

## **"Rules"**

Rev. Jeff Bacon

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us that we may love you and love one another. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

In our reading today from Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus explains very graphically, some rules about how we should love one another. The rules make sense, but Jesus uses such extreme examples that in our own imperfection, we shudder at the implications of his rules. If you murder someone you are liable to judgement, but if you are angry with someone, or insult someone, or call someone a fool, you are also liable, even "liable to the hell of fire." You should not commit adultery, but even if you look at a woman with lust, you have committed adultery with her in your heart. So, if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. And then there's a rule about swearing where anything more than "'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'" comes from the evil one. Loving one another has never seemed so difficult, or failure more costly.

Jesus is providing advice about love based upon the Great Commandment: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" Jesus compares what his listeners have heard read in the synagogue from the Old Testament scriptures, with what Jesus is teaching his disciples. In his comparisons, Jesus goes to the root of the Law and uses extreme examples to emphasize the need for vigilance in striving to obey God's will in an imperfect world.

Jesus begins with a verbatim quotation of the command against murder. It's a non-controversial place to begin. But God's will is that there not only be no murder, but that there be no anger among us. Even the disciples would have had difficulty with this! But we're being called to change the world through reconciliation, and overcome alienation and exclusion. The importance of this is emphasized by an extreme example: for a worshipper at the altar could not possibly leave in the middle of the offering, find the offended party, go through the process of reconciliation, and then return to the temple to complete their offering. It's absurd, and its absurdity makes a compelling point about the importance of reconciliation.

The Jewish law against adultery ensures that a married woman does not have sexual relations with anyone other than her husband. Like anger, Jesus emphasizes the law by suggesting that if a man even thinks about another man's wife with lust, he is committing adultery with her in his heart. Extreme examples reinforce the point: if an eye causes you to sin, tear it out; and if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It's absurd, but maintaining proper relations between men and women, especially in marriage, is important.

At the time, divorce was entirely the prerogative of the husband, which was relatively easy to obtain and relatively common. But divorce, while sometimes inevitable and sometimes a practical necessity, is not the will of God. According to Jesus, marriage and family are not a contractual arrangement regulated by law, but a gift from God that should be respected as such. The holy act of marriage is important.

In both the Jewish and gentile cultures, an oath invokes a deity to guarantee the truth of what was said or to punish an untruth. Testifying falsely under oath is considered a falsehood made before God. It's still a

serious crime today, punishable by our human law. But Jesus says that oaths should not be necessary, because God wants us to always tell the truth. Being truthful is important. Reconciliation, proper relationships in marriage and being truthful in an imperfect world are all very important and they follow from the first commandment - the main rule - to love God.

In 1902, a girl named Clara was born in Palmerton, Pennsylvania. At the time, her last name wasn't important for a young, black, servant girl. It was a difficult time in the United States for Clara and her family.

When Clara was 14, she was hired by a white family to be a nanny for their newborn baby boy, Morton Kelsey. Morton was born prematurely, a breach-birth, with clear signs of deficiency, so his mother didn't even want to hold him. The lack of a parent's touch teaches a baby early on what it means to be unwanted and unloved. Morton's parents hired Clara to look after him, which she did with as much love as she could. As Morton struggled, Clara fed him and clothed him and, though she was specifically told not to, she picked him up, held him, rocked him, and sang to him. Morton's parents didn't know how to care for a sick child with physical and mental challenges. When Morton was three, his parents discovered that he had a hearing impairment, so they fired Clara and sent Morton away for treatment.

Morton was too young to remember his time with Clara and after his years of being moved from home to home, and becoming accustomed to unkind names like retarded and unlovable, Morton carried an oppressively heavy burden. His mother died, his father remarried, his home disappeared and Morton found himself totally alone in a deep pit of depression. When he was 19 years old, Morton couldn't carry the burden any longer, so one night, he walked out into the desert of California with a bunch of pills and a plan to end his life.

Some of us here may have known some of Morton's pain. Even if we've never come to the desert of despair, I imagine that many of us have to chase away unwanted memories of old problems: nicknames, or recollections of a childhood bully, or hurtful things said by an unthinking parent that continue to haunt us at the edges of our consciousness, threatening to feed on our insecurities.

What happens in our minds is very powerful and can lead us astray. Jesus knows this and makes his point that anger in our mind is like murder, which must be reconciled; that lust in our mind is like adultery of the heart; and that telling a lie is like evil entering our hearts and minds. We must keep our hearts and minds focused on loving God and experience God's melody of love.

As Morton lies in the desert looking up at the stars, feeling small, unimportant, unloved and alone, he notices a desert breeze blowing on his face and with the breeze comes the ghost of a melody, a song that enters his heart and mind, somehow enlightening him to the reality of a deeper truth: that he is loved by God. Morton would later describe this experience as God's powerful healing touch of love; like being baptized in the Spirit. For Morton, it came in the form of a mysterious melody of love.

Bathed in love and baptized by the Spirit that night, Morton becomes a Christian, gets up, walks out of the desert, and gets help. A while later, he meets and marries his life partner, and they have a family together. Over many decades Morton writes more than 30 books on Liberal theology and Christian mysticism, and he shares the enlightenment of his desert experience with the world. Because, when we experience a moment of God's grace; when we experience the peace of knowing that we are loved by God; when we understand what it means to be filled with the Spirit; the experience is too big to keep in. The love of God is not a gift that can be

kept to ourselves. It's a calling to let the love that fills us, overflow to others: to love our neighbours.

By the time Morton Kelsey is 77, he has achieved a lot and given and received a lot of love, concealing, but not eliminating, the hurt of his difficult childhood. It came as a surprise for Morton, to receive a letter at Christmas time from a 91 year-old woman who he doesn't know, who never had any children and lives alone in a nursing home. In the letter, Clara wonders if he is the same boy she cared for in Palmerton, three quarters of a century ago. Morton flew out to meet her, to look at the faded photograph that she had kept of his early years; to hear her stories of bathing him with tenderness, holding him with care, tickling and touching and cuddling him with love.

As Morton was preparing to leave Clara's room, Clara asks Morton for a final favour. Clara places her 91 year-old hands on Morton's 77 year-old face and sings a song that she used to sing to him every day for the first three years of his life, and he knows it immediately. It's the same song that came to Morton on the breeze in the desert; the day of his epiphany. When Morton was so lost, it was Clara's song that came to him as a miraculous gift of love from God.

God loves us unconditionally and there's really only one rule: love God. Loving your neighbour comes as a natural result. Thanks be to God. Amen.