

**As You Wish**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Epiphany 6A  
*Matthew 5:21-37*

The scene takes place in a movie called “The Princess Bride.” It’s a fairy tale, about Princess Buttercup and her servant who silently loved her. The servant’s name is Westly.

Princess Buttercup ends up engaged to the evil Prince Humperdink, and this forced marriage is scheduled to take place in the grand Cathedral. Perhaps you’ve watched the scene. It begins with magnificent organ music. All the people are in the pews, dressed in regal splendor. The bride and groom arrive at the altar.

Then the camera zooms in on the bishop, and, as the magnificent music concludes, the bishop opens his mouth and says, “Mawage. Mawage is what bwings us togever today. And wove...twue wove...will follow wherever you go.” Then the bishop says to the groom, “Do you have da wing?”

The first time I saw that scene, I laughed so hard that I started to cry.

In the end, Princess Buttercup does not marry Prince Humperdink. As the movie unfolds, Buttercup looks back on the early days, when she mistreated her servant, Westly. Every time she barked an order at him, his response was the same. He would say, “As you wish.”

He was her servant. So that’s all he could say to her. But Buttercup finally realizes that, whenever Westly said to her, “As you wish,” he was really saying to her, “I love you.” She eventually grasps the truth. Whenever Westly said “as you wish,” she had to understand not ONLY to what Westly SAID, but what he MEANT. What he *meant* was, “I love you.”

In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear Jesus preaching his famous “Sermon on the Mount. The sermon is already in progress. In the section we hear today, I think Jesus is asking us not only to listen to what God *said*, but to also ponder what God *meant*.

Jesus is inviting us to go deeper in our understanding of God’s call in our lives. He wants us to understand how much God loves us, and how radically our lives can change if we put God’s *intentions* into practice.

As we listen to Jesus today, we realize that he is inaugurating a new kind of faith community, a new kind of HUMAN community. And in that community, we are not just called to AVOID certain things. We are called to be a community which enables each member to live out the glorious dream that God has for all of God’s children.

In this section of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus quotes a series of commandments which were spoken by God through Moses or the prophets.

From our study of the Bible, we know that God said: “keep holy the Sabbath. Do not have other

gods before me. Honor your father and mother. Don't steal. Don't kill. Don't commit adultery. Don't covet what your neighbor has. Tell the truth."

The ancient people, God's chosen people, wrote down what God *said*. But perhaps some people missed what God *meant*. Sometimes, people tried to reduce God's commandments to the "minimum daily requirement." Even today, people want black and white instructions: "Just tell me what to avoid so that I can be defined as a good person!"

Then and now, people sometimes look at the words God spoke, and they try to figure out how they can 'get around' their meaning. How can I rob the word of God of its power? How can I reduce its challenge and still tell myself that I am fulfilling God's plan?

For instance, people sometimes say to themselves:

+ OK. God said, "Keep holy the Sabbath." But what did God mean by "keeping it *holy*?" Yes, back in the book of Genesis, God rested on the Sabbath...

But... our schedule today is so busy. I work during the week. Surely God won't mind if I buy groceries on the Sabbath, or shop for a birthday gift. Doesn't God want us to feed our families and be generous? Sure, God rested on the Sabbath, but my boss wants this report on Monday, and I have my computer at home on Sunday. So surely God won't mind if I slip away from my family and work from home.

For many families, soccer has become their actual religion – they are more faithful to soccer than to church. So if we go to five soccer games on Sunday, isn't that a holy Sabbath, since we've spent it with family, doing something healthy?

You see the point.

Sometimes, people say:

+ OK – God said, "do not kill." That's what God *said*. But is the word "kill" the same as "murder" or "execute," or "self-defense?" Did God select a specific word to leave us some loopholes?

God said don't *kill*, but he didn't say anything about using weapons of mass destruction as a deterrent. God doesn't get specific about using force to defend yourself. God said "don't *kill*," but maybe we can 'end someone's life' and call it 'euthanasia' and still be OK... or we can kill the child in the womb and tell ourselves that it's not really a child so therefore ending that heartbeat isn't really killing so we are OK....

You see the point.

Sometimes, people say:

+ OK – God said "do not commit adultery." But when God said 'adultery' doesn't God mean

“thou shall not actually *touch* someone else?” Adultery means actually doing something with someone else, right? So, if I stare at someone who is not my spouse, and obsess about them, or click on internet images, I am OK with God, right? After I, I didn’t actually touch anyone...

And maybe God left a loophole- what if my current spouse is awful, and I’ve finally found someone who loves me for who I am... it’s OK to get close to them, Right? Doesn’t God want me to be happy? God won’t judge me, would he?

You get the idea.

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that those of us who are called into his community of disciples must learn not only to listen to the words God *said*, but also to take seriously what God *meant*. When we reduce God’s commandments to words alone, we can turn them into a word game. We can manipulate ancient words to rationalize modern unfaithfulness.

When we listen to God’s commands, when we listen to Jesus’ preaching, we listen not just to the words he used. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand what God intended for us to know... and how God intends for us to live.

God knows the human heart better than humans do. God knows that our external behavior flows from our internal thoughts, decisions and feelings. So God wants to change, not only our external appearances, but the interior of our hearts.

Let’s face it – many of us have mastered the skill of *appearing* to be perfectly calm and composed, while inside we are seething with anger, or smoldering with rage. We get good at *pretending*. But God does not want us to pretend. God wants us to be whole and holy.

So Jesus challenges us as he sits there on the Mount of the Beatitudes – Jesus calls us to pay attention, not only to what God *said*, but what God *meant*... *what God intended when he spoke to us*.

When God said, “Thou shall not kill,” God meant it. God meant that we should avoid violence toward others. And God also meant that we must learn how to identify our angers, confess our angers, transform our angers into productive action through the grace of the Spirit.

Think of what our children are learning as they listen to American adults right now. Our entire culture is flooded with anger, with people utterly convinced that they are right about everything, and that anyone who disagrees with their ideas is, by definition, evil.

God has something to say about that kind of self-deception. God said it. Jesus preaches it. And let’s be honest: it takes so much energy to be angry. Anger kills our souls. And it wounds the Body of Christ.

When God says, “Don’t commit adultery,” God is not only talking about who gets touched by whom. God challenges you about what you do with your eyes, and where you go in your

thoughts, and what channel you click on your cable. You can use, you can objectify or abuse a human being when you are with them. You can do the same in your mind and heart – and the sin will equally consume you, and wound the body of Christ.

When God gives us commandments, God is not imposing rules for the sake of rules. If we pay attention to what God *means*, we will see that everything God asks of us is for our good, for the good of others, and leads all to freedom.

When God says, “Don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t lust, don’t lie, don’t cheat, let go of your anger...” What God means is, “I love you. I love you – so let me change your heart as well as your hands, let me change your feelings as well as your behavior, let me change your attitude as well as your action.”

This is not easy. That is why the Lord calls us together in the community of the church, so that we can learn together, and encourage each other, and prayerfully focus on Jesus.

The Lord’s message leads to life. I pray that, with the Spirit’s help, I will become better at listening when God speaks. So that when God speaks to me, my only response is,

“As you wish.”

—*Michael Renninger* © 2020