

“BUT”

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Matthew 5:21-37

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 22 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. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 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. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

33 “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.’ 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37 Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Remember last week’s scripture and the message in which Jesus was giving his sermon on the mount and he, a Jew speaking to Jews, reminded them that he wasn’t trying to abolish the law or the prophets. His purpose was to fulfill the law. And so we come to the continuation of Jesus’ sermon...

- You have heard it said... BUT I tell you –You have heard it said... BUT I tell you
- What do we do with “the law” of which Jesus speaks?
- BUT
 - Have you heard about the dangers surrounding the use of the word, “BUT?” It goes like this... “Using the word ‘but’ negates everything that came before it.”
 - “You’re a great guy, but I’m just not that into you”
 - Character Ned Stark (Game of Thrones S1E3) quote “Nothing someone says before the word ‘but’ really counts”? (so just leave it out)
 - “I’m just not that into you!”

- Some interpret “the BUT” as the introduction of the nasty, hurtful, disappointing, or negative truth (the “Disqualifier) that’s going to follow. And anything that’s said before the word **but** is said ONLY to soften the blow.
 - “You have such a beautiful face, BUT you really shouldn’t cut your hair that way.”
- I think, based on my own life experiences, and you might agree, that there is some truth to this:
 - I was going to take the trash out, but...
 - I would like to meet for coffee, but...
 - I was going to do my homework, but...
 - But, what?
 - Just say, I didn’t do my homework OR
 - I had no intention of doing my homework because playing videogames is more fun.^{1 2}
- You have heard it said... BUT I tell you
- So --- When Jesus says, you have heard it said...
 - Is Jesus actually saying that everything before the “BUT” is to be negated or ignored? That it doesn’t really count?
 - “Jesus – you don’t NEED to say do not murder, just talk about not being angry with others.”
Really?
- But is a word that is far more complex. “[It’s] a conjunction used to introduce something **contrasting** with what has already been mentioned.” [Also used as a preposition, adverb and noun].
 - Understanding this definition of “but,” leads us to see that Jesus isn’t NEGATING the first part of the sentence **but** is offering a contrast. Consider part B in light of part A.
- So what is Jesus saying about “the law?”
 - Go deeper. Go broader. Go higher. Go within.
 - “The law” / “Laws” sound black and white, cut and dry, clear-cut, but in daily life – then and now - we learn that often they are not.
 - Jesus reminds us - teaches us - to not simply accept laws blindly, **but** to engage them critically. Think!
 - (Matt 5:43) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
 - Love neighbors, hate enemies – got it! Check!
 - BUT ---- Just reminds us to ask the who, what, where, when, why and how regarding “the law.”
 - Does God really command us to hate others, even if we see other as enemies? Do we define neighbor according to our understanding or God’s? What IS God’s idea of a neighbor?
 - Knowing our struggles with understanding and interpreting scriptures, Jesus helps us in Matt 5:44 with “the but” - But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
 - Consider not only yourself, but how “laws” affect or potentially affect everyone one else.

¹ http://www.beresources.co.uk/everything-before-but-is-bullsh*t/

² <https://medium.com/@mcpflug/using-the-word-but-a-brief-guide-to-sincerity-clarity-ab311a2af6a6>

- IN JUDAISM³
 - Midrash (exposition, investigation) – refers to an interpretive act, where Rabbis (teachers) seek the answers to religious questions (both practical and theological) by plumbing the meaning of the words of the Torah. Midrash has always meant to respond to contemporary problems and craft new stories, making **connections** between new Jewish realities and the unchanging biblical text. It is often difficult to determine, simply from reading the biblical text, what Jewish law would be in practice. The text of the Torah is often general or ambiguous when presenting laws. Midrash attempts to clarify or extend a law **beyond** the conditions assumed in the Bible, and to make connections between current practice and the biblical text. Midrash fulfills the law, without abolishing it.
 - Talmud (study, learning) compilation of ancient teachings consisting of the Mishna (“repeated study”), the Gemara (“completion”), and certain auxiliary materials, which are the results of Midrash. Talmudic documents are secondary to the Torah.
- Albeit not a perfect analogy to rabbinic teaching and the Midrash, the U.S. Supreme Court is an example of a specific body of individuals whose job is to go deeper regarding law. And they have proven that “the law of the land,” isn’t written in stone and can’t always be interpreted as literal. The Constitution is a set of American laws, historically written and created, which have been enforced, questioned, broken, interpreted, reviewed, rewritten and/or reaffirmed. Like the Midrash, the court attempts to clarify law **beyond** the conditions assumed in the Constitution.

