

A Third Way

TEXT: Matthew 5:17-20

Delivered at Kanto Gakuin Church, Summer, 2008

Today, I'd like to talk about a *third* way. I think surely all of you have seen this symbol—it's originally a Taoist symbol, but is used in many Eastern religions. In English, we call it the "Yin/Yang"; in Japanese, "in / yo". You all understand the meaning, I think, but just in case, let me review it.



According to the ancient thought behind this symbol, the world is divided into two parts: Black and White, Hot and Cold, Active and Passive, Male and Female, Day and Night, Summer and Winter, and so on. The Black stands for all that is Yang—hot, summer, day, active, male. The White stands for all that is Yin—cool, winter, night, passive, female. Surely, that sounds a little sexist, but remember -- this is very old symbol! Inside the symbol, there are two small dots—inside the black part of the symbol there's a tiny white dot. In the white part of the symbol there's a tiny black dot. These dots are supposed to show that the seed of the Yin is inside the Yang and that the seed of the Yang is inside the Yin. All things involve the other. Everything Yin eventually turns into Yang and everything Yang turns into Yin. There is balance. And balance is good.

This is a very natural way of looking at life. All humans tend to divide life into *two* parts—it's in our nature. If I say to you "right," you think, "left." If I say "up," you think "down." If I say "good," you think "bad." If I say, "true," you think "false." We are good at dividing the world into two parts. We do it naturally. But there is a problem with this—it actually gets us into quite a bit of trouble...

Imagine this example of a married couple. They have problems. The couple has run into financial difficulties because the husband has a habit of buying expensive things without consulting his wife. They often can't pay their debts on time.

The wife sees what is happening, and she tries to talk to her husband about the problem, but he refuses to listen. She knows that *she's* not the one causing the family's financial troubles—*he* is. So, because he refuses to deal with the problem, she begins to resent him. She has been the "good" one. He's has been the "bad" one. She is white, he is black. She begins building a case against him inside her head. Every day that he doesn't talk about the problem with her, her anger builds. Subconsciously maybe, she decides to punish him. As

months go by, they drift apart, seldom talking to each other.

At the same time, the husband begins to resent the wife because she doesn't show him affection anymore. She rarely talks to him. From his perspective, she's not being good to him — obviously, she's the "bad" one. She nags. She complains. She seldom compliments him. She hurts his feelings. He is white, she is black. He complains to his colleagues at work about her coldness. One of his female colleagues sympathizes with him. He talks with her honestly and often about his problems at home with his uncaring wife, and you can guess what happens next, right...

He feels that she has wronged him. She feels that he has wronged her. Inside their own minds, they've both managed to justify their own reasoning. "One is right, the other is wrong. One is black, the other is white."

This is not an uncommon scenario, is it? It's real life. It's a life where we judge others based on their adherence to a set of rules that we keep organized in our minds. Our rules tell us what is right and wrong. Our rules allow us to punish others based on our judgments about them. We feel proud when we have obeyed the rules and when others haven't. And when we see "wrong people" punished for not obeying, we feel justified.

This is very natural. It's the way we naturally operate. Even though it never really works, we humans try our best to order our relationships by using a set of rules. Social systems attempt to do this, and unfortunately, some religions resort to it, as well. Much of modern Islamic and Christian fundamentalism, for example, operates on the very same set of ideas. And the most popular forms of Judaism in Jesus' day operated on the same ideas.

In today's text, we read Jesus' comments about the "law" — the social and religious rules of the Jews at that time. To most of the Jews of Jesus' day, the world was black and white. There were good people, and there were bad people. There were righteous people (mostly Jews) who obeyed the law, and unrighteous people (mostly Gentiles) who didn't. Things were very clear—black and white. The religious leaders—Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees — all operated on the same fundamental idea. That idea was simple: If you live by the rules, you will be rewarded by God because you have been a *good, faithful, and wise person*. But if you don't obey the law, you will be punished by God, because you've been a *bad, unfaithful, and foolish person*.

