

## **From Stiff-necked hearts to hearts aligned with the wholeness of God! Hallelujah**

From the beginning of time, Creator God promised us blessing --- with the condition that we trust and obey his commandments. The commandments exist to help us choose righteousness – behaviour that is moral and just and pleasing to God! The human heart is prone to wandering off the path of righteousness, however. When Jesus began his Sermon on the Mount, he could have chastised and scolded. But he didn't, did he! When Jesus lays the foundation for us to understand -- and remember -- the blessing God has in mind for us, he begins with affirmations! He constructs the character of a human heart that is prepared to receive the blessing of God! A heart that is pure, meek, humble. A heart that is capable of "making peace". A heart that can support a life experience that includes grief and persecution, and yet that never falters in loving God and neighbour. This characterization of one capable of truly receiving God's blessing is upside down from the character we associate with strength and power and success. Jesus sure got our attention with these Beatitudes. How comforting it must have been for the people in the crowd --- those who felt invisible and disempowered – to learn that the blessing was for them and that they are in fact being called to be the salty salt and the bright light for the nations! And this becomes an invitation for all to put aside all that stands in the way of joining the pure in heart, by the grace of God!

Now, only Jesus has the perfect heart of God, but if we commit to following the teachings of Jesus, as found in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is assuring us that we too will be included in the Blessing – a blessing available to all who commit to living by God's wisdom through obeying God's commandments. Today we will look at three teachings that help us understand the work that sustains our heart: we are invited to do the work of understanding God's

commandments and laws through wisdom rather than legalism. God's wisdom is inclusive of all, dignifies all, protects the vulnerable, and calls us to integrity rather than deceit and secrecy. If we understand and apply God's laws through any other lens, we are out of integrity with the Wisdom and great love of God – we may even be hypocrites!

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five sermons Jesus shares with us in the book of Matthew.

The Sermon on the mount lays the foundation for the other four sermons. Without considering the teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, we will get the mission work wrong, we will not have the imagination to understand the vision of the Kingdom of God – on earth as it is in heaven. And we will not know how to deal with our enemies the Jesus way. Yet many Christians skip over this important sermon – to the detriment of spreading the true Gospel of Jesus.

For Matthew, these five sermons evoke the 5 books of Moses and parallel the life and contribution of Moses in several significant ways. They set the stage for us to understand how Jesus – as teacher and son of God! -- is fulfilling God's vision laid out by Moses, to guide us to wholeness as his children – to guide us into blessing. We are created in the image of God! We have so much potential!!! And yet we stumble. We are distracted, we are tempted, we succumb and in doing so, we hurt ourselves and others. That is the impact of sin.

When we read the books of Moses, we see in Moses a leader so close to God – and so patient with what God himself described as a stiff-necked people -- the people Moses was called to lead! And Moses struggled with the human nature of the people he was leading. Moses, over

and over again, reminded, laid down the choices before his people – choices that were in stark contrast to each other. “Follow God’s commandments and you will thrive! Ignore God’s commandments and you will suffer.” In Deuteronomy 18 Moses predicts a future prophet to fulfill what had begun through him as leader. At the point where Moses passed the torch to Joshua, he lays the foundation for a future relationship to the law. The laws of God, under his leadership, were written externally on tablets and then in scrolls. Moses imagines a day when the laws move from external laws of holiness, sacrifice, and justice, to an internal compass of laws written on our hearts!

Deuteronomy 30:6

6 “Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your [a]descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, so that you may live.

Jeremiah 31:33

33 “For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord: “I will put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Moses longs for and imagines this, and God sent us Jesus to help us get there!

One aspect of Jesus’ job description was, then: to give us a blueprint to help us transform our human heart so that our heart is pure and humble and, in an upside down way – strong and practiced enough to contain the message or law of God – so that our hearts can be free enough to love God and each other ---- with all our heart and all our soul and all our strength. So that we may live. Now of course we can only do this if we give ourselves up to God. We know this because that is the great commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your strength and with all your heart and with all your soul!” And from that comes love for each other – dignity and respect for men, women, children, slaves, the earth itself along with all living things!!!... That love is the foundation for transforming all of our ways and institutions that violate this

inherent God-given dignity and respect. It gives us the humility and the courage to announce the good news of God's abundant blessing!

Ok. Let's get back to the text at hand. Jesus was steeped in Jewish law – or teachings -- and the writings of the prophets. Jesus embodied God's wisdom, and thus is able to enlighten us on rules for partnership with our creator -- in the evolving story of covenantal relationship between us and God. That is the grand story we are part of as God's people. And just like we have theological discussions about what Jesus meant by this, or what Peter and Paul meant by that --- Jesus was surrounded by discussions about what Jewish laws really meant – especially in the context of the Roman occupation which made it really hard to even follow some of these laws. So there was lots of debate going on, and Jesus didn't always agree with the Scribes and the Pharisees. He challenged their boundaries of what constitutes “work” on the sabbath, for example – he didn't condemn gleaning or healing on the sabbath! And his guiding God-wisdom was always: **does the understanding of this or that law work for the wholeness and healing of everyone? Or does it fail some and entitle others?** Jesus' teachings were all about whole and healthy communities with mutual loving relationships. Jesus was all about transformation -- how to transform hostility into honour and respect. The apostle Paul reminds us of this work in Christ when he says: in Christ the walls of hostility come tumbling down.

