"Think Different: Challenge the Status Quo"
Matthew 5:21-48

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Scripture: Matthew 5:21-48
Sermon: Imagine...

I want you to imagine a culture in which only certain children are valued. It’s not that difficult. Imagine a culture in which children with disabilities are not wanted or cared for. Imagine a culture in which girls past the first daughter are seen as an unnecessary burden and therefore are not wanted or cared for. Imagine that in this culture, such unwanted children are left outdoors, exposed to the elements to die. Although we may think this cruel today, in our imagined culture it is not cruel, it is normal. It is accepted and even expected. It is the status quo, the way things are.

Now imagine in that culture there appears a small minority group. This group thinks differently than their culture. Their minds have been changed, transformed and renewed. Because they think differently, they act differently. Slowly, at first, this small group starts to re-examine this practice of exposing unwanted children. They re-evaluate their thinking and realize that this is not right, that these children are valuable; they are made in the image of God and, even if they have disabilities, they are precious in his sight. So this small minority group starts to collect these unwanted children. They start to rescue them from the elements, taking them home, feeding them, caring for them and adopting them as their own.

Soon, when they hear a baby has been born and the parents don’t want it, they go and ask for the child. They seek them out. Then, as word spreads that they are doing this, people who have children they don’t want to care for begin bringing these children to these people. Eventually, this minority group starts to set up houses where these children are raised. People begin to bring their unwanted children to these houses, leaving them there to be loved, cared for and raised by these strange people who think and live so differently than the surrounding culture.

What impact do you think this minority group would have on their surrounding culture? What impact do you think they would have on their neighbourhoods? What impact would they have on the parents of these children? What impact would they have on the children? How many children’s lives would be saved? What do you think these children would think as they grew up among these radically counter-cultural people?

Now I said I wanted you to imagine this culture. But it’s not an imaginary example. In the Roman Empire, children born with disabilities—physical or mental—would be left exposed to the elements to die. Similarly, while a first daughter was seen as a valuable asset to marry off and form bonds with another family, more daughters were seen as an unnecessary expense. They, too, were left to die.

Into this culture Jesus Christ was injected. As Christianity spread, Christians began to rethink this practice. They came to change their thinking about it. They came to the understanding that all people are created in God’s image and, therefore, valuable and loved. It was Christians who started rescuing these children and adopting them. It was Christians who created the concept of an orphanage. It was Christians who changed what they thought, which changed how they viewed children, which changed what they did. And it wasn’t just that Christians no longer exposed their unwanted children. Nor did they seek to outlaw or change the minds of the culture around them (directly at least). Rather, they took decisive action to save the children. They didn’t berate the people who brought their children to the orphanages. They just took the children and loved them, cared for them and raised them knowing about Jesus.

Why? Because their encounter with Jesus changed the way they thought. That changed the way they lived. That changed the way they acted and that, eventually, changed their entire culture. They challenged the status quo because of what they learned from Jesus. By challenging the status quo, they transformed lives. By transforming lives, they transformed their towns and cities. By transforming their towns and cities, they transformed their culture.

Context

In the passage we are going to look at today, Jesus challenges the status quo in his culture, Judaism. He
offers 6 new understandings of the Law, the Old Testament, that really challenged current understanding in the culture around him. **Jesus challenged the way people thought, in the hopes he could change the way they lived.**

Before we get into the text itself, it is helpful to know that in Jesus’ day, Rabbis had to be highly qualified to comment on scripture. In fact, before they could comment in a passage, they had to have it completely memorized! Once they began to comment on it, they didn’t just offer their own opinion, either. They would always cite another Rabbi or even several Rabbis. “Rabbi so-and-so says…” They wouldn’t offer their own opinion on the text itself, but comment on or build on what other Rabbis said. It’s like our process today of footnoting our sources. If you write a paper for school, you can’t just rip off a quotation, or even an idea. If you borrow an idea from somebody else, you have to say so and give credit. With Rabbis in Jesus’ day, it was even more strict.

