

**A NEW KIND
Matthew 1:18-25**

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Amarillo, Texas
November 20, 2022**

Frederic Buechner in his very candid book, *Telling Secrets: A Memoir*, talks about his mother. He writes: **“Being beautiful was her business, her art, her delight. It took her a long way and earned her many dividends. But when, as she saw it, she lost her beauty and you stand a better chance of finding your cane behind the radiator than finding blue eyes and golden hair again, she was like a millionaire who runs out of money.**

She took her name out of the phone book and got an unlisted number. She became so deaf that it became almost impossible to speak to her except about things simple enough to shout — her health, the weather, when you would be seeing her next. It was as if the deafness was a technique mastered for not hearing anything that might threaten her peace. She developed the habit of closing her eyes when she spoke to you, as if you were a dream she was dreaming.

It was as if she chose not to see in your face what you might be thinking behind the simple words you were shouting, or — as if ostrich-like — closing her eyes was a way of keeping you from seeing her. With her looks gone, she felt she had nothing left to offer the world. What she did was to simply check out of the world — that old, last rose of summer.

My mother holed herself up in her apartment on 79th Street — then in just one room of that apartment — then in just one chair in that room — and finally in the bed where, one morning a few summers ago, perhaps in her sleep, she died, at last.

It was the motto of her life — you had to suffer in order to be beautiful. What she meant, of course, was all the pains she took in front of the mirror — the plucking and primping and powdering and brushing and painting — that kind of suffering. But it seems clear that there was another kind, too. To be born as blond and blue eyed and beautiful as she was can be as much of a handicap in its way as to be born with a cleft palate, because if you’re beautiful enough you don’t really have to be anything much else to make people love you and want to be near you. You don’t have to be particularly kind, or unselfish, or generous, or compassionate, because people will flock around you anyway, simply for the sake of your beauty. My mother could be all those things when she took a notion to. But she never made a habit of it. She never developed the giving, loving side of what she might have been as a human being.

And, needless to say, there was where the real suffering came — the two failed marriages after the death of my father, the fragment among all her friends she had over the course of her life. She never, as far as I know, had one whom she would, in any sense, have sacrificed herself for, and by doing so might, perhaps, have begun to find her best and truest self.

William Butler Yeats, in his poem “ A Prayer for My Daughter” writes: “Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned by those who are not entirely beautiful.” My almost entirely beautiful mother was, by no means, heartless, but I think hers was a heart that – who knows why – was rarely, if ever, touched in the deepest place.”

Even as Frederic Buechner’s mother concentrated on physical beauty, at the expense of a beautiful heart, we, too, must be careful – as the people of God – not to concentrate on an outward righteousness that in some way excuses us from having our heart shaped to be like the heart of Christ.

Come to the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew. Our first story is a story about a man by the name of Joseph. The text makes no bones about it. Look at verse 19: “Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man.”

Joseph knows right from wrong. Joseph is a keeper of the commandments. As Thomas Long says, “You give Joseph an ethical dilemma and he knows the way to go.” And he does. He does – he does what is right. In this case – oh, my – he even knows the way to go when his fiancée – his fiancée – turns up pregnant. And he knows not by himself. He’s not a cruel man. He’s going to do it compassionately, but he’s going to do what is right. He’s going to play by the book. Righteous men put such women away.

And then, that great and glorious intrusion of the angel. “Joseph, there is more holiness in this matter than you ever could have imagined. There is more divinity in this pregnancy than you have ever dreamed. You will not put her away. You will take her as your wife, and you shall name the baby Jesus. For He will save His people from their sins.”

Now, Joseph has a choice. Is he going to be righteous, in the old sense of the word – or is he going to be righteous? He took her as his wife and he named the baby Jesus, as the angel had commanded. Right there, at the outpost of Matthew, Matthew gives you the very paradigm of who he wants you, his reader, to become.

Turn over to Matthew 5, verses 17-20.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say unto you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness – [notice, notice verse 20] – unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The Pharisees, much like Buechner’s mother – who was worried about her outer beauty, her blond hair and her blue eyes – the Pharisees were worried about their outer righteousness. Christ is not contradicting the law, but neither is He preserving it unchanged. He will fulfill it; He will bring the law to its intended goal.

