

“Teach Me Your Way, and I Will Observe It to the End”
Matthew 5:38-48; Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Psalm 119:33-40

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

¹The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

⁹When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God.

¹¹You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the LORD. ¹³You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the LORD. ¹⁵You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD. ¹⁷You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Psalm 119:33-40

³³Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.

³⁴Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

³⁵Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.

³⁶Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.

³⁷Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.

³⁸Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.

³⁹Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.

⁴⁰See, I have longed for your precepts;

in your righteousness give me life.

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Prayer

Eternal God Who Is Love,
Giver of Good News,
God of Hope, Prince of Peace,
Table and Fount of Righteousness,
Spirit of Wisdom,
You who are the Way, and the Truth, and the Life,

We have received the witness of many holy people.

The ancients who lived up to your covenant,
the desert fathers and mothers of the early centuries after your son’s incarnation,
the mystics of the Middle Ages,
the faithful Reformers of the Church,
all those who came before us with faith and truth and insight and compassion,
who worked with their own hands to feed and tend your sheep,
who taught us the example of what it means
to be fed, nourished and satisfied by your word
and to feed others till their bodies and their hearts were full:
“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;

and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isaiah 55:1).
All whose lives seem bathed in goodness and radiant in holy light—
They all seem so good at this!
And sometimes we feel like we are *so bad* at it,
so inadequate, so ineffectual.

Our hearts are often stirred by majestic words
of compassion and truth and sacred testimony from your people—
astounding declarations of forgiveness;
statements and actions of extravagant self-giving, humility, and nobility;
profound examples of arms wide open to embrace the whole world.

O God, we want to be like that.

In this room are people of goodwill and good faith,
people of intelligence and passion,
people who have worked and prayed and sometimes bled and wept
for the sake of a world that is righteous before you,
and just and compassionate for all people.

And sometimes, O God, when we hear each other speak,
it’s like we are living in two different universes,
or two different dimensions,
watching and listening to the same things
and yet seeing and hearing them completely, utterly differently.

And just as one person’s happy news is another person’s sadness,
sometimes what one Christian interprets as pure, Biblical faithfulness
another equally intelligent, equally flawed,
equally dedicated and loving Christian
interprets as being profoundly against your will.

Perhaps our being of one mind on everything
is not your will for us for this time, O God.
Perhaps in this time you are simply calling us to love one another
while we engage in the challenge of seeking to discern your will.

Maybe, you are sending us back out into the wilderness,
not to “get our act together and come back when we’ve got it figured out,”

but to realize how much we depend on you,
and how deeply we really do love one another,
and to appreciate how small our minds are,
until we allow you to expand them,
and how fiery our passions are
as we pray for you to harness them to your purposes.

You have assured us in your Holy Word
that you are our faithful God.

Your son Jesus Christ died for our sake,
and in that universe-defining reality
is our whole life and meaning and purpose and conviction.

You have given us your instructions.

You have said to your Covenant People:

“You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.”

In reaping the food harvest of our land,
You have told us not to be efficient but to be compassionate:
to leave something for the poor and the alien.

You are the LORD our God.

You told us not to steal or deal falsely or lie to one another;
not to swear falsely by your name,
not defraud our neighbor; not to withhold the wages of a laborer until morning.
Not to revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind
but to fear only you, our God: You are the LORD.

Not to render an unjust judgment; not to go around slandering,
not to profit by the blood of our neighbor: You are the LORD.

Not to hate in our heart anyone of our kin;
not to take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of our people,
but, you commanded:
“You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

Please keep teaching us the way of your statutes,
and, with your help when we need sustenance,
and your forgiveness when we stumble,
we will observe it to the end.

The Sermon

In the time that each of us is allotted, how do you make your mark on the world? What will be the criteria by which you hope that one day your life will be assessed? By what measures will you, or God, or the next generation consider how well you inhabited the time when you were here?

On Christmas Day, 2004, hundreds of millions of miles from earth, an unmanned spacecraft from NASA arrived, after a seven-year journey, in the vicinity of Saturn's largest moon, which is called Titan. Titan is larger than the planet Mercury; one and a half times the size of our moon.

