

How to Change the World for the Better

February 12, 2023

I'd like to tell you a story about butter this morning. I was around 8 years old, and my family and I were sitting at the dinner table. With dinner, we were eating bread. There was a stick of butter on the table. I went to cut off a bit of butter for my bread, and the butter was too hard. I couldn't cut it well.

So using my 8-year-old problem-solving creativity, I took my piece of bread and I rubbed it along the top of the stick of butter. It worked; my bread was buttered, but I left a mess of crumbs in the butter. My parents were, I think, stunned or maybe amused, and they didn't say anything.

But then my older brother, who must've been around 15 at the time, did the same thing, after seeing my genius plan and that there wasn't any fall-out. He took his bread and rubbed it along the stick of butter.

My brother unfortunately did not fare as well with the parents. They scolded him.

My brother's response was, "Andrew did it!"

My mom responded, "Andrew is 8 years old. You" (and here's the crux) "You should know better."

Living proof that younger siblings have it easy. I was okay with that, happily munching my well-buttered bread.

I don't know why I remember that incident so vividly, but I do. My brother was held to a higher standard because he was older.

Today, in our Gospel, Jesus gives the same message to his disciples that my parents gave to my brother. "I am holding you to a higher standard – not because of age, but because you have chosen to follow me."

And Jesus lays out a couple of topics that the religious Law speaks to. And then each time, Jesus states the minimum requirements of the Law, then calls his disciples to exceed those requirements.

First, we have murder. The Law says, "Do not murder." That's a pretty low bar, Jesus says. I'm calling you a higher standard. Don't be angry with or insult your neighbor. If you have a quarrel, settle it before you come worship. Be in right relationship with the people around you, because that is a part of your spiritual life."

If you fail to live up to this, the punishment is as severe as if you murdered someone. That'll wake you up. But lest we live in constant fear of eternal damnation for insulting someone, allow me to remind you that this is the same Jesus who talks extensively about forgiveness and new life.

So the world's rule: Don't murder. Jesus' higher standard: Don't insult or quarrel.

Then we move on. Rule number 2 of the world: Don't commit adultery. For those who are married, don't break your wedding vows. Side note: Jesus is talking to his disciples. It seems as though at least some of the twelve had wives that we don't hear about.

Jesus' new higher standard: Don't objectify people or lust after them. View every person as a human being, complex and real and created by God. And if you struggle with this, remove from your life whatever stands in the way. Cut it out.

Again, we have the law, and a higher standard that Jesus calls us to.

Then it gets fun. Because 2/3 days before Valentine's Day, who doesn't want to talk about divorce? This is a passage that we hear almost every year, and because it is so often misquoted or taken out of context, I always like to look at it whenever it comes up.

Again we have the same pattern. The law is that a man can divorce his wife by writing up a certificate of divorce. We know that this could be for any reason: the wife burned dinner; she was late coming home from visiting a friend; or even if she wasn't beautiful enough. Marriages were usually arranged in those days, and divorce left the wife poor and destitute.

So Jesus calls his followers to a higher standard. Don't divorce your wife for something inane. Don't bring about financial ruin to your spouse. Treat marriage as the sacred relationship that it is.

That is the context in which Jesus is speaking. Jesus is not talking about people who are married and who, after years of conversation, counseling, and discussion, have made a thoughtful, prayerful decision to separate. This is not a passage to condemn anyone who is divorced today. It is a rejection of the once-sided patriarchal practice that was done in Jesus' day.

The law says men can divorce their wives for any reason. I call you to a higher standard of marriage.

And then lastly, Jesus talks about promises or oaths. The law says, "Don't break oaths or vows." But I say to you, Don't make promises at all. Let every word you speak be true. Let your "yes" mean "yes" and let your "no" mean "no."

And then our passage ends (thank goodness, because it's long enough), but Jesus continues in this same vein. The law says, "An eye for an eye," but I say, Don't strike back when someone hits you. The law says, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy," but I say, "Love your enemy." There is always a higher standard.

Remember last week's message from Jesus? You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And here's how spread that light and salt. Treat people better than they deserve.

It's a powerful lesson. I'll be honest with you. Sometimes I hear this and I think, "That's nice, but how realistic is this? Can we really do this? And what good would not insulting anyone do?"

It's worth noting from history that this is the way, maybe the only way, that we progress as a global society.

Think back to Mahatma Gandhi, who was leading the campaign for Indian independence from Great Britain in the 1930s and 1940s. Gandhi followed this same idea that Jesus puts forward in his Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi coined a name for his movement, his behavior, called "satyagraha," which translates to "holding firmly and politely to truth."

Here is what the world says is acceptable. Here's what the world says is permissible and necessary in war. What Gandhi and his followers decided was that they would hold to the highest standard they possibly could – non-violence, truth, respect (even for enemies), fearlessness. When they were struck, they did not hit back. When they were insulted, they spoke the truth respectfully. When they were arrested, they did not resist, but they continued to speak.

And in holding themselves to a higher standard, they changed their country.

It's also worth pointing out in this Black History Month that the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., studied these same tactics of Jesus and of Gandhi. He employed them in the Civil Rights Movement here in our country. Through non-violent sit-ins, through peacefully protesting, through not resisting arrests and beatings, the Civil Rights activists brought about change.

So we hear Jesus' words, and that might sound like a nice pipe dream. But by my lights, this is not just a feel-good teaching by Jesus; this is the blueprint for improving the state of our world. As followers of Christ, we are called to a measure of behavior that is above the minimum of what the world calls "acceptable."

It's good to keep that in mind when you're interacting with someone on Facebook or you get into an argument with a family member on the other side of the political aisle, or heaven forbid you find yourself talking to a Kansas City Chiefs fan.

Jesus calls us to a higher standard. And this is nothing less than a way to reshape our world for the better. Go Eagles.

Amen.