

“Our Shared Identity in God’s Image” based on Matthew 5:21-48 and Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, February 12, 2023, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Who are you? What makes you, you? What is your identity? What does who you are mean to you? Take a moment now to answer that question in your mind. Who are you?

There’s a lot of talk in our culture today about identity and who we are. Some act as though this is a new issue for human beings, but identity politics are as old as humanity itself. From the earliest days, we have identified with groups for security. We have “in” groups. We have “out” groups. We have “insiders” and “outsiders.” Our groups include our families, extended families or tribes, and then nations and even empires. In this way, we divide ourselves based on these group identities. Within our groups, we have “good” people and outside of our groups, we have “bad” people.

The typical attitude is that our own actions, opinions, and choices, and the those of the people I identify with in my group will be excused, condoned, and even defended. But if someone from one of those “out” groups – does something, it is offensive. Now, this doesn’t mean that within our groups, there’s never any tension or strife. Family is the easiest group in which to see that. What’s more, within our groups generally relational groups, we divide ourselves in other way – status, occupation, gender, ideology, religion or any number of things. We find comfort within our own group or cross-section of groups and have conflict with those who are outside of our group.

Eventually, we settle within one identity, often some intersection of groups, but we sacrifice some of our individuality to remain in this safe place. Or we can choose to hold on to our individuality and eventually end up alone. The balance of finding security in the identity of a group and maintaining our own personal identity is at the heart of what it is to be a human being.

It’s also at the heart of the gospel. Abraham’s descendants were called to be a light to all nations – a particular people with a particular identity called to be a blessing. In Jesus, this is fulfilled, with a particular person embodying both a particular people and their particular God, providing the bridge to bring everyone and every identity across the world to Israel’s God in and through him.

Today’s gospel continues the Sermon on the Mount, through which Jesus explains to us the identity of God’s people – how they will be known. So first, we have the Beatitudes. These are the people blessed, or made full, or complete, by God, even in situations the world might call undesirable. Then Jesus commands his followers to be salt and light to enhance this world and reflect God’s light.

So now, Jesus here continues by delivering a challenging set of teachings that hit us right in the heart of our human condition. They both challenge our selfish nature and our “groupish” behavior by affirming God’s image in us and all people. They’re called the six antitheticals, statements of *“You have heard this, but I say that.”* But these are not about Jesus going against the law his audience knows, but beyond it. Remember, Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and restore order, to set things right – as they should be. Because of their difficulty, I’m not sure these are the teachings people have in mind when they say they love Jesus’s teachings. However, these should be the teachings we hold up, because they help reveal how we can love as God loves.

The first is the one we will spend the most time on. Jesus says, *“You have heard it said do not murder, but I say don’t be angry,”* and what’s more he says not to call people names. In the examples he

gives, the first is the word *'raca,'* an Aramaic word that means empty, worthless. It's an insult used to say a person has no value, is without God's favor. The second is a Greek word, *'moros,'* meaning a fool or stupid. It's where we get the word 'moron' from in our English language.

If you call someone worthless, or even Godless, and if you call someone a moron, not as enlightened as you are, then you are liable to the council and liable to the fires of Gehenna. This place, Gehenna, was a trash heap on the outside of town where often fires raged. It's an image for hell. With anger and name calling, Jesus says we are worthy of the same punishment as murder.

What Jesus is doing here is not getting rid of the law, but making a clear statement that the law is more than following the rules. I'm really good at avoiding murder. I follow that rule well for almost 45 years. I am really bad at avoiding anger. I think I've done well for about 45 minutes.

You see, the thing about anger is that if we hold on to it and feed it, justifying our anger, eventually it leads us to be the type of person who might murder. It can lead to greater violence. Think of all the people with righteous anger who do things like blow up buildings in the name of God and murder in the name of God, using God's name in vain because they want to justify their anger.

Jesus essentially says, *"NO! Cut it off at the source. Don't be angry and if you're angry it's the same as murder right from the get-go."* He's setting the tone for a theme in all six antitheticals and the whole Sermon on the Mount that has to do with the humanity of each person and their identity, and it all points forward to his statement toward the end of the sermon about judging others.

So, let's look at the name calling again, "Sticks and stones can break my bones...but names can be far more brutal." A name brings identity. And so, the prohibition of name calling establishes that calling someone "worthless" or a "moron" is the same as murder because by labeling them, you take away their humanity. You replace God's image. So, essentially, in our estimation, we kill them. We've heard of the term "character assassination." Name calling judges and condemns outsiders, or praises insiders whom we make to be like God, without need of a savior, or correction.

You see, when I was young, I was precocious and came from a well-respected family, so I got a wonderful label of "good kid." Yet, I did lots of things that should have warranted a less favorable label. This sermon would be far longer if I listed the many sins.