This is to say that, in Jesus' day, there were only *two ways* — 1) the way of the bad person, and (2) the way of the good person. We read about this in Psalms 1, right? We also read about this in the Book of Proverbs — Proverbs is full of verses teaching about the wise man

who follows the law and prospers, and about the foolish man who disobeys the law, and will be destroyed. Things were very clear. If you have the law, you have all you need to live a good life, because the law tells you how to distinguish between what is good and what is bad, between who is “righteous” and who is “unrighteous”, between who is wise and who is foolish.

But let’s read today’s text again. This is what Jesus says about the law, <read 17-20>...

“...For I say to you that, unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Now, what does this mean? At first glance, this seems difficult to understand. Is Jesus rejecting the law here? No, obviously he’s not. Jesus is *not* teaching that the law is bad—quite to the contrary. Jesus says that the law is good. But there is a *problem* with the law. Jesus seems to think that *the law is not enough*, doesn’t he? In verse 17, it’s recorded that Jesus says the law must be “fulfilled.” He says that the “righteousness” of his followers must exceed the righteousness of the “good” Scribes and Pharisees.”

The word “righteousness” here (義), is used in the New Testament mostly by Matthew and Paul. In the Sermon on the Mount alone, the Greek word translated “righteousness” here is used six times (5:6, 10, 20, 45, 6:1, 33). When Matthew uses this Greek word, he uses it to mean “right actions.” For example, look at chapter 6:1:

“Take heed that you do not do your good deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

The Greek word translated “good deeds” here is the same word translated “righteousness” in today’s text. Jesus is not talking about “legal righteousness” in today’s text. (Paul often uses “righteousness” in a legal context — to talk about our “righteous standing” before God through faith in Christ, but Matthew does not use the word “righteousness” in this way). Jesus is not referring to legal righteousness here, or our “right standing before God,” or our “justification,” he’s talking about *the quality of our good works*. Jesus stresses that the quality of our good works must exceed the quality of the good works of the Scribes and Pharisees if we’re going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is a shocking claim, but it makes us realize that there can’t be only two ways to live — the bad way, of ignoring the rules; or the good way, of keeping the rules. *There must be a third way* — Jesus’ way. There must be a way of a *superior goodness*.

This is the Happy (Blessed) Way — the way that *fulfills*, or perhaps we should say,

accomplishes the purposes of the rules. The third way is a new way — a better kind of “righteousness.”

We read about this Way throughout the famous Sermon on the Mount, of which today’s reading is just a small part. In the opening of this Sermon (Matt. 5:1-12), it’s interesting that Jesus doesn’t set out to teach his hearers how to be *good*. He doesn’t talk about being good at all! Rather, he forces people to use their imaginations by making them think outside the “black and white” framework. He asks us to think about how to become *happy* (“blessed”). He doesn’t say, “*Good* are the meek” or “*good* are the pure in heart,” or “*good* are the peacemakers.” Those qualities are not prerequisites for being *good*. You can be good *without* those qualities — that is, you can obey all the rules without having any of those traits.

Rather Jesus says, “*Happy* are the meek,” “*Happy* are the pure in heart,” “*Happy* are the peacemakers.” Jesus is not teaching about how to become good — the Pharisees and Scribes, along with most faithful Jews, *already* knew how to be “good.” They knew the rules. They often obeyed the rules. Jesus is not talking about that. Jesus’ message is about becoming *happy*. *What makes humans truly happy and fulfilled? What creates Shalom — a world in which all of our relationships are healthy, and which leads to peace?* These are the questions he’s answering.

Jesus wasn’t just another typical prophet in the Old Testament style. The Old Testament prophets, all the way up through John the Baptist, stressed the same fundamental message — “turn away from your sins and start obeying the rules again. Only then will God forgive and heal us!” The prophets’ message was a message of *two ways* — stop being bad, and return to being good. This sounds like the same message many of us tell our children, doesn’t it?

But that’s not Jesus’ message. Jesus knows that it takes more than being good to make people really happy. Rules are good. Following the rules is good. But we need to do *more* than simply follow the rules to be happy and truly content. The world needs *more* than a set of rules — to find shalom. *We need to nurture new hearts.* I believe that this is the fundamental message of the Sermon on the Mount.

Throughout this famous Sermon from chapters 5-7, we find Jesus talking over and over again about the inadequacy of living by a set of rules. In the passage immediately following today’s text, (5:21-48), Jesus offers eight case studies of why the law is not enough to make people happy.