That's where they had missed it – the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus mentions the Pharisees and the scribes precisely because they were a paradigm, a model of the greatest righteousness imaginable within Judaism. He does not challenge their scrupulous attention to the law. But as the subsequent verses will show, He simply declares that now, with the coming of the new age of the Messiah – now that He is here – more is required to be in fellowship with God. People must now follow Jesus in discipleship, which these Jewish leaders had refused to do.

Christian discipleship requires a new, a greater righteousness. Lest we be left wanting for an example, Jesus gives us – not one or two, but count them – six. With each example He contrasts what is said in the law, the Torah, and its traditional interpretations – and with His new authority declares how each part of the law will apply to His own disciples. Jesus redefines spiritual maturity.

The Pharisees were a group of lay persons, not preachers, who were drawn from all segments of society – who had separated themselves. In fact, the Hebrew word for Pharisee means “to separate” from all who would defile – in order to carry out with precision every regulation developed by the scribes.

But the righteousness of Jesus requires more.

Oh, the laws of the Old Testament were not enough for the scribes and the Pharisees. They had developed an oral law. These additional instructions were passed down from generation to generation by the scribes. In the middle of the Third Century, these oral laws – interpretations of the Torah – were compiled and summarized and codified, and this became known as the Mishnah. Later Jewish scholars wrote commentaries on the Mishnah, explaining the explanation – and this was known as the Talmud. It was a legalistic mind that was constantly defining and redefining the laws.

But this strict adherence to the law doesn't bring about the righteousness Jesus is talking about. He emphasizes that righteousness comes from a right relationship with God and with man. He emphasizes not more rituals, but more relationships. That was the whole purpose of the law to begin with – to show man how to get along with God and with each other. Amos spoke for all the prophets when he said in Chapter 5:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like a never failing stream.”

The first application is not murder, but anger.

In verses 21-26, Jesus begins: What was spoken – notice – ‘to the people long ago.’ This was a reference to the Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments given on Mount Sinai. “Be careful, lest you throw yourself a party because you haven't murdered anyone.”

Sometimes after a death, a family will describe to a pastor the life of the one they loved who is no longer with them. “He was a great man. He did not smoke, he didn't drink, and he was faithful to his wife.” Well, I'm glad that he didn't smoke, and I'm glad that he didn't drink, and I'm glad that

he honored his marriage covenant. But is that what makes a man good? Do we simply judge ourselves by what we are not doing?

The formula recurs over and over: “You have heard it said, but now I tell you...” Jesus in no way contradicts what is said, but brings it into sharper, ethical focus – the radical intensification of the demands of the law. Jesus intensifies murder saying that anybody who is angry with his brother will answer to the court. God looks beyond the act to the inner attitude that produces the act. Kingdom righteousness demands the removal of any desire to harm others. Jesus says no *orge* – no brooding, inward anger. Don’t call your brother “Raca” – that is, “you good-for-nothing.” “I spit on you,” *raca* means. Don’t call your brother “moros” – fool. To do so is to be heading straight for the fire of destruction. In his work, *Stride Toward Freedom*, Martin Luther King, Jr. admonished people to “avoid not only violence of deed, but also violence of spirit.”

In reflecting on the teaching of Jesus from this section – you’re going to church and it comes time, at the altar, to present your offering. Then you remember that your brother has a just claim against you. Stop. Stop going through the ritual. Relationships are more important than a ritual, says Jesus. “Leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

Some of you here this morning are worshiping with an angry heart – a heart that is angry against a brother or a sister in Christ Jesus. It might be a family member, it might be a co-worker, it might be someone else in this congregation. Be careful, says Jesus. Don’t sit back and pride yourself on the fact that you’ve not broken the “law.” Jesus said, “I’m not concerned with ritual. I am concerned with relationship.”

What about your relationship to your brother, your sister in Christ Jesus? Does someone have just cause to be angry at you?

The second application concerns the Seventh Commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.”

Adultery refers to the sexual relations by a married person with a partner other than his or her spouse. Don’t pride yourself in your record of faithfulness to your wife if, in fact, you are looking upon other women with the intention of committing in your heart adultery. The tense of the language is someone who continues to look, rather than just casting a passing glance. It is in this case that adultery happens in the heart long before the physical act. Thoughts and actions make the possibility of giving in to temptation all the more likely. We must take drastic, dramatic action to avoid them.

