



# DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

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## "BEING GOOD"

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"Think not that I have come to abolish the law....unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:17-20

Let's say that we're all here today because we want to be better people. We are here to be good, to become more righteous. After all, surely this is one of the main functions of religion, the Christian or any other, to make us better than we would have been if we had not gotten up on a cold February morning and gone to Chapel. And let's agree that, even if we have not arrived, we are at least on our way toward goodness because we did get up and go to the Chapel, which in no way is meant to detract from those of you who will watch this service this afternoon on cable because that means that you are on your way too, even though you are traveling on your sofa.

Yet the trouble with being Christian good is that good people were often the very ones who caused Jesus so much trouble. A lot of good people, "scribes and Pharisees," people who had never cheated on their taxes or their spouses, people who knew scripture backwards and forwards, people who lived by the book and kept themselves clean, were those who eventually cried "Crucify him!"

Why? Well, one reason was the way Jesus lived. Shortly after saying, in his Sermon on the Mount, that he did not want to "abolish the law," he did just that.

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples (9:9-13). A clear violation of Torah.

"I haven't come for you good people," replied Jesus, "I've come to seek and to save the bad."

"The Pharisees fast, why don't your people?" they asked him.

"Doesn't the wedding party begin when the bridegroom arrives?" asked Jesus (9:15-17). "Forget your rules about fasting, let's party!"

"Look!" they said. "Your disciples are doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath!" (12:1-14).

"The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath," said Jesus.

"Master, heal my daughter," pleaded the Canaanite woman. "Well, I'm really supposed to only go to the House of Israel," said Jesus, "but what the heck?" (15:21ff.). He heals her.

"Rabbi, Moses said a man could get out of marriage by giving his wife a



certificate of divorce."

"It was a dumb law made for dummies like you," said Jesus (19:3-9). "Sometimes you've got to break a rule to do what's right. Stay married."

"You have heard it said of old....but I say to you" (5:21-48). That's our Jesus. It is possible to be so good, so right, that you are wrong. You can be so religious that you miss the point of religion. As Paul says, "The Law kills!" Dry, dead, jot-and-tittle legalism can just suck the life out of religion until it is a cold, calculating, posturing, ugly thing.

Mark Twain once described someone as "a good man in the very worst sense of the word."

John tells a story (Matthew doesn't, but let's say that he would approve) of a woman who was caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). They had gathered to fulfill the law, namely, to stone her to death. That's how Torah, the law, handled adultery.

"What do you think about our version of People's Court, Jesus? A law is a law, right?"

"Wrong. Let he who is without sin throw the first stone," said Jesus. And one by one, they dropped their stones and slipped away.

Scholars don't think that story appeared in John's original. It was added later. But let's imagine that there was good reason to add it later. If Jesus didn't actually do this, it was certainly true to form for Jesus. And by the time they added it to John's gospel, the church had been around long enough to have thoroughly confused Jesus' earlier religion of grace and acceptance with the old rules-and-regulations righteousness. So here's Jesus against sneering self-righteousness, Jesus versus the cruelty of misguidedly "good" people.

Yet I don't think any of this is our problem with today's gospel. The message that rules and regulations can't save, if once interesting material for a sermon, has become conventional wisdom. Most of us are in greater danger of antinomianism than legalism. Can you say antinomianism? We have moved from the awareness that just obeying a few rules makes you right to the conviction that no rules are right. Learning that sometimes a rule must be broken, we now assume that anything goes. In a fight between legalistic scribes and Pharisees on the one hand and rule-breaking tax collectors and harlots on the other, you know on whose side we stand.

Big deal that Jesus abrogates religious laws about how we keep the Sabbath holy, how we prepare ourselves for worship, the sort of company we keep, the sanctity of the marriage bond--we never kept any of those laws anyway.

They gathered to stone a person to death for adultery. Jesus says to them, "Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone."

As they silently drop their stones and slip away, Jesus says to the woman, "I do not condemn you, go and sin no more."

And she says, "What do you mean by sin?" And Jesus says, "Well, I mean like adultery. That's wrong."

And she says, "So what gives you the right to judge me? How do you know it was wrong when you know nothing about the relationship?"



