

God is on Your Side.
August 25, 2013

Our scripture today comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is teaching in what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. So many of Jesus's best known, and best loved, sayings are found here in the 5th Chapter of Matthew. Let me quote a few.

Matthew 5:3 ff. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." " We hear the beatitudes often enough, we may not understand the shock to Jesus's listeners.

Back then the idea was that if you obeyed the Law, you were righteous, and God would bless you. If you didn't, God would curse you. Wealth and power could be taken as a sign of being on the good side with God. If you were poor, or crippled, or blind, it must be because you had sinned, or perhaps your father had sinned. Yet, here is Jesus proclaiming, Blessed are the poor.... Blessed are the mourners, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. Furthermore, Jesus goes on to say "You are the salt of the Earth. You are the light of the world." These poor, meek people, these people who thirst for righteousness, it is they who are not only blessed, but they are the blessings to the world.

So, where is the Law in all this? In Jesus's time, the teaching was that the Torah, the law given by God to Moses, defined how one was to be righteous. That and many rules, traditions of the elders, and interpretations that spelled out how that law applied to almost everything. It was not about being poor in spirit, or meek, or pure of heart. Where does Jesus get this? In Matthew 5, Jesus makes the transition to talking about the Law.

Matthew 5:17 "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them."

Jesus then gives several examples of what the law says, and gives his interpretation. He contrasts the practice of obeying the literal strictures of the Law while still finding ways to circumvent its intent, with being faithful to the intent. For example, in verse 21:

Matthew 5: 21 "You have heard it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement.' 22a But I say to you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgement:

Did you hear that? It is the Anger, particularly capricious anger without cause, that is the root problem. Yes, of course murder is wrong. Of course, the murderer should be punished. But the righteous should strive to live a life without the kind of anger that inspires murder and many lesser offenses.

So, this is the background that brings us to our first scripture for today, another one of these contrasts. You don't hear this one as often, but we will explore it today.

Matthew 5: 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more comes from evil. (RSV)

Now, this is hard to understand from today's perspective. Anger and killing are issues much the same as in Jesus's day. But "oaths" or "swearing" is different. This is not about what you might call, "cussing." Bad language seems increasingly common in our society, but I expect it was always there. I spent several years in the Navy when I was young, and there were folks who could hardly utter a sentence without including extra adjectives for emphasis. So much so, that if you asked someone to pass the "regular" butter, it would be jarring.

It is interesting that, today, the most offensive words have nothing to do with religion. Someone uttering the name of our Lord Jesus in vain is hardly noticed. Saying, "God damn it!" or just "Damn it!" is only just mildly strong language. Yet to the ancients, this was serious business. Such an utterance was literally a curse, a serious prayer to the Almighty God to condemn the offending person to an eternity of damnation.

An "oath" is related to "swearing." It a promise to do something, secured by the witness and power of enforcement of some agent, usually God. We often use the expression, "utter an oath", for cursing. Often, for emphasis or for additional power, a curse is uttered accompanied by an oath. Listen to this oath uttered by Jezebel, the Caananite Queen of Israel, against the prophet Elijah, after her prophets of Baal were slain at Mount Carmel:

1 Kings 19: 2b "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time." (KJV)

What Jezebel has done is to take an oath to kill Elijah within the day. She has sworn this oath by her Caananite gods. The oath was enforced, then, by the gods, who she gave license to slaughter her "and more". This particular oath was not enforced.

Now, we are familiar with oaths of this sort in our time. We don't often need to take such an oath, but we have on certain occasions, and we have witnessed them. The example perhaps that most readily comes to mind is the courtroom scene, when a witness is sworn in. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Traditionally, this oath was taken with the witness's hand on a Bible. If the witness answers "Yes," then he has taken an oath. The words, "so help me God"

make this an oath sworn before God, who as enforcer of the oath is expected to act against the person should the promise be broken. This is serious business.

I teach at Wilkes, and one of my favorite events at graduation is when several newly graduated R.O.T.C. students receive commissions into the U.S. Air Force. They each swear, before the multitude assembled, to carry out the duties of a commissioned officer, “so help me God.” It is serious business. Wedding vows also are promises made before God. We do not do such things lightly.