For example, every society has rules prohibiting murder. But in 5:22-26, Jesus encourages us to consider this question, “Will simply avoiding murder make humans happy? It might make us *good*. But it won’t make us *happy*. People won’t be happy until they *let go of their anger*.” This is a *heart* problem.

The rules tell us, “Don’t commit adultery.” But Jesus says, “Simply avoiding adultery won’t make us happy. We won’t be happy until we *let go of lust*, and until we can treat the men and women around us as people rather than simply as objects to be desired.” This is a *heart* problem.

The rules say, “If someone does a bad thing to you, you have the right to punish them — an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” We can punish bad people, and still be good. But will punishing bad people necessarily make us happy? Will it create *shalom* for us? Will it create the peacefulness that comes from right relationships? No, not necessarily. We won’t be happy until we can *learn to forgive*. As a matter of fact, we won’t be happy until we can *learn to love others* — even those who have hurt us deeply — without reserve. These are *heart* problems.

In chapters 6 and 7, we read more examples. Good people pray and fast. But will praying and fasting make us happy? No, not if we’re hypocrites — that is, not if we’re only doing it because we feel like we should, or to make ourselves look good to others. Heart problems.

Good people use their money wisely — they don’t waste it. They save what they can. But will saving money make people happy? No necessarily. The same traits that lead people to become frugal can also lead people into a lifestyle fraught with worry — always caught up in the fear of whether or not they have enough. Jesus knows that money won’t make us happy until we become genuinely generous. Heart problem.

Good people have good judgment — they can determine right from wrong. They can tell when a person has obeyed the rules or has broken them. But does our ability to judge others correctly make us happy? No — not if we have hearts inclined to look at everyone else’s failings, and ignore our own. That kind of attitude won’t lead to personal joyfulness, and it won’t lead to a world of *shalom*. It’s a heart problem.

Throughout this Sermon, Jesus is talking about a Third Way. He’s not asking us, “Are you doing the right thing?” or “Are you doing the wrong thing?” Certainly not! He’s asking us these questions: Do you have the kind of heart that will lead you to true happiness? Are you able to do a better kind of “good deeds”? Have you discovered what the rules are *for*? Have you really tasted and seen the world God envisions for us—the “Kingdom of Heaven on

earth”?

We get the sense from listening to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, that we humans can’t understand the Third Way until something miraculous happens to us — until we are truly renewed from inside out. “Happy are the pure in heart,” he says, “for they will see God.” We don’t decide to follow the Third Way so much as the Third Way opens up to us, as if it were a gift. It is entered upon through an act of grace. It is discovered as we begin to feel God recreating within us a new inner being. That’s what Jesus is talking about when, in John’s Gospel, we hear Him say “you must be *born again*”.

What does this mean? It means coming to discover that *God doesn’t want good people to be his emissaries of hope in this broken world*— he wants much more than that from us. He is not creating “good people” in a world of “bad people.” That’s not the point — God is creating people who can do *much more than* simply follow the rules. Jesus wants to launch out into the world a whole new breed of people — reborn people, *happy* people. Forgiving people, sincere people, people with a deep respect for all their fellow human beings, kind people, non-anxious people, generous people, and above all, loving people. People who live out the heart of God, everyday, in real life.

Simply living a conventional kind of life — obeying society’s rules, being a “good person” — is not what Jesus is suggesting. To the contrary, Jesus is well aware that we often simply use rules as a kind of mask—disguising our own true selves. Even when our hearts are filled with anger or resentment towards other people, we look at ourselves, as if into a mirror — and we see “good people” staring back at us. We think we’re okay, when in fact, we’re really unhappy and suffering.

Think of the scenario of the family with marriage problems I mentioned a few minutes ago at the beginning of this sermon. Remember the husband, and his infidelity? Remember the wife, and her resentment? This is not an uncommon predicament — each looks into the mirror and says, “Why is he being so bad to me?” “Why is she being so bad to me?” Each of them thinks of *themselves* as the right one. “The rules” become useless to them, because the rules in our heads only serve to help us disguise the true complexion of our *hearts*.

