

“A Deeper Righteousness”

Introduction: As you might imagine, the COVID - 19 pandemic has not been kind to the church. Coming out of this health crisis, to which we could add financial, political, racial, and social crises, church buildings have emptied or have been repurposed. The number of “nones”—people who don’t identify with any established religion—in the U.S. grew to nearly 30 percent as of 2021, while the percentage of professing Christians continued to drop, to near 60 %, a trend that is anticipated to continue. At the same time, while many remain skeptical of both Christians, as well as organized religion, there is a great spiritual openness. One stat has it that 44% more people are open to God now than before the pandemic hit.

So, in Christian circles, there is much reflection going on in terms of how to meet this hunger. Fuller Seminary, one of my alma matters, devoted its most recent quarterly magazine to the topic, “Renewing the Church.” One of the articles that caught my attention was written by Tod Bolsinger, author of *Canoing the Mountains*. In this article, “What To Do When We Don’t Know Where We Are Going,” noted that during the first four centuries of the church’s life it also had to exist under numerous crises, from the political oppression of the Roman Empire, to constant plagues, to numerous wars, to flat out brutality. And yet, during that time, a tiny community of 12 Jesus followers slowly grew into what, by the fifth century, would become the largest religious movement in the world.

When we ask how they did this, Bolsinger writes that it is natural to assume they focused on church planting, evangelism, and mission work. That’s how a church grows, right? Wrong, offers Bolsinger, at least not in times of deep uncertainty, disruption, and oppression. Instead of devising plans and strategies, the church in those days came together and looked to God to form them into a people whose life together would be attractive to outsiders as it was displayed in acts of love, kindness, hospitality and care for their neighbors in need.

Bolsinger concludes, “The uncertainty of our times should take us back to that which we know to be foundational to our faith. [It] should lead us forward in simple acts of community, formation, and love...When we don’t know what to do, we can always do what we have been taught to *always* do. Come together. Be formed for the challenge. Listen for the pain of our neighbors. Love them well.”

To my ears, hearing this call makes the ancient words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount pop with relevance as we hear Jesus’ call for his people to be salt and light, forming them as kingdom citizens, so that others can come to experience and know the living God. Let’s hear that call again, and then begin to consider how Jesus desires to form us and lead us forward. [READ 5:13-26]

I. Not to abolish but to fulfill

A. I understand that Jim Pocock left you with an assignment last week! If salt preserves and brings out the best, and if light clarifies, guides, gives life, and protects, you were tasked with thinking of someone in your world or sphere of influence who needs a touch, who needs to experience even just a dash of salt or a ray of light, and simply reach out to them. So, how did it go? [time to share]

B. For the next two plus chapters, Jesus parses out what salt and light begins to look like, what, to use Bolsinger’s words, community, formation, and love are all about. Jesus starts this by laying out six areas of life that the current religious teachers have stressed—murder, adultery, divorce, oath keeping, revenge, and love of enemies—and then leading his listeners to consider a deeper sense of what each looks like, of a righteousness (a

right way of living) that is not skin deep but heart deep. In each case, Jesus responds to the current line of thinking: “You have heard it said...” with his way of looking at things: “But I tell you...”

C. This, as you might imagine, began to rub those teachers the wrong way. “Who does this fellow think he is?” they were sure to have asked. “What gives him the authority to say these things?” (cf. Mk. 1:27; 2:10). “And by the way,” we hear them say, “he hangs out with all the wrong sorts of people.” These kinds of observations led the religious leaders to think that Jesus had abandoned, or was seeking to abolish, the law and the prophets (stands for the entire OT). All this talk from his mouth about grace and mercy and poverty of spirit...What happened to the law? Are the Ten Commandments now just to be ten suggestions, they must have wondered? Inquiring minds wanted to know!

D. Absolutely not, says Jesus, who explains that far from abolishing what we now call our OT, that everything in the OT actually points to him, it finds its conclusion in him. He has come to *fulfill* the law and prophets. As he explained, after his crucifixion and resurrection, to his confused disciples, “everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk. 24:27, 44; see also Ma. 17:1-9 with Moses representing the Law and Elijah the Prophets).

