

Command or Promise?

When we read the teachings of Jesus as given by Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount which goes beyond the beatitudes or those narrated by Luke as basically these same teachings but delivered “on the plain” what is our basic reaction? We tend to remember them, but do we consistently apply them. The reading for today is a continuation of last week’s reading in which Jesus proclaimed blessings and woes to this audience whom he had healed as he walked among them before beginning to teach. The injunctions from the passage are very familiar to us: The call to do good; to love everyone on the positive side, then the don’t judge as a prohibition or warning. When we read these things it seems we often voice our approval of the sentiments, but then as we go about our daily lives we seem to dismiss them as being idealistic, not achievable. We tend to dismiss these teachings by assuming that Jesus is setting up an impossible scenario—commands impossible for us to live out. This inability to follow his teachings forces us to have us admit our need because sin, that brokenness of the world around and within us drives us to the good news of Jesus’ promise of forgiveness and grace. Another option used would be to dismiss these teachings as the naïve instructions of a dreamer; someone whose head was always in the clouds, someone who clearly did not understand how the world really works. That is often the opinion given of those who vocally proclaim these as how things should be. Considering the way the narrative ends, this cynical view does not seem to apply to the one who proclaimed them then who steadfastly set his face to Jerusalem and what awaited him there. And sometimes, I think we dismiss these teachings by assuming we actually follow them pretty well. We are often guilty of a deep enough self-deception for that view to comfort us; and we then often take on the burden or responsibility to ensuring that others are following these teachings. We tend to view these teachings as commandments or rules—but what if these were teachings based on an alternative reality—a promise that if they were actually used as the basis for our lives, our lives would be abundant and blessed. Each of those ways of dismissing Jesus’ words is based on hearing them only as a set of commands or rules. Commands and rules that can drive us to despair, that are naïve or ineffectual in our world, or ones we can take to enforce on others whether it is in the name of morality, family values or justice. What if we bought into God’s vision for humanity that there is enough resources for all; enough for everyone’s needs? Notice, I did not say desires. But what if there is enough love, attention, food, worth, honor, time, enough of everything that is needed to go around for all to live well. What if that is the promise that God gives us if we but trust fully so that we can treat others the way we want to be treated—not the way that the world responds in the reciprocal. The basis of the view supported in this broken world is one of reciprocity. That was the view that dominated the world in which Jesus lived. In many ways it is the view which still dominates our world. The predominant way of treating others seems to be based on two factors—the way that one is treated or the expectation of what will be received in return for certain treatment. Luke’s account of these teachings describes the situation that Jesus is on the plain with the audience—Jesus has already healed all who have come to hear him. He is among them when he begins his teaching. Jesus’ words are seeking to level the playing ground so that all are on the same level. This audience contains his chosen disciples and those who have come to hear him who may be among the crowds who follow him, who are seeking discipleship as well. Today’s passage begins with: “But I say to you that

