

“You Have Heard . . . But I Say”

Jesus’ Command to Love

by Margaret Nutting Ralph

During his Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:1—7:29), Jesus compares the Law that Moses promulgated (see Exodus, chapter 20) with Jesus’ own understanding of the Law. Jesus reminds the people of what they have heard: They must not kill (see Matthew 5:21). They must not commit adultery (see verse 27). They must not bear false witness (see verse 33). After each reminder Jesus continues with “But I say . . .” Jesus, of course, does not say that the people should discard the Ten Commandments. However, he does say that the Ten Commandments are not demanding enough. To refrain from evil actions is not all that disciples of Jesus Christ are required to do. We are required to love, even our enemies (see verses 43–44).

Jesus, the Teacher of the New Law

This is a difficult teaching. If we are required to love our enemies, we are required to love everyone, without exception. This teaching put Jesus in conflict with the religious leaders of his own time because to love everyone required that Jesus and his followers love people whom the Law directed them not to love but to marginalize. It also required Jesus, as a teacher, to challenge others to love rather than to be self-righteous, accusatory judges of the sins of others.

Jesus’ command to love without exception has been a challenge for every generation, including our own. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must ask ourselves what presumptions and beliefs cause us to exclude some people from Jesus’ command to love. We must also ask ourselves how, as high school religion teachers, we can, like Jesus, lovingly challenge others. To answer these questions, we will first examine several passages in which Jesus himself disobeyed the Law in order to love. We will then look at several passages in which Jesus challenged his contemporaries to overcome their presumptions and prejudices in order to become more loving of others.

Jesus Teaches through His Actions

In Jesus’ society some people were considered unclean (either permanently or for a certain time) and were therefore marginalized. To come into physical contact with an “unclean” person was to become ritually unclean oneself. Among the people whom a law-abiding person would avoid were lepers, women during their menstrual periods, and Samaritans. Jesus had certainly heard the Law. Despite this, Jesus went out of his way to welcome the unclean.

For instance, early in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is approached by a leper (see 1:40–45). According to the Law, this leper should not have joined the crowd or approached Jesus at all. He should have remained at a distance and called out, “Unclean, unclean!” (Leviticus 13:45) so that others could avoid him. When the leper kneels before Jesus, he expresses deep faith in Jesus’ healing power, saying, “If you wish, you can make me clean” (Mark 1:40). How should Jesus, a faithful Jew, respond? Should Jesus reprimand the man and tell him to call from a distance? After all, Jesus does not have to be in physical proximity to a person to heal that person (see John 4:46–54). Far from correcting him, Jesus is



"moved with pity" (Mark 1:41) and stretches out his hand and touches the leper. He touches the leper! Jesus then directs the man to obey the Law. He is to "show [him]self to the priest, and offer for [his] cleansing what Moses prescribed" (verse 44).

A similar situation arises when a woman with a hemorrhage longs to be healed (see Mark 5:25–34). The fact that she is bleeding makes her unclean. No wonder she wants to touch Jesus' cloak anonymously—better that Jesus not know that she has touched him, thereby making him unclean too. However, when Jesus asks who touched him, she finally gets up the courage to tell Jesus the whole truth. Again Jesus does not correct the woman for disobeying the Law. He affirms her for her faith.

Over and over we see Jesus disobey the Law or the norms of his society in order to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God. He responds to the request of the Syrophenician woman, even though she is a Gentile (see Mark 7:24–30). He goes out of his way to talk to the woman at the well, even though she is a Samaritan, unclean from a Jewish perspective, and a public sinner besides (see John 4:1–30). The very people a law-abiding person could, in good conscience, avoid, are the very people that Jesus accepts, affirms, seeks out, and loves. We are called to do the same.

Jesus Teaches through His Words

Jesus is often teaching a resistant audience. People who were religious leaders, such as the scribes and Pharisees, were often among Jesus' antagonists. The Pharisees valued both the Law inherited from Moses and the application of that Law to contemporary circumstances as taught by the scribes. They believed they knew what was right and did what was right. For some Pharisees this unmitigated belief in their own goodness resulted in a self-righteous and judgmental attitude that got in the way of their loving other sinners. Jesus often corrected the Pharisees by telling them parables.

Telling parables is a wonderful way to teach a resistant audience. As the story begins, those in the audience do not realize that, in a way, the story is about them. So they lower their defenses, pass judgment on the characters in the story, and realize only in hindsight that in doing so they have passed judgment on themselves. An example of Jesus' using this teaching device is when he tells the Parable of the Prodigal Son (see Luke 15:11–32) to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling because Jesus "welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

As the Pharisees and scribes listen to Jesus' parable, they do not at all identify with the younger brother. The younger brother is an obvious sinner, just like the tax collectors and sinners to whom Jesus is so welcoming. The Pharisees and scribes identify with the older brother. In their own eyes, they have never disobeyed a command. They have been good, obedient sons. Like the older brother, they are quick to judge and to reject other people. In other words, they recognize the sins of others but not their own.

A second example of Jesus' using a parable to teach a resistant audience that the command to love supersedes strict observance of the Law is Jesus' response to a lawyer who is trying to test Jesus. The lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. The lawyer knows the Law. He proves this by quoting both Deuteronomy and Leviticus when he answers his own question. The Law teaches that one must "love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The lawyer looks foolish now that he has answered his own question, so, in order to justify himself, he asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). In response, Jesus tells the lawyer the Parable of the Good Samaritan (see verses 30–35). As the lawyer listens to the story, he is able to see a neighbor in all of the characters but one. The man in the ditch, the priest, the Levite, and the innkeeper could all be neighbors. The one person whom the lawyer, with a completely clear conscience, cannot consider a



neighbor is the Samaritan. Samaritans were considered unclean. The Law did not require the lawyer to love a Samaritan.

To make his point clear, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?" (Luke 10:36). The lawyer can't bring himself to say, "the Samaritan"; rather, he says, "The one who treated him with mercy" (verse 37). In this parable the Samaritan—the outcast—has done the right thing, the merciful thing, the neighborly thing! Through the parable Jesus teaches the resistant lawyer that he is to "go and do likewise" (verse 37), to show mercy to all—even if the one who needs mercy is a Samaritan.

Jesus, the Teacher of Teachers

We too are to "go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). We are to recognize today's "unclean," those whom the accepted norms of society or our own sense of self-righteousness allow us, contrary to Jesus' command, to exclude from our love. We must help our students do the same. Because Scripture is the living Word, Jesus is saying, "You have heard . . . but I say" to us too. Like Jesus we are called to teach Jesus' Law of Love in both our words and our actions.

One way to highlight Jesus' teaching is to ask the students to write their own parables. First ask them to describe the person asking the question, Who is my neighbor? Then instruct them to have Jesus tell that person a story that challenges that person's assumptions. (Before the students begin writing, make clear whether the essays will be read aloud.)

For a more personal exercise, you could ask the students: Who is a Samaritan in your life? Who do you find difficult to love as Jesus asks us to do? What story would Jesus tell *you* about yourself and that person? (Of course, these essays would not be read aloud but would be for personal reflection only. Make this clear to the students before they begin.)

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