

Message for March 7, 2021

Exodus 20:1-17

Matthew 5:17-20

It now appears that after months of anticipation there is finally light at the end of the tunnel with the ramped up roll out of the Covid-19 vaccines. There is also general agreement as to who should receive their vaccinations first, that it should be the older and most vulnerable members of society along with those whose occupations are deemed to be essential. The rest of us will then follow. In other words, the general consensus is that where one stands in the vaccination queue depends upon their circumstances or situation; this is reflected by the anger directed at those who are perceived to be queue jumping for whatever reason. We generally assume that it is the circumstances of a situation that determines whether something is right or wrong; in fact such thinking is the basis for our modern morality and ethics. While we may not realize it though, this is a fairly new idea.

The book, "Situation Ethics: The New Morality" was written by an Anglican professor named Joseph Fletcher more than fifty years ago. It created quite a stir at the time and now, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that it was pivotal when it comes to our views on ethics and morality.

Up until his time very few people questioned the idea that there is an absolute right and wrong. Some things were considered to be always right and some things were thought to be always wrong, end of discussion! But not so, said Fletcher. He argued that there is no absolute right or wrong; what is right and wrong all depends upon the situation or the circumstances. To use an example, the Ten Commandments state that one should not kill another person. Suppose though that you were threatened by a knife-wielding intruder. Wouldn't you take all means necessary to protect yourself and your loved ones, even if that meant killing the intruder? And if you did kill the intruder, would that be morally wrong? Or to use another example, the Ten Commandments state that a person should not steal. Suppose however that your children were starving and that you had no money to buy food. Would it be morally wrong to steal a loaf of bread in such circumstances? Most of us would say no said Fletcher, and so

there is no consistent right or wrong. What is right and wrong all depends upon the situation or the circumstances. Fletcher did however say that whatever we may choose to do, it should be based on love.

As I have already written, this book provoked a great deal of controversy when it first appeared but it has also had a profound influence on how most people today view morality and ethics. Up to his time few people really questioned such as the Ten Commandments and that the Commandments were the foundation upon which ethical decisions were to be based. Even if we didn't always keep them in practice, we still paid lip service to the ideal that they should be obeyed. After Fletcher's book though, it seemed as if everything and anything was permissible; that everyone could do whatever they pleased. After all, all they had to do was argue that it was done in the name of love and that the circumstances justified their behaviour. This type of thinking is the basis for our modern ethics and morality but this being the case, what are we supposed to do with such as the Ten Commandments? Should we still try and follow them or should we just ignore them? Or perhaps we should just regard them as the ten helpful suggestions that may be followed or ignored as the circumstances warrant?

In this morning's New Testament passage, Jesus made it abundantly clear that the Ten Commandments should not and indeed must not be set aside or ignored. As Jesus himself said:

“Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches others to do the same will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Far from dismissing the Ten Commandments as being irrelevant, Jesus did the exact opposite and emphasized their importance. Jesus in fact even said that it wasn't enough just to keep the letter of the commandments but that we should also try and keep their spirit as well.

To use an example, one of the commandments states “Thou shalt not kill” or, to translate it more accurately, “Thou shalt not murder”. This of course is obvious; the followers of Jesus most certainly should not go around murdering people. Jesus however said that it was not good enough just to refrain from the

act of murder, he took this one step further and said that his followers should not get angry at other people or insult them either. To use another example, the Ten Commandments say that we are to refrain from the act of adultery. Jesus though took this one step further too and said that we are to refrain from looking at others lustfully. Far from being unimportant, Jesus insisted that the Commandments are to be kept in both spirit and in deed. It is perhaps needless to say but this of course is far easier said than done.

One day a young boy and his friend were walking home from school and it was a bitterly cold winter day. As they trudged along, they saw a car coming up behind them. The one boy realized that the driver was his older brother's wife. "Great", he said, "we will get a ride home now!" Playfully he stuck out his thumb for a ride but his sister-in-law just smiled, waved her hand and kept on going! When he got home he was half frozen, so he phoned his sister-in-law and asked her why she hadn't stopped. And what was her reply? "Your brother told me to never ever pick up hitch-hikers!"

The letter of the law may have been kept but the spirit was missed altogether! The truth of course is that it is impossible for us to always keep such as the Ten Commandments and Jesus' teaching all of the time, in both letter and spirit. Perhaps it is just easier then to opt for such as situation ethics and do whatever we wish, claiming that our choices and decisions are done in the name of love and therefore right under the circumstances. Is this though really an option for us?

As the people of God and the disciples of Christ, we are called to at least try and keep God's laws. Realistically though, it is impossible for us to keep all of them all of the time, especially in spirit. While it may be possible for example to refrain from murdering someone, it is a whole lot harder to never ever get angry at someone. Or while it may be easy enough not to worship another god in the religious sense, it is a whole lot harder not to make such as money, possessions, our jobs or something else the god of our lives. And who can travel through life without ever feeling at least a little bit jealous of others, their possessions or their accomplishments?

Jealousy can be so hard to avoid at times and I am reminded of the story about an old monk who lived a saintly life. The devil sent some demons to tempt

him to do something wrong but no matter how hard they tried, they failed. When they reported their failure to their master, the devil told them that their methods were too crude. Then the devil himself crept up behind the saintly monk and whispered in his ear, "Did you hear the great news? Your brother has just been named a bishop!" At that very moment the monk's normally serene countenance was marred by a scowl of envy.

Truly it is impossible to keep both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law all the time. Our failure to do this is, to use what is considered by many people nowadays to be a rather old-fashioned term, sin. This is the bad news, but the good news and the great news even, is that all is not lost. A wonderful reminder of this is found in the old gospel hymn, "Rock of Ages".

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears for ever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

This God has done for us through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We cannot help but be sinners because of our inability to follow Jesus' teaching and keep such as the Ten Commandments all of the time in both spirit and deed. We are however forgiven sinners, and there is a world of difference between the two.