

Matthew 5:21-37

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,^[a] you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult^[b] a brother or sister,^[c] you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell^[d] of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister^[e] has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister,^[f] and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court^[g] with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.^[h] 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.^[i]

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ 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 your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.^[j]

Deuteronomy 30 15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God^[a] that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Choosing Life

Choose life. In the scripture, it seems so simple. Given a choice, the decision is obvious. Who would disregard such a warning? Who would choose death over life?

I thought about taking out a packet of cigarettes, displaying the label, and lighting one to make a point, but I can't ever get a lighter to work, and it didn't seem right to use one of the church candles, somehow.

So instead, I thought about what Yoda said. That's Star Wars Yoda, by the way. He is still the sage I go to for answers. I will get on to John Howard Yoder presently. When asked "Is the dark side stronger?" he replies "No. Quicker, easier, more seductive".

If choosing death over life is quicker, easier, more seductive, then what is choosing life? Slow, difficult, discouraging? In an intellectual vacuum, choosing good over evil, life over death, is pretty simple. In fleshy reality, it gets complicated. People need more than just a choice, they need support to make their choice meaningful.

After all, choices have consequences. Deadly consequences, sometimes. This is the place where Jesus' intervention in history messes up the story. Jesus made choices that led directly and inexorably to his death. According to church tradition, all but one of his disciples made similar choices and suffered martyrdom. It seems that following in the footsteps of Christ involves choosing death.

And yet, those martyred for the faith are said to possess the life immortal. In Revelation, that remarkable book of nonviolent resistance to the powers of empire and death, is it the prayers of the martyrs that animate the rebellion of heaven and the advent of the shining city of life. Out of death, life. The power of resurrection has entered the cosmic scene.

But let's bring it back to a more human scale. What does this choice of life or death mean for us today? What do **we** mean when we talk about life?

There is a cartoon making the rounds of the internet at the moment showing a man in a ragged business suit, in a scorched wasteland by a fire with some children, explaining *'yes, the planet got destroyed. But for a beautiful moment in time we created a lot of value for shareholders'*

I would argue that life is more than shareholder value. But, one of the key assumptions of the economy we live in, and which is so increasingly the concern of government, is that only things with a cash value can be said to fully exist. You can admire a piece of art, but in the final analysis it is whether it can be traded that determines how it exists in the world.

This way of looking at the world is very useful for scientific advance and the commonwealth. But it requires renaming the cosmos, reinterpreting the nature of things, and assigning value everywhere.



So, citizens are renamed taxpayers. Social policies that keep people out of prison are replaced by regimes of mandatory minimum sentences to fill the gaols because gaols employ more people. Everything has a value, and some things are more valuable than others. Even the constitutionally protected treaties that predate this country are ignored when the potential profit from resource extraction against the wishes of First Nations outweigh immaterial concepts like the honour of the Crown.

Ultimately, people become a commodity too. Do you produce? Do you consume? Can you be said to exist if you do not? It is no longer even the question 'do you work to live, or live to work?', but instead work and life become the same thing. The purpose of life becomes work and consumption. People who don't fit into that become a problem.

I think of old Scrooge, being told that many of the poor would rather die than go into the workhouses. "Then perhaps they should die, and so reduce the surplus population!"

Not a very attractive position, but a very logical one to a man who embodies business logic. Business probably shouldn't be setting social policy. Whether people are valuable to the economy or not, in the spirit of these times, that makes everyone into a commodity.

So how do you choose life, under such a spirit? Do you choose a path that creates as much money as possible? That transforms raw materials, human labour, animal and plants and mountains and seas into currency that can be exchanged and given and hoarded? Under such a spirit, can it even be said to matter how much death results? since death is, after all, very cheap.

Don't despair, though. If you'll pardon the spoiler, we can flip forward to Revelation 18, and learn that Babylon, the great city, cipher for Rome, symbol of centralised power and the demonic economy, comes to a bad end.

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—that is, human souls.

This traffick in human souls is doomed, along with the whole city, the whole dehumanising system of greed. But I have jumped ahead. Let us see what Jesus has to say in our gospel reading, as he offers some insights into the received wisdom of the day. He is critically examining moral practice of the day, and is finding the people's use of the law to be unsatisfactory.

