



**“The Spirit of the Law”**

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Matt. 5:21–37(NRSV)***

Does today's gospel lesson ring a bell for you? Do you remember these words of Jesus? Maybe. Maybe not.

I bet Jimmy Carter remembers them. I bet Jimmy Carter remembers them, not only because he is a devout Christian and a highly sought-after Bible study teacher, but because he referenced today's passage in his November 1976 interview with *Playboy* magazine.

For those who are too young to remember the *Playboy* interview, or weren't paying attention to politics back then, I'll explain that in November 1976, Bay Area reporter Ken Hawkins was asked to cover the Carter campaign and do a piece for *Playboy* on the Democratic nominee that would reveal his true character, particularly for those who found his political agenda “fuzzy” and for those who were concerned about how Carter's Southern Baptist affiliation might affect his potential presidency.

At the conclusion of the interview, Hawkins asked Carter, “Do you feel you've reassured people with this interview, people who are uneasy about your religious beliefs, who wonder if you're going to make a rigid, unbending President?”

Governor Carter offered a lengthy response that ended with these remarks:

...I'm just human and I'm tempted and Christ set some almost impossible standards for us. The Bible says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Christ said, I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery. I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times.... This is something that God recognizes, that I will do and have done, and God forgives me for it. But that doesn't mean that I condemn someone who not only looks on a woman with lust but who leaves his wife and shacks up with somebody out of wedlock. Christ says, don't consider yourself better than someone else because one guy [is involved with] a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife. The guy who's loyal to his

wife ought not to be condescending or proud because of the relative degree of sinfulness.<sup>1</sup>

## II

I still remember the fuss that Carter's infamous *Playboy* interview caused in my hometown. I doubt that Carter's willingness to be interviewed by *Playboy* won him many votes in Iowa in 1976, but now that I'm old enough to understand what the President was talking about and have had the benefit of theological education, I appreciate not only the risk that Carter took in accepting the *Playboy* interview, but also the profound statement that he made about pride and humility, and the meaning of Christ's teaching about lust and adultery, when he responded to the reporter's question about how his faith values would affect his potential presidency.

Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, and his mother, Lillian Carter, stepped out and supported his statement in *Playboy*. Powell underscored Carter's points about pride and humility, and Miss Lillian echoed the Amen's of prominent preachers who had phoned her directly and affirmed her son's exegesis of Matthew 5.

My home pastor, the Rev. John Syster, wasn't one of those preachers who phoned Miss Lillian, but he did address Mr. Carter's *Playboy* interview from the pulpit. It was a memorable occasion.

Imagine—the pastor of big church in a small town in Iowa quoting an article in *Playboy* magazine from the pulpit. No pastor I had ever known before would admit to owning a *Playboy* magazine, much less quote an article from the periodical from the pulpit. My hometown and my home church were never quite the same again.

I was thirteen years old in the fall of 1976. I still remember sitting in the pew, listening to Pastor John defending Jimmy Carter—not simply because John was a card-carrying Democrat, but because John said that most people were missing the point that the Governor and Jesus were trying to make.

Their point was that all of us make mistakes, all of us need forgiveness, all of us must amend our lives, and all of us require God's grace. In other words, the Christian life was not about rigidly applying rules, and making judgments about others. The Christian life was about humility, accepting God's grace, and extending it to others. Sadly, these points were lost on most people—most especially the Pharisees and their modern day equivalents.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/history/faculty/troyweb/courseweb/jimmycartertheplayboyinterview.htm>

### III

The Pharisees were legalists. They not only strove to live literally by the ancient laws, they harangued others to do the same, and they thought more highly of themselves than others for having done so.

In today's passage and several other places in the gospels, Jesus strives to point the Pharisees—and ultimately all of us—to a life beyond legalism—by showing them the futility of such pursuits—and imploring them to lead lives that reflect the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

In Matthew 5:21–37 Jesus offered five examples—dealing with four topics—that reflect what it would look like to live by the spirit of the law as opposed to living by the letter of the law. Here Jesus covers the situations of anger between two individuals, adultery, divorce, and the taking of oaths. In order to clarify the meaning of what Jesus is saying, I'll summarize and paraphrase today's passage.

In the first illustration, Jesus said, don't be content simply because you have not committed murder. If you are angry with someone or you have insulted another, take steps immediately to resolve your grievances. Do not allow resentments to build. Anger will merely destroy both of you, and your relationship with each other.

