

August 14, 2022

11. Building a Fence Around Violence — Matthew 5:9, 38–48, NRSV

The title of this session may be misleading if it seems to suggest that what we need are more rules to keep us on the straight and narrow. The scribes and Pharisees had constructed a “hedge” around the Mosaic Law, adding more than eight hundred additional rules to keep the faithful at a distance from major violations. So if, in our text, Jesus is only saying, “Thou shalt not get angry,” “Thou shalt not look at a woman lustfully,” “Thou shalt not get a divorce,” “Thou shalt not swear an oath,” and “Thou shalt not resist one who is evil,” is this very helpful?

Perhaps Jesus’ conversation with a wealthy man clarifies the situation (Mark 10:17–22). The man was a well-meaning person who had done his best to keep the commandments. He wanted to be assured that what he was doing was good enough to get into heaven. But Jesus challenged him to give up his possessions and follow Jesus. The man went away sorrowfully.

Because of their high social standing, becoming a scribe or Pharisee in the time of Jesus had considerable inducements. A proverb preserved in the Talmud lists seven kinds of Pharisees. Only one kind became Pharisees because of their fear and love of God. Another kind were the “oh, my poor head” Pharisees, who walked along the public streets with their heads down so as not to look by accident on any woman, and who were liable to bump into walls. Jesus is scornful of religious teachers whose efforts to appear more righteous than others were acts of attention-seeking.

Today, we have many vehement political and ideological leaders who are determined (mostly by severe criticism and personal abuse) to set down patterns for society. The list of what ordinary citizens are not allowed to do becomes longer almost daily. For example, in Canada, parents are not allowed to influence the sexual orientation their children may express. Some rules, like this one, are very specific, while others tend to suggest appropriate behaviors in all kinds of situations.

What Jesus seems to be saying here is that mere keeping of formal rules is not enough (Matthew 5:20). Jesus is giving examples of what it really might mean to keep one of the commandments. Most of the traditional commandments are of the “thou shalt not” variety. But what would it really mean to love God and your neighbor?

- What is the value of having rules for society and in our Christian lives? What are some of the uses of rules and some of the limitations?
- Would you say that in these passages Jesus is giving illustrations or commandments? Might there ever be a benign occasion to address someone as “you fool”?

- What kinds of rules do you find are most insisted upon in your social circle, community, or congregation? How do they compare to Jesus' teaching in this passage?

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Resources for this session

URLs in the leader guide

A reader's theater and additional commentary on Matthew 5 are available at www.MennoMedia.org/Salt-Light-Supplements/

Salt & Light Videos are great for leader preparation or introducing each weekly session. **Elizabeth Soto Albrecht** and **Dave Elkins** are the presenters for unit 3. The videos are closed captioned, free, and available on [MennoMedia's YouTube channel](#).