

Zero Tolerance

By: Keith Holste

February 13, 2011. Pastor Keith preaches from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus selects four areas of life as examples of where the scribes and Pharisees are kind of tolerant, but God has zero tolerance. And Jesus receives the zero tolerance punishment of death for us, and sets us at peace with God and at peace with one another.

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We reflect more on these verses from Matthew in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I'm guessing that most of us, if not all of us, when we were children had times when we resisted taking a bath. Our parent would say to us it's time to have a bath, and we would say I just had one. Maybe it was days ago, but we'd say that anyway. Or I'm really not dirty, I don't need one. Well when Jesus came, he was telling the people around him in so many words: you need to take a bath. You need to get cleaned up, just like a child in denial thinking that they really don't need a bath, even though they are dirty. And Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and the scribes and the people around him: you need to get yourselves cleaned up. He says to them, in effect, you've convinced yourselves that you are clean, but you've lowered the standards of what cleanliness is. And in a way, you've kind of hidden it with perfume or deodorant or something like that. You don't realize how dirty you are. And who among us hasn't looked at the Ten Commandments and said, I think I can keep them okay? I don't really do so badly. I care about God. I try to watch my language. I go to church. I care for my parents. I don't kill people. I don't steal. I don't commit adultery. I don't lie about others. I don't plot to get their stuff from them and take their workers away from them. I'm not really so bad, really. I just need a tune-up maybe now and then, but I'm not so bad when it comes to the Ten Commandments.

But in Jesus' day people who were really serious about the Jewish faith wanted to be absolutely right about it, because they didn't want to be taken into exile again ever. They wanted to get it right. And so they thought maybe the Ten Commandments were too vague. So they added some 613 laws to have a more complete guide about how to live. They sorted through the first five books of the Old Testament -- that's what we call it; they would call it the Torah -- and counted some 613 different laws for human behavior. There were rules for exactly what you should believe, how to do the rituals, how to do marriage, how to do sexuality, how to take a vow, how to correctly appoint a worship space, how to be proper at the holy days. There were laws about how to treat your neighbor, and on which days how to treat them, how to be fair in financial dealings. In all that were 613 rules for righteous living. And they set about keeping them, thinking that things were fine between them and God if they kept these 613 rules.

But our lesson today shows us that Jesus has something else in mind. He says in the verse right before where our text begins, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter into heaven." The scribes and Pharisees thought they had it pretty well together. They thought they were clean. They had enough income to keep the rules. They attempted to be righteous enough that God would look favorably upon them. And they had it together pretty well. They were the epitome of devoted living. They had the means to keep these laws in detail. They thought they were in for sure. Their hope was through their carefulness and their respect for God, so they thought they had an in.

But Jesus comes and says: not so quick. You've given honor to God, but look where your loyalty is. It's really to a book of laws. And that really distracts you from God. You think about those laws, how you can satisfy those laws, but really they're just the basics. It goes much deeper than just some prescriptions for behavior. Your whole person is involved in this, Jesus is saying. Your head, your heart, your hands, all of you is involved in this. And unless you respond with your whole self in a perfect way, you have come up short. We hear about zero tolerance for this or that infraction. Especially we hear about it in schools and workplaces. But the prime example of the one who has zero tolerance is God. The scribes and the Pharisees thought they had it mediated in such a way that they could find the law of God as something they could keep, and they defined it for themselves. But just as Jesus says, unless you are more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees you will not see the kingdom of God. They needed a bath. They weren't clean enough. Their whole selves had not been dedicated to God. They needed something to clean them up. They were only half clean.

Jesus selects here then four areas of life as examples of where they are kind of tolerant, but God has zero tolerance. They may think they have kept the faith and the commandment if they haven't killed someone, but this commandment goes all the way inside. It's not just about killing and committing murder. It's also about hurting someone, hating someone, or even having anger against someone. All these are the same in God's eyes. It's not about just calling somebody a fool or not insulting them. All these things are included. It even goes inside, into what you're thinking. So this is where Jesus calls for a thorough cleanup and for peace, so that you don't come before God, even get to church and find your offering is there but you still have a lingering thought about someone, anger with that person. He says drop your offering where you are, go amend those differences with that person so you aren't thinking hateful thoughts when you come before me. Get yourself cleaned up. Come to the table with a good feeling and with peace.

