

Based on Matthew 5:21-26, 33-37  
*Sixth Sunday After Epiphany*

*Jesus said, "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. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

*"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, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."*

The world is a complicated place sometimes and it bombards our brains with more stimulus than we can reasonably manage, so we have developed the ability to tune out much of it so that we can focus on only the most important things. We have, mostly unconsciously, developed rules that help our brains make sense of the world.

But besides those unconscious rules that govern our senses, humans also make rules to help us to live together and be successful. We have social rules, which we sometimes call etiquette, but we also have rules about who we can be in relationships with, like you can't marry a sibling.

And as our societies have gotten more complex, and our technologies more dangerous we have developed ever more complex rules to govern them. For example, the rules of the road developed after cars were invented because the harm potential of a car or truck is exponentially greater than a horse and buggy. Look at an old photo or painting of a city street before the widespread adoption of cars and you'll see people and horses and wagons all mixed together and going in all sorts of directions. We don't do that anymore because, with cars, it's just too dangerous.

So rules are often very helpful, they can keep us safe, and help us to thrive and the desire for them is seemingly hardwired into us.

The rules that God gave to Israel are mostly pretty good rules. Don't murder, don't steal, don't lie... all good. Maybe the ones about not eating cheeseburgers or wearing cotton-poly blends not so much, but overall, God's rules, the Mosaic Law, were offered to us to help us thrive.

But sometimes the rules become a crutch and we become rigid about them without thinking through how, sometimes, they allow us to become disengaged from or callous towards others. And sometimes they become a club we use to hurt others, often while exempting ourselves from the same rule. Anyone who's ever sped up when the light turns yellow but complains about others running red lights is guilty of this.

So Jesus, while acknowledging that the rules God gave us are good, also wants us to address these instances where the rules work to bring about not human thriving, but human suffering. What Jesus offers us is filter to see the world anew, an invitation to ask before following a rule – is this the most loving response possible to this situation? Jesus asks us to consider the implications of our rule following and then demands that if the answer to this question is no, then to overlook the rule and respond instead with love.

As Jesus shows here, rote compliance is not God's wish for us. As Jesus says elsewhere, the Law was made for humans, not humans for the Law. The rules, the Law is offered as a gift to guide us toward human thriving, but when we misuse the law, or fail to go beyond the bare minimum that it requires, we miss out on opportunities to build real relationship and real community that lifts us all up.