E. So, all of those sacrifices point to him; he would be the ultimate sacrifice. All of those great metaphors like rock, lamb, and shepherd, are filled out by him. All those great events, like the Passover, point forward to an action or activity by Jesus. All of those promises of the prophets, from the offspring of Eve crushing the head of the serpent, to the child to be born, were brought to completion by Jesus. The high priest of Israel, who made atonement for the people, pointed to Jesus, our High Priest. The Promised Land, the future hope of Israel, points to God’s new creation. And the great love story, begun in the OT with God’s pursuit of his people who have wandered away from him, culminates in the arrival and ministry of Jesus and is, in fact, not complete without him.

Illustration: It would be a bit like reading *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* by beginning at the part where Snow White ate the poisoned apple. You would certainly have an exciting read going forward, but you would miss the richness, and the purpose, of the ending. How much more sense, how much more thrilling is the rescue by the Prince, if you’ve read all that goes on before Snow White eats the apple.

So, with this in mind, what we see in the Sermon on the Mount is that the behavioral and moral prescriptions found in the Law and Prophets are not ignored or weakened or in some way deconstructed by Jesus; in fact, he deepens them and fulfills them by living them out and showing us their true intent. He in fact says that if we want to get in on what God is doing, there is an even greater righteousness for us to pursue than that sought to be observed by the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

II. Murder without Knives

A. As he begins to unfold this deeper righteousness, Jesus starts with murder...without knives:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

Murder, here, refers to homicide, the criminal taking of another life. The Pharisees sought to limit the command to the physical act, but Jesus brings anger into the discussion by tracing murder back to the human heart, where the seed of murder is sown. Jesus points out that angry thoughts and insulting words—highlighted here by

“Raca” and “You fool,” expressions of contempt—are highly harmful, and hardly characteristic of those who are seeking to be salt and light.

B. John picks up on this deeper righteousness when he writes: “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer...” (1 Jn. 3:15). James has nearly a whole chapter on the damage the tongue can do (ch. 3). And Paul adds to the discussion: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph. 4:26f). Here, Paul does seem to allow for anger that we sometimes call righteous anger. Indignation against injustice or cruelty or abuse is an element of human goodness, and we’d be concerned if such anger is never present. The difficulty we have, and which Jesus and Paul recognized, is that we often cannot control our anger. Writing 300 years before Paul, Aristotle makes this insightful comment:

Anybody can become angry—that is easy; but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time, and for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not within everybody’s power and is not easy.

I don’t think it’s within anybody’s power, which is why Jesus raises the issue. Unlike Jesus, who was righteously angry on more than one occasion, our anger often surfaces because we are hurt, jealous, proud, arrogant, or our toes have been stepped on and our noses have become out of joint! We may not have used a knife or gun, but if we’re running around and living with anger, we won’t make a very attractive community for outsiders to want to enter.

C. Jesus gives two brief illustrations to encourage his listeners to take remedial action when they notice anger beginning to have a foothold. One is in the house of worship and involves being reconciled with a brother or sister who has something against you as a higher priority than coming to worship. The other takes place while on the way to a law court and involves settling an unpaid debt, probably with someone outside the family of faith (“adversary”), before arriving there. Both highlight the necessity and urgency of seeking reconciliation. If we neglect doing so, relationships, and churches, will be destroyed.

D. One of the blessings or promises of God pertaining to this deeper righteousness and fulfilled by Jesus is recorded by the prophet Jeremiah: “I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts...” (31:33). How would God do this? As he tells the prophet Ezekiel: “I will put my Spirit within you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (36:27).

Illustration: The story is told of a bishop in Uganda who was on his way to preach after just having had a huge argument with his wife. On his way, the Holy Spirit said to him: “Go back and pray with your wife.” The bishop argued: “I’m due to preach in 20 minutes. I’ll do it afterward.” “OK,” said the Spirit. “You go and preach; I’ll stay with your wife.”

In order to live out the deeper righteousness of Jesus, we need the gift and the accompanying power of his Spirit. One way to open ourselves to his work within us in this area would be to take a few quiet minutes at the close of each day and look back over the events of your day. As you attend to your encounters and activities, ask two basic questions: “Where did I give or receive love?” and “Where did I withhold love?” What do you learn about yourself? You might want to write a few things down that you discover. Then, take a few moments and talk to God about it . . . Let us make space for God to form us as salt and light in our day.