A little while ago we made peace with one another. Get all that stuff cleaned up. You want to be clean before the Lord. We exchanged peace. And this is what Jesus does: Jesus exchanges it. While calling for righteous living, he takes our sin upon himself. He receives the zero tolerance punishment of death for us, and sets us at peace with God and at peace with one another. With our greeting of peace to each other as we did this morning, we remind each other of this peace that God has with us, and therefore we have with each other. And we extend that forgiveness ourselves as we forgive other people, with the authority that God has given us to do that. The exchange has been made. Jesus took the punishment. We are able to receive the peace, and we share that peace. What a difference a bath makes. If we call that baptismal washing in the font that we had a moment ago a bath, we find that we are cleansed -- and we are cleaned by God. Our actual sins and the sins we mentally contemplate come before God and they are forgiven. We come away with peace with God, and not so focused on our behavior. We come away giving thanks to God for the peace that has been given us. And we make peace with other people.

When we look at these laws we find out how much trouble we're really in. We find out that being angry or hateful is contrary to God. We find also that our inclination to make other people into objects that we would like to possess is what amounts to lust. Again, it's hard to put limits on where our mind goes. We image and desire things and people that were not meant to be ours. We know how hard it is to keep our mind from going where God doesn't want it to go. But rather than pretending we're okay, it's time to take a bath and to be cleansed of it. This morning, little William got one of these baths. Most of us here have gotten one of these baths at the font. They are named after the Greek word for washing: to be baptism. That's where the word comes from. As William was baptized, we have been baptized with the double kind of promise that our sins have been washed away through God's own death for us, and we're free to have a whole relationship with God and with others. We don't reduce our connection to others

because we just look at them on the basis of looks and say I only care about how you look. Because we've been baptized, we connect with people on a deep level, with the whole person, appreciating that person as a gift of a thorough creation God has given to us in another person.

And God gives us the gift of family and the unity of marriage. Especially in times when women were viewed as property more than as full human beings, it was easy to change wives. One could write a certificate, a piece of paper, and be done with the association. As long as one followed the rules of the day, a person really saw no problem with it and no sin was really involved, they thought. But Jesus says that's not really the way it is. For a man and a woman to be in marriage is not a matter of property. It's a matter of full human relationship. One doesn't move from one person to another person as though you're changing titles to cars. Relationship is a whole human endeavor involving heart, mind, and soul. God is a god of relationship. God has created human beings to be in relationship with each and every one. Since the first man and the first woman, that relationship has been abused and taken advantage of by humans. God, in zero tolerance, could have said you've offended me, you went away from me already in the Garden of Eden, and you failed this relationship. God could have written a certificate declaring that God was out of there, God was done with it all, and said: you're on your own. I'm out of here. I have no care for you anymore. God had every right when people disobeyed him.

But God didn't. God valued the humans and the relationship too much to do that. God said: I will do whatever it takes to redeem and restore this relationship. So God gave his son. And he came and he loved us, showed us, and reminded us what this relationship is all about. He said and showed how it was about love, about whole people, about dignity, and regarding one another as full human beings. The only certificate that was written was the one that was above his head when he was hanging on the cross that said, "This is the king of the Jews." And far more powerful than that paper certificate was the word that came from heaven that said of his upcoming death, when he was at the Mount of Transfiguration, "This is my Son, with whom I am well pleased." That was like a verbal certificate saying this is the one. Jesus was washed for us at his baptism that we might live as full human beings, and in full relationship with God, and in full and loving relationships with one another. And Jesus died for us that these same things might happen.

Well, what do we need for relationships? And it's what we talked to the kids about: we need full communication and loving communication to have good relationships. Sometimes we say to someone who's spoken badly: go wash your mouth out. Our speech is critical, both with God and with one another. It's the second ranking commandment behind love of God himself. We say you shall have no other gods, and then we say you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. It's number two commandment. Our speech with God is all important. It's what we use to thank and to praise and to pray. It's a precious thing. When we throw our speech around like it's nothing and use God's name in vain when we're not talking to or about God, we're taking God's name and making it into something cheap. God says it's a precious thing I've given you: my name, and speech, and the ability to communicate with me. Use it as this precious thing.

And so Jesus says make your communication with one another, with other human beings, precious too. As you talk to other people, as you talk to God, don't make it so light and so unreliable that you need to swear to some sort of oath to make someone think that you're telling the truth. Be truthful in all of your communication, so that when you say yes, people know you mean yes -- and when you say no, people know you mean no. And they can count on you to be reliable about that. That's having a washed-out mouth. That is a baptized mouth, one that knows that to be loved by God and to love means that truth is spoken for the sake of relationships. As Jesus tells us these things that are expected of us, it can be daunting. But they are the things that God's had in mind from the beginning. It's all a matter of what

makes for a good relationship -- with God and with one another: feelings of love not anger, valued persons, valued relationships, and valued communication for the sake of relationships. In Holy Baptism we have been cleansed. We've been reborn. We start again to love, to cherish, to go the extra mile, to speak well to and about one another. What Jesus says might seem arduous and even impossible just to hear it. But through the Holy Spirit these are marks of the Christian life. And with Christ they're not only possible, but even likely. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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