Ultimately, after citing other learned scholars, if you wanted to add your own contribution, you might say, “The Law says…” or “The Prophets say…” You would never say, “I say….” Always the discussion was in deeply respectful light of God’s word given through the prophets in the form of Scripture. **One would never dare to speak for God or say anything that would make it sound like you were critiquing God’s word.** All you were doing was enlightening people on what God’s word said or meant.

Text

Bearing this in mind, let’s turn to our text, Matthew 5:21-48, part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, coming shortly after the Beatitudes.

**What It Says**

This is a particularly rich passage. I could easily preach on each of Jesus’ 6 “But I say” statements on their own. But today I want to take a step back from the individual statements and look at them as a whole. This means that while I usually try to model carefully drawing out the meaning of a passage, today I’m going to give you the end result of that work. So if you wonder, at times, “Where did that come from?” satisfy yourselves that I’m sparing you the details! If you have questions that you really need answered, please feel free to talk to me after the service or send me an email during the week and I will do my best to help you see where the results come from.

In the big picture, **Jesus is challenging the spiritual status quo in Judaism.** There’s a fine line somewhere between finding your groove and getting stuck in a rut. It’s funny that we use those two images, a groove is a good thing, but a rut is a bad thing. The Jews in Jesus’ day had gotten stuck in a rut spiritually. They knew the Law, that is the OT, but they had lost the sense of its true meaning. They had the letter of the Law down pat, but they missed the spirit of the Law completely.

So, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives a number of examples in which the Jews were getting their relationship with God wrong, even though they thought they were following God’s word. Jesus begins each example by saying, “You have heard it said….” This was a teaching technique Rabbis used to introduce a literal but misleading interpretation of the Law. After giving the literal but misleading interpretation, they would then offer what was perhaps a less literal, or less wooden, interpretation of the Law that actually gave a better, or truer understanding of the Law in question. [R T France, Matthew, p. 118] Jesus, then, is comparing a more literal understanding of the OT and then offering or contrasting his own more discerning interpretation. What is shocking, though, is that when he offers his own interpretation, he doesn’t follow the practice of saying, “Rabbi so-and-so says…” Jesus says, “But I say….” **Jesus is claiming a dramatic authority of his own to be able to comment directly on the very word of God.** Certainly he is claiming a status higher than the scribes, Rabbis and “theologians” of his day. He’s not just adding his opinion to the discussion, he is making a “definite declaration of the will of God.” [France, p. 118] Jesus puts his words next to the Word of God, on an equal level, higher, even, than the prophets themselves. At least the prophets said, “The Lord says…” not “I say….” Basically, Jesus is saying, “The Bible says this, but I say this….”

This is what’s going on in the big picture. Let’s look, now at how Jesus is reinterpreting the Law. Let’s look at what the passage means.

**What It Means**

As I said, there are 6 examples of Jesus reinterpreting the Law. The first is from the 10 Commandments,
“Do not murder.” That’s #6 on God’s Top Ten List! If you commit murder, you will face judgment. This was one law it was relatively easy to keep. Not many of us commit murder. But Jesus goes deeper than that. He’s not satisfied with that. He says, “But I say, if anybody is angry with his brother he will face judgment.”

The word for anger is not the kind of sudden flare up of temper that quickly dissipates. This is a burning anger. The idea is that anybody who holds a grudge against his brother (and not just his biological brother, but another brother in the Lord) will face judgment like that of a murderer. Murder is an overt act. It is clear for all to see. But holding a grudge is also an overt act. To hold a grudge requires a decision, you decide to hold a grudge when it is up to you to let it go. That decision to hold a grudge is also an intentional act, it’s just not as visible as murder. [Frederick Dale Bruner, Matthew Vol 1, p. 175]