Of course, most of us do not expect God to suddenly strike dead someone who breaks an oath. Consider the courtroom scene. If someone, having sworn to tell the truth, was to lie, and was later found to have lied, that person would have committed the crime of perjury. They could be prosecuted for that. That is, enforcement is not just left to God. There are civil authorities who will act as enforcers whether god acts or not. So, in our society, it has become such that it is the civil authority that brings the threats people might fear more than God. So much so, that invoking God’s name in casual oaths, threats, or curses is hardly noticed.

That’s not all so different from Jesus’s time. But in that day, the religious and civil authorities were tied together. If you were found to have uttered an oath, and that oath was “by God”, and you violated it, you were in serious trouble whether God took a personal hand in punishing the offense or not. There were priests and other authorities who would see that oaths were enforced. After all, oaths go all the way back to the Ten Commandments: The third, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” and the ninth, “You shall not bear false witness.”

So, what exactly is Jesus talking about? Why is he talking about oaths here in the Sermon on the Mount? Oaths go back to the Ten Commandments. They are an ordinary, and serious, part of life. Swearing oaths was and is seen as essential in order to get people to tell the truth when truth is needed, such as in legal proceedings. What is wrong with that?

Jesus, in this saying, seems to sweep away the whole machinery of making oaths. He says, “Don’t do it. It comes from evil. ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ should be good enough.”

There have been people who have taken this stand. Jesus was not the only one in his day to take this view. The Essenes would not take oaths. The Quakers of our day do not take oaths.

Let’s look at how oaths could be a problem. In Jesus’s day, as in ours, people would use oaths frivolously. “May I never see the comfort of Israel if that is not an olive tree.” This example just emphasizes the speaker’s correct identification of a particular tree.

A more dangerous use was what William Barclay calls “evasive swearing”. That is an oath sworn by some power that was powerless. Thus, the oath was unenforceable

and hence meaningless, despite seeming serious. It could be used to deceive. “By heaven, I tell no lie!” That sounds serious. It sounds like an oath sworn by God, since God’s abode is heaven. But, technically, it is meaningless. The Jews of Jesus’s day had a finely defined sense of what oaths were by God, and hence binding, and which ones were not. The key question was whether God’s very name was invoked. “By heaven”, “By Jerusalem,” and “By earth” did not invoke God’s name, and allowed the speaker to give emphasis and seriousness to a statement without it being a binding oath. Using this technique was a fine art.

In our day, oaths by God are not really enforceable by civil authorities. What makes an oath enforceable is the legal system set up to define whether a false statement is perjury or not, or another similar crime according to our system of law. For example, a false statement to a policeman, whether sworn or not, breaks the law. Clever people will figure out how to commit injustice against others while staying within the technicalities of the law, or knowing how to avoid enforcement of the law. That’s bad. But, as bad as this is, there is worse.

In Matthew 5, Jesus does not give an example of how oaths can be corrupted for evil, but he does later in Matthew’s gospel. Let’s look at that, in Matthew chapter 15. Jesus has just been asked by the Pharisees why his disciples do not correctly obey the handwashing traditions.

Matthew 15: 3 He answered them, “And why do you transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God commanded, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die.’ 5 But you say, ‘If anyone tells his father or mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father.’ 6 So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 8 ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 9 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.’ “

Here as earlier customs are a bit different from our times. It’s hard to follow. But here’s the essence of it. A young man, displeased by his parents, would tell his father, “Anything by which you would be benefited by me is a gift to God.” Let’s analyze what is going on here. First, this is the kind of thing that is said in anger, perhaps even a momentary passing anger. Second, “anything by which you would be benefited by me” means everything: financial support in old age, hospitality, meals, and more, . . . everything. At least, anything tangible or measurable. Third, all of this, these assets and resources, are to be a gift to God.

You can’t take back a gift to God. Even in our day, have you ever made change out of the collection plate? Say, put in a 20 and taken out a 5 as change? Even with our informal ways and casualness in handling money, we are reluctant to remove a bill that someone else has put in the plate. That would be stealing from God. Well, yes, we were

only making change, so maybe it's not stealing, but we still won't do it. Things given or promised to God are serious business for believers now, as in Jesus's day.

"Anything by which you would be benefited by me is a gift to God." The speaker of this oath has promised to give to God anything that he might be obligated to give to his parents. That cuts him off from obligation to his parents. After all, giving them anything after that would be breaking an oath made to God. So where do the resources go if not to his parents? Why, to God of course. Or, rather, the Temple.

