

# Sermon For Sunday, February 12, 2017 - "Seek to Love"

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 12, 2017  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

## Seek to Love

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Today's portion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is one of those passages that can turn people off to Christianity. It can give us the impression that we have an angry God who's ready to send us off to hell for calling someone a fool, a God who condemns those who know the pain of divorce. Christians have often used this reading, and others like it, to judge and to exclude people from community.

But is God really some controlling coach who will kick us off the team for thinking bad thoughts? Will we be voted off the island if we get a little angry? That's the view many people have of Christianity.

Yet, if we dig a little deeper, Jesus' words offer us a very different image of God and very different guidance about how to live in and as a community of faith.

Jesus first spoke these words to the Jewish people as they lived under Roman occupation. The people were divided about how best to deal with the oppressive Roman rule. A group called the Sadducees decided to collaborate with the Romans, a "go along to get along" approach. A group called the Zealots advocated taking up the sword and trying to overthrow the Romans. Most of the Pharisees decided their best bet was to separate themselves from the evil around them and maintain their identity as Jewish people with an intense focus on God's law. They couldn't change the oppressive structures but they could choose to be righteous.

Our circumstances are vastly different but we still see many of the same approaches to the challenges of our day: go along to get along, resist with violence, or retreat from it all and seek personal righteousness.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenges all these approaches.

In the first part, the Beatitudes, he challenges those who want to collaborate with power. He calls blessed those who are lowly, meek and persecuted by the powers of this world; he commends those who hunger, thirst and work for God's peace and justice. In the part of the sermon we'll hear next week, Jesus challenges those who would resort to violence by teaching us to love our enemies and turn the other cheek.

In the middle section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes on what righteousness truly looks like. First, he says righteousness is not about being isolated and separated from the world - he says we are to be salt and light for the world, we are to be engaged in making the world better. Jesus goes on to say that righteousness includes the law - he hasn't come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. But then, in the portion we heard today, Jesus reinterprets the law to highlight its true purpose. The law isn't about making us

personally righteous, separate and morally superior to others. It isn't just about getting us to avoid things that are bad. It is about relationships. It's about how we live together in community for the sake of the world.

God's law isn't just about refraining from murder. We should also treat each other with respect and not speak hateful words. We should not let anger consume us. We should seek reconciliation.

It isn't just about refraining from dishonoring our bodies. We should also not objectify other persons and view them as ways to satisfy our physical desires.

It isn't just about following the letter of the law regarding divorce. We shouldn't treat people as disposable and should be concerned for the welfare of the most vulnerable. This was especially true in Jesus' day when women were considered the property of their husbands and men could easily dispose of their wives with a simple note of divorce. Jesus challenges this and shows concern for the vulnerable.

And the law isn't just about keeping ourselves from swearing falsely or lying to others. We should speak and act truthfully in all our dealings so that others know they can trust us.

One of my favorite cartoons is of Moses looking at a stone tablet that says, "The One Commandment: Don't Be a Jerk". Moses replies, "Hey, it works for me, but maybe you need to spell it out some more for all the jerks down here." Apparently ten commandments weren't enough for us; we need even more explanation from Jesus about how to live well with others. A need Martin Luther also addressed when he wrote his Small Catechism to teach the faith.

As Jesus reinterprets the law, he also restores it to its original intent- God's law was given as a gift so that we would live well together and be a light for the world. It is given so that we can have the rich, full, good life God wants us all to have.

But what happens when we don't live this way? Does God condemn us to hell? The references to hell in Jesus' sermon seem more descriptive than prescriptive. If we live with anger, insulting others and calling them fools, we will experience the hell of isolation from the community God longs for us to know. If we let lust control us we will feed a fire that can become all consuming. If we are jerks, we will know the hell of being cut off from others, from life-giving relationships.

Throughout scripture we see that God longs for us to have good relationships and abundant life; and that God longs for relationship with us no matter how often we turn away. So God chooses to be in relationship with us despite all the ways we violate the commandments.

In many ways, the commandments and Jesus' interpretation of them can drive us into relationship with God. They show us how much we fall short of what God intends for us and how much we need to be forgiven, how much we need God's help.

And thankfully, God chooses to forgive us and restore us and renew us again and again. God doesn't look at us and say you're outta here, you're off the team, you've been voted of the island. Instead, God looks at us with love and says get out there, go, love the world as you have first been loved.

As it turns out, this is ultimately what God's righteousness looks like. God's righteousness is about relationship, restoration, forgiveness and love. This is what God desires, and this is what God seeks to bring about in us.

This, too, is the strategy Jesus advises when living in a broken world. Don't collaborate with power, don't turn to violence, don't isolate. Rather seek to love, forgive, and restore relationship. Be who you are, be salt and light for the world.

Let us take a moment for a silent prayer.

Hymn of the Day - #603 God, When Human Bonds are Broken