

*Staying With It*

A sermon preached by  
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**Text:**  
Matthew 5:33-37

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

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’<sup>32</sup> 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.

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

There's been a bit of a shift in civility in public discourse these days. We see it daily on television, hear it everyday on the radio, read it online. We can see it in newspapers and on billboards. And it comes across particularly clearly in political rhetoric.

Somehow we have shifted the focus of public debate more on emphasizing the negative of those we disagree with more than on promoting the positive side of our issue. Have you noticed that too? And not just in campaigning but in posturing as well.

Whether it's criticizing the First Lady's dress while the Chinese President was visiting as being “Commie Red” or the existence of her organic garden at the White House, opponents hold back no punches. Just yesterday, a conservative probable 2012 presidential candidate delivered a speech to the CPAC saying "Now, I'm not one who questions the existence of the President's birth certificate. But when you listen to his policies, don't you at least wonder what planet he's from?"

Or liberals on the attack as they mock Sarah Palin's opinions as being egotistical or while they point out the stumbles of the new House majority as it opened the new Congressional session – excising pieces of the Constitution which they read from the floor or having two Congressmen miss the swearing in while they attended a fundraiser.

Come on! What's going on here? Is no one willing to commit to telling us where he or she stands on the issues that matter to us? Jobs and economic recovery, education, a balanced budget, security in our neighborhoods, ending gun violence, addressing the causes of crime, the ever-growing number of people below the poverty level, and if anyone mentions health care reform its just to criticize whatever the opponent suggests.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to say that things were better in the good old days when politicians would tell us the truth. I am a firm believer that there is no such thing as the good old days and that those days were no different than these new days. Recently I was accused of always seeing things differently than other people because I explained that earlier that day I had been at a meeting of people discussing "the family" and when we were asked if we thought the family was better or worse than it was 10 years ago, I was the only one that voted "better".

So I'm not saying that we should go back to the time when politicians would do what they promised to do, because I'm not sure that there ever was such a time. And I'm not trying to say that politicians themselves have somehow changed, but rather that I have noticed a distinct difference in their message this year. The subtle, or maybe not so subtle, message is "I'm not going to commit myself to anything substantive during my campaign or even during my term." So the only thing left is attack the opponent; focus the attention over there rather than on my lack of commitment.

To those of us who are feeling personally over-committed already, lack of commitment by our noble leaders is not well received.

What does an average day look like for you? For me, it sometimes feels like I spend more time in my car driving between places than I ever get to simply sit and be focused. For families with children or teens its often up at 6:00 am and constant motion until midnight. School buses to catch, schedules to meet, work commitments, kids after school activities or soccer, or piano lessons, or scout meetings, then there's homework for the kids or at-home work-work for the parents, church meetings and other stuff to squeeze in – and don't forget you need to make time to stand in line for Justin Bieber movie tickets or a new iPhone. Then it's back to bed until the next morning – maybe mom and dad get an hour for themselves and each other late at night.

No need to try and outdo each other by saying that you've got it worse because you get up at 5:00 AM and are running until 1:00 AM. That's not the point. The point is that each one of us is probably in constant motion most of the time, not able to stop long enough to absorb what is going on around us. Even those that are retired. I am always amazed when I try to schedule something with a group of people and the retired folk seem to have more hectic calendars than anyone else. I thought some of this stopped at retirement!

I can't tell you how many times people tell me that they just don't feel like they are getting anywhere, that they don't feel as if they are able to do any one thing the best they can, that nothing in their life gets enough attention. I constantly wonder whether or not I am so overextended that I'm not a good enough father to my children, or son to my mother, or friend to those that are around me, or pastor to you. And I also suspect that I am not alone in asking this question of myself: "When I can't devote more than an hour at a time to any one thing, am I failing at the commitments that I have made along the way?"

My guess is that that is reality for many of us today. We are so committed to doing everything as best we can and with as much energy as we have, that we often feel over-extended. We have made legitimate commitments and we try to carry through on them. When we're not able to, we feel uncomfortable about it. We'd rather say a hesitant "yes" than a "no" and when we have to say "no" we feel like we've let someone down.

Our lives are filled with commitments. But despite our commitments, it seems like those in the political rhetoric game won't make any commitments. That's frustrating and it concerns me. And I'm not so sure that it's just in that arena either. I am beginning to wonder what the concept of commitment has turned into.

