

Jesus said: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** (Matthew 5:17) The Book endures, because the Author of the Book endures.

The next time you are driving 75 miles an hour on I-95, you may faintly remember the Delaware Law Code or vaguely notice its roadside summary that says the speed limit is 55 miles an hour. Neither the code nor the road sign slows you down. But let one State Police car mingle into that Interstate madness, and momentary sanity returns to the hurtling traffic. The Code of Law endures, because the officer of the law makes it real and personal. The Book endures, because the Author of the Book endures and makes it real and personal.

Here is another way to think about the same thing. The Sermon on the Mount is the Author of the play stepping on stage in the middle of Act III to correct the actors, who have misunderstood the intentions of the Author and are getting their lines wrong. His words to them are full of compassion, but they are hard. Today, we receive His words about the drama He envisioned. He makes it real and personal.

### The Centrality of Scripture

It gladdens the heart of every Evangelical that the Author’s words are firmly rooted in the wisdom of God that comes to us in the Bible. Jesus said, **“I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”** (Matthew 5:17-18) Jesus said, **“Whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:19)

The Ten Commandments are not the Ten Suggestions. What is at stake here is who is telling us the truth about life. For example: “The fool is disturbed not when they tell him that his ideas are false, but when they suggest that they have gone out of style.” (Nicolás Gómez Avila, quoted in *First Things*, “The Back Page, Matthew Schmitz, August/September, 2014, 71) Is it possible that you support gay marriage, because that’s all you see on TV and all you hear in your school? Listen: The Church “is the only thing that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age.” (G. K. Chesterton, <http://www.chesterton.org/why-i-am-a-catholic/>) It gladdens the heart of every Evangelical that Jesus’ words are firmly rooted in the wisdom of God that comes down to us in the Bible.

It is also the wisdom of God that challenges everything we thought we knew about ourselves. Jesus said, **“Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.”** Jesus said, **“I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** (Matthew 5:19-20) If you are no better than your pastors, you are in trouble. Jesus drives that point home in a way that challenges everything we thought we knew about ourselves.

### The Turn Inward

Before we see how He does it, don’t miss the towering authority with which He does it. Jesus said, **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder’ ... But I tell you ...”** (Matthew 5:21, 22) Moses may have said, **“Do not murder,”** but a greater than Moses is here. Moses’ interpreters from that day to this may have said,

**“Do not murder,”** but a greater than Moses’ interpreters is here. God may have said on Mount Sinai, **“Do not murder,”** but in the Sermon on the Mount God is speaking once again. We are on holy ground.

We don’t have to listen long before we realize how intense Jesus is about righteousness. **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘You hockey puck!’ is answerable to the courts. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”** (Matthew 5:21-22)

His words hit men especially hard. He says, **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”** (Matthew 5:27-28)

He says remarriage after divorce is usually adultery. He denounces oath-taking and oath-making in favor of a simple, truthful “Yes” or “No.” He tears our heart out when He says, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”** (Matthew 5:38-39) It is non-violence taken to insanity.

And when we think we can take no more, Jesus says, **“But I tell you: Love your enemies.”** However calm we seem when we hear that, our response within is visceral. “It’s just not possible to love your enemies. They hurt you. They hurt the people you love. They disrespect you, undercut you, and slander you. How can I love them? Why should I love them? I don’t want to love them. Jesus, what are you doing? That’s not the real world. It’s an impossible agenda. You are wasting our time and yours.”

### **An Interlude with Jesus**

I think Jesus might reply something like this: “I thought you said in your prayers, ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ Do you really want that? Do you think doing the will of God in heaven is the half-hearted thing it is on earth? Do you think citizens of heaven are trying to do the minimum? Do you think they are trying to do what is least inconvenient to them? Have you ever thought five straight minutes about what doing the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven might be like?

“I can help you get your heart around that. What seems unreal, impossible, and futile to you is my way of getting you accustomed to heaven on earth. I know it’s hard for you. I know you fail and feel bad and want to give up. But I don’t want you go through life thinking that not killing somebody or not committing adultery or texting \$10 to Haiti Earthquake Relief is doing the will of God on earth as it’s done in heaven. That barely reaches the bare minimums. I need to jar you, waken you, and rock your world.

“And the first thing I have to do is make you feel your moral poverty. You like to say, “I’m not saying I’m better than anybody else, but I’m not worse than anybody else either.” It’s the wrong yardstick. You think righteousness is keeping the rules, and you measure yourself by the next guy. The yardstick is God Himself. That’s what makes you say, ‘It’s impossible. That’s not the real world.’ That’s what makes you feel your moral poverty. I really want you to be righteous, and I want you see that righteousness is first of all a right relationship with me. I’m the one who is asking you to do the impossible. I want you to learn that you are never closer to me than when you try and fail and feel far

from me and regret it. I also want you to see that righteousness is having pure affection for every human being that comes across your path, the nice and the not so nice, your brother and your enemy. The Ten Commandments are not about keeping score. They are about people, who are made in the image of God for the purposes of God, and they can't get there if you mistreat them.

