

Oh the Humanity

Matthew 5:17-37

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“Oh the humanity!” You’ve probably heard that old phrase many times. Often it’s shared with some levity these days, meant to express something terrible but with an air of sarcasm. “Oh the humanity!” There was no sarcasm to this phrase as it was first famously cried by the radio journalist Herb Morrison on May 6, 1937 in a field in New Jersey. As common as the phrase is today, it historically originated in the midst of a radio broadcast by Mr. Morrison as he watched the *Hindenburg* arrive in America. As the massive airship burst into flames and came crashing to the ground, Herb Morrison was moved by the horrific disaster and cried these words aloud—echoing across the airwaves of his era, and hauntingly into our own times.

“Oh the humanity”, we’d be right to cry aloud today as we read this conclusion to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. “Oh the humanity”, we’d be right to cry aloud as any preconceived notion of our own self-righteousness came crashing down all around us, perhaps less conspicuously than the *Hindenburg*, but a disaster nonetheless. “Oh the humanity” this is a disaster.

Jesus boldly announces to us today, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ 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.”

Oh the humanity... Don’t murder? That’s easy. The Fifth of the Ten Commandments. It was supposed to be the center square of a bingo card—the freebie for all the righteous. But Jesus comes along today and makes it so much more complicated. And he doesn’t stop there! Our giving during worship and our whole approach to God’s altar gets complicated! Our legal systems, in Jesus’ words, should be more about reconciliation than punishment! And the Sixth Commandment, all about adultery, that was supposed to be pretty easy for me but I may have broken that too! And divorce, and vows, and all the rest are now being made so *complicated*! Oh the humanity...

This is a disaster for me. That’s a pretty understandable reaction to hearing this gospel read aloud, right? I’m here stressing and thinking to myself about the ways that Jesus may be alluding to my own murderous and adulterous nature. A text like this can turn me to a

self-serving spiral of shame that obsesses over my own salvation as i am brought face to face with my own sinfulness.

Oh the humanity! What a mess... Oh the humanity! What's the point? Oh the humanity! Why is Jesus doing this? Oh the humanity! Why is Jesus messing up this nice comfortable little system of self-righteousness I've built up for myself? Oh the *humanity*...

Oh the **humanity**?

Oh the **HUMANITY**! Maybe that's the point? Oh the **COMMUNITY**! Maybe these laws are about more than me and my own personal salvation, my own right relationship with God? Oh the **HUMANITY**! Oh this is all about my **NEIGHBOR** and not all about me! When I sin, I don't just wound myself but I wound those around me. Sin is not just about my right relationship with God, but about my right relationship with my neighbor. There are real people—a whole humanity—affected by the choices I make to sin or build up the kingdom of God. Oh the **humanity**!

Jesus is calling us back to the heart of the law, not just setting an impossibly high bar! God's love for humanity is the heart of the law! Jesus is calling me to look beyond my own self-interest and devote myself to the building up of the Kin-dom of God here on earth! I am not capable of achieving this righteousness alone that Jesus describes in these verses. Righteousness belongs to Christ alone, and righteousness is not just his gift to me but to **US**. God's love is poured out from the cross on *all people*, not just me. Jesus holds these laws up to the light of his righteousness, his fulfillment, his life not so that I might save myself, but that **WE** might be redeemed.

We are incapable of living out these laws perfectly. But we are capable of considering the ways in which our sinfulness, our brokenness, our selfishness affects our neighbor. We are capable of knowing the humans who are hurt by our actions and our inactions. Lutheranism teaches a distinction between The Law—what God asks of us—and the Gospel—what God has done for us. Within the Lutheran tradition, we teach that there are three uses of the Law, often summarized as “curb, mirror, and guide” the faithful. Ultimately the law convicts us of our sin, and drives us to the foot of the cross where we receive the grace of God, gospel for our weary souls. But the law still stands to curb behavior that is harmful and to hold a mirror to our lives that reveals the ways we've failed to live within God's vision. Hotly debated for hundreds of years within Reformed tradition is the third use. There are those that say Luther did not ascribe to this use of the law, and if I could have dinner with any famous person, I think I'd like to debate third use with Luther. This is the aspect of the law that guides us, that shows us God's way, that lives out—in response to Gospel—a true devotion to being a new creation guided by God's will.

We will fail at this, but the law that Jesus pronounces today can still guide us. Oh the humanity! We are called as siblings, united in Christ's love through the sanctifying power of our baptisms, to think of our neighbors and allow God's law to guide our living. No, we may not have murdered anyone, but have we worked to build up the lives of others? Oh the humanity, go and do so! No, we may not have committed adultery against our partner or spouse, but have we considered the ways our thoughts, words, and actions create a culture that is so often sexually hostile to one another, particularly toward women? Oh the humanity, go model a culture of mutuality, particularly teaching our young boys and men about a culture of consent and healthy sexuality! Oh the humanity, Christ is clear about the pain of divorce, but he is not calling us to cast one another out. Rather we are meant to realize that there are humans—hurt and in need of community—in the midst of these relationships that have been broken.

Compassion, reconciliation, consent, mutuality, fidelity, truth. These are the values of the law that Jesus holds up today that we might build a Kin-dom that honors our shared humanity. Oh the humanity, we have siblings all around us who desperately need to hear the word of hope found in the midst of God's community of care. Oh the humanity, we as individuals need to hear the word of hope that we cannot save ourselves but it is Christ who has redeemed us. Oh the humanity, Christ is turning us away from our individuality today toward a Kin-dom of love and grace and hope and peace that surpasses all understanding. Oh the **HUMANITY**... because that was the point of it all... of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. It wasn't for you, it was for us all.

Amen.