

Mediocre Morality

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on February 14, 1993, the 6th Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Matthew 5:17-37, 9:9-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Hubert really liked his doctor. She was so much more than a doctor. She was a dear friend. He felt that he could talk to her not only about medical problems but about everything. On one of his visits, the doctor asked Hubert to step on the scales. Being a very kind doctor, she didn't reveal her innermost thoughts concerning the results; but her face expressed concern.

"Hubert," she said, "the last time you were here, you were forty pounds overweight. Since then, you've gained another seventeen pounds."

Hubert averted the doctor's eyes and looked down at the floor shamefacedly like a little boy who just got caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Are you still eating the Twinkies and chocolate covered donuts?" the doctor asked. Indeed, he was. He had a fondness for donuts, Hershey bars and, especially, chocolate and vanilla ice-cream.

The doctor said, "Hubert, sit down! We need to talk seriously about your health. I've been your friend for years. You're more than just a patient to me. I really care about you. You have so much to live for and with exercise and dieting, you could enjoy life for many years. But I must tell you, quite frankly, your weight, blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides are out of sight. If you want to live you've got to exercise, lose weight and cut out the sweets."

"~~Are~~ Sweets?" Hubert asked.

"Yes! All sweets!"

Hubert agreed to try harder to exercise and diet. But, alas, on the way home he

stopped at the convenient store for some gas and when he went inside to pay the cashier he picked up a new Hershey mint and cookie candy bar.

"Just one won't hurt me," he said to himself.

Hubert kept postponing joining the Y and never could get around to start his diet. His love for Twinkies and donuts proved a larger influence in his life than his desire to be healthy.

One day, Hubert was walking in a shopping mall. In front of one of the shops he saw an old fashioned scale with a large circular face and a bright red dial that spun around to point to the weight. It only cost a penny to be weighed. Hubert stepped on the scale, got out a penny, and placed it in the slot.

"Oh, wow!" he exclaimed out loud. The scales gave his weight as nearly forty pounds lighter than the doctor's scales. His was not to question why. From that time on, Hubert got weighed only on the scales at the mall. When his wife said anything about his candy bars and donuts, he would reply, "The scales at the mall say that I've lost forty pounds since I was at the doctor's office!"

Now Hubert had a long standing appointment with the doctor that he couldn't postpone. The appointed day finally came. He had to go back, face the doctor, and get weighed on her scales which he knew would tell him his correct weight. I can't tell you what the doctor said to Hubert after he got weighed. It was said in the privacy of the doctor-patient relationship. All I can tell you is that he left the doctor's office with a rather ashen look on his face and tears streamed down his cheeks. Hubert had known all along that the shopping mall scales weren't right but he went on deceiving himself because those faulty scales made him feel so good.

Now I want to turn your thoughts to Jesus. Jesus is also a doctor and the friend of sinners like you and me. No sinner ever had a better friend and doctor than Jesus. Think of how Jesus dealt with sinners in the Gospels. "Thou shalt not commit adultery", the Law of God said. But do you remember the story of the woman caught in adultery? Jesus didn't condemn her. He treated her tenderly, more tenderly than any man had ever treated her before and he forgave her and told her to sin no more.⁴ The Law of God says, "You shall not swear falsely." But think of how Peter, on the night that Jesus was betrayed, swore falsely, denying that he ever knew Jesus. Three times Peter swore he didn't know ~~Jesus~~, but when Jesus rose from the dead he came to ~~Jesus~~, not in wrath, but in his grace and forgiveness. The Law of God says, "You shall not murder." But Saul, the proud pharisee, participated in the murder of St. Stephen and was breathing out threats of murder against Christians ~~which~~ ^{when} Jesus met him on the Damascus Road and converted him.

Jesus is the friend of sinners. One of the reasons I love Jesus so much is because he accepts me right where I am, sin and all. He looks at me and sees beneath the surface. He sees my thoughts and feelings as well as my actions and still loves me. He sees sins in me that all of you can see. He sees sins in me that I hide from you. And he sees sins in me that I don't even know about.

Christ doesn't require me to change before he accepts me. He doesn't say to me, "I'll love and save you only if you, first, turn from your sins and clean up your life." He accepts me where I am, warts and all, with the promise that he'll make the best of my life, no matter how badly I might have messed it up in the past.

Jesus' attitude towards sinners was so liberal that his enemies accused him of

being soft on sin. They said he'd come to destroy the law. They accused him of being a law breaker because he healed on the sabbath and ~~didn't keep himself separate from~~ ^{wasn't away from them} ^{hung around with} sinners.