Jesus goes on to say that if you say to your brother, “Raca,” you will be judged. Basically, if you call your brother an idiot, you will be judged by the provincial authority—the Sanhedrin. If you call your brother a fool, literally calling him a liar and questioning his moral integrity, you will face even higher judgement—the fires of Hell. [Bruner, p. 175]

What’s happening here? What is Jesus saying? How is he reinterpreting the law against murder? The 6th commandment, “Do not commit murder,” protects human life. The reason is that people are created in God’s image. That is the spirit behind the law. Because people are created in the image of God, do not murder them. Jesus understands the spirit of the law and extends its application. The law protects life, Jesus protects the whole person. [Bruner, p. 176]

The root of murder is in ones heart. It is not ok to murder a person in actuality. But it is also not ok to harbour in your heart the feelings and attitudes that lead to murder. “Resentment and hard words kill people more swiftly than cigarettes and alcohol.” [Bruner, p. 176] We are to submit even out thoughts and feelings to the scrutiny of God. [France, p. 120] In Jesus’ day, few people would go so far as to murder a person. After all, God’s law forbids it. But, like today, they would have no qualms about holding a grudge against someone or holding contempt for another human being. But human beings are created in God’s image and therefore nobody deserves our contempt. Holding a person in contempt, holding a grudge against someone, violates the spirit of the 6th commandment just as much as actually murdering them does. We judge a man on the outside, his actions, but God judges a man’s heart. (1 Sam 16:7)

Jesus follows up on discussion of how we violate the 6th commandment with two ways that we can keep the 6th commandment. [Bruner p. 178] When in conflict with somebody, actively seek to reconcile and resolve the conflict as soon as you can. If you are about to bring your offering to God and remember you’re in conflict with somebody, that you are the person in the wrong, leave your offering and go be reconciled. This is fascinating because in Jesus’ day the teachers said that we owe God first and people second. They would say we should finish worshipping God first, then be reconciled to a person. Jesus stands this on its head! [Bruner, p. 179]

Jesus’ second reinterpretation of the Law has to do with adultery, incidentally God’s #7 on his Top Ten List. Jesus gives the traditional thought on the law, “Do not commit adultery,” which is the actual act. Jesus expands on the spirit of the law saying that to even look at a woman in order to lust after her is to commit adultery with her in your heart. Jesus says, “with a woman” and it is implied a married woman. [France, p. 121]

Jesus is not talking about natural attraction, recognizing a person is attractive. Rather, he is condemning what so often happens after that first acknowledgement of attractiveness- a desire to possess the person. Looking at a beautiful person is a drive given in creation; staring or leering is a drive given in the fall from creation.” [Bruner, p. 183] Lust, like anger, seeks mastery over a person, just in different forms. [Bruner, p. 182] And lust can master both the person lusted after and the one doing the lusting. Both parties are affected by it.

The command to protect life is followed by the command to protect marriage. [Bruner, p. 182] And that protection of marriage must be desperate and courageous. Jesus says, in a bit of hyperbole, that if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out! If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. We must remember that this was doubly shocking to a Jew. Not only is it shocking to speak of cutting off your hand, or gouging our your eye, but a person so maimed would no longer be able to enter the temple! This would prevent a person from worshipping God in the Jewish mind set! But Jesus says it is better to be prevented from entering the temple than to be thrown into Hell for not doing what it takes to get your lust under control.

“The purity called for here is nothing short of heroic.” [Bruner, p. 184] To take this command seriously
means that every attractive person you meet is a fresh reminder of your need for the strong grace of God! [Bruner, p. 184] As one commentator put it, “The commands of Jesus are the best evangelists, because like few preachers they show us that without the forgiving help of Jesus Christ we are lost!” [Bruner, p. 184]

Both of these commands from Jesus, these reinterpretations of laws taken for granted, shift the focus from a person’s outward actions to their attitude of heart. It’s not enough to resist actually killing somebody physically, you must also resist assassinating their character or holding contempt for them. Similarly, it’s not enough to refrain from actually having sex with someone other than your spouse, you must not even fantasize about it! These commands have to do with how we think about people, not just how we act with people.