In this wonderful collection of sayings in Matthew's Gospel that we call the "Sermon on the Mount," Jesus addresses varying needs and issues of the human condition. He seems to be saying something about swearing oaths in the text for this morning, one of the hard-sayings of the Sermon that we refer to as an antithesis, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you ..."

Jesus' focus here is not on any one particular clause in Hebrew law, but rather on various different passages from Leviticus, Exodus and Deuteronomy which prohibit perjury and demand that a vow made to God must be kept. He sums it up in this line: "You shall not swear falsely but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." No one hearing this would have any problem with it. It sounds concrete enough for anyone to live by, even us today. But yet Jesus tries once again to get us to stretch beyond the mediocrity of what we hear. "Okay," we say, "The law requires that in the courtroom I have to `swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God'." We think, "I can handle that, swearing before God that I will tell the truth, knowing that if I don't the law will crash down on me. I'm an honest person most of the time, I can live with that."

But yet there's something else to it. Jesus says you don't need to take oaths, you don't need to swear to anything. Let your yes be yes, your no be no. That's it. Nothing to it. No need for formulas that bind you to what you have promised. Could it be that simple?

I saw a comic strip with two people sitting on top of a hill looking out over the horizon. The one says to the other, "They make it sound so easy ... 'Just say no' ... 'Just do it.'" The other person responds, "Never trust a culture whose commandments start with the word 'just'". How true that is. They want us to "just say no" to drugs. Nice thought but it takes a lot more than that to stop the drug epidemic. Nike wants us to "just do it" and oh, by the way, in order to be able to do it better, buy our shoes. There is no such thing as "just" anything. Life is not red or green, up or down, yes or no.

So maybe that's what's troubling me about recent political advertising. Messages are presented as if there is a right and a wrong and that's all there is. To stop crime, **just** build more prisons. To stop welfare fraud, **just** limit the number of children a welfare recipient can have. To reduce the deficit, **just** raise taxes. To restore family values, **just** bring back Ozzie and Harriet. It's **just** that simple, they tell us. **Just do it.** Well it's not that simple. When I'm racing through my life fulfilling my own commitments and feeling like my accelerator is pressed to the floor, it **just** doesn't help when everyone **just** keeps saying all you have to do is **just** do this or **just** do that.

And here we have Jesus telling us "just" let your yes be yes and your no be no. Or is that what he's saying? Is Jesus being sucked in by the lure of a culture that begins its commandments with the word "just"?

In a sermon on the Sermon on the Mount, Stanley Hauerwas talks about having taped to his office door a poster from the Mennonite Central Committee that reads: "A modest proposal for peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill one another." The poster drew attention and an occasional note would be slipped under his door, "How dare you -- why should Christians only refrain from killing other Christians? This is just another example of Christian self-centeredness." He explains that it would be wonderful if we stopped killing anyone, but at least this would be a start, that's why it's a "modest proposal". What he says is that unless we are a people committed to at least that modest proposal, the Sermon on the Mount makes no sense. In its peace-making propositions, the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be heard in a community that is already committed to peace.

The same is true with this yes/yes, no/no proposition. If the Sermon was meant to be understood in the context of community, then it seems to me that Jesus is not trying to lay another "just do it" at our feet. Whenever he spoke these words it was to people already within his community of followers or at least to those that

wanted to consider being in it. When Matthew recorded them, it was for his church which had already formed into a close community. What Jesus is trying to do is let our community -- that which we call the Church -- a community which is prepared to hear his message, know how to live in that community and how to allow that way to spread to others.

Gene Davenport, in his book *Into the Darkness*, reminds us that "when the first hearers of Matthew's Gospel heard Jesus' call to suffer rather than inflict suffering, to accept death rather than inflict death, to reject all efforts to save themselves from their plight by military action and to leave their deliverance to God, they knew that the one who gave such scandalous instruction had himself lived and died in accord with that call. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount is not one who extols an esoteric or naive or idealistic ethic -- a way of life never tested or tried -- but is one whose instruction sets forth the way of life which he himself embodied, the way of life that manifests God's life."

