

Raising the Bar

In the name of him who taught his disciples with words of power and authority, dear friends in Christ: In most of the Olympic track and field events, the gold medal is awarded to the athlete who does the best overall and who is not defeated in his or her event. The exceptions to this are the high jump and the pole vault. In these two events, they start the bar at a moderate yet challenging height to quickly weed out the non-contenders, and then by gradually raising the elevation that the athletes must clear to stay in the competition, they thin the field, until at last they arrive at a height that only one can jump or vault over. But even when they get there and establish the winner, the event is not over. No, what they do is continue to raise the bar until they reach the point that no one, not even the winner, can jump over it. The question is “How high can the winner go?” Maybe a new record will be established. But my point is that in the end, even the winner – the one who did the very best – goes down in defeat. You might say that the award goes to the best of the losers; but he’s a loser nevertheless.

In a sense, this is what Jesus is doing in this morning’s Gospel as we continue to hear him preach the Sermon on the Mount. He is raising the bar, not on the high jump or pole vault, but on the holy Commandments of God. Actually, to be more precise, he is re-raising the bar to where it was supposed to be – to where the Lord intended it to be in the first place.

You may recall that in last week’s Gospel, Jesus sharply criticized “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same.” That’s what had been going on for a long time. For centuries the rabbis and teachers of the Law had been lowering the Law’s demands. Through their judicial wrangling, pragmatic reasoning, introduction of creative exceptions, and narrow adherence to the precise letter rather than the spirit of the Law, they had taken the bars of the various commandments from the insurmountable heights they were designed to be and brought them down to a more manageable level. They made it possible for outwardly good persons to stay in the competition, so to speak, to continue to clear the bar by meeting the Law’s demands with their own natural abilities and inherent moral fiber. Based on these teachings, which were widespread in Jesus’ day, there were a lot of people who imagined that they were winning the prize; that they were pleasing the Lord with their lives and that ultimately they would be crowned with glory by a grateful and thoroughly impressed God.

It is to such people that Jesus is directing his comments. He is out to dispel their minds of this myth. And he does it by raising the bar, by putting it back to where God intends it to be. He begins with the Fifth Commandment. “You have heard from the scholars of old, ‘You shall not murder’; and whoever commits a murder is liable to judgment.” (The word “judgment” Jesus uses there means the death penalty.) This is what people were being taught: that to go out and physically beat, stab, or choke another person to death or to cause other grievous bodily harm was a violation of the command; but that pretty much anything short of that was permissible. Jesus, explaining God’s original intent, goes straight to the root of the sin. Murder, he says, is a sin of the heart. It’s any thought directed toward another person that falls short of perfect love. Therefore, merely to be angry with someone or to hold a grudge against them is an offense that merits the death penalty. To insult someone is a violation so grave that it should be heard and condemned by the highest court in the land. And to call someone a fool is a crime sufficient to condemn you to an eternity of hellfire. That’s God’s Word on the subject. That’s how he looks upon us when we fail to love one another: as murderers.

And that's why Jesus follows up by saying that if you've come to worship the Lord, bringing a sacrifice to die as an atonement for your sin, and you remember that there is someone out there whom you have offended or who's offended you – someone with whom you're at odds for whatever reason – leave your offering and go first to be reconciled to that person. How can you be reconciled to the Lord whom you've not seen if you don't love your brother or sister whom you have seen? How can you stand before God telling him how sorry you are for your sins while at the same time continuing to commit murder in your heart against a person made in his image? It's the height of hypocrisy. The Lord hates it.

