

NEW LAWS IN CHRIST

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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MATTHEW 5:21-37

The Sermon on the Mount is the largest block of the teachings of Jesus we have. Beginning with the Beatitudes, Jesus words about His followers being the salt of the earth and the light of the world follow. He then tells them that He has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. If you were here the last two Sundays, you heard sermons on those topics, and I promised you that we'd look these next two Sundays on the way that Jesus fulfilled, redeemed, expanded, and transformed the interpretation of the law of the Old Testament.

George Buttrick is my source for this series of sermons. A Presbyterian pastor and Biblical scholar, after a long career as pastor of Madison Avenue Church in New York City, Dr. Buttrick taught at Harvard, Garrett Seminary, Davison College, Vanderbilt University, and finally at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville Kentucky, where I had the privilege to hear him speak.

George Buttrick died more than thirty years ago, at age 85, while working on what would have been his last sermon.

In *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary* on Matthew, he writes Jesus gave us six instances of how He was transforming the law, of how the law of His kingdom fulfills (and therefore supersedes) the Law of Moses. We'll look at three today, and three next week.

The first, Buttrick calls The New Law of Murder. All of us know that the sixth commandment is "Thou shalt not kill." A better translation would be "you shall not commit murder." Jesus equates anger and contempt with murder as He fulfills and transforms the law.

Buttrick states: "Anger (if it is not righteous indignation) and contempt are incipient murder. Killing is not done by knives alone, but by contemptuous sneers and by the casual indifference that regards men as less than men. Our courts of law address themselves to the act, to the end of the process; Christ is concerned with the motive and thought, the beginning of the process." (pages 295-296)

There are indeed crimes of violence and anger, crimes of passion, that take place in the heat of a moment. But there are also crimes that are purely the result of a lack of contempt for another person, a total disregard for the humanity or the sanctity of the life of another.

The emphasis in the teaching of Jesus is upon reconciliation. We Presbyterians have in our confessional documents the Confession of 1967, which should really be called the Confession of Reconciliation.

That statement of faith tells us that in Jesus Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself (9.07). That in giving himself freely for all, Jesus took upon himself the judgment under which we all stand convicted. But we are told that "All who put their trust in Christ face divine judgment without fear, for their judge is their redeemer." (9.11)

We are all guilty of murder. Haven't we said, "I wish you were dead"? Haven't we said "I could just kill you"? Though we've never struck a blow, fired a shot, poisoned a drink, we have contemplated, perhaps with joy, the demise of another human being. And we have cursed, reviled, deprecated, ridiculed, others, which Jesus told us was just as bad. Anger is the equivalent of murder in the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. And we have all been angry. In the New Law of Murder, any anger, any contempt, any thing that would harm another human being, for all human beings are our brothers and sisters under the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of Jesus Christ, is as deadly as a homicide. But it is also a sin that in Jesus Christ is fully and freely forgiven if we repent, if we are sorry for our sins, if we turn away from them.

Jesus applies the same standard in the New Law on Adultery. We know the seventh commandment tells us not to commit adultery. But Jesus once again emphasizes that the thought is as bad as the deed. He tells us that any man who looks at a woman lustfully is guilty of adultery. Now President Jimmy Carter got in a heap of trouble with some folks for talking about this in an interview with Playboy Magazine almost 40 years ago. But Jimmy Carter was right. Well, he was wrong to give the interview to Playboy, but he was right about "lusting in his heart." And we've all done it. And television commercials (much less programs), movies, even print media advertising, are designed to cause us to lust in our hearts and with our eyes.

Now I don't think that Jesus meant literally what he said here about plucking out eyes and cutting off hands, but I think Jesus did indeed want us to recognize the seriousness of the sin of lustfulness.

One of the besetting problems of our age is addiction to pornography. Pornography has gone from the printed page to the video store to the internet, and people ruin their lives, lose their marriages and their jobs, because of it.

Addiction to pornography is lusting in ones heart, lusting with ones eyes, taken to the extreme.

If the New Law of Murder requires us to set aside violence in our thoughts and words, the New Law of Adultery requires us to set aside lust in our thoughts and words. The New Law of Adultery makes our sexual thoughts and behavior a part of our Christian life and witness. The New Law of Adultery elevates both sex and marriage into the realm of the kingdom of God.

These are high standards that Jesus sets. They are goals that few achieve, but all should strive towards.

Our third instance of Jesus transformation of the law is the New Law of Divorce.

Now let's talk about what divorce was in the time of Jesus. First of all, a man could divorce his wife any time he wanted to, for any reason. All he had to do was simply say, "I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you," in front of at least three male witnesses. And a man didn't have to have any grounds. If breakfast wasn't to his liking, a man could divorce his wife before the dishes were done.

But a woman could not divorce a man at all. The woman who was divorced got no alimony, no child support. Indeed, she probably didn't get custody of her children. She was simply put out on the street, where she probably would either become a beggar or a prostitute, and that was the harsh reality of divorce in the days of Jesus.

Note that as stern as the teaching of Jesus is here, it focuses on the sins of the man. No sin, no wrong, is attributed to the woman.

Buttrick states that Jesus is here concerned not with the statute books of the state, but with Christian marriage, and the Christian marriage service that we use reflects this mind: 'Until death do us part'. Or, as the service I use puts it, "As long as we both shall live."

But I've come to realize that the operative phrase in a marriage service isn't "as long as we both shall live." It is "whom God joins together, let no one put asunder."

The New Law of Divorce strengthens marriage, while condemning the old order.

You may have heard the report several years ago that half of all marriages were ending in divorce. It wasn't true. What was true was that in a particular year, there were half as many divorces granted as there were marriage licenses issued. What happened to those who married in that particular year is yet to be determined, but those whose marriages ended in that year, well, some of them may have taken forty years to get to that point.

Buttrick reminds us that marriage is a sacramental act shadowing forth the love between God and (hu)mankind...In Christian marriage the bride and groom should give themselves to a preparation of the soul, far, far more deeply than in our 'wedding rehearsals.'" (p. 299)

So George Buttrick proposes a higher order of marriage for Christians than for the rest of society, and a deeper commitment, and a stronger bond.

I officiate at a lot of weddings. And I'm proud that over the years, 80 per cent of the couples I've married are still together. But I can't predict which relationship will last and which won't. What I can predict is that without God's blessing on the marriage, it won't last. Without a Godly focus, by both partners, the marriage will be fragile, breakable, vulnerable.

The New Law of Divorce may seem harsh, but remember, there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus. Jesus confronts us with our sins: He calls us all murders and adulterers, and we are. In our anger, we kill. In our lust, we commit adultery. And in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

Let us pray.

Lord, we confess our sins of anger, of lust, of pride and envy, of thoughts that were worse than any deed we have ever done. Forgive us, and create in us clean hearts, O God. Renew right spirits within us. Cast us not way from your presence, but restore to us to the joy of your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.