In his third reinterpretation of the Law, Jesus talks about divorce. We don’t have time today to give a complete understanding of the Bible’s teaching on divorce, but let me give a brief summary of the situation in Jesus’ day. The Mosaic Law extended protection to women. By giving a certificate of divorce to his ex-wife, a man allowed her the freedom to remarry. He was basically admitting that the divorce was his doing not hers. In the OT Law, there was a phrase “if he finds any indecency in her.” In our text, it is rendered “sexual immorality,” but that is too strong a phrase.

In Jesus’ day, there were two schools of thought about what this meant. The conservative school of thought said that the indecency that allows a man to divorce his wife must be sexual in nature, some sort of misconduct short of adultery. Adultery was dealt with separately. The more liberal line of thinking focussed in on the word “any” in “any indecency.” They concluded that if your wife burned your breakfast you could divorce her legitimately as long as you gave her a certificate of divorce. Now, that certificate of divorce also entitled the woman to get her dowry back! It didn’t entitle her to anything she earned or contributed to the household while married, but at least it didn’t leave her flat broke. [David Instone-Brewer, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible, p. 5, 33, 154]

Not surprisingly, in Jesus’ day more people followed the liberal view than the conservative view. Divorce, while not rampant, was relatively easy as long as you gave the woman back her dowry. Here, though, Jesus challenges that view. He sides with the conservative view that only in cases of indecency is it allowable to legitimately divorce. This was the hot topic of the day in terms of marriage and divorce. [Instone-Brewer, p. 156]

Let me make one side comment about divorce. The New Testament does leave room for legitimate divorce, especially in cases of abandonment and adultery, but also for abuse and neglect. After a legitimate divorce, it’s ok to remarry, but not after an illegitimate divorce. We can’t go into all the details today, but suffice it to say that the NT allows for divorce, but upholds the ideals of monogamy, that marriage is for life, that divorce is not compulsory even in cases of adultery (you can reconcile) and that the clause in the OT, “any indecency,” is an invalid excuse for divorce unless it’s a sexual indecency. Given that a generation of Jews had been following the more liberal school on divorce, Jesus is making almost an entire generation of divorcees adulterers! [Instone-Brewer, p. 178] Shocking! People were following the letter of the law, giving a certificate of divorce and returning the dowry, but not the spirit of the law- that marriage is for life.

Jesus then goes on to the issue of making oaths. Jews were careful not to take the Lord’s name in vain, for instance swearing by God. But they concocted all sorts of rules about other ways to make oaths and which were binding and which were not. Again, Jesus cuts through the jargon and says, in essence, “Stop playing games with oaths. Just be honest and transparent in all your dealings.” James picks this up in 5:12, “Let your yes be yes and your no be no.” Don’t be fudging on your commitments all the time. Be honest, transparent and reliable and you won’t need to swear oaths. People will believe you are a person of your word.

Jesus’ 5th reinterpretation has to do with proportionate justice. [France, p. 125] Again, the original law was actually a restraining law. Think of cultures in which they chop off a person’s hand for stealing. That’s disproportionate. Think of a situation in which a person loses an eye, so they get revenge by killing the person, or burning their house down, etc. The original law was intended to put an end to escalations of this sort. Make sure the punishment fits the crime and doesn’t exceed it. There’s no room for “making an example” of someone.

But by Jesus’ day, being stuck in a spiritual rut, people would use this restrictive law to try to make sure they got everything they deserved. They didn’t show mercy, they took things as far as they could within the law. Jesus, though, counters this by reasserting the spirit of the law- restraint. Jesus is advocating an attitude in which
holding on to one’s personal rights is done loosely. [France, p. 126]

**Jesus gives examples of not seeking retribution, but showing grace.** In the case of being struck on the right cheek, this indicates a backhanded slap to the face. This is a grave insult in many cultures! [France, p. 126] Today, it would be like having someone spit in your face. In Jesus’ day, the person could be heavily fined for expressing such contempt and abuse. Instead of striking back, though, or taking the person to court, Jesus says you should change the equation by offering the other cheek. You will not be provoked!