One example is when in about 10th grade, I helped organize six or eight of us "good" kids, each at least 250 pounds, to line up on one side of the hallway with our backs against the lockers and then run as fast as we could into the other wall in an attempt to knock it down. We had noticed the wall was easily shaken and thought we could knock it over. So, three times we ran into the wall, shaking the entire wing of the school before the Physics teacher ran out and chased us away.

Not a one of us though, got detention. No one was suspended for what would have definitely been a costly repair and would probably have been a tragedy for at least one of us when the ceiling fell on top of us. With the label of good kid, we were fine. Nothing I did shook the good kid label for me. I am grateful for it, but it had its drawbacks, too. There were things I got discouraged from being a part of, like sports even, because I was smart and didn't need that.

But the real tragedy of labels is what I saw in the peers who got the label of "bad" kid, or "dumb." Usually, it was because of some setback in an earlier grade level, or because their report cards were

not as good, or they had parents who were labeled bad kids. These peers struggled, and they always bore the consequences of their actions – sometimes more than they deserved. Whereas I did not get the full brunt of punishment because of the different judgement about me.

Some of my peers were judged as “dumb” and “worthless,” and some lived into it. They have met every negative expectation in their lives, including jail time. But others moved away, out of our hometown to redefine themselves in places where those judgements didn’t follow them. They are living amazing successful lives. You see labels, stereotypes, prejudices, and a long list of “isms” can be quite damaging. Positive or negative judgement puts people in a box of our making and doesn’t allow people to live into becoming the person God made them to be.

Each of the antithetical statements deal with this in some way. Each one is meant to help us see people in their full humanity with God’s image within them and God’s love for them. They also allow the follower of Christ to be more like Jesus who redeems our humanity by his life, death, and resurrection, upholding our human dignity by joining our life with God’s.

With that in mind, let’s look at the other five statements beginning with adultery. You have heard it said do not commit adultery, but if you lust for a woman, you have already committed adultery in your heart. This is about seeing women as objects of sexual gratification. Now, in the patriarchal culture Jesus is speaking to men about women, but one of the positives we’ve seen in our life is gender equality, so guess what ladies, you’re in this too. It’s not ok to look at a man or a woman as something to consume.

Jesus makes it clear that it’s not ok to objectify people, rating them by how they look. Doing things like choosing a person for how they look for employment, and not their qualifications. This is the same as when advertisers use sexual images to sell completely unrelated products. This turns people into commodities, taking away their humanity. The epistle of James, which expands on the Sermon on the Mount in wisdom literature, warns the church against giving the best seats to those in fine dress and higher stations in life. This too, is a way we objectify.

Jesus is telling us that other people are not a means to an end. Like with anger and murder, Jesus cuts off adultery at the source, making it clear that when we give in to lust in our minds, we lay the groundwork for adultery and wanton sexual promiscuity because this lust makes us see people as objects, rather than human beings with dignity made in God’s image.

This transitions to Jesus talking to men again about divorce, which he severely limits. In our modern culture, again, sorry ladies, this applies to you as well. But I’d also venture to say this applies to all relationships, including friendships. This is about cutting people off. Jesus is speaking into a culture where some of the leading rabbis permitted divorce if the wife burned toast, couldn’t cook, or “let” the husband be more attracted to other women.

Jesus warns against seeing a spouse as a possession, an object to do with as you please. In a lot of circles, especially Christian ones, we see logic like those rabbis gave still quite prevalent. There’s a lot of “advice” given to women that implies a good wife is one who meets cultural expectations, and “advice” given to men about being properly “masculine” or “primal.” This relegates the woman to keeping the man’s attraction, as if being a possession is the purpose of marriage.

Jesus rejects this because that mentality implies that if a marriage doesn't work, it was the woman's fault the divorce happened. Men and women in marriage, Jesus says, should be faithful to one another. The only exception made is a word *'porneia'* that is often translated as sexual immorality, but that is vague. What it means is promiscuity, affairs, or unfaithfulness. This is serious. You can cheat on a spouse with your job, with abuse, or any number of ways. This is a broader term than we often narrow it down to and while it is not an excuse to say any divorce is fine, it is also not meant to condemn those who are divorced. This teaching calls us to see the other person in any relationship, whether active or soon to be dissolved, as a human made in God's image.

In the fourth antithetical, Jesus says we should not make oaths, not on heaven, earth, or ourselves, and to instead just say "yes" or "no." Sometimes, when asked for help, we make excuses and use oaths to justify our action or inaction. *"I swear to God that...or I swear on my mother's grave...or I swear on my honor..."* Rather than being accountable, simply choosing to act or not act based on whether or not we can do the thing being asked of us, we judge the worthiness of the recipient. Jesus says let your "yes" be "yes" and your "no" be "no."