Do you see what this does? This oath makes God an accessory in breaking one of the Ten Commandments: "Honor your father and your mother...." The word "honor" meant tangible as well as intangible expressions.

Who benefits? The speaker may derive the short term benefit of satisfaction in an expression calculated to hurt his parents. But, in the longer run, that would be devastating to the human relationships. The speaker, his parents, and the whole family will all suffer. Who benefits? Why, the Temple. Not God; God can get by fine without this kind of money. But the human institution.

This isn't just a phenomenon of Jesus's day. Have you ever heard an elderly person threaten to cut off a relative, perhaps even a son or daughter, from inheritance? "I'll give it all to the Church." That's the same kind of thing, although we tend not to regard an oath to do that as binding, as did the authorities in Jesus's day. Surely no pastor would encourage an elderly person to follow up on such an expression to the financial benefit of his church, but perhaps you can see the corrupting temptation. In Jesus's day, the Temple was not only a religious institution. It also functioned as a bank. It was governed by the most powerful people in Jewish society. Imagine bank executives, with power of enforcement granted by law, receiving a deposition that all of someone's financial assets were to be paid to the bank rather than the person who should be the beneficiary. Appalling, huh? That's the picture.

This gets to the heart of the problem. Jesus says oaths, anything more than "No" or "Yes" comes from evil. That's because oaths, as a practical matter, are enforced by those who have power against those who do not. God may be the theoretical agent of enforcement, but the powerful will act as his deputy when they see it as in their interest to do so. The unwise man who promises God anything he would have given father or mother may find some priest or another agent of the Temple asking for that promise to be fulfilled sometime later. When the parent who has promised his inheritance to God rather than to his sons dies, the Priest and the scribes will be there counting his assets and seeing that they are liquefied and deposited in the Temple treasury.

It has been interesting that even as our society and institutions drift farther away from God, the powers that be still believe in the practical utility of oaths. Indeed, maybe more than ever. I recall that when I was working in industry 23 years ago, there was a great hue and cry for more ethics in government contracting. A consequence was that everyone in my company was required to undergo "ethics training". The sessions were 8

hours and resulted in a signed statement to be put on file. Four of the eight hours were taken on a Friday, and we were allotted 4 hours of “indirect” pay (that is, paid out of company overhead funds) for that time. The other four hours were scheduled for a Saturday so that we did not need to be paid. The next year all eight hours were scheduled for a Saturday. How clever! Do you see the irony? Training to be ethical was required, a condition of continued employment. Yet, the company did not see anything wrong at all with forcing employees to surrender 8 hours of their own time, unpaid, to take this training. Indeed, it is “normal business practice” to find ways to get employees to do company business on their own time. Travel to meetings was often on weekends. Marketing meetings and such were after hours and not chargeable. Proposal work was often unpaid. And yet, the purpose was to certify, after the training, that all the employees had the required ethics training, and were required to be ethical.

Now, I’m not complaining. I had a good job. It paid a salary. It was always understood that we logged 40 hours per week charged to clients, and occasionally indirect things like the four hours of ethics training. But we were also expected to put in more time for things that were not compensated, things that benefited the company rather than clients. The problem was doing that to more poorly paid people, like secretaries, who ought to be paid for all of their work. People who likely have to hire a babysitter or endure some other hardship to meet the obligation, so that they can give their time away for free. Such are ethics in the corporate world.

Systems of rules, whether they be called ethics or laws, generally tend to favor those who are in power. It is not that those in power do not take oaths. We hear sincere promises and even oaths from those in power all of the time. But the powerful generally have a cunning sense of the fine points of legality and the enforcement mechanisms. They know what they can get by with, and what they can’t. This hasn’t changed. Jesus’s condemnation of the Scribes and Pharisees in Matthew is for just this. He says, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 8 ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; ...’”

Jesus is telling his listeners that God understands what is happening. That the Law, given to Moses to be a blessing, has been distorted and perverted by those in authority. The problem is not the law itself. Jesus declares earlier “Think not that I have come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.”