The spacecraft was in two parts: an orbiter, which would circle the planet, and a lander, which would descend to the surface of the moon and send data up to the orbiter, which would then be relayed to earth. Once the lander separated from the orbiter, it would take twenty days for it to make its way down to the surface.

The distance between planets in the solar system tends to be much cozier in our minds than in reality. In fact they are terrifyingly distant, and the fact that they don't all orbit around the sun in a straight line means there are hundreds of millions of miles of empty, cold, dark, silent, vacuous space between all the planets.

On Christmas Day, 2004, the longing reach of humankind had scaled a cosmic distance beyond the conception of the human mind, and had made its way through all of that unimaginable empty vastness to a distant neighbor.

Tragically, on that same day back on earth, one of the most devastating earthquakes ever recorded was taking place under the Indian Ocean, which led to catastrophic tsunamis, which would, in the following hours and days, take the lives of more than a quarter of a million people and cause inconceivable damage, heartbreak, and misery.

Most people in our part of this planet were completely unaware of either of those events as they took place.

On Christmas Day, 2004, a family gathered around a Christmas tree and opened presents;

a soldier in Iraq thought about home, and wondering how her second-grade son was doing, who had been getting in more trouble at school;

a college student who could barely afford to be there realized he had developed a nervous twitch from worrying about whether he had passed any of his classes last semester;

an African American family man automatically sat up straighter and gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as a police car pulled up next to him at a stoplight;

a teenager was sitting in silent, desperate frustration trying to figure out who she really was and wondering if she could ever be accepted by anybody, including herself;

a couple who had retired and moved to their dream location grappled with the fact that they didn't know anybody there and dearly missed the place they had just left;

a newly unemployed factory worker was churning with worry over the next credit card bill;

a firefighter's spouse felt her body tense up as she heard EMS, fire and police sirens all racing in the same direction;

a 72-year-old man was walking down a hospital corridor to visit the brother whom he had only seen twice in the last 40 years, and wondering what kind of reception he was going to get.

How do we know when we're making the mark on this life we're supposed to make?

How do we know when we're really doing what God put us here to do?

And in such a time as this—this divided, divisive time, when everything seems like it's shifting, and things we used to think were certainties are kind of up in the air, and blatant, obvious falsehoods are being distributed like wildflower seeds—

what does it mean, what are you supposed to do, to be the person that God created you to be? And in the great span of eternity, in which God still knows the hairs on your head, what will it mean for you to have occupied this body, and lived for these few years in the epic span of human history?

There's an island just off the coast of Finland where they have a nuclear power plant, and as part of that facility, there is a spent nuclear fuel repository—in other words a place to put radioactive waste material until it is no longer dangerous—and it's called Onkalo, which means, “hiding place.” They've engineered a place deep underground that needs to be secure for 100,000 years. They think they've got the technology to make that possible, but the problem is, when even 100 years represents a gigantic leap in terms of the developing story of humanity, how on earth do you safeguard something for such an inconceivably long time—longer than any language has lasted, longer by tens of thousands of years than any kind of record keeping...

If God does not choose to bring about the Second Coming in all that time (and I am not making that assumption), how do you communicate with whatever human or posthuman intelligent life is on earth, when the time span in terms of the development of civilization is so far beyond our ability to imagine?

If, in that inconceivable future, we as a species are able to reach out, through words, as the wandering Jews in the ancient Palestinian wilderness speak to us today, what will be the testimony of our lives, from the time when we walked the earth?

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

In 1997, there was a Holocaust remembrance in New York City, and a woman named Dr. Anna Kohen was invited to speak.ⁱ

She said, “Dear Friends:

“I'm honored to be here today commemorating the biggest tragedy of our nation, the Holocaust. We are also here to celebrate one of the aspects of human behavior—that of helping each other in time of need.”

She said, “My parents...were living in Vlora when the Nazis invaded Albania. They fled to the mountains and hid in a small Muslim village called Trevlazer.

They took Muslim names, my father David became Daut, my mother Nina became Bule, and my brother Elio became Ali. Everyone in the village knew they were Jews but not one person betrayed them.”