If you can do something, just say yes. If you can't, just say no. We should not give excuses to get away or respond based on the worthiness of the recipient, including whether we think they will be properly grateful. We cannot let the people who ask for help be seen as objects. This is hard, but it is where Jesus is leading us. The judgement of the oath puts us in the same place as anger, name calling, lusting for someone, or making a spouse into a possession. Our oaths can be used to make a value judgement based on their worthiness of our response, with justifications and excuses.

Jesus pushes forward with the famous turn the other cheek passage, which if you remember Richard Hart's sermon last spring when he preached this passage from Luke, if you're slapped with a backhand from a social superior, turning the other cheek offers the side of the face, which would require a punch to hit. A slap was perfectly acceptable, or even expected from a social superior in that culture, but a punch meant a fight. Turning the other cheek is a way to uphold your dignity by saying, if you're going to slap, just punch me. If you're going to take my tunic, take my cloak. If you're going to ask me to go one mile, let's make it two. This is a way of stopping the violence. This is a way to stand up to someone while keeping your dignity intact without escalation.

Then it seems Jesus contradicts himself by saying, do not resist an evil doer. But the word translated "resist" is one typically used for military conflict, as in the stand you take to push back and engage your attacker. Think of how we say, "Custer's last stand" or "this is where I take my stand." It's the hill you're willing to fight, or die, on. Jesus asks us not to do that. He asks us to do more, by standing up for our dignity but not by fighting back because that perpetuates the problem.

This leads to the last one, where Jesus tells us to love our enemy, speak well of (or bless) of those who curse you. He says to do good to those who treat you poorly, so that you may be called children of God. God gives good things to people who insult, hate, and reject God every single day. These individuals are still loved by God. If we want to be like God then, and be children of God, that means we have to do this too, regardless of how difficult it is.

There isn't a litmus test for whether a person deserves our blessings and good treatment. Even the one who hurts us is made in the image of God. As said before, this doesn't mean we are told to be

doormats and accept abuse, but we are called to end the cycle of hatred, abuse, and violence with us. If we speak well of our enemy, it creates contrast between us and our enemy. If we do good to them, as the Psalmist and later Paul in Romans says, it pours hot coals on their head, not literally, but in a redemptive way.

Being “perfect,” or more accurately translated, “being complete” as our “Father is complete,” is about recognizing that it’s not our job or calling to judge whether a person is “good” or “evil.” Rather, Jesus tells us we can discern whether our own choices and the choices of others were good or evil choices without a value statement that ignores their humanity in God’s image.

We all know the phrase, “*Judge not lest ye be judged,*” which Jesus eventually gets to in the Sermon on the Mount. This is not about ignoring wrongdoing. This doesn’t prohibit us from pointing out that someone stole from us. But it does keep us from naming that person a “thief,” as if this is their identity, and they are no longer made in God’s image. There’s a difference.

When you thought about who you are, did you use adjectives and nouns, or did you use verbs? Did you say, “I’m a baker,” or did you say, “I’m someone who bakes.” There’s a distinction. Jesus is not saying you can’t call someone out for stealing, murder, or hurting us. But he is saying we should not label that person unchangeably with a label. In the Judeo-Christian framework, we are called to make choices, and the guilty then seek forgiveness to set make amends and set things right. Justice is found in restitution, reconciliation, and restoration, not punishment.

This is what Deuteronomy points to: We have a choice of life or death. When we choose death it separates us from God, and this is why Jesus came to us – for restitution in his atonement, reconciliation through his church, and restoration in the new creation of the life to come. The eternal Son of God entered same humanity we struggle in, with its divisions and labels. Christ came to share in our life, to live as we live, die for us, and rise again for us, so that we might be “blessed” in our being filled with the presence of God through the Holy Spirit in and among us all.

By this, we are called as temples of our God, both individually and corporately, to seek justice by repairing this world as we share in this work to reconcile all things in Christ until all is made new. This means even loving our enemies because our job is not to condemn the world, but to point others to the one who redeems all things.

We make good choices and bad choices. A bad choice does not make you evil. A good choice does not make you a hero, or like God and without need of Jesus’s forgiveness and redemption. When we choose life though, by doing what’s right, loving God and neighbor, we live into God’s love for us. In this we obey the Lord’s voice, and cling to the Lord who is our life and the length of our days. If we choose death, we separate from God and neighbor and need reconciliation ourselves.

In this world, we have differences – many good and worthy of celebration – but we must resist the attempt to turn our identities into something by which we divide ourselves from one another with judgement and condemnation. We are called to be holy, meaning different, just as Israel was called to be holy and different as a light to all nation, not to condemn all outsiders, but reveal God to all nations. Let us then ground our true identity in the love of our God, which is the shared identity we have in the image of the one who made us all. Amen.