today. If it’s not in an envelope just grab one and stick in an envelope. Now write the name of a person on the envelope with whom reconciliation is necessary. Maybe it’s been kind of nagging at the back of your mind every now and then again, maybe it torments you every single day. Ask God to help you – maybe God’ has someone in mind if you don’t.

Now here’s the crazy part. Put that envelope – that offering – back in your purse or pocket. Do NOT put it in the plate today. Hold on to it. Keep it where you’ll see it every day as a reminder, and think about some practical steps you can take to seek reconciliation. But remember, sometimes the only safe, practical step toward reconciliation is to pray.

“Go: first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come offer your gift.” So DO remember to bring it back next week! And if you’re willing, maybe we can have few of you tell us what happened?

This is not one of those “in the Greek it’s different” kinds of passages. This is one of the hard ones. This one stops us in our tracks just like it did to those listening to Jesus that day. Chop off your hand! Do I have your attention now? What in the world is Jesus talking about? Cutting off one’s hand doesn’t sound like something that the meek or the peacemakers would be ok with, now, does it? Not to make an offering doesn’t sound very practical either.

In all of this, Jesus’ focus is reconciliation. The new community, the kingdom of God, is a reconciled community. Jesus focuses on the importance of reconciliation, but not only should we try to be reconciled with those who may have harmed us, and those that we have harmed, we also need to be reconciled with the parts of ourselves that sin.

Jesus is not saying that we need to go chop off our limbs. What he’s saying is that we need to recognize that we are sinners, all of us. We’re human after all, and we need to offer forgiveness and reconciliation to ourselves.

That’s why divorce is such a big deal to Jesus—it removes the possibility of reconciliation for that relationship, although there can still be healing. But even if Jesus is right about divorce is bad and all that, remember that what God has NOT joined, no one should force together. We are not perfect, and we will always sin—but as we live into God’s ways, we will find forgiveness and reconciliation.

Reconciliation is not easy. It is a return to the original purpose for which we were created—to be in relationship with God and with each other—to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves -- Which is what God has been working on since Adam & Eve ate from that stupid tree in the garden!

Of course there are people with whom we will never find reconciliation — but with God all things are possible. Besides, being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we can also be reconciled to ourselves—forgiving ourselves and learning, no to be sinless, but to sin less. Then maybe we can work on being reconciled with others

A young man was getting ready to graduate college. For many months he had admired a beautiful sports car in a dealer’s showroom, and knowing his father could well afford it, he told him that was all he wanted.

As Graduation Day approached, the young man awaited signs that his father had purchased the car. Finally, on the morning of his graduation his father called him into his private study. His father told him how proud he was to have such a fine son, and told him how much he loved him. He handed his son a beautiful wrapped gift box.

Curious, but somewhat disappointed the young man opened the box and found a lovely, leather-bound Bible. Angrily, he raised his voice at his father and said, "With all your money you give me a Bible?" and stormed out of the house, leaving the holy book.

Many years passed and the young man was very successful in business. He had a beautiful home and wonderful family, but realized his father was very old, and thought perhaps he should go to him. He had not seen him since that graduation day. Before he could make arrangements, he received a telegram telling him his father had passed away, and willed all of his possessions to his son. He needed to come home immediately and take care things. When he arrived at his father's house, sudden sadness and regret filled his heart.

He began to search his father's important papers and saw the still new Bible, just as he had left it years ago. With tears, he opened the Bible and began to turn the pages. As he read those words, a car key dropped from an envelope taped behind the Bible. It had a tag with the dealer's name, the same dealer who had the sports car he had desired. On the tag was the date of his graduation, and the words...PAID IN FULL.

A couple of years ago, I was working with a confirmation class discussing some of the different elements of worship and what they're for, like reading of scripture, prayer, music, and we got talking about an element of worship that a lot of churches do, but we don't. The passing of the peace. And it's perfectly fine that we don't use this particular element, I don't have any strong feelings about it one way or another. Sometimes I think that it's a little bit silly to stop everything in the service so everyone can shake hands and say good morning. If we haven't done that already – without being asked – there's something seriously wrong with us!

We talked about the original "Kiss of Peace" or "Holy Kiss" and how awkward it would be if we started doing that again! Mentioned 5 times in the New Testament, It was very controversial at the time because it bucked the tradition norms about who could kiss whom. We talked a bit about the concept of church being our non-biological family? Well, the Kiss of Peace basically said that no matter who we are outside of here, in the context of worship and church, we are all family. This is our chosen family.

We talked about how it was a visible sign of our reconciliation, of being in right-relationship with one another – as well as with God and with ourselves – before engaging in the Body-of-Christ-making event of communion. One kid remarked, "I'm not sure a handshake and good morning can do all that!"

Youth are really very astute. They felt that if we were really going to be reconciled to each other, we would have to get to know each other first – makes sense, right? You gotta make a relationship before you can think about being in "right" relationship. They came up with the idea of having folks talk to someone sitting near them sitting near them for few minutes – someone who isn't related to them and didn't drive them to church this morning, and getting to know each other by answering one or two of three questions:

1. Who inspires you? Why?
2. What are you afraid of?
3. What place feels sacred to you? Why?

So guess what? I thought it would be fun if we did that this morning. Take 5-6 minutes and have a little conversation with someone you don't know that well.....and pass the peace as we continue on our journey toward reconciliation.