So Jesus says, "But you weren't married to this man." "So?" she says. "It was a loving and fulfilling relationship."

"But...." says Jesus.

"And before that, there was Sam. That loving relationship was fulfilling for about three months. Then there was Joe. So what's with this sin bit, Mr. Morality?"

Jesus looked around at his feet, searching for a large stone.....

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets....till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so, shall be called least in the kingdom....unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Go through the rest of the Sermon. Jesus takes an older command, difficult enough to keep even for a scribe or a Pharisee, and he intensifies the command.

You know you are forbidden to kill your brother. I forbid you even to be angry with your brother. Call him a fool, you'll go to hell (5:21-22).

You know that adultery is a no-no. I say, look at another person lustfully, it's adultery of the heart (5:27-28).

If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off (5:29-30).

Remarry after divorce, I don't care what the law calls it, I call it adultery (5:31-32).

Somebody hits you on the right cheek, offer them your left as well (5:38-42).

Love your neighbor, invade your enemy? I say, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you. Do not lay up treasure for yourself on earth. Judge not, lest you be judged. Enter by the narrow gate.

No wonder Matthew reports that, when Jesus got finished with this Sermon, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching" (7:28)!

You want to be good? Don't just keep the law like the scribes and Pharisees, go beyond the law. Duke's W. D. Davies, in his classic commentary on the Sermon, says that this text, opening the Sermon on the Mount, "stands as a guardian against every immoral or antinomian misunderstanding of the gospel." And what a guardian it is. Here we encounter the bracing unsentimentality of Matthew's moral gospel. It challenges us to be good, really good, if we would be God's. To enter a narrow gate.

Yet we are accustomed to coming to church and, if we should stumble over a difficult passage like this one, it usually takes no more than twenty minutes for a skillful preacher, using the skills of historical criticism and pop psychology, to explain it away, reassuring you that a nice person like Jesus would have never said something tough like this to a good person like you. I know of no way to do that with this text.

"You think I've come to help you weasel out of the law? Forget it," says Jesus. "I've come to intensify, exceed, deepen the frontal assault of the law."

And all of our sweet Jesus sentimentality and gushy grace just crumbles before these searing commands. We are, as Matthew says of Jesus' first congregation,



astonished.

You want to be good? "Keep all that I have commanded you" (28:20), says Jesus.

There is the arrogance of the rule-stressing legalist, yes, but there is the arrogance of the rule-ignoring antinomian. Paul showed us the delusion of thinking that fallible, limited human beings like us had the resources for attaining so high a righteousness. Goodness comes as a gift of God's grace, not through our determined human efforts. Grace assuets the legalist.

The peculiar brand of contemporary arrogance is that of the antinomian. I am the only one who knows what's right for me. My opinion is the measure of all things. The rules are made up as we go along to suit the situation. Don't bother me with your judgments, I'm doing the best I can. What right has Jesus or anyone else to tell me what I should do? Such antinomianism arises not out of an appreciation for the limits of the Law but rather out of a lack of appreciation for any limits upon my own ego. At least the scribes and the Pharisees studied God's law, pondering its implications for their lives. We have no object for study other than our own feelings.

Against such modern parochialism, Jesus slams these demands for a higher righteousness. He refuses to back off in deference to our human frailty. He will not pander to our ethical sentimentality, patting us on the head, saying, "There, there, I know that you're doing the best you can which is certainly good enough for me." No, he refuses to withdraw one iota, one dot. How can Jesus, knowing our frailty, our arrogant moralism and our arrogant antinomianism, intensify, exceed the law, knowing our inability to keep the law?

About fifteen chapters later, Matthew tells the story of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler (19:16-22). You know it. A rich, successful young man comes to Jesus, saying, "Good teacher, what must I do to get 'eternal life'." The successful YUPPIE has been so successful at getting everything he wanted in life, he now wants to get what Jesus is selling.

First Jesus says, "What's with this 'good' business? Nobody's good but God." But then Jesus tells him, "You know what the Good Book says. Obey the commands of God, all of them, then you will have eternal life."

