

My birthday is coming up. Email me and I'll send you my registry! (😊 Just kidding.) In fact, my birthday is still five months away. But I've noticed that on birthdays a lot of people spend a lot of time responding to Facebook birthday greetings. I can't participate in that, because I'm not on Facebook, and honestly, I don't have any plans to be on Facebook. But I'm not sure what the etiquette is for Facebook birthdays because it seems it's now the preferred twenty-first-century method of wishing someone a happy birthday. I often get cards in the mail on my birthday from family and friends, a couple of “e-cards” through emails, text messages too, but never via Facebook.

What do you Facebook users do? I'm really not sure what someone is supposed to do with a Facebook birthday wish. Do you post a general “thanks for all the birthday wishes” on your status page? Do you “like” each one? Do you send a personal message? I don't send a personal note back to people who send me a card by mail, but I do usually reply to e-cards. Only because here at Ken Mawr there are such deeply devoted card senders do birthday cards keep coming to me in my middle age by way of the U.S. Postal Service.

I know some people are very proficient with Facebook, spending hours posting their own stuff and commenting on others. When I'm told something about someone and ask the person I'm talking to, “How did you find that out?” their response at times is, “I saw it on their Facebook page.” It's a pretty amazing tool in that regard. We even have a Facebook page for our church. Did you know that? You can “friend” KMUPC and make comments or get information. Our Admin Assistant, Vicki, updates it. We're not sure who all looks at it, but you should check it out.

Like I said, I don't know all the rules of Facebook, real or unwritten, but I'm 99% sure that I would embarrass my family by doing something “uncool” with my Facebook page—if I had one. I probably wouldn't update everyone on my status, partly because I have trouble believing anyone would care. People have

gotten into real trouble because of Facebook and apparently regimes have been overthrown in part due to Facebook. If you read the newsfeed, it's not difficult to find something significant that is happening on the world stage.

It's quite a range, when you think about it, from "Having a bad hair day!" to "Joining a revolution to depose the dictator!" But the same instrument serves both causes. No wonder we'd like to know the rules. We don't want to run the risk of misusing the power of social media. To be honest I have questions about how social media impacts conversations in our nation and world. I frequently vow to just shut down all media and delete all the apps on my phone, but then I find myself going back. Are these things a net positive or a net negative for humanity? Depending on the day and the media that one reads, it could go either way.

But this sermon is not really about social media, except as a way of thinking about life and how we learn about procedures and systems. Are there any ground rules for communication in 2023? Learning the rules is a common exercise. Jesus knew that was so in his life, which is why he took the time to talk about rules in the Sermon on the Mount. He knew he lived in a rule-based society, so he decided to take a look at the rules and to basically mess with everyone's head at the same time.

"You thought you knew the rules?" he seems to be saying. "Well, listen to this!" *"You have heard that it was said...But I tell you..."* Read through these verses again and tell me you aren't just a little overwhelmed. I mean, for goodness' sake! Rules are one thing. But this seems a bit much, doesn't it? Extreme rules. Intense rules. Rules for people who are really into rules, or something like that. We've kind of let much of this stuff slide. But should we?

Let's take a closer look at the sensitive situations that Jesus covers. Murder isn't just a literal exterior act: We can also have a murderous spirit that shows up in our speech, attitude, thoughts, and treatment of others. Adultery isn't just something we physically commit: An adulterous disposition leers at other

people in order to take and selfishly consume without regard. The way Jesus describes divorce implies a problem with the ease in which it is chosen: What does it say about our willingness to keep commitments to someone we love? A similar meaning is seen in Jesus's teaching about oath taking. God's people don't need to use oaths because they ought to already be committed to telling the truth. The oath should be implied every time Christians open their mouths.

Jesus' higher standard goes way beyond adding to a list of rules, because he's trying to show us something about ourselves and about our relationships. He's saying that all relationships are a gift from God, so please don't ignore them, abuse them, or waste them. Did you notice that all these scenarios have a communal component and impact? Anger leads to the discipline of the community. Reconciliation is prompted by church involvement. When we don't address wrongs we've committed against others, there are real-world consequences. I hear Jesus saying that we ought not take any relationship for granted. We ought not run the risk of intentionally or unintentionally hurting someone. We ought not treat anyone as less than someone made in the image of God. These aren't *rules* so much as a way of viewing the world around us and creating a community that resembles the kingdom of heaven.