It's easy for us, today, to think, because of this, that Jesus came to take the hard edge off the Law of God and soften it's demands. But if any of us thinks that Jesus is satisfied with a mediocre morality, we must come to terms with this text which says that he doesn't subtract "one letter, not one stroke of a letter" from the severity of God's law. Jesus shows us that God's law is far more demanding and severe than anyone ever thought. At the very beginning of his ministry Jesus makes us feel the implacable severity of the law of God.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder', and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire...

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart....

It was also said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' 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.

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.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all.

On the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to us, "Step on the scales of God's law. These scales are accurate. They won't lie to you. Measure yourself against God's holy Law."

We look at the scales and see how far we are from where God wants us to be. Jesus sees the discouragement in our eyes and says, "I want to help you become what God wants you to be but you have to believe what I say about your condition, follow my instructions and place yourself under my discipline within the community of faith. When you fail, I'll be there to pick you up. But I won't lie to you about ^{the condition} your condition in order to make you feel good. I'll forgive you, encourage you, discipline you and lead you

to get you in shape.

in the direction God wants you to go. But it's not going to be easy."

Now, some of us may have had mothers and fathers who were ~~implacable~~ ^{harsh} and severe perfectionists and disciplinarians. And we may think of them with some hostility when we hear what Jesus says about the implacable demands of the Law of God. Maybe your parents made you feel that you were worthless unless you could measure up to their impossible standards. They expressed their love for you only if you got straight A's, kept your bedroom neat and clean, washed the dishes, and did nothing to embarrass them in public. But they withheld their love from you if you got a B or a C, or let your room get messy or embarrassed or failed them in any way. You felt like you had to earn their love. You felt that you could never measure up to their demands or earn their love. And you wonder if that's what God is like.

But that's not how Jesus is. That's not how God is. The law of God isn't given in order for us to earn God's love and acceptance. If that were so the Law of God would be utterly intolerable. God, in Christ, unconditionally accepts, loves, and saves us out of pure *unmerited, undeserved* grace brought to us by Christ. And, unlike the demanding, perfectionist parent, when we refuse or fail to submit ourselves to Christ's discipline, Christ weeps for us, Christ prays for us, Christ stretches out his arms on the cross to us and goes ~~down the ways of hell~~ ^{all the way to} to bring us home to the Father. His, indeed, is a love that will not let us go.

But ~~we~~, too often we prefer the shopping mall scales that ~~make us feel good~~ ^{lessen the severity of God's} ~~because they~~ ^{law and} tell lies about ourselves ~~that~~ ^{and to} make us feel good. But deep down inside, we know those scales are lying to us. Sometimes people flatter us and tell us things about ourselves that we know very well aren't true. We might look like death warmed

over and someone may say, "You look so good." We know they're lying to us, ^{but it makes us feel good} ~~but~~ We sometimes like to be lied to.

A true and loving friend, however, confronts us with the truth ^{in a loving way} We may get angry and even reject friends who tell us the truth about ourselves. Because he loves us so much, Jesus risks incurring our anger and rejection by telling us the truth about God's Law which is more severe and demanding than we had ever thought or imagined.

There are two responses we can give to Christ in the light of what he tells us ~~is~~ about the severity of God's law. We can get angry, reject him, deny him and refuse to believe what he says. We can weigh ourselves on shopping mall scales that don't tell us ^{about God's Law and our own condition.} the truth/ We can believe the lies of so-called friends who ~~are~~ simply flattering ~~us~~ us. This may actually work for a while, but not forever, because sooner or later the illusion will be shattered and the reality will be known, that God is holy.

There's only one other response to what Jesus says about the Law and our inflexible Judge. We can get to know him for what he's really like. We know this holy God most truly at the cross. At the cross our divine Judge took our judgment upon himself. There, on the cross, his accusing finger, once pointed at us, was changed to an open hand outstretched to us. On the cross we see that our Judge is our Savior.

Friends, let's believe what Jesus says about God's law.

Don't believe lies ^{that weaken the demands of God's law.} ~~about what God's Law requires.~~

Let's trust ourselves to the good physician who is the friend of sinners.

~~He will help us. He will~~ ^{forgive and} ~~save us.~~

He will forgive, save and help us!

Amen.

Let us pray. Almighty God, you gave the law as a good guide for our lives. May we never shrink from your commandments, but, as we are taught by your Son Jesus, fulfill the law in perfect love; through Christ our Lord and Master. Amen.

The story is a retelling of Rev Robb, Mrs Triplechin Avondale