Having raised the bar on the Fifth Commandment, Jesus moves on to the Sixth. "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" This was narrowly defined by the rabbis as a man physically engaging in sexual intercourse with a woman who was married to someone else. So understand that with that definition, if she were not married or if she were a prostitute, well, then it's not adultery. That's how far they'd lowered the bar. In putting it back where it was intended to be, again Jesus goes to the root of the sin, which is planted deep in the human heart. "I say to you that anyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent [that's any woman, whether she's married or not] has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus is saying that merely to fantasize of a sexual relationship outside of its proper place in marriage constitutes the sin of adultery – which, by the way, was a capital offense under the Law of God. And lest anyone think, "Oh, c'mon, Jesus; aren't you overstating it?" He goes to say, therefore if your right eye or right hand causes you to [commit this sin], it's better to remove them and enter life missing some of your parts than to go to hell with your body intact. He's stating as emphatically as he can that yes, you'd better believe that the Lord who knows your most private thoughts will condemn you for those which he judges to be evil.

The Lord gave us the good gift of sexuality. He wants us to enjoy it; but he intends that it be enjoyed only in the context of a committed, lifelong, "one-flesh" relationship between one man and one woman. And for this reason Jesus goes on to raise the bar on the institution of marriage itself. The rabbis had done their watering down routine here too. At the time of Jesus, all a man had to do to dissolve a marriage was to hand his wife a certificate that said, "I divorce you." He could do this for just about any reason, though it depended upon which rabbi you spoke to about it. Some were more lax than others. So of course if you wanted a divorce, you went to the rabbi who told you what you wanted to hear. "What? She overcooked the lamb? She didn't put enough starch in your tunic? Oh yes, by all means. That's grounds for divorce. Send her away with a clear conscience. It's no problem for you. Just be sure that you do the paperwork, and the Lord will be as pleased as punch with you."

That isn't the way it is, says Jesus. Marriage is a holy estate created by God for our benefit. Those who enter into it make vows of lifelong fidelity to one another. Therefore the only legitimate ground for dissolving a marriage is if one of the partners is unfaithful. To divorce for any other reason, Jesus says, is the sin of adultery. To marry someone so divorced is adultery. And if you are the instigator of an illegitimate divorce against the wishes of your spouse, you are guilty not only of adultery yourself, but also of causing that person to commit adultery because you make it impossible for them to keep their marriage vows. The Lord is deadly serious about marriage. He likens his relationship with us to a marriage, one in which he promises to be a faithful husband who will always lead, provide for, and protect us from harm. And he always keeps his Word. As his people, he wants us to do the same in our marriages.

This is no doubt why Jesus moves on to the topic of taking vows and oaths in general. Here the rabbis did some very creative sleight of hand. For fear of violating the Second Commandment, which prohibits taking the Lord's name in vain, no one at the time of Jesus ever

used the name of the Lord. They figured if they never spoke his name, they couldn't be accused of using it inappropriately. But the Law of Moses also said that if you swear an oath to the Lord, you must fulfill it; so obviously the Lord intended that people make their vows in his name. To get around this, the rabbis suggested that people who make vows should do so in the name of things associated with the Lord, like "by the heavens", or "by his creation", or "by the holy city of Jerusalem". They even had these on a graduated scale. It was thought to be a more serious offense to break an oath made "by the heavens" than "by the earth". It was all rather silly, really; but when you allow yourself to be fixated on the letter rather than the spirit of the Law, this is the sort of thing that happens.

Once again Jesus goes to the source of the problem, which is our inherent lack of honesty. We're born liars. We deceive each other. Sometimes we make promises falsely, knowing full well we won't do what we said we would. Other times we make promises that we intend to fulfill, but in the end we either can't or don't keep them. We enter contracts and when we find them too difficult to carry out, we look for ways to break them. *This* is the problem, Jesus says. *This* is the sin. The solution is not found in taking oaths but in always speaking the truth. And if we were known as people who always kept our word, there would be no reason ever to take a vow. Therefore, says Jesus, forget about taking oaths. When you say yes or no, mean it. Be truthful. The Lord's standard is for his people to conduct their lives with absolute honesty and integrity. That's where the bar is. Anything that falls short is sin.