These verses are often understood as an opposition, or substitution, or fulfilment. "You have heard it said... but I say to you". In fact, these are collections of triads. Jesus identifies a situation and the legal answer, then uncovers an aspect or consequence that is hidden under this traditional response, and then proposes, more or less clearly, a different solution.

It's important that we recognise that this is not a case of 'one law is being replaced by a harder law'. [Wes Howard-Brook](#) writes of the dangers of understanding these verses as "either an unlivable fantasy of perfect human behaviour or, as for Martin Luther, a bar so impossibly high to cross that its purpose must be simply to turn people in desperation to God for salvation"

Instead, Jesus humorously but firmly insists on looking beyond the letter of the law. We mustn't overlook this.

You have heard it said to the men of old "you shall not kill". This is one place where I resist the temptation to use inclusive language. I am pretty sure that, over the millennia, it has been men who have needed to hear this message. In the Bible and in cultures around the world, killing, masculinity and power are intertwined. Remember the passage in 1 Samuel 18 where the women sing that Saul has killed his thousands, but David has killed his tens of thousands?

The human male has always been inclined to violence. After all, it was Cain and Abel, not Elaine and Abel.

The law's solution is to ban killing, and punish any who do kill. But Jesus refuses to let the matter sit at simply killing or not killing. He identifies anger as the spirit behind killing, and that killing is just one consequence of anger. He does not say not to have anger – people believing this is Jesus' command are liable to read this as one more impossible standard – but gives some advice on what to do with anger – advice that is better than simply 'don't kill anyone'. Advice that, if followed, would force examination of conscience and a just and nonviolent reckoning of accounts, at least between equals.

You have heard it said – you shall not commit adultery. But Christ pushes past the act and names the spirit behind it – lust, and the male capacity to dehumanise the object of lust. Knowing the tendency of men to blame their eyes for looking with lust – or other parts, for prompting unchaste activities – Jesus rhetorically suggests that they ought to have them removed. I'm pretty sure that the intention is to encourage men to dig deeper in their analysis than blaming their fleshy nature for their bad behaviour. The question is "what is really making me act this way?"

Jesus brings up divorce. He looks beyond the legal niceties and tells his listeners of the reality when men divorce women within a patriarchal society, forcing them to return to their father's house or find another husband, whilst the man goes on with his life, freed of obligations under the divorce certificate. He uses strong language, shaming language, to remind the men of the power they are accorded in taking a wife, and demands a higher standard of responsibility from them. Perhaps even, that they might be equals with their partner?

Finally, Jesus instructs his followers not to make extravagant oaths, but live with simple honesty and self awareness. He criticises making oaths by earth and heaven – which is the scope of the witness called upon by God in the Deuteronomy passage, helping us to see the hubris Jesus is naming. The bluster of these extravagant oaths serves to outsource responsibility for follow through. Instead, Jesus tells people to truthfully assess their own capacity, know their limits, and be honest about them.

In all these cases, these incidents of male behaviour, Jesus strips the power of pious acting to cover what is really going on – violent emotion, predatory sexuality, patriarchal neglect and the shirking of responsibility.

How do the words of Jesus affect our reading of Deuteronomy? We are forced to acknowledge that "loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances" cannot just be a matter of behaving according to certain codes of good behaviour. It is a

familiar enough story for us, to live our belief in the realms of justice and peace, not mere obedience and good order.

But the reason I bring it up at all is to get us to look at what is really happening in our world today.

What is the spirit behind human trafficking? What are the assumptions made about value and purpose that modern slavery relies upon to function? What rights are being ascribed to male sexual power and projected into being in the form and culture of the rape trade?

By rape trade, I refer to the forced sex trade and the culture that supports it, with the clear understanding that this is not sex in any acceptable manner, but is the reduction of human beings, predominantly female, into tools for the pleasure and profit of other human beings, predominantly male, using violence. I am not addressing sex workers or the sex industry as a whole.

Human trafficking is a logical outgrowth of uncontrolled capitalism, in terms of capitalist power, including the power to define reality. This form of spirituality has already done the work of assigning everything possible a dollar value, and dismissing anything that has no marketable value.

Women and the Natural World are linked in the eyes of this spirit. Both are exploitable, both are untrustworthy, both exist to serve a purpose. There is a very ugly and very real link between the destruction of the earth for profit, and the commodification of women's bodies, most starkly shown in the high rates of missing and murdered indigenous women of this very landmass. The same domination culture that labels one as acceptable marks the other as natural, regrettable, but inevitable.

