

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But 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. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But 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.

³³“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.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Sermon

Some of you have likely read the book “Being Mortal” by Atul Gawande. Dr. Gawande is a general surgeon, and I am sure he’s excellent with a scalpel. But I know for a fact he is one of the most powerful writers I know currently wielding a pen. While “Being Moral” is probably his most famous collection of essays, I just finished one of his lesser known works, “Better.” It chronicles stories of how the medical profession has achieved moments of improvement through the virtues of diligence, doing the right thing, and ingenuity. While his stories are vast in scope, tales of eradicating polio and reducing battlefield mortality rates from 24 to 10%, the actual details he’s illustrating are both small and applicable across the board.

Take, for example, the story of eradicating polio. Polio, to be clear, is not fully eradicated. There were 173 diagnosed cases last year, and the disease is still present in the nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria. But it’s not in India anymore, and in fact, India hasn’t seen a case since 2011, and this is remarkable. See, Polio is particularly virulent among children under 5, and kids can remain active carriers for weeks at a time. Sometimes it takes a few weeks to diagnose, and in that time period, a kid could have exposed almost literally countless others. And just a few years ago, India would have a single kid pop positive for Polio, but by the time health workers could get there, whole communities may have been exposed. But that didn’t stop the World Health Organization and UNICEF and others from trying, anyway.

Dr. Gawande writes about a case in 2003, when a young boy, who had been sick for several weeks, was finally confirmed positive for polio in southern India. Within 24 hours a mop up plan was produced and sprung into action. The plan called for the employment of 37,000 vaccinators, 4,000 health care supervisors, the rental of 2,000 vehicles, supplies for more than 18,000 insulated carries, because of course the vaccine has to be kept chilled. The hope being that over 3 days this team would go door to door to vaccinate at least 90% of the 4.2 million children living in this southern Indian state.¹ Let’s just repeat that: in less than 24 hours a team of 41,000 people was stood up to deliver 4.2 million vaccines over three days. And, for the most part, they did it. 4 million kids were vaccinated in this effort, and while a couple of unvaccinated kids did get polio, the virus was effectively halted from spreading in this region. Just 8 years later, India would see its last polio case.

¹ Atul Gawande, *Better*. (2007, New York: Picador) pg 35.

There's a lot of stuff that goes into these pop up vaccination campaigns. Stores of polio vaccines, networks of local physicians and nurses and others who suspend their work for a few days to supervise, local Rotary clubs publish posters and handbills and will send speakers on rickshaws through the streets, so neighbors know to expect a visit from the vaccinators. The effort to eradicate polio started in 1988, and the WHO has, on several occasions, pushed out the finish line date because we just haven't been able to do it. A few hundred cases continue to persevere each year, and we just haven't quite cracked it. But we did it in India, and the US, and Ethiopia, and countless other nations around the globe. And, it seems, it's within our sights to eradicate it fully at some point. And even before we've finished at that goal, it's amazing to think that we've seen a "99.95% reduction from the estimated 350,000 cases when the eradication effort began in 1988."²

It's all down to the dogged, tireless efforts of people all around the globe. From printers who whip out thousands of signs on a moment's notice, to field captains who check to make sure the ice packs are frozen enough to be effective, to the gentle conversations of each vaccinator with a parent, convincing them to let their child receive the vaccination. Again. And Again. And Again. Wash, rinse, repeat in a new location with a new case.

Dr. Gawande's point is well made in this story—real change, in healthcare and in our world, requires diligence and commitment and focus and that unsettled feeling which says to us "99.95% eradication is just not good enough. We can do better." In its own way, I think this is message of this famous section of Jesus' sermon on the mount, too.

Jesus gets into the weeds of a bunch of stuff here: murder, adultery, our vows and promises. The most memorable of this, to me, is that implication that to even think an unkind thought toward another is, in and of itself, an act of murder. That to look at another lustfully demands the full excision of an eyeball. Like, geez, Jesus, high standards much?

But this is the whole point of Jesus' sermon, right? The high standards are intentional. To really believe and follow the law sent by God, it's not good enough to simply do the bare minimum. Like that rich young man who comes to Jesus and says, "I've donated so much, I've given away my solid 10%, what else do I need to do?" And Jesus says, "sell it all. All of it, donate it to the poor." Your 10% tithe isn't good enough—it's not enough to do the bare minimum. You can't just not murder, you need to dive deeper, to those feelings and thoughts and words that lead to actions, which could eventually, in a long chain of events, lead to violence toward another. Get to the root of the issue, and pluck out your very eye if need be.

This is the life Jesus calls his followers into, a life where "good enough" is never actually the goal. A life where diligence and careful attention to compassion and acts of mercy are the cost of this discipleship. A world where we'll go to extremes to make sure God's Kingdom is established.

² "Polio Eradication" Wikipedia, 14 February 2020.

Now, let's just get clear on a couple of misconceptions before I wrap this up. First of all, I am not saying that Jesus requires our action as a test of discipleship, or that we can earn our way into God's kingdom with good actions, or that (trademark) Protestant Work Ethic is Jesus' main message. None of these things is true. What I think Jesus is getting at is simply the fact that "bare minimum" isn't commitment.

If we really believe what he's saying, it's a joy to follow. If we really do believe that murder goes against God's intention for humankind, then we should be as concerned about the roots of violence, our thoughts and words, as much as we are with the act of violence itself. We inoculate polio, not by waiting until 5,000 kids are infecting, but by springing into action the moment a single case is detected. You go to the root, and you tirelessly work to protect the whole.

This isn't about brute force or all our good work, it's about seeking out root causes and being committed enough to God's work in this world, that we'll do the hard, deep work, not just the easy, avoid murder stuff at the top. To be a believer means to go deeper, do the more demanding and countercultural work. And we won't do it perfectly, obviously. Jesus knows we're not actually going to cut off a hand or pluck out an eyeball. He's not asking for personal piety and a holier than thou attitude. What he's asking for is, in a sense, a radical campaign to inoculate our communities against violence and hatred and hurt.

It's a campaign that demands each one of us not take a simple slurp of Jonas Salk's miraculous vaccine, but that we honestly assess the words, the motivations, the cultural norms, the beliefs, and the actions of ourselves and our communities, in order to root out the illnesses of violence and objectification and hatred at their deepest levels. And while we will never, in this way, reach 100% eradication of hate, we can be diligent and persevere in the work, knowing that each time we raise a child in the way of love, we are bringing about God's reign a little bit more.