

“Reforming”

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Matthew 5:17-26*

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A young man named John received a parrot as a gift. Originally the parrot was wonderful. But the parrot adopted a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of the bird's mouth was rude, obnoxious, and laced with profanity. John tried and tried to change the bird's attitude by consistently saying only polite words, playing soft music and anything else he could think of to "clean up" the bird's vocabulary.

Finally, John was fed up and he yelled at the parrot. The parrot yelled back. John shook the parrot and the parrot got angrier and even ruder. John, in desperation, threw up his hands, grabbed the bird and put him in the freezer. For a few minutes, the parrot squawked and kicked and screamed.

Then suddenly, there was total quiet. Not a peep was heard for over a minute.

Fearing that he'd killed the parrot, John quickly opened the door to the freezer. The parrot calmly stepped out onto John's outstretched arm and said, "I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and actions. I am sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude and unforgivable behavior. I have reformed!"

John was stunned at the change in the bird's attitude. As he was about to ask what had made such a dramatic change in his behavior, the bird continued. "May I ask what the turkey did?"

The parrot, of his own free will (sort of) reformed! He became a parrot of virtue and integrity: or something like that!

Over these past several weeks, I have at times shared thoughts and ideas from chapter 5, of Matthew's Gospel. This chapter is the beginning of an extended sermon – teaching of Jesus, up in the Galilean Hills, a more beautiful spot in the world would be difficult to find.

Too often the intricacies, and literary depth of our Bible are neglected, if not outright ignored or rejected; this in addition to the spiritual and timeless truths therein.

This text is so wondrously woven together! An amazing grasp of human nature, human history and human experience is enfolded in these opening sentences of Jesus' teaching.

As dispossessed people, the Jews are living in their own country, Israel/Judea – and yet they are not in control – politically of their land. The latest interlopers are the Romans. All things considered, the Romans weren't all that bad – considering some of the other despots of earlier times. Nevertheless – the Jews were not free – and everybody knew it!

Jesus has captured their attention, not by making an argument for his people to buy into the Roman culture – Hellenism – being imported in, and at the very least – indirectly being pushed on them. Nor does Jesus speak as a member of the radical “Sicarii” group, of Jewish assassins committed to ridding

Judea of the Romans, through targeted assassinations. No, Jesus leads them into and through their meaningful and captivating religious/cultural way of life. In their political powerlessness, and in defiance of the Roman way of life, Jesus declares blessings, ways of possessing their lives as individuals, families, and a people by continuously embracing their tradition and the God of that tradition!

And then he seems to change course, but actually is building, rebuilding the great edifice of this Way of Life through the Torah, Law, teachings of Yahweh, through the prophets of old.

Apparently, Jesus' reputation had preceded him, and not all was true – there was some "Fake news" moving through the Judean villages and cities. So, he declares to them – "Hey, I am one of you. I know my pedigree, I was brought up on our law and our prophets!" (I'm paraphrasing). "In no way, shape or form am I trying to do away with them! In fact, I want to further them – what with the way we are living today, under a foreign ruler." "There are laws, rules, commandments that can never be changed, rejected and ignored! Never!!"

Jesus says this is not negotiable – some things never change!

And then what does Jesus say? "You have heard (been taught) 'Do not kill, and if you do you are on your way to hell!' "But, do you know what – if you are angry with your brother, you are a step closer to judgement. Call someone a 'fool' and that paved road to hell awaits." Jesus continues, "You have been taught this, but I say this."

But, wait a minute, didn't he just say – no change in the law and prophets? Yes!

So, much more is going on here! Stability and Reform (change). But how much? Which? Why? How?

There's the rub.

Jesus carries this theme, using several examples of continuity and reforming. None of this is easy! It will never be – but it is necessary! But, what is not to change, and what should change?

A continuous struggle! With us today!

Of paramount importance is first knowing your tradition – "your law and the prophets"! You, we, need a marker – a beginning point. My fear, concern today is, we, Christians – nationwide, Western civilization wide – are almost totally lacking in a cultural/Christian social vocabulary.

It could be that some reforms are not reforms, but radically separate from the roots and branches of our historic culture.

I recently mentioned that this October we Protestants will be celebrating our 500th anniversary, when Martin Luther, not dreaming such would happen – set aflame the Reformation!

Thank God, we have come a long way, and our sisters and brothers of Roman Catholicism are actually going to commemorate this epic event.

During the fall, we will remember this world history changing European event, and consider its importance for our lives today.

Over the next several months, I hope to steer your attention to some of the historic figures and developments which basically are traced back to the 16th century Europe, and into America.

Many of you know that I have the privilege and joy of having lunch on a monthly basis with a Monsignor, a Priest, two Rabbis and a Muslim. Not too many years ago, and in fact in some areas even today – this type of gathering would never take place. (It could even be dangerous)

Now, within Judeo/Christian history – let's consider, borrowing the phrase of Jesus from Matthew 5: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, you shall not sit down with anyone, except those who follow after our way of belief..."

- Early Protestant Jesus: "You shall not sit down with those Papists – those Roman Catholics!"
- Early Catholic Jesus: "You shall not sit down with those unredeemed, anarchists – Protestants..."
- Even Martin Luther (who was angry with other Protestants in viewing the Lord's Supper), declared – he would never sit down with those other Protestants who disagreed with him!
- Early Catholic and Protestant Jesus: despising the Jews for millennia "You shall never commune with them! Convert them, exile them, and worse..."
- To be fair – Jews would have normally been fearful of getting to close to Christians...
- Islam is certainly a mix – from radical to moderate to modern, fear, misunderstanding and harm have and do block sitting together.
- The history of hatred and mistrust between Catholic and Protestants has greatly abated – thank God!
- The history of hatred and harm to Jews throughout Christian times – is vile and deplorable! Anti-Semitism is a cancer that mutates from era to era and must be despised and strongly fought - even today!

So here we are. My sense is that (as but a snap-shot of today's reality) as I so thankfully sit with my friends – Catholics, Jews, Muslim – (Vince, Eric, Larry, Roger and Mahmoud) the non-changing verities of the "Law and Prophets" are present. As we discuss our traditions, our similarities and differences, our concerns for increased understanding, and the need to stand firm to protect the children of God in all of their expressions – all of our faith traditions (in whatever form needed to be expressed, whether thru Bible verses, Old or New Testaments, or Suras of the Koran), must embrace reforms while holding faithfully to the "Law and the Prophets" as Jesus correctly intuited and knew.

None of this is a piece of cake!

Get to know Matthew 5, something must never change! But, there are times that need "a changin" to quote theologian/Nobel prize winner and sometimes writer of songs – Bob Dylan.

The task is with us today! More than many know!

Remember: "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden under foot by men."

Salt was and is a preservative! We have much worthy of preserving! May Jesus' latter phrase not be our epitaph.

Reforming – with a solid foundation!

Amen.