listen..." In the original language the sense is one of a continuing conversation...those that are still listening. This begins Jesus' teaching on the way that a true covenantal relationship with God works...on how those in that relationship live and behave. These things which Jesus proposes leads to a reality that can shake up those considering discipleship who hear them. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." The call is not to just avoid harming them, not to just think well of them, but to bless them and pray for those who abuse you. Do good for them. Jesus points out that only doing the reciprocal actions toward others is not different from the way the world is currently working. Jesus says, "If you love those who love you what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same" (v.33). The individual injunctions within the passage are a call for those who are in the covenant relationship with God to be like their God, to be as compassionate and merciful as God is. The theme is repeated again in verses with the example of giving to others while hoping to receive something; again saying that sinners behave this way. Instead Luke points out that the world deserves apocalyptic punishment instead God is merciful as God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. The kindness that God gives is not to be taken as approval for their behavior, but means that God still seeks the best for them. The call here is to "be merciful, just as God is merciful. This gives them the promise and possibility of turning away from disobedience and punishment through repentance and turning toward and joining the movement to bring God's realm into the here and now. These teaching are to give guidance on how the values and imperatives of God's realm are put into practice among them. Jesus is exhorting the disciples and the audience there to replace old-age qualities of behavior with those that are characteristic of the New Age he came to proclaim...the nearness of God's reign. The admonition to stop judging and condemning here does not mean that moral judgments are never to be made about behavior, but that individuals should not act like they know the final verdict on anyone else. Human perception is always finite—all have the ability to repent until the apocalypse. The call to forgive is possible within the security of living in God's reign; in the security of God's love and forgiveness, it is possible to forgive which releases both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. These teachings invite us into relationships that are deeper and more life-sustaining than the way of reciprocity. These teachings allow us to set our own boundaries about how we respond, not depending upon what others do but acting toward others based upon our relationship and trust in God, God's love and God's promise to be with us. Our boundaries and responses are to be a mirror of God's own response to the world. When reading our scriptures we often miss the very important nature of differences caused through translation. English has no way of differentiating between the singular and the plural of the 2nd person pronoun: y o u covers both. Yet throughout these verses the pronoun is always in the Greek plural form—this is one of the indications that Jesus' concern was for all those present—the community that he wished to form. Not only are we invited to do these things together—to do these good hard things but we endure the suffering from the hands of others together. We are commanded to join others in love and in compassion. This passage is a call to extend the generous give and take that is usually reserved for immediate family and close friends to everyone. Imagine is the name of a song by John Lennon which seems to be an attempt to describe the reign of God although he does not mention faith—he sings of a time and place where nothing divides us. Some of the lyrics go like this: "imagine no possessions, I wonder if you can. No need for greed or hunger, a botherhood of man. Imagine all the people sharing all the world." Another way to

phrase this is to imagine a world where the economy changed from “I give you this only if you give me that.” to “I share this with you knowing that you, or someone else, will generously share with me whatever I need.” The basis for this imagined world is rooted in the first four verses of today’s passage...these first four subvert the principle of hatred. No other human being is to be despised, written off, not even those who pose the greatest threat and harm to oneself or others. There is no room for hate in the reign which Jesus is leading us toward. That’s not because Jesus is leading people into a fantasy where no danger exists. This passage contains “eyes-open: instructions. It lists situations where the one following the teaching will encounter those who do not. It asks for a response that is different. It does not promise that all hate will disappear toward you, only asks that you don’t respond with hate. Throughout this passage we may balk at the notion of not expecting rewards. We make decisions based on the fact that we want what is best for us. We are always acting in our interests. Jesus is making a bid to persuade us that it is in our interests to merge with God’s interest and with others’ interests—to live together in love and compassion. Any other choice we make breaks that unity of common life in which there is room for all and someone is cut out. The great deceit of our lives is to persuade ourselves that our interests are best served by the world’s broken ways, by not loving, which effectively then makes everyone who is not our supporter our enemy. This seems to be the ways many are living these days. It seems to me that seeking to live as compassionately and showing grace towards others as we are assured God promises that we will receive is taking a big step toward taking that vision of a world full of people who experience neither greed nor hunger and all share in one human experience where all needs are met and all can experience peace. Imagine...or seek to visualize God’s vision for this world that God so loves that Jesus of Nazareth was born, dwelled among us revealing God’s vision to us and then journeying to the cross so that we could be redeemed. These teachings...are they command or promise? If command—that is, one more thing someone has told us and that we will be held accountable for—then we’ll likely continue to live in fear and hatred, while we may behave a little better, at least when someone is watching, ultimately we will be no different. But if a promise, then we might just be able to imagine that there is another world, available to us at this very moment, and see each other as gifts of God and experience the transformation within that Jesus offers. When you imagine Jesus is offering an invitation rather than simply giving a new set of rules, everything sounds different. “Do not judge and you will not be judged, do not condemn and you will not be condemned, forgive and you will be forgiven, give and it will be given to you.” This is the good news of love brought to us—the invitation to live and experience God’s reign in our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.