Likewise if a neighbor has a complaint against you, leave your offering at the altar and make amends immediately. Avoid litigation. Make amends quickly. Or, as my mother would say when my sister and I got in a fight, "I don't care who started it; I want to know who's going to end it."

Third, Jesus says, don't think more highly of yourself because you are not an adulterer, because everyone is guilty of lust and everyone is in need of forgiveness and grace.

Regarding divorce, Jesus seemed opposed to it except in extreme circumstances. This teaching is difficult for many modern people given that half of all marriages today end in divorce. But before anyone darts for the door, let me say that in Jesus' time opposing divorce was actually a progressive idea, maybe even a proto-feminist approach. You see, women did not have any independent status or personal economic resources in first century Palestine, and their economic well-being was almost entirely dependent upon their association with their father as children, and their husbands as adults. If a man divorced his wife in first century Palestine, she could not remarry or return to her father's household, or earn her keep through any respectable means, so a husband who divorced his wife essentially abandoned her to a life of abject poverty.

In his last point on the law in today's pericope, Jesus commented on the significance of covenants and oath taking. Here Jesus urged his followers to lead a life of Christian integrity. By this he meant that if you make a promise, by all means fulfill it. Let your oath be your bond. Let your words and your deeds be synonymous.

So we see, Jesus did not abandon the law, nor did he promote legalism. Instead, he interpreted the law in a way that enriched its meaning, breathed life into it, and helped his followers better understand how adhering to the spirit of the law would promote a healthier, more grace-filled world.

#### IV

Studies have shown that except for the extreme left and right in our society—legalism has fallen out of fashion in American culture, particularly among Baby Boomers and the younger generations. I don't regret this loss at all, but I do regret that we have nearly lost Christ's vision of a world beyond legalism—a world that reflects the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

What would our world be like if it were based on the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law?

Since the laws that Jesus discussed in today's gospel have something to do with family life, I'll offer some domestic examples that illustrate what it would be like to live by the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law.

Let's start with family conflict. Jesus' taught that we should resolve conflict at the lowest level, rather than allow it to escalate. I remember hearing a couple who had been married 75 years expounding on the importance of solving conflict early on. When asked about the success of their marriage, they explained that they never let the sun go down on their anger with each other. They got to the bottom of grievances right away, and kept disagreements from festering. In this way they adhered to the spirit of the law that Jesus talked about, not simply the letter of the law.

Another way to adhere to the spirit of the law is to be the person who takes more responsibility for settling a dispute. Often disputes fester because each person in a dispute expects the other to meet them "halfway," and each is sure that they are doing more than their part. Do more than your part, Jesus says. Or as my mother said, time and again to my sister and me, "I don't care who started this fight; I want to know who is going to end it."

Taking responsibility for our own behavior goes a long way in helping us to live by the spirit of the law rather than just the letter of the law. One way of taking healthy responsibility for our own behavior is to pay attention to very human feelings that we may be ashamed of, such as lust. Rather than denying these feelings, we can acknowledge them and discern what they may be telling us about ourselves and our primary relationship. For example, these feelings may be telling us that our primary relationship needs some work, as opposed to these feelings being a sign of immorality or a license to act on those attractions.

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, relationships come unraveled, and we find ourselves headed into a divorce. In these sorts of times, there are still ways of adhering to the spirit of the law that can be helpful. For example, I often recommend that couples who are divorcing pursue couples counseling, even when both parties are sure that the marriage has ended. The

reason for pursuing counseling even when the marriage has ended is so that couples can have “a good finish.” Counseling at this juncture can be a place where couples celebrate the good things about their marriage, acknowledge their mistakes, mourn the loss of their relationship and of dreams that haven’t been fulfilled, develop parenting strategies for the future that are in the best interest of their children, and be better prepared to forge new relationships from a healthier base.

Lastly, Jesus speaks about the importance of integrity in today’s pericope. Here he says, don’t just give an oath (or make a promise), keep it. Make sure that your words and deeds are synonymous. Let your word be your bond. Do what you say, and say what you do. In the context of family life, the thought occurs to me that children are particularly effective at helping adults adhere to the spirit of this law. Think, for example, how you have heard these words, “But Mommy, you said...” or “Daddy, you said...” And we know that we’re “busted,” and we have to align our words with our deeds.

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So there you have it—a few examples from family life that illustrate what Jesus meant by living by the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law, for our time. God grant us the wisdom and courage to discern what steps to take, even today, that would help us fulfill the spirit of the law in our homes, so that we, in turn, might be able to replicate this spirit and these practices in our common life as a church and community. Amen.