Now, try to imagine how the people listening to Jesus would have heard these teachings. They had thought that they were doing fairly well keeping the Commands of God. After all, most of them hadn't physically murdered anyone or committed adultery as it was narrowly defined. Those who were divorced found some rabbi who approved of their actions and they made sure they did the required paperwork. Regards the oath taking, they played according to the rules of what they were taught (for the most part) and no one ever failed to perform an oath taken in the Lord's name because they were smart enough (or so they thought) to leave the Lord's name out of it. They thought they were good. It took some effort to keep their noses clean; but they cleared the bar. They were winners. God was happy with them. And here's Jesus telling them that they weren't even in the competition. They lost before they started. The bar of the Law is impossibly high and they can't even get their feet off the ground. And the Lord? Far from being pleased, he's disgusted with their performance and is planning to cast them into hell.

It would have been a rude shock, to say the least. And in response some, no doubt, turned to anger. "Who is this Jesus? How dare he tell me that I'm no good? Where does he get off calling me a sinner?" They would have stormed off in a big huff. We can only hope that over time the power of his Words melted their prideful and stone-cold hearts. Others, however, would have heard these teachings with stinging conviction. The Holy Spirit working through the Words would have convinced them of the truth and they would have seen where they really stood before the Lord – and been terrified: terrified of God's wrath and judgment.

But as frightful as that sounds, that's exactly where Jesus would want them to be. Why? Because the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. A person must know where he or she stands in God's judgment on account of their sin. Only then will they be ready to hear the Lord's solution to their problem, which is to seek salvation not in their own puny, pathetic, and sinful efforts to be righteous in God's sight; but rather to find it in the righteousness that God gives to sinners through faith in Jesus. Jesus, who kept the whole Law of God. Jesus, who easily cleared the bar of the Law and won the victory for us. Jesus, who for our sin was raised up on the bar of the cross to pay the penalty we justly deserved for being losers. Jesus, who for

sinners died and was raised to life again. He is God's righteousness for all who believe in him; but only someone who knows he's a sinner in danger of hellfire can see and believe that.

The rabbis and religious teachers, by lowering bar of God's Law, had taken the fear of the Lord away from people. And we do the same thing today when we lower God's perfect standards. It happens all the time. I don't need to tell you that it's the general trend of the culture in which we live. Pornography is rampant and thanks to the internet is readily available in most homes, marriage has been redefined to include homosexual relationships, so called "no fault divorce" is the standard, and couples routinely live together enjoying the privileges of marriage without accepting the sacred vows and responsibilities of marriage. All of this is increasingly being seen as acceptable, as the new norm. Jesus calls all of this what it is: adultery – an abomination to God. We expect it in the culture at large, which is not led by the Spirit or governed by God's truth; but what's truly sad is when whole church bodies or individuals within churches that bear Christ's name go along with the culture and lower the bar.

But let's bring this closer to home: how have you in your own life lowered the bar? Do you take these words of Jesus seriously? Do you truly believe that that irritating person who rubs you the wrong way, for whom you feel anger and contempt, the one you have all kinds of names for—do you understand that in God's sight you're guilty of murdering that person – and that you continue to murder the person, adding crime after crime as long as you feel the way you do? Do you truly believe that every one of those lustful thoughts that pass through your mind are acts of adultery? Do you really think that a lie – yes, even a little white one – is an offense the Lord finds damnable? If not, you've lowered the bar, which is a dangerous and potentially soul-destroying thing to do.

Today, if you hear Christ's voice, put it back where it belongs. Raise the bar. Recognize your failure and your sin. See how far you fall short. Then confess it. Repent of it. And rely all the more on Jesus who is your Savior and your righteousness before God. And doing so, he will raise you up. He will raise you with him on his cross and crucify your sinful flesh. And rising with him to new life, by his Spirit he will give you the strength to jump higher than you did before. No, in this life you'll never clear the bar; that goal awaits in the life to come. But you'll never improve your performance by lowering the bar. Only keeping it where the Lord intends it to be can you grow in Christian faith and godly life. May the Lord in his mercy grant us the grace and the will to do so. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!