So, what? What do we do with this?

We have opportunities every day to consider “the law” in our lives and in our world. Since February is black history month, I’ve been reading and pondering the contributions and lives of the African diaspora here in America, from the perspective of God’s laws and our understanding and interpretation as it affects the black community.

Hearing the words of Jesus, here’s where I am...

- LIVING
 - You have heard it said that ALL lives matter,
 - BUT- when black people are twice as likely to be shot and killed by police versus white people,⁴
 - AND - when almost twice the number of black babies vs. white babies die in childbirth⁵
 - I say to you - we must advocate and affirm that BLACK lives matter.
- DISCRIMINATION
 - You have heard it said that since the civil rights act of 1964 discrimination is no longer a problem in America.
 - BUT – while the numbers of black professors, physicians, engineers and attorneys have significantly increased in the last 60 years, blacks, by far are still singled out, pushed out and

³ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/midrash-101/>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud>, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Talmud>

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/report-black-people-are-still-killed-police-higher-rate-groups-rcna17169>

⁵ <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/health-disparities-race-ethnicity/>

sold out at far higher rates than whites when it comes to housing, education, crime, and employment, so...^{6 7}

- I say to you – we must stop talking and listen better to our black siblings when they say, “things aren’t better.”
- HISTORY
 - You have heard it said that CRT is no more than indoctrinating white children into believing that they are not as good or as worthy as black children^{8 9}
 - BUT – when accurate and factual details about America’s racist history is blatantly evident in its systems and social institutions
 - I say to you – We can do no less than acknowledge that the depth of our knowledge is really quite shallow and we must trade our fear of losing power for the unconditional value of all of humanity.
- VOTING¹⁰
 - You have heard it said that “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (15th Amendment),
 - BUT - if municipalities severely restrict access to voting by providing fewer ballot boxes, if they exclude mail-in balloting, if they criminalize providing water and snacks to voters waiting in line, and if they create specialized identification processes only in certain areas or only toward specific oppressed and marginalized Americans, then
 - I say to you – these are Jim Crow Laws disguised as 21st century decrees and we must be more active in our civic duties in order to lift up, instead of pushing down the voices of EVERY American.

In Jesus’ sermon on the mount, he speaks about laws of actions - murder, adultery, retaliation - and he teaches us to think more critically and consider the associated feelings in those laws, like anger, lust and humility. Actions are more often clearcut, whereas feelings tend to be murky.

So, Jesus’ teachings about the law lead us toward a better approach and understanding; connecting the law with life in love, heavenly justice and true reconciliation. For if we won’t fight for justice for all and reconciliation of all of creation in love, then laws --- good, bad or otherwise – are absolutely meaningless and the consequences dire.

- Jesus teaches us that a stringent adherence to “the law” isn’t required to live in the kin-dom of Heaven.
- He teaches us that righteousness isn’t about strictly following laws, but rather about the Spirit of the law.

We do far better in understanding God’s laws and living them when we appreciate the “BUT” for what it is; a bridge, a connection that doesn’t negate, but adds, improves, expands, and diversifies. That is the radicalness of Jesus and the mercy of God.

⁶ <https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-racial-discrimination>

⁷ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/black-progress-how-far-weve-come-and-how-far-we-have-to-go/>

⁸ <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory/>

⁹ https://www.nvdaily.com/nvdaily/letter-to-the-editor-crt-is-racism/article_fc1f9781-924c-51c8-9eb8-d7b67cae3c1a.html

¹⁰ <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/5-egregious-voter-suppression-laws-2021>

I know that many of you have probably heard the poem, STILL I RISE by Maya Angelou, but I'd like to read it again for you now. And I ask that you listen and appreciate the actions and feelings, the **contrasts** that she offers to "the laws" in which she was forced to exist and how she chose to respond through poetry.

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Heeding Jesus' instruction to not just obey the law, but to engage it, work with it, speak through it and go deep into it...are we prepared to confront, to listen, to contrast and if we're lucky, even to rise? I pray that it may be so.

AMEN