Jesus’ Third Way does not ask us to think of ourselves as good or bad. Of course we should follow the rules — that goes without saying. All of us are good in some ways and bad in others. But to live in Jesus Way, with Jesus’ kind of heart, is to ask *these* questions first: *Am I happy? Is what I’m doing right now truly leading to healed human relationships? Is it leading to the world God envisions for us? Is my heart in tune with God’s heart?*

When we ask these kinds of questions we begin to become a *different kind of people*: people who are the “new creation” Paul talks about in II Corinthians 5:17, people who have been freed from bondage to the law, and made alive in the God’s Spirit (Rom. 7:6), people who “abide in Jesus” (John 15:7) and who, in word and in action, act as Jesus’ “body” here on Earth (I Cor. 12:27). *This is the power of the Church*. This is what it means to “be saved.” People who are “not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of their minds” (Rom. 12:2) — these are people who have found the Third Way.

In churches, we often refer to salvation as “salvation from our sins.” That is, we talk about needing to have our *debt of sin* cleared by God. There’s nothing untrue about that, of course — all of us certainly need to be saved from our sins. But that’s only a small part of what salvation means. Too many Christian groups truncate the Christian faith when they stress only what humans need to be saved *from*. This is a particularly bad habit of American Christianity. It sells Christianity very “cheap.”

But Jesus doesn’t stress what we’re saved *from* — he consistently stresses what we’re saved *to*. He paints a picture of a new kind of human who can live above the law; that is, who can live above anger, above worry, above stinginess, above judgmentalism, above hypocrisy, and above self-righteousness. He paints a picture of people who are skilled at renewing relationships with one another through active forgiveness, genuine humility, and mutual care. When Jesus talks about “the Way,” he’s talking about this — about real traits of real people. And he presents himself as a model of this new kind of life. He’s talking about introducing the world to a better kind of “righteousness” — a better kind of “right action” — that leads to true *healing* in our families, in our communities, and in our world.

This is what the world needs to see from the Church right now. It’s foolish for us to think that people will become Christians if the Church doesn’t offer them live examples of people who truly act like Jesus acted — people who *forgive* like Jesus, are *sacrificially generous* like Jesus, are *kind* like Jesus, are *welcoming* like Jesus, are *deeply joyful* in the face of adversity like Jesus. Think about how you became a Christian. I bet you became a Christian because you were moved by *someone you knew personally* who *truly lived out*, in their own daily life, the ideals of Jesus Christ. Am I right about that?

Most people don’t become Christians for purely intellectual reasons. They become Christians because they have *seen* with their eyes a “better kind of righteousness” — a better kind of life — the powerful witness of Christ-like life in another person. They’ve seen uncommon kindness, uncommon generosity, uncommon humility, uncommon respect, uncommon forgiveness. They have caught a glimpse of the Third Way. If people can’t see this—if they can’t see a *different, better* kind of “right action” in so-called “Christians” than

they can see anywhere else, there's not much reason for them to spend their Sundays sitting in a church building, when they could be resting, or playing golf or spending time with their families. Evangelism only becomes effective when the Church is living the Third Way.

So let's take a moment to ask ourselves this question again: Have we really found it — have we found Jesus' way? The *narrow* way to shalom? The way that leads to life? Have we entrusted our hearts to God, to be remade according to God's desires? Have we discovered the joy of the *uncommonly* "good" life?

We humans are not black and white. We're far more complicated than that. Life is far more complicated than that. We need more than the law — we need more than a set of rules — to help us live our lives well. We need hearts directed by a new internal compass, inhabited by a living and holy Spirit. Let's ask God to grant us those new hearts again today.

Let us pray.

Loving Father,

We praise your name!

Forgive us of our sins today, but so much more than that!

Give us hearts capable of forgiving *others*.

In fact, don't forgive us, if we can't forgive them.

We think ourselves as "good" and others as "bad" far too quickly.

We lose our way. We become judgmental, cruel.

This disease — a heart of stone — take it away,

And give us hearts of flesh. Come and live within us—

Overpower us with your vision and with your joy.

Make us free again.

Help us soar above the law, living in *your* life, and with *your* heart,

So that we can learn to truly care for others and

To become your hands of healing in the world.

For this saving grace, we ask in Jesus name again today,

Amen.