

Going Deeper
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37
2/13/11

Louis Gerstner, Jr. has written a book titled, "Who Says Elephants Can't Dance." It is the story of how he turned around and saved the IBM Company. He made some very significant decisions that many people questioned. He put the brakes on a plan which was well on its way. The company seemed to be in competition with itself. Departments were divided up into several operating units working separately from one another. They calculated success by how they outperformed another division. Early on Gerstner taught the whole of IBM was greater than the sum of its parts. One of the big changes was tying employee compensation to the performance of the whole company rather than the employee's particular division.

One of the other huge decisions was firming many of the senior staff who were met their quotas. Meeting quotas was not enough! He was looking for passion and heart commitment.

As Jesus is teaching his disciples and other followers, he challenges them to go deeper than just meeting their quotas. There is more to the Christian life than just doing the basics. In this passage Jesus uses the law on murder, adultery, divorce, and taking oaths. The Old Testament teachers interpreted the law on these four topics of life. However, they stayed on the surface and only did what was expected. This often allowed them to manipulate the interpretation of the law to their benefit.

It is like having a conversation with a teenager about lying. They did not tell the truth and did not admit they had done something wrong. Therefore they are not liars because they did not directly tell a lie.

Like a submarine, Jesus takes his disciples below the surface on these four topics of life. These are four areas of life are destroying relationships. Jesus goes beyond the established boundaries to deal with deeper questions.

Jesus begins each topic with the phrase, "You have heard it said to the people long ago, but I tell you." Jesus is not rewriting the laws. He has already said that he came to fulfill the law. He is rewriting or correcting the interpreters of the Ten Commandments. They have interpreted it this way, but I am telling you something different – something much deeper and more difficult.

Murder – everyone knew murder was wrong. It would be easy to say I am perfect with this law since I have not murdered anyone. Jesus moves this conversation from murder to anger and hateful words. He goes deeper. There are two words for anger in Greek. One is a quick to start and quick to fizzle kind of anger. The other one used here is a long-lasting anger. It is an anger a person feeds and nurses. It is an anger that often leads to hatred and revenge.

Anger then can turn to insulting words. We see this in families between brothers and sisters. The word "Raca" is difficult to translate since it is more of a tone of voice. The meaning is

contempt, despising the other person. It carries the translation of idiot or fool. Calling a man a fool attacked his or her character – their name and reputation.

To destroy a person's character involved the highest court – the Sanhedrin.

Murder is a much bigger issue than literally taking someone's life. Looking below the surface every one of us could break this law with our anger and insulting thoughts and words.

This is so important that Jesus suggests that we not worship, if someone has something against us. We should try to bring reconciliation. Things are not right with God until they are right with our human relationships.

You have heard it said, “Do not commit adultery” but I say...

If you lust you are committing adultery. This word describes a deliberate intention that dominates another person for one's own pleasure.

Jesus then uses hyperbole to heighten the importance of dealing with our sin. If your eye causes you to sin, cut it out or if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better to cut off the bad and still go into heaven, then keep the bad and be separated from God. The cause of sin is described as a piece of bait on a trap that causes destruction.

If there is a rock on the walkway that will cause you to trip, you go around it or remove it. That is the point. Whatever is causing you to sin, take care of it? The cause of our sin will not just go away; we must deal with our weaknesses. If we don't, they will destroy us.

“It has been said anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate...but I say...

Divorce is an interesting topic. It impacts families, friends, churches, and any relationships the couple had with others. The Old Testament elevated marriage to a high standard. However people did not honor that standard. Divorce was made simple. Women had no legal rights. A man could easily divorce his wife for any reason but a woman could not divorce her husband without his permission. By the time of Jesus the sacredness of marriage was depleted and the family unit in danger.

Women's role in the 50s...

The Greek culture was just as bad. They did have a law that if the man divorced his wife, he had to return her dowry too.

It just seems people intently look for loopholes. One time someone caught W. C. Fields reading the Bible. He said, “I am looking for loopholes.”

You have heard it said, “Do not break your oath” but I say...

When people made an oath, it was to insure their follow through. If they used God's name, it was binding. It was binding because God became a partner in the agreement. If they did not use God's name, it was not binding.

I am imagining kids asking for a “Pinkie Promise” or “Cross your heart and hope to die” kind of promise.

The person’s word was not good enough. There needed to be something more – bigger than the person to guarantee fulfillment. The “loophole searchers” found a way to make an oath that sounded serious but really was not. They would add heaven, Jerusalem, or even God’s throne to their promise.

I go back to thinking about Gerstner firing the quota people. What is the limit I have to do? Kids in high school and college will ask a professor what we need to know for the test. What is the least amount of material I need to memorize to pass this class? It seems like the goal is getting a passing grade and not getting an education and learning to think on your own!

Clement of Alexandria once said a Christian’s character – the way they live – should not need an oath.

Life cannot be divided up into compartments where God is involved in some and not in others.

- A person’s language should not be different at church than at school or work
- Not one kind of conduct at the office and another around family or church people
- Attitude towards people...

When the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, Moses warns them. They would have a choice between following God or not. Will they love God, walk in his ways, and obey his commands? That will lead to life and blessing. However if their hearts turn away from God to worship other gods, they will be destroyed.

The question this morning is do I live my life, as if God is present already. Life is not about following the rules and doing what everyone expects. It is not about trying to do more good than bad, so we don’t get punished. It is not even about avoiding sin. The Christian life is about recognizing God’s presence with us through Jesus Christ.

A cleaning woman who’d been converted at a Salvation Army meeting was asked what difference Jesus made in her life. She said, “I don’t sweep dirt under the carpets anymore.”