Similarly, Jesus says we are to “Go the extra mile.” The Romans had a law that in an occupied territory they could demand a local carry their pack for 1 mile. [France, p. 127] The Jews hated their Roman occupiers. To have to carry ones pack would have been a terrible insult! Likely, it would make you ceremonially unclean and unable to enter the temple. If nothing else, it was a lot of work. But Jesus says that you should not only carry his pack the mile required, but go an extra mile because he is a person in need. Demonstrate agape love even to your enemies! Literally go the extra mile for your oppressor.

Following up on this, in his 6th command, Jesus says to pray for those who persecute you. For occupied Judea, that meant praying for the Roman soldiers you see around you every day! Instead of hating them (see his first command) pray for them and seek their wellbeing. If you only pray for your friends, you’re no better than tax collectors- the lowest of the low.

In this way, Jesus says, you will be like your Father in heaven. You’ll be a “chip off the Ol’ Block!” (As a side note, this is another way of saying you will honour your father- another of God’s top ten!) Be like Dad who shows kindness and grace even to his enemies, providing rain for the righteous and unrighteous both to provide food for them.

**Why It Matters**

So why does all this matter? How do we make use of this today?

Remember, Matthew’s Gospel closes with the Great Commission in which Jesus, in part, instructs his followers to teach people “everything” he has commanded them. **This passage that we have looked at today is part of what Jesus commanded!** [Bruner, p. 165] So if nothing else, we need to learn what he is saying in Matthew 5 if we are to obey what he says in Matthew 28.

This may seem daunting. Jesus’ commands here in chapter 5 are scary. It’s not enough to refrain from certain actions, we even have to keep out thoughts and motive pure! We have to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us! But thankfully Jesus’ commands come on the heels of the Beatitudes, the first part of the chapter. It is in light of the blessings Jesus promises that he gives the commands. “The momentum for keeping the following commands flows from the drive of the preceding Blessings.” [Bruner, p. 164] “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God!” (Matt 5:8) He then goes on to describe what it means to have a pure heart.

What we see here between the blessings and commands is a legitimate tension in the Christian life. God loves us and has rescued us, but that requires obedience and growth on our part. It has been said, “God loves me enough to accept me the way I am [the Beatitudes], but too much to leave me that way [the commands].” [Bruner, p. 165]

**God wants to heal broken people.** Here at Priory, our vision is “We see broken people becoming whole through the love of Christ.” That’s what this passage is about. It’s about how we, broken people, find wholeness in a new understanding of what God requires of us. It is also how we offer wholeness to others- protecting the person as well as life; protecting marriage by guarding our imaginations and supporting life-long commitments; by being people of integrity ourselves and dealing with others honestly and with transparency; by not holding on to offenses, but demonstrating forgiveness and even seeking the good of those who would seek to take advantage of us; by honouring our Heavenly Father by demonstrating his character in loving our enemies. Not only do we grow in wholeness ourselves, not only do we find healing in Christ when we seek his Spirit to help us live this out, but it also helps heal the wounds of others too.

This is not to say that these commands are easy to uphold! There is a heroism involved here. We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, even if we disagree with God’s adoption policies! [Bruner, p. 175] We frequently get angry with our fellow Christians the most because we expect the most from them. [Bruner, p. 175] But when we do learn to get along with one another, forgiving one another and protecting one another, it is a missionary activity. Other people stand back and say, “Behold how they love one another!”
Reconciliation is not easy, but it is what God has done with us. So we need to strive for it with one another. This is how we “reach in” as a church. We need to exercise Christian love, forgiveness and reconciliation here, we need to practice it with other people in whom the Holy Spirit is at work if we expect to be able to do it “out there” where people are not in step with the Spirit at all.