What Jesus is talking about in his yes/yes, no/no instruction is not that it is **just** easy to do that and that that is **just** all you need to do. He did not say "just say yes and mean yes, or just say no and mean no." "Just do it" is in no way a part of the message. The message is about commitment to what you are saying. It means that the only possible way that you can survive in community is by letting your yes mean yes and your no mean no. Jesus lived it in fact. Facing Pilate when his life was on the line he had to say yes when yes was the answer and no when no was the answer. How much easier it would have been for Jesus to say no and have his life spared, to swear an oath to God that he was not a rabble rouser. But in the context of the community in which he lived, the community to which he was committed, he had to live out his commitment to saying what he meant.

Jesus lived through the pain of what sticking to commitments means. He lived a life that knew there are no simple answers and that "just do it" is not an answer to anything. "All of the so-called

hard sayings of the Sermon," says Stanley Hauerwas, "are designed to remind us that we cannot live without depending on the support and trust of others." Jesus knew that letting your yes be yes and your no be no can only be done in the context of a community which gives you support and trust. Your yes or no commitment can only mean something if it is made in relation to someone in that community with you.

So what does that mean for us? It means that we have the ability to stay with it, to stay with the commitments we have made because they are within an accepting community.

The point of what Jesus says is freedom from introspection, from concern for one's own perfection or imperfection, and freedom to live a life that is totally devoted to one's neighbor. One writer suggests that "when human discourse is debased so that under certain circumstances Yes can mean No and No Yes, community is destroyed." Perhaps that's what's coming across in political campaigning this year. When campaign promises can say yes and mean no or say no and mean yes, when our elected leaders can't make any commitment to the community which would like to support and trust them, when their commitment is to themselves rather than their neighbors, when our yes commitments are not being supported by those that we elect, is it possible that community is being destroyed?

"You may be 38 years old, as I happen to be," said Martin Luther King, Jr. at Ebenezer Baptist Church on November 5, 1968, "And one day, some great opportunity stands before you and calls you to stand up for some great principle, some great issue, some great cause. And you refuse to do it because you are afraid ... You refuse to do it because you want to live longer ... You're afraid that you will lose your job, or you are afraid that you will be criticized or that you will lose your popularity, or you're afraid that somebody will stab you or shoot at you or bomb your house; so you refuse to take the stand. Well you may go on and live until you are 90, but you're just as dead at 38 as you would be at 90. And the cessation

of breathing in your life is but the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit."

When you are within a community that supports and trusts you, you can take those stands, you can make those commitments. Rev. King did it. He knew what saying yes,yes or no,no meant and he knew that there wasn't any easy "just do it" answer. He knew the power of living in a community that allowed him to make and carry through on commitments. He knew that community involves people and that commitments are made for people that are committed to you and he knew that there was nothing to be afraid of in that context. And I suspect that he would be concerned that we might soon be mourning the early death of community because of an unwillingness to make commitments.

But the brighter side of it is the fact that within the larger community, there are communities like Hope. Because it is in those places where commitments are still made and where we can stay with it because the community supports its members. So we can say yes,yes to making a difference in our world. We can say yes,yes to reaching out to those around us who are hurting or hating and surround them with love. We can say yes,yes to people on the other side of the world and to people in our own neighborhood without homes. We can say yes,yes to people who cry out for justice. We can say yes,yes because this is a community of faith that supports and trusts its members, a community that recognizes that commitments are made between people, a community that knows there are no "just do it" responses, a community that is predisposed to hearing and understanding what Jesus suggests in the Sermon on the Mount.

For each of us individually, Jesus' instruction might mean that our personal commitments need not be so overwhelming. The hecticness of our days and the strain of what our commitments sometimes feel like doesn't mean that those commitments to which I have said "yes" will do us in. In fact, if I am willing to accept what Jesus is suggesting, I can commit to being a good person, a good parent,

child, sibling, friend, and a good pastor because I do so in the context of a community that supports and trusts me. I can say yes to those commitments because of the people to whom the commitments are made and because those people have made commitments back to me. I can say yes when I mean yes and carry through on my yes because I do it within the context of community and because I do it for others in that community. And when I reach the point of feeling overwhelmed, that community will accept that and allow me to re-evaluate.

So maybe I've been too hasty in thinking that we've lost the concept of commitment and that "community" might be on its deathbed and that our commitments might be too much to handle. It seems that Jesus isn't willing to give up on us, that he's willing to stay with us as long as we need. It seems that he knows that as long as we can understand our yes,yes and no,no within the context of community that our commitments to each other will be carried out and that community will be strengthened by our commitments to others. And maybe, just maybe, the strength of our future lies in communities like we have created here, where commitment is alive and yes means yes.

Amen.