But rape culture is more than violence against women. It is the minimising of concern about violence against women. It doubts and denies the voices of women, through misinformation, slander, casting aspersions, and sometimes simply through violence to women who speak out. Rape culture may permit some men to be punished as scapegoats, but it preserves, hides, and perpetuates society-wide structures of misogyny.

Rape culture protects men who abuse. Great film directors like Woody Allen, great musicians like R. Kelly, great theologians like John Howard Yoder – all have benefitted from the willingness of their institutions to turn a blind eye. I have seen it happen in activism – men who are known to be abusers are also known as hard workers, valuable to the movement. The unspoken but very much heard corollary is that women are not useful – it does not matter if they leave, so long as the abusive man stays. And that's what happens. The victims of male sexual violence are silenced, abuse persists, and sin flourishes. This is what is called the rape culture.

This might seem ridiculous to us good people in church today. There are plenty of ways to disbelieve. Like any oppressive culture worth its salt it cloaks itself in excuses and encourages everyone to ignore its operation. After all:

You have heard it said - "a man has needs... A man has marital rights... Rape cannot happen within marriage"

You have heard it said - "a rape accusation would really mess up his life, is that what you want?"

You have heard it said - "he was angry, he was confused, he was aroused, he wasn't himself, it wasn't really his fault, he was in one of his drunken stupors"

You have heard it said - “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized” - That from a Toronto Police Officer.

You **have** heard it said. But you might not have recognised it as part of the spiritual evil at work to trivialise male sexual violence and ensure silence.

You have heard it said – and now, what does Jesus say to us?

What are the roots? How does this manifest in our daily living?

Human trafficking rests on the two pillars of rape culture, which tolerates violence by men, and capitalism, which commodifies bodies and exploits everything. What do we do about these? What are we already doing?

I have followed the Becoming a Faithful Church Process for a while, and was particularly interested at document 5, subtitled ‘Biblical perspectives on Human Sexuality’. Now, when I think about the problems of human sexuality, and the spiritual dimension to these problems, I am not primarily concerned with same-sex marriage. I am thinking about gender violence. I am thinking about misogyny and transphobia and patriarchy. In our thinking and discerning, we ought to find tools and insights to understand more broadly.

We might think that BFC 5 is just about same-sex marriage. If we allow it to be, it will. But if we follow the example of Jesus, we’ll be able to look deeper. This is not just a question of who can marry, but who can live? What is life? And what is death?

When we explore the spirituality of sexuality, are we looking deep enough? Are we remembering to explore the ways that spirituality supports abuse? Silences victims? Denies human rights? Creates a culture of law and piety that obscures domination and control?

Identifying the links between police institutional racism and the Ku Klux Klan, Rage Against the Machine sang ‘some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses’

I would suggest that “some of those that ban marriage are the same that human traffick”

Because these issues – capitalism, rape, human trafficking, hetero-patriarchy, domination power and the empire of death – are connected. When we address the spirituality of sexuality, which determines which bodies are good, which freedoms are good, we need to realise the seriousness and scope of what we are discussing. Life is more than personal sexual choice, it is freedom from oppressive, choking power, in whatever form it takes.

At the end of the day, we have the same choice before us, life or death, blessing or curse, good or evil.

Life, as defined by the world, is about material acquisition in ignorance of consequence. Sometimes following God seems to result in choosing death.

In the teaching of Jesus, the good life as defined by law, society and religion is not good enough. Disciples must seek to unmake the oppressive structures of patriarchy, so that life is good for all.

These structures of oppression persist today. Coupled with a global economy, they commodify human beings in many forms of slavery. Humans, beloved children of God, are dehumanised, trapped, silenced, hurt, killed.

Sexuality is twisted into a weapon, a dehumanising definition, an enterprise of profit from pain. These uses are against God's intention.

God's response is redemption. Buying back the stolen, healing the wounded, restoring. However much we are connected to these enslaving systems, we must be redeemed. Bought out, brought out. And we must seek the redeeming work of God for the world.

Instead of the life promised by the world, Life under God's definition is a life redeemed from death, oppression, slavery, injustice and violence. It is life in all its fullness.

Therefore, in faith, we choose life.