

West Branch Friends Meeting  
October 6, 2019  
Sue McCracken, Pastor  
"Jesus' Teachings Part 2"

So today we are going to continue to take a look at some of Jesus' teachings from Matthew 5, commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount." And as a quick reminder from last week, there was a saying back in the 70's that went, 'If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' My thinking continues to focus on the evidence needed to show how well I am following Jesus' teachings. So today we start off with a double doozy – adultery and divorce!

If you're as old as I am, you may remember when Jimmy Carter was running for president, and a reporter asked him if he had ever committed adultery. Carter, probably one of the most honest presidents we've ever had (regardless of your opinion of him as a president), said yes, he probably had committed adultery because the Bible says if you lust after someone other than your spouse, it is the same as committing adultery! Just to be clear, Jimmy and Rosaline Carter have been married for 73 years, and no doubt have been faithful to each other during all those years. But Carter was referencing Matthew 5: 27-28 which says:

***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."***

I think these verses are meant to remind us that rigidly following the letter of the law we think is required of us as Christians, is only the beginning of the teaching. So here is the query for our consideration on this teaching for those of you who are married or in a committed relationship:

***Am I content to love my spouse through the good times and the bad, without thinking there might be someone who would be more exciting; more perfect?***

And as for the divorce aspect, well...historically, Quakers were only permitted to marry other Quakers. Breaking that 'law' meant that if a Quaker chose to marry a non-Quaker, the marriage ceremony could not take place in the Quaker Meetinghouse, and the couple would be disowned. Fortunately, that practice was eventually given up with the idea that even non-Quakers had the light of God within them, and might eventually join the meeting, helping it grow. But divorce? That was simply unacceptable in many Quaker meetings, based on verses 31 and 32:

***"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'"***

Obviously, as a divorced woman myself, this teaching is personal. But in doing some research on these verses, it seems we should remember the circumstances of divorces in Jesus' patriarchal society. It was extremely easy for a man to simply sign a slip of paper saying he was done with the current wife, immediately moving on to 'marry' the new wife, which often meant breaking up another marriage. Jesus was laying down the law for the men of his day, saying if you ditch your wife, **you** are the sinner.

Today, we probably don't take marriage as seriously as we should. Early Quakers who desired to marry had to go through rather rigorist sessions with a clearance committee before they were granted the right to marry. And maybe we take divorce too lightly today since many marriages do fail; but perhaps the teaching we can take from these verses is the need to respect the solemn marriage vows and give considerable thought and prayer before ending a marriage.

This query is a simple,

***If I am contemplating divorce, have I given my marriage vows my due diligence before deciding to end the marriage?***

Then we get to the teaching about your 'yes being yes' and your 'no being no'. I like verses 33-37 from The Message for us today:

***“And don’t say anything you don’t mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.”***

In the past, the Quaker focus of these verses seemed to be on not **swearing** to tell the truth with your hand on the Bible when on the witness stand in a courtroom. I’ve only been asked to testify one time during a trial, and I remembered my Quaker teachings to say “I affirm” rather than “I swear.”

But I think this teaching goes way beyond any courtroom. It’s about being conscious of what we say that might be misinterpreted by another person. I remember my Aunt Jerry, who was a very ‘religious’ person, often lacing many of her conversations with religious talk. “The Lord told me to....” was often the beginning of her sentences. In my experiences with my aunt, I always felt rather unchristian like when it didn’t seem that the Lord told me much of anything personally! Again, our actions are what support the evidence that we are following Jesus’ teachings, so this query might be best for these verses:

***Am I careful in my conversations so as not to offend another with ‘religious’ talk, but let my words and my actions show that I am loving my neighbor as myself?***

And the final two teachings in chapter five are also tough ones to understand: turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. Verses 38-44, and 46

***“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone***

***forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?"***

- This is not the world I see around me today. Someone cuts you off on the freeway, you're justified in running them down, flipping them off, or even shooting at them.
- A foreign country doesn't behave in ways our government thinks they should, then we punish them by cutting off food and supplies for the people, rather than working with their government for a peaceful solution.
- And social media? Wow....ever read some of the vitriol on Twitter or Facebook when someone makes a political comment that others find offensive?
- And how many senseless deaths just the past few years have occurred when young LGBTQ have been bullied to the point of taking their own lives?
- And sadly, how many times have churches belittled those they believed to have the wrong theology, causing the ostracized persons to give up being a part of the congregation, and the whole idea of religion? It saddens me to read the Facebook posts from members of a group called Exvangelicals who have been treated so harshly by their churches' teachings that they no longer want anything to do with religion. Are these examples of following Jesus' teachings about turning the other cheek and loving our enemies?

So perhaps this might be the hardest of chapter 5's words to follow:

***Do I work to 'turn the other cheek' when I feel I've been wronged?  
and Who is my enemy, and how can I learn to love that enemy?***

Perhaps the only question that all Christians should and must ask ourselves is simply this –

***Am I following the teachings of Jesus as demonstrated by my actions?***

It's a deceptively simple question that should push us to consider whether or not we can actually call ourselves – and even our nation - Christian. Again....If I am brought up before a judge and asked to present evidence that I am a Christian, can I show by my actions that I am a follower of Jesus? It's a challenge for me each and every day to consider these queries and assess how well I am following these teachings.

I'll leave you with this thought by Alex Shaffer on a different way to approach today's somewhat difficult time that includes so many multiple challenges:

***“Peacemaking doesn’t mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injustice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight, but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.”***

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