Jesus’ commands in Matthew 5 are completely counter-cultural. We, too, as Jesus’ hands and feet, as his body, are to be counter-cultural. Not long ago, maybe 50 years ago, our culture held to Christian values for the most part, even if people were not Christians. These values were taken for granted. The church was seen as a source of authority and was generally respected, even if people were slow to commit to it.

But that’s not the case anymore. Increasingly, the church is seen with hostility or apathy. Christian values are no longer the norm. But this can actually work in our favour. The Gospel thrives in hostile environments. When people find wholeness through the love of Christ, the transformation that takes place can be breathtakingly dramatic. That transformation of a life is one of the most powerful tools for establishing the truth of the gospel. It works!

But in order for that transformation to take place, believers need to change. They need to change the way they think, which leads to a change in how they act and how they live. We need to be tough on ourselves! When it comes to temptation, when it comes to going with the flow of the people around us, we need to be completely decisive. We need to chop off our hand, if necessary! In matters of morality and temptation, swift action and decisiveness often wins the day. [Bruner, p. 186] We need to challenge our thinking and our attitudes. We need to submit them to the scrutiny of God, not just compare them to the people around us.

For instance, in the matter of lust and sexual purity, our whole culture is obsessed with being attractive, impressing attractive people and gaining their approval or attention. How much time and energy do you spend trying to be attractive or attract the attention of attractive people? “Popular culture thrives on the theme of seduction and would grind to a thundering halt without it.” [Bruner, p. 187] Think of music videos, tv commercials, print advertisements, and the themes in so many movies and TV shows. We use sex to sell everything! This is the status quo. What would it look like if a small minority of people, people who were being transformed themselves, decided to inject Jesus Christ into their culture when it comes to seduction, sexuality and our imaginations?

What if a small minority of people in Guelph and the surrounding cities changed their thinking when it comes to protecting exploited people, protecting marriage, protecting sexuality, protecting wounded people, protecting personal integrity and stopped seeking everything they were due? That would be counter-cultural indeed! Our culture doesn’t value marriage. It doesn’t value sexual faithfulness or purity. It doesn’t value losers, the abused, the wounded. Our culture denies the existence of truth; it certainly doesn’t value personal integrity and truthfulness in all our speech and dealings.

Jesus came to the Jews. He didn’t come to the Greeks or Romans first. The Romans ruled the western world. The Greeks were the deep thinkers, the ideas people. But Jesus didn’t go to them. He came to the Jews. Who were they? They were the religiously zealous people! They were the people of the Law, the holy people of God.

And when Jesus came to the holy people of God, the pious people, the religiously pure people, he had to turn their culture on its head. He had to turn their understanding of what God wanted completely around. If he had come to the Romans or Greeks first, the Jews would have said, “Oh, those are nice ideas, but we have the Law. We know God’s will. Here it is written down.” But Jesus came to the people who supposedly knew God’s will and showed them God’s will for us is so much deeper than they ever imagined. Then, having shown the good people, the religious people where they needed to improve, and providing them the grace to do so, they were able to take this good news to the ideas people, to the people who ruled and everybody in between.

What would Jesus say to the religious people in Canada today? What would Jesus say to our church today? What would Jesus say to you? Jesus challenged the Jews in their thinking so they would change their living. Where would Jesus challenge your thinking today? Where does he want your living to change?

The culture surrounding us is like that faced by the early church. It is not a Christian culture anymore. Some say it’s not even a post-Christian culture anymore but that it’s back to being a pre-Christian culture! So let’s blow them away like the early church did. The gospel thrives in a pre-Christian culture because those who
accept it and commit to it are so radically transformed. Their transformation then transforms the society around them. Amen.