So how can we consistently love God in order to do right by ourselves and our neighbour? We get a glimpse into Jesus' exploration of God's wisdom as it pertains to Jewish law through six case studies highlighted in the Sermon on the Mount. I will be borrowing heavily from the *Bible Project* (@Bibleproject.com) in my following reflections.

Today we will examine three of these case studies. These all have one thing in common: God commands us to treat each other well – with dignity and respect, resolving differences with consideration of everyone’s needs in mind. Treating each other well is doing righteousness! And the good news is: we can learn this through studying God’s wisdom contained in God’s laws! And Jesus shows us how to do this well – to go to the root of the law to understand the wisdom itself! So – not the letter of the law – but the spirit of the law.

The first case study is the question of the law surrounding murder. The Ten Commandments says “You shall not commit murder” But Jesus digs deeper into the wisdom of this law. Jesus says that anger and name calling is like murder. It might be a continuum of harm --- murder is very very harmful! But anger and verbal abuse are also harmful! They all have to do with how much we value or don’t value someone else as a full equal. Losing our temper or belittling someone is an expression of superiority. And this hierarchy of value impacts our relationships and communities in negative ways. This teaching reminds us to treat everyone as valuable. It’s not about disagreeing with someone – its about demeaning and devaluing others. It’s about negating the other’s being created in the image of God. When we remind ourselves that every human being is created in the image of God, we relate – and maybe even disagree – respectfully. We relate with each other to understand and empathize, not demean and diminish. And going to court violates the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation. Rather than going to court --- work things out as equals on a walk together! Suing each other – even individuals we don’t know -- is not the will of God!

The second case study involves the question of adultery. Again, from the Ten Commandments – you shall not commit adultery. And Jesus again digs deeper into the wisdom of this commandment. He says: anyone who stares at a woman to stir up sexual desire is committing adultery of the heart. He is not talking about being attracted to someone – wanting to get to know them and maybe form a healthy relationship with the whole being of that person. No – this is the sort of thing that women find creepy – that long stare, that experience of feeling like an object and not a full human being. And Jesus was really serious about helping men understand the sin of objectifying women! He goes on to say that having fewer limbs is better than not cutting this terrible sin out of our hearts. But he really wants us to cut this objectifying of others – be they men or women -- out of our hearts so that we don't ruin our society – so that we have healthy loving communities!

And the third case study revolves around the question of divorce. This is not a law from the ten Commandments --- but is part of Jewish law which states that if a man divorces his wife he must give her a certificate of divorce --- to make her eligible for remarriage. Women were like property in the Old Testament – owned by men. And so only men could initiate a divorce, and this was only to be done for a “legitimate” reason. But what is a legitimate reason? This was the big debate during Jesus' time. Was it only for adultery? Or for any reason – like finding a better option???? I guess there were disposable relationships back then too. This latter approach is a recipe for abuse, isn't it! Jesus therefore sides with the idea that only adultery is a legitimate reason to divorce – otherwise, the man who divorces for any other reason is actually forcing his second wife to commit adultery! And that's because a frivolous reason means the marriage covenant is still in tact. Jesus puts the onus on the man to preserve the dignity of women. He

blames the man for the position a frivolous divorce puts the woman in. Although not the book of Matthew, there is the story in John 7 about Jesus and the woman taken in adultery. Adultery is a grave sin, but at that time was only cause for divorce – and even stoning! – if a woman was caught. And in this story, Jesus makes things right not by changing the law to include men, or to remove adultery from the list of grave sins. No. Jesus asks those wanting to harm and even kill this woman to look at their own hearts and invites the one without sin to cast the first stone. Everyone left the scene. He then told the woman he too did not condemn her, but to go and sin no more. Jesus was teaching forgiveness over judgement and condemnation. In both of these stories about adultery, Jesus is doing two things: he is naming adultery for what it is: harmful to your partner, but also to yourself, and he is correcting a cultural sin by elevating the dignity and value of women as created fully in the image of God – not throw-away property of men. In Jesus there is neither patriarchy or matriarchy – there is value and dignity and mutual responsibility to uphold the wisdom of God's laws. Jesus is inviting us to treat the marriage covenant as mutual – where mutual respect nourishes the relationship, and where shared family roles and leadership can flourish for the good of the family and community.

God's wisdom in these commands is aimed at our core desires and motivations that affect how we treat people. Following the letter of these laws is not enough to protect us from demeaning and disrespecting each other. The good news is that we all have ultimate value in God! The work we have is to clear away the stuff in our hearts that prevents us from seeing each other as having equal value and treating each other as having ultimate value.

Jesus invites us to reshape our imaginations to clear the way for our hearts to follow. It is our imaginations that help us confess our sins of compromising the value of others, and through that confession, God can guide us to purify our hearts.

Do we have the DNA of a stiff-necked people? And do we have the DNA of people created in the image of God? We have both! And in our scriptures through our sacred stories, we have the whole picture of our human nature – a story that culminates in the birds-eye view from heaven - - brought down in Jesus as God’s incarnation in this world. Through Jesus we now have the teachings we need to fulfill and to live into God’s eternal law, if we will only trust and obey and believe it is possible to be transformed. This is what God desires: for us to confess our stiff-necked-heartedness, and to let go of all our ego and human entitlement and expectations, in order to live from a pure heart. Only through listening deeply and humbly and confessionally to the teachings of Jesus – teachings that fulfill the laws as laid out by Moses – teachings that explain what it means for God to write the law on our hearts, will we walk with God and be God’s people.

*Through Christ, we too can multiply the blessing: “The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you, the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.”*  
(Numbers 6:23)