It's possible that Jesus may have used social media in the first century IF—and that's a big if—it is used constructively for building up instead of tearing down. Like Facebook, our own community of faith can be about the littlest almost trivial details of daily living, like someone's birthday, and at other times, it can be about highly consequential things like wars, revolutions and scientific breakthroughs. Nona Jones is a Christian author, speaker, and social media expert who advises humility when it comes to our participation in social media. She writes, "Too many Christians have attached our identity to *being* right, instead of *doing* what's right." Now there's a thought we can all take to heart. Woven together by the grace and love of God, by annual birthday wishes and by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we at Ken Mawr are a family of God and a community of faith, a fellowship of affirmation and a source of hope. We are a Christ-breathed community of renewal and spiritual growth.

I seriously doubt that is what Mark Zuckerberg had in mind, but Jesus, on the other hand, probably had that and much more in mind when he tells us that he has not come to *abolish or contradict* the law. Rather, he gives us a fresh perspective on God's law, *as only God himself could do*. Instead of governing our lives by constant reference to an encyclopedic list of rules and regulations, Jesus would have us look for God's love in common things. And in that context, we refrain from sin, not because of prescribed punishments, but because sin is the antithesis of God's love given in Jesus his Son. In him, our focus shifts from "dos and don'ts," to actively witnessing God's love, which means not only looking to the letter of the law, but to the Spirit of the Lord.

What would Jesus do? What would he have us do? Jesus would have us live more active and more complete lives as defined by the love of God, and by demonstrating that love to our neighbor. (By the by, that's part of our church's mission statement) He is raising the bar and he is calling us to elevate our game. He is telling us that the *state of our souls* is just as important as the *actions of our bodies*. To be consumed by revenge and seething with anger is as wrong as acting out that anger. To indulgently wallow in lust is to commit sin without moving a muscle. To openly commit sin is a clear and obvious affront to God. But it is also sinful for the human heart to embrace the sinfulness that pushes love out of the picture.

In calling us to follow him, Jesus would have us live in the fulness of the love of God, leaving no room for sin, filling our hearts, and filling our days in joyful harmony with his will. That means we wake every morning in Christ's love. We give him our day. We spend it together with him and with others. And we end it gratefully. Of course, we know that in this life we will never be completely removed from temptation. On the contrary, as the lives of the saints testify, the virtuous ones are coveted prizes, subject to a constant onslaught from the world, the flesh, and the devil. But the Lord has changed the whole dynamic of good and evil. Jesus took the highest human wisdom and corrected it because *he was who he was*.

One little girl, when asked by her Sunday school teacher if she could recite the 10th commandment, stood up and said, “Thou shalt not take the covers off thy neighbor’s wife.” We can get confused about the rules too. Jesus, however, didn’t need to argue about the rules. It was sufficient for him to speak. No one can honestly and seriously listen to Jesus without feeling this is God’s last word, beside which all other words are inadequate, and all other wisdom is incomplete.

So, what are the rules according to Jesus? Even if you and I have lived a life of “outward” moral perfection, none of us can say that we have *never* experienced a forbidden desire for the wrong things. The inner perfection that Jesus models, makes it necessary for us to say that we ourselves are dead and Christ lives in us. Paul describes this most plainly in Galatians 2:20, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.*”

This is the new rule, the new standard Jesus gives, that kills all our pride. Living with Christ forces us to die with him, who alone can enable us to attain the standard which he himself has set before us. In Christ’s love we run toward holiness, instead of running away from sin. We are not alone, under siege, while we hang on by our fingernails. But rather, we confidently take the hand of Jesus, a hand that was pierced for our salvation. And hand in hand, he protects us and claims us for his own.

Someone suggested to me this week that we get out the scissors and pull a Thomas Jefferson with this passage from Matthew’s gospel. Granted, it’s quite obvious that Jesus is raising the bar for our moral behavior as it relates to murder, reconciliation, adultery, divorce and swearing an oath.

But in his infinite love, he raises US *so much higher*, well over the bar, and safely all the way home. Post that good news on your Facebook page! Amen.