Now, in telling the young man this, Jesus probably hopes that the smart young man will say something like, "Gosh Jesus! I guess I haven't been such a success after all, when you put it like that. Why should I be going around looking for even more rules to break when I haven't kept the rules that God has given already?"

But this young man was a hard-core success. That isn't what he said. What he said was, "No problem! I've kept all those commands since I was a kid. Never have I cursed, stolen, fornicated, coveted, blasphemed, killed, lied, talked back to Mom. How 'bout giving me some real commands, something a morally successful person like me can really sink his teeth into."

And then Jesus, in one of the greatest understatements in all of the gospel says, "OK. You want to be good? All you must do is one teeny, weeny little thing. Go. Sell all that you have and give it to the poor."

Matthew says that, with that, the young man slumped down and got real depressed



and went away. Isn't that typical of Jesus in Matthew? Here you've got these commands which are already burdensome enough and he lays an even tougher command on you!

So the disciples spoke for us all when they then asked, "God, who can be saved?"

And Jesus responds with the good news: with you, it's impossible, but with God, all things, even the salvation of people like you, is possible. With God, it's possible.

The law, the excessive righteousness which Jesus demands of you and me, is a means of making us good, but not as though goodness were the result of our own earnest efforts. Goodness arises out of our being driven into the arms of a merciful and just God. The commands are the means of taking us there.

John Calvin spoke of three uses of the law: First, we must obey God's laws, all of them, because thereby we are given something that doesn't come naturally -- humility. Go out tomorrow and try to live truthfully, nonviolently you'll be humbled. Secondly, because God always requires more of us through the law than we'll ever be able to do, the law teaches us to pray to the Lord for more strength than we have on our own, teaching us that we are more guilty of sin than we like to admit. Thirdly, the law is like a bridle on a horse, keeping us under the rein of God. If God demanded only, easy, little things of us, then we could be good through our own effort. We wouldn't need a just, loving, and forgiving God to save us. Fortunately, God demands excessive things of us, responding to our failures through excessive forgiveness.

Luther says that's why Jesus begins his Sermon with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," (5:3) because, even if you felt rather rich in spirit when we began this sermon, by the time Jesus gets done with demonstrating your lust, violence, covetousness, and sin, everybody looks poor....thus rendering you into exactly the sort of person Jesus loves to love.

The foundation for goodness that would be Christian is this: It is not the mere mastery of God's rules or their merely skillful reinterpretation but relationship with Christ, who both commands us to keep God's holy law and gives us the resources to do so, namely his presence among us.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, after the Sermon has been preached to astonished disciples, after the Rich Young Man has gone away and the disciples have wondered who could possibly be saved, Jesus tells us to baptize and teach the whole world "all that I have commanded you." All? Yea, all, even the bit about turning the other cheek, giving away all that you have, not remarrying after divorce, all.

Then comes the punchline that makes the fulfillment of the commands possible and the burden of the law bearable: Lo, I am with you always.

Notes: W.D. Davies, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, noted that Matthew's rendition of the gospel stands guard at the head of our canonical New Testament against every antinomian or immoral misunderstanding of the Good News of the rest of the New Testament. In these verses (5:17-20), Jesus clearly puts himself



on the side of the "law and the prophets." And yet, after these verses, there follow a whole series of antitheses ("You have heard it said of old, but I say to you....") in 5:21-48. Additionally, we have Jesus' own behavior in which he appears to put himself at odds with some of Torah's commands. 5:17-20 is a tough text to interpret.

While not wanting to relax in any way the tough commitment to Torah (which Davies points to so well in his commentary on The Sermon), I felt that Calvin's interpretation of the three uses of the law (Geneva Catechism, 1541) had continuing usefulness. The law must be taken with great seriousness by Christians and, when it is taken seriously, we find out how unable we are to be faithful and are thus driven back into the arms of a gracious God. Only people who try to obey God's law, really to obey, see how unable they are to obey God's law and are thus driven to a situation whereby the gospel is Good News for them. Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Word Books, Waco, Texas), was particularly influential on my interpretation of this text as well as Frederick D. Bruner, *The Christbook* (Word Books, Waco, Texas).