If I have ever preached a sermon on this portion of Matthew 5, in all my years of ministry, I have no record or memory of it. Now, that could mean one of two things. It could mean that traditionally this is the week when I take a winter vacation. But more than likely, I think it means I’ve dodged the issues this text addresses. And after hearing me read this text, maybe you wish I were on vacation right now.

We’re fine with the earlier parts of this ongoing series of teachings in Matthew which some refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. You know, the “Blessed are the meek and the merciful” parts. Who could possibly find any fault with the Prince of Peace pronouncing a blessing on the peacemakers of this world? But get down into people’s marriages and their extra marital affairs—telling people how to live and now Jesus seems to be meddling.

So what exactly is happening here? Many scholars make the case that Matthew’s gospel is presenting Jesus as the next Moses, giving a new law for the new covenant. And on one level it is tempting to believe that a complete sweeping away of the law would make everyone breathe a little easier. Make life less complicated and burdensome. Free us from guilt and a sense of not measuring up. But that’s not at all what’s happening here.

Not included in today’s text but appearing just a few verses earlier is the disclosure of what Jesus is up to. Jesus explains, “Do not think I have come to abolish the law…I have not come to abolish it but to fulfill it.” In other words, I have come literally to perfect it or complete it.

It is, after all, something with which the early church struggled as it sought to establish and define itself. What was the role of the law? As the Christian movement spread and attracted converts, it raised the issue of adherence to the law. To how much of the law were Jews bound given that the Gentiles converts received some exemptions? Circumcision, for example. So if Gentiles didn’t have to become Jews in order to become Christians, then what was required of anyone?

And Jesus seemed to intuitively know that the law, when left to itself, could sometimes be cold-hearted. It could be indifferent. And in the worst case scenarios, adhering strictly to the letter of the law can actually harm people.

Surely that is not a shocking or radical statement?

We can all think of examples of business being conducted that is completely legal but that exploits the poor and does harm to the environment. Nations may legally sanction other nations crippling economies and compromising the lives of people already on the margins. But when that happens somehow everyone is left diminished along the way.

And in both secular and religious instances we know how the law can be used as a weapon, manipulating those who dwell under its authority. And when that happens, when the law is used in that way, it becomes a convenient callous crutch to justify an empty justice.

*Hey, I didn’t make the law I’m just here to enforce it.*
Don’t talk to me talk to my lawyer.

I hear what you’re saying and I’m sorry. It’s not fair and it is not right. But it is the law.

Thank God California has lessened its infamous “three strikes” sentencing laws, which sounded at the time to be reasonable and fair in dealing with persistent crime. The law, established in the 1990s, however, proved only to be effective in swelling prison populations while doing very little to deter crime or rehabilitate offenders.

Take the case of 55 year old Dale Curtis Gaines who suffers from severe mental illness and who has never committed a violent crime. Under California law at the time, Mr. Gaines was serving a life sentence for receiving stolen property. His first two strikes were a pair of unarmed burglaries of empty houses in which he came away with little more than pocket change. (See The New York Times, 11-22-12)

Surely we can do better as a society than being bound by the letter of the law.

So recognizing the inherent problems in a strict adherence to the letter of the law approach, Jesus began preaching the need to move beyond that and to embrace more fully the spirit of the law. To move it away from being strictly a matter of the mind to matters of the heart. You have heard it said….but I say to you.

But before we continue further, it must be acknowledged that an eye of an eye was a vast improvement in its day. It was the formalizing of a system of justice in which reasonable fairness was introduced. In other words, if my ox accidentally gored your ox to death, you have a right to take my ox. You don’t have a right to take my life. The punishment must fit the crime.

And it wasn’t that having a sense of the spirit of the law didn’t exist until Jesus started preaching about it. Way back in the day the prophet Jeremiah said,

The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel…I will put the law within them and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people (33:31-33).

I want the law written on their hearts. So when Jesus declares, “You have heard it said…but I say to you,” Jesus is setting a new standard—a new ethic for a new day—a fulfillment or completion of the law. And in so doing, he’s going the extra mile and taking the law beyond where it had been left.

Not only was Jesus upholding the law, he was also upholding the dignity and worth of humanity calling us to do better by each other than merely that which is required. To do more than the bare minimum. To move beyond what is and into that which could be. Jesus introduced a newer, higher and more holistic standard for humanity.

So even if you haven’t actually committed the physical act of adultery, if you are thinking about it, if you are tempted to do it and find yourself flirting around the deceptive edges of it, Jesus says that’s as bad as actually doing it.

In other words, the mere temptation indicates that you have issues in your marriage and in your relationship and you shouldn’t cheapens yourself or the one you love by engaging in lies and deception and behavior that reduces your value as a person and theirs. It’s about more than just the act. It’s about what kind of person you are and what your behavior reveals about your understanding of basic human dignity.

It isn’t enough by a long shot simply not to commit murder. Rather we must do everything we can to prevent the vitality and dignity and the lives of others from being destroyed. If we really value and respect the dignity
and self-worth of each individual, as a loved, child of God, then we also will not engage in insults and gossip about them, or other forms of putdowns that would indicate otherwise.

You cannot claim to value humanity if some within the human family are treated as property, which was exactly how women were treated in the first century when it came to divorce. They simply had no say in it, no rights and no recourse. They were victims.

And then finally it comes to this,

> You have heard it said an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, ‘Do not resist the evil doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give them your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you.’

You have heard it said... *but I say to you.*

And so as part of this Sermon the Mount, Jesus spelled out a new ethic for a new day that calls on us to go beyond what is merely required of us. To go instead the second mile.

The great symbol of justice for our legal system is captured in the representation of Lady Justice, which dates back to ancient Egypt. In one hand she holds a sword representing the power of reason. In the other hand she holds a scale on which she will weigh the strength of the case and the opposition.

But the telling symbol is that she is wearing a blindfold. “Blind” justice is meant to indicate that the law is unaware of distinguishing characteristics such as status or fame, implying that everyone is treated equally under the law.

But a system of justice that is truly blind and functions purely in that way will always lean toward carrying out the letter of the law and will be incapable of reflecting the heart of the law. It will be very difficult for creativity, boldness and dare I say, basic humanity to be recognized under such a system.

In fulfilling the law or completing it—in making it whole, Jesus was essentially saying that in a new world and under a new ethic, justice is not blind. Rather is sees right through the letter to the heart of the individual—right through to their humanity and their inherent self-worth and dignity as people. As children of God.

And it invites us all, when it comes to others and our treatment of them, to lead with our hearts instead of merely with our heads. It invites us to go the second mile if need be. And it invites us to discover that living according to such an ethic, allowing the law to be written on our hearts, will not be a burden at all but is something that actually gives us life.

Amen.