

Matthew's Jesus is just getting warmed up. He began this teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount by saying to those with ears to hear that God is blessing them *now* with the inbreaking of God's heaven. Jesus made no mention of a massive, bloody war that would determine who is to be damned and who is to be carried away to some off-world afterlife. Instead, he made the startling claim said that heaven is available to those in right relationship to God.

"You have heard that it was said...but I say to you."

Jesus went on to describe how God would use as salt and light those who consented to God's presence to kindle the coming of God's heaven on earth. He did not say that if we behave ourselves, God would someday make good people into the vessels of God's light. Instead, he said to anyone who will hear it, that staying in right relationship is how we participate in God's out-pouring of life and light.

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But he also said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Now, some parts of the church have chosen – in ages past and in our own time – to teach or imply that Christianity completes Judaism, making Judaism wrong or unnecessary. Others insist that our scriptures must be taken as God's final word *exactly* as they are written.

I find nothing in the teaching, the life and the ministry of Jesus to support either of those views. Matthew's Jesus is the most Jewish of all Christian scripture, and he is teaching here like many of his rabbinical contemporaries. His opening premise is that God is present and alive to us in scripture. That is true not only for Jews, but for Episcopalians. We worship a living God, not a 17th c. British book.

Matthew's Jesus takes scripture not as *ending* points that settle all further questions and exploration, but as *starting* points intended to revitalize or restore our relationship with the living God. Biblical authority, for Jesus and for us, is not unquestioning devotion to the written letter. Biblical authority is, instead, a posture of trust that God will continue to teach us through our ancient texts *and* through our life experiences.

The point is not to be unfaithfully faithful to what has been written, but to use what has been written as a guide for being faithful to the living God. What compels Matthew's Jesus to bring up and enlarge the scriptural tradition is, in fact, his respect for the genuine, uninterrupted presence of God whom we still hear and encounter through scripture.

The temptation – then and now – is to appeal to ancient writings *about* God as the final word *from* God. But doing so implies that God is either no longer alive or has stopped actively interacting with creation. Jesus counters by insisting that not only is the living God present in scripture, but that God cares intensely about our being in right relationship with God and with each other.

Matthew's deeply Jewish Jesus asks his followers to trust and to love scripture as God's teaching. And most of us begin by learning God's teaching as rules. That's what Paul means by feeding the infants of Christ with spiritual milk. But as we grow more familiar with our Bible, if we don't see more than a rule-book, our sense of who is obeying those rules and who is not can become arbitrary. Our spiritual practices can become fixated on the memorization of chapter and verse. Our faith can stagnate and stop nourishing the body.

Fortunately, there is another option. Without ever contradicting God's teaching to the ancient ones, Jesus deepens scripture by embodying it; he broadens God's teaching by living it. His incarnated example enhances our perception, inspiring us to live into our own authentically human, dynamic and reconciling relationships with God and all people. Living our faith as the children of God looking to serve Christ in all creation – *that* is the solid food that Paul refers to.

As a rule, "You shall not murder" certainly still holds pragmatic value. But in the context of the relationships that matter to God, a rule only goes so far. If, for example, we choose to rupture a relationship by allowing our anger to hijack our actions toward a brother or sister, then we begin the process of making others less human in our eyes. And consequently, we become less fully human ourselves. When we choose the path of dehumanization, God's judgment does not wait for us in the afterlife, but begins immediately. We expose ourselves to the risk of being cast into the fire.

Now, the reference to the "hell of fire" here is misleading. The word "hell" did not exist until the 8th century. We adopted the word into English to introduce a pagan concept of hell into Christian theology. But the King James Bible and several subsequent translations use the word "hell" to cover two very different Hebrew words.

First century Jews used the word *sheol* to talk about a relatively neutral place of darkness where all the dead went. The other word that Jesus uses here, is *gehenna*, meaning "The Valley of the Son of Hinnom." *Gehenna* is the name of a place just outside Jerusalem where garbage and corpses were burned. Neither *sheol* nor *gehenna* mean an afterlife where God finalizes some people's irreversible fate in a place that surpasses all human violence with eternal torture and endless punishment.

People listening to Jesus would have heard him referring to a physical place in the here and now. And in the context of teaching right relationship, the earthly example is enough for Jesus to show how God's teaching can be expanded into life-giving guidelines for interacting with each other.

"You shall not murder" is clearly still a good rule to live by. But as a guide for our relationship to God and God's creation, it needs bolstering. The path to life, love and service involves respecting the dignity of every person. But snapping the leash off your anger until it drives your actions will erode your own humanity or the humanity others – forms of slow suicide and murder. You can let your anger burn long enough and hot enough so that nothing of your humanity is left. Only waste to be tossed into the garbage-pit fire.

The same pattern shows up in the other teachings. “You shall not commit adultery” is a good rule. As a guide for our relationship to God and God’s creation, it also needs enhancement. To admire beauty in another person is life-affirming. To act on a desire to possess another person for the satisfaction of our own physical impulses erodes full humanness in both people.

“Sexual desire,” Bishop of Durham Tom Wright wrote, “though itself good and God-given, is like the fire of *gehenna*, which needs firmly keeping in place.” If we can’t keep that impulse in its appropriate place, even by exposing it to the light of truth by talking with a spouse or a counselor, we can damage our humanity to the point where we might just as well cut off a body part.

“You shall not swear falsely.” As spiritual milk, we do well to teach our children a rule about telling the truth and not lying. Even as a rule, by the way, this teaching has nothing to do with cursing. Nor does it forbid the formal swearing of courtroom oaths. The context is commerce.

Without any regulators or oversight to ensure quality, merchants frequently called on God as a witness to their claims about what they were selling. But when we make promises propped up by phrases like “I swear to God” or “as God is my witness,” we are borrowing God’s good name and reputation without permission. That’s bad for a relationship.

More practically, adding these or other phrases – “believe me” or “trust me” – don’t serve to build trust with other people, but instead tend to call our general truthfulness into question. And if people can’t trust us, our relationships suffer.

That is why we feed spiritual milk in the form of helpful rules to children and people new to their faith. Rules help us learn to think before we speak, to mean what we say and say what we mean. When we are ready to go deeper, to practice righteousness, we practice living in truthfulness, transparency and dependability in all our relationships, especially with God.

You can see that learning the moral lessons of scripture is an essential start and a vital task for the church. But Jesus did not want us to remain stuck in the details of precisely what is and isn’t allowed. The point, as Paul pointed out to the Corinthians, is that people must start where they are, not where they are not. Scripture is *one* platform that God uses to reach people where they really are.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus extends an invitation to those who have learned enough to be weaned from spiritual milk. To those who are ready, Jesus offers the spiritual solid food of God’s teachings *embodied*. He lays out the pattern for a way of being more fully human in his own life, death and resurrection.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,” the Risen Christ still says, “but I say to you...”

Listen. Please. Listen.

Works consulted:

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