“That means taking to heart hard things like loving your enemy. Stop complaining how hard it is. Stop fretting about failing. Take your eyes off yourself. Listen again to what I just said with other people in mind. It's not about you. It's about the coming kingdom of God that you pray for, and which I am preparing you for here and now.”

### **The Turn Outward**

I feel joy in my heart when I represent Jesus to you like that. I hope you feel joy in your heart when you receive it. With that in mind, listen again as Jesus takes us inside the Commandments. He has radically reinterpreted respectable morality. The kingdom of heaven is not interested in minimums. The kingdom of heaven is not interested what is least inconvenient. The kingdom of heaven treats all people as sacred – worthy of great respect – because God made them for His purpose. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' vivid way of teaching us to love God and our neighbor.

**“You have heard that is was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.** “You have not murdered anyone. Well, bless your heart! You may go a lifetime without doing that. Now, look deeper! Pay attention to the anger in you. Pay attention to the invective with which you berate people. Do you realize that your anger and ridicule reduce the other person to a bull's-eye?” They kill friendships and destroy marriages and ruin churches and sometimes lead to murder. Is the public image you cultivate so carefully a shell? What's inside you? Do you really care about other people?

Listen to the completely unexpected course of action Jesus proposes. **“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”** (Matthew 5:23-24) “No, no! Jesus can't mean that. It's backwards. If I'm angry, it's because my brother has offended me. Why should I go to him and make things right? He needs to come to me and apologize.” You are right, of course, but Jesus' words ask something from us before we demand an apology.

Have you bothered to find out why your Christian brother or sister treated you the way they did? They might have a good reason. You'll never find out while you are red in the face and thinking violent thoughts. Anger is subject to God's judgment as surely as murder is subject to God's judgment, because both are sins against love for our neighbor.

Here's another example. Jesus said, **“You have heard that is was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”** (Matthew 5:27-28) “You have not committed adultery. Well, bless your heart! You may go a lifetime without doing that. Look deeper! Pay attention to the ways you feed your lust and excuse your lust and why you have given up trying to change. Do you realize that lust reduces the other person to a plaything?” Your lust can dull desire for your spouse, destroy

marriage, make women fearful, and sometimes lead to adultery. Is the public image you cultivate so carefully is a shell? What's inside? Do you really care about other people?

### Take Away

Jesus said over and over, **“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near.”** (Mark 1:15) In other words, watch Jesus, and you will see what God's authority looks like in human life. You will see God's priorities on display. As we learn from our Lord's call to righteousness, God will contradict human authority and human priorities.

Unlikely disciples become extravagant disciples as they allow themselves to be corrected by the Lord they follow. They learn sooner or later that His thoughts are not their thoughts, and His ways are not their ways. They learn sooner or later that they are doing Him no favors by following Him. Jesus is pouring out the new wine of heaven on earth. It remains to be seen, if disciples then and disciples now are wineskins that can stretch and not split under the pressure of His expanding presence in their experience.

The One who is intense about righteousness is here with us by means of the Gospel of Matthew. We hold in our hands the revelation of Him who said to then and He says now, “Watch me, and you will see what God is like. God is with you. Don't miss Him!” We won't miss Him, if we keep in step with the Holy Spirit. We keep in step with the Spirit, when we obey our Lord's radical call to follow Him. There are many ways to do this. Let's talk about one of them that is urgent for BVBC.

What I have shared with you today calls for repentance. May I share with you briefly how repentance is working in my experience? The Sermon on the Mount has hit me harder than anything in the Bible has hit me in decades. It's not just that I fell short when measured by God Himself. It's that the righteousness Jesus commanded us to seek did not have my serious attention. I don't know if I didn't see it or didn't pay attention to what I saw. In either case, the Sermon on the Mount stopped me cold. It said, “You are going the wrong way. You are going away from me. Change course!” And that's what I've done. At least, that is what I've begun to do.

Sorrow has risen within my heart. I regret that I have been for so long so cavalier about the righteousness Jesus is so intense about. It makes me sad that I have not been a better example for you by how I lived and how I taught the righteousness of God.

That is why it is likely that what I have shared with you today calls for repentance on your part as well, if we are to keep in step with the Spirit at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. If the Holy Spirit has opened your heart to this call to repentance, would you pay attention to it this week and in the weeks to come?

I am not asking for, and I do not expect anything spectacular or ostentatious. If enough of us hear the Spirit's call to repent and heed the Spirit's call to repent, then I believe that God will be freer to move among us and shape Christ in the soul of this congregation.