Let us pause for a moment to consider the importance of the Ten Commandments. We as Christians hold the Ten Commandments in honor, even as they are being discarded by our public institutions. The first commandment is indeed the most important of all: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Monotheism is crucial. Recall, Pharaoh considered himself a god. So did the Roman emperors, and many other potentates of antiquity. They MADE laws. If you make the laws, are you subject to them? Only if you want to be. For example, Congress is not subject to the social security system. They crafted their own generous retirement system, with no payroll tax necessary. But it’s the law for almost everybody else. Here, God declares that there are no other gods before him. If he as the One God issues commandments, laws, they are for everyone. That

includes anyone who might call himself king. They are Law for the authorities as well as the people. That's important.

Consider the case of David and Bathsheba. David caused Bathsheba's husband to be killed to cover up his earlier sin. The prophet Nathan confronted David, and told him that he had sinned. If that happened somewhere else in the ancient world, here's the king's response: "Sinned? What, me? No no no! I'm a god. I make the laws. I'm not subject to them. I'm the one who tells others they have sinned. I can do anything I want. That's my right as a god. Are you a god? No? Then you, on the other hand, have sinned by coming into my august presence with this absurd accusation." You can guess what happens next.

So, God's laws, starting with the Ten Commandments, are meant for the protection of His people from injustice. He cares for the oppressed, as the Israelites were the oppressed in Egypt. The prohibition against work on the Sabbath is meant to give people needed rest and opportunity to commune with God. Is not just for the citizens of Israel. Exodus 20:10b ff. reads: "In it [that is, the Sabbath] thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates." (KJV) This concern for equity and consideration for the powerless: the widow, the orphan, the alien, permeate the Law. Jesus condemns not the Law, but the clever manipulation of it by those in authority, to profit at the expense of the powerless.

That is Jesus's message. God loves you, and is on your side when those in positions of favor and power manipulate the tools of righteousness to turn them into tools of oppression and selfishness. God gives his blessing of the Law, and it is distorted. It has ever been thus.

We know God seeks to help the oppressed, rather than the oppressor. We have His word. In Exodus, the Ten Commandments show God's concern for the powerless. In Jesus's words, we have the same, more fully expressed. Fulfilled, as he says. Listen again to Jesus's opening words of his message. "Blessed are the poor. ... "Blessed are those who mourn.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.... Blessed are the pure in heart.... Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." Jesus is saying that, despite the appearance that the evil people prosper and the powerless must live under their curse, God is on the side of the oppressed. And those who distort the law, while seeming to be the righteous ones, are not the ones God favors.

Now, in this day and age, in this country, not that many of us really see ourselves as being counted among the oppressed. We enjoy more blessings than anyplace else in the world. But, do you ever find yourself getting angry at how those in power manipulate things? At how you, and other ordinary people, faithfully pay taxes while those with enough power don't? About the inequities that you see resulting from clever people doing whatever it takes to get ahead? Jesus is saying that it is right to be angry at these things. He was angry at this kind of thing in his day. His message: God is on your side,

and loves you. If you are poor in spirit, if you mourn, if you seek righteousness, if you are pure of heart, if you are persecuted, then God seeks to, and will, bless you.

For in Jesus the Kingdom of God has come. The things of earth are transient. The heavenly will last forever. Indeed, Jesus especially emphasizes the last of the beatitudes, Matthew 5:11-12: “Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (RSV)

If you stand with Jesus against the oppressors, against systems that seek to enslave rather than uplift, you will have to pay the consequences. People in power will hate you. But God will bless you. You will have a satisfaction in what you have done for God, and for the oppressed. When you do good, does it not lift your spirit?

That satisfaction is incomparably better than the satisfaction of clawing your way through the rat-race of human status and ambition. There is always a pack hungry rats behind you, nipping at your heels, trying to pull you back and down. You stay ahead of them only to find there is always still a bigger rat ahead of you, doing his best to keep you in your place. He isn't pretty either.

Beyond the blessings we receive from being right with God, and standing with Him against evil, when our days are done, we have God's promise to gather us to himself as His children, blessed forever.

So, if you struggle with systems or people who seek to prosper by manipulation, by perverting God's laws or our human institutions, whether of you or someone else, know that God is with you. Jesus declares that God's love is more powerful than the cleverest of manipulators. His blessings, and his peace, will reach you if you are faithful to his gift of love. Face the powers that be with courage and confidence, and in the knowledge that God is on your side. Amen.