One of the Albanian Muslims who had sheltered Jews during that time said, “We all have one God, and he has commanded us to help others. It’s the same thing Jesus said, that Muhammad has commanded, and Moses said the same thing.”ⁱⁱ

And you would hear the same thing from all over Europe, from, for example, the French Christians in Chambon who hid Jews in their cellars and basements and sheds, and the Nazis would come around looking for Jews and they’d go, “Uh, no, we haven’t seen anybody...”

In the horrors that took place in Rwanda in the 1990s, even when, shamefully, the institutional Church was found to be complicit in some of the atrocities that took place, there are records of individual Christians heroically sheltering and protecting people who were being brutally hunted just for being who they were.ⁱⁱⁱ And simultaneously there are equally compelling records of mosques, Muslims, doing the exact same work.

We all know what we’re supposed to do.

But Jesus turned the world upside down with his preaching and his teaching and his healing. He said, “You have heard, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say, if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

Douglas Hare said about that statement that “In its earliest form, the law of *talion* (‘an eye for an eye’) was intended to set strict limits on the right to revenge: one could not avenge the loss of an eye by violently extracting two eyes from the enemy. By Jesus’ day Jewish law further restricted vengefulness by substituting monetary compensation for the removal of the aggressor’s eye. Jesus’ substitution is far more radical: he challenges his followers to renounce their right to retaliation.”^{iv}

Christians today still grapple with that one: to stand down from a conflict when you don’t have to. To refrain from engaging when someone tries to cut you down or be hurtful to you. To risk wasting love on people who seem only to deal in hate.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

“For if you love those who love you, big deal! Even the worst people you can think of can do that. And if you only speak to people just like you, what more are you doing than anybody else? Be perfect, therefore,” he said, “as your heavenly Father is perfect.” And that use of perfect doesn’t mean you have to be flawless; it means fully mature, completely grown into the person you were born to become.

“Around five billion years from now,” wrote Alan Weisman, “the sun will expand into a red giant, absorbing all the inner planets [including Earth] back into its fiery womb. At that point, water ice will thaw on Saturn’s moon Titan, where the temperature is currently -290 degrees Fahrenheit, and some interesting things may eventually crawl out of its methane lakes. One of them, pawing through organic silt, might come across [the] probe that parachuted there [and landed in] 2005, which, during its descent, and for 90 minutes before its batteries died, sent us pictures of streambed-like channels cutting down from orange, pebbled highlands to Titan’s sand-dune seas.”

Humankind has the capacity to—from time to time—exceed our own reach. From time to time, we have it within us to reach out and bridge the terrifyingly vast, empty and cold void

 between planets, and between each other;
 between our current selves and the One in whose image we were created;
 between our daily rejection and our longed-for acceptance
 of the person that each of us sees in the mirror.

We are called not only to not be a curse,
 nor to settle for a leaving a only a neutral footprint.

We are called by our Savior to be a blessing:
 to do better than 50-50 for those around us—
 especially the most vulnerable,
 and for the whole world—those who deserve it, and those who don’t,
 and for all of creation: to be healers and stewards, not slumlords.

“Sadly,” wrote Alan Weisman, “whatever finds [that NASA probe] won’t have any idea where it came from, or that we once existed. Bickering among project directors at NASA nixed a plan [that would have included] a graphic explanation”

somewhat like the ones on the Voyager spacecraft, which are still out there somewhere beyond the solar system by now. The one on the probe that went to Saturn's biggest moon "would have been encased in a diamond that would preserve a shred of our story [for] at least 5 billion years—long enough," had it been God's will, "for evolution to provide another audience."^v

No matter what may come, no matter what the circumstances, no matter if my life is known for five billion years or I'm forgotten tomorrow, I know what God has said to me, for my life: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy."

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.

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ⁱ http://www.beautifulislam.net/judaism/albania_holocaust.htm

ⁱⁱ <http://www.readthespirit.com/interfaith-peacemakers/albanian-muslims-holocaust/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://podacademy.org/podcasts/rwanda-genocide-1/>

^{iv} Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 55.

^v Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007), 169.