Jesus continues – speaking about suffering the loss of an eye or a hand. It is better to be blind or dismembered than to enter hell. Of course Jesus doesn’t mean for us to pluck out our eye or chop off our hands. But He does mean to say you’d better take whatever measures necessary to control the natural passions that will readily flare out of control.

In the third application Jesus is taking them beyond obeying the simple Mosaic law in regard to divorce.

He wants them to know that marriage is sacred. Divorce is an appalling social evil. Why in some marriage ceremonies the couple exchange vows and say something like this – instead of “until death do us part,” it goes “as long as we both shall love each other.” Jesus teaches that the marriage commitment is binding for life – the only exception being a state of immorality which has already broken the covenant.

I want to add very quickly that I think the church has to be serious about two things. First, the church has to be busy proclaiming relationship – the one-flesh relationship of husband and wife that lasts a lifetime, holding high the standard and expecting it at the beginning of marriage. But I also want the church to be careful lest, in some way, for some reason unclear from the text, we make divorce the unpardonable sin. God is able to forgive all sin, including divorce. And we, as a community of faith, should not be seeking ways to exclude those who have suffered divorce but, rather, through the forgiveness of God and grace we should be seeking to restore them to service and to worship. Somehow we’ve developed a double standard. We love to hear born again murderers and drug lords in our pulpits, but not those who have been divorced. Remember, God does not highlight divorce any more than he highlights our anger or our lust. It’s in the list. God is a God of second chances.

The fourth call to new righteousness concerns the disciple’s honesty.

The disciple is to be honest, trustworthy, making the swearing of an oath unnecessary. One’s “yes” means yes and one’s “no” means no. Whatever is needed beyond this is because there is evil. Where there is honesty and trust, there need be no more words. Jesus said that swearing is unnecessary – irreverent and ineffective. It really doesn’t change anything. The issue is still the truthfulness of the disciple. Jesus wants his disciples to practice truth in relationship to society, but also in their relationship to themselves.

The fifth call to a new kind of righteousness involves the disciple imitating God, who returns good for evil.

The oldest law available – *lex talionis* – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, all the way back to Hammurabi, the 18th Century B.C. king – found three times in the Old Testament in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The original intent was to restrict unlimited revenge. But now Jesus, to his disciples, changes limited retaliation to non-retaliation. Like Jesus, like their Master, they must accept unjust abuse. Three examples of non-retaliation for personal abuse are offered. If someone should insult you with a backhanded slap to the right cheek, turn the left cheek for an additional blow. The backhanded slap was a double insult. It carried twice the punishment of an openhanded slap. Secondly, if someone takes you to court and deprives you of your shirt, let him have your coat, also. The third illustration of non-retaliation draws from the ancient practice of armies conscripting peasants to carry their gear, as Simon of Cyrene was forced by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross – not one mile, but two.

The final application concerns the disciple’s compassion.

Of course, the Old Testament never tells us to hate our enemies, but they had heard it from those who were interpreting the Old Testament. The true test of genuine Christianity is how we treat

those we are naturally inclined to hate. A second rational for loving one's enemies is that God loves them, too.

Yes, the godliness that the disciple must show cannot be comprehensively formulated in a set of rules. A team of evangelical Christians invaded Shipshewana, Indiana, to bring the lost of Shipshewana to Christ. It was in front of Yoder's Dry Goods Store that one of these earnest souls confronted a Mennonite farmer with a challenge. "Brother, are you saved?" The farmer was stunned by the question. All his years of attending the Peach Bloom Mennonite Congregation had not prepared him for such a question, particularly in front of Yoder's. He didn't want to offend the earnest man, and he truly felt like the man was posing the question with good will. He seriously considered how he might answer. After a long pause, the farmer asked his questioner for a pencil and paper and proceeded to list the names of ten people he believed knew him well. Most of them, he explained, were his friends, but some were less than that and might even be enemies. He suggested that the evangelist ask these people whether or not they thought he was saved, since he certainly would not presume to answer such a question on his own behalf.

What are they saying about you – your friends, your family, your enemies? Is yours a righteousness – an old righteousness of the Pharisees, like the old Joseph who was willing to put away Mary? Are you still at the stage of the old righteousness? Or, have you heard the call of the divine to name Him Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins – the sins of the heart as well as the sins of the hand.