

“Maimed”

A Sermon by J. H. Reed

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Text: Matthew 5:21-37

Jesus was a teacher. This morning in Matthew he is teaching. Parents are teachers, too, and parents learn that consistency is important. Setting standards for children that can be maintained consistently is important, but Jesus wasn't a parent and I wonder if he missed that point. That is, were his standards too high, or too low, for entering the kingdom of heaven? Were Jesus' requirements for following him too difficult...or too easy? I don't think Jesus was very consistent in his standards.

So, let's look at the bars that Jesus sets up in some of his teachings. You're going to agree with me about his variable standards. Here's the first one: “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Oh, that bar is pretty low, pretty easy to achieve. So, what about this one: You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But *I* say to you that everyone whoever even *looks* at a woman with lust has already committed adultery...” Whoa! Ouch! THAT's a *high* bar! It was also said, “If you divorce you have to give a certificate of divorce.” But *I* say, “whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Another *very* tough requirement!

Okay, this one: Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink just because you are a follower of Christ, will most certainly not lose his reward. Hey, what? That's way too low—very easy. A cup of water for any other Christian? Of *course* we can make *that* happen.

Next, anyone who is an obstacle tripping just one little somebody with faith would be better off with a 500-pound stone tied around his neck and thrown into the sea! Survey says, unfair, far too difficult.

And if just one little part of your body causes you to sin, cut it off. Wow. Not me, man, not me. That's just crazy.

Maimed? Better to be spiritually whole and physically maimed? Is that even possible? Better to finish life maimed and receive heavenly reward than to come to the end sinful.

I'll never forget the true story of Aron Ralston. There was a movie called "127 Hours" about the young rock climber who got pinned down inside a crevice while rock climbing alone. The young man cut off his own arm in order to live. But that was this life. Or, wait a minute, was it? The minister who married my wife and me was an avid wilderness lover. For sabbatical leave one summer Mike went into the Wind River Range in Wyoming for the month of August for camping and hiking alone. He arranged for his wife and three teenage children to meet him on the other side on August 30th. Sometime mid-month Mike diverged from the planned course he properly had given his family and the forest service. He walked down into a vast bolder field toward a lake, and when one of the boulders shifted ever so slightly, Mike Turner was pinned there by his ankle. There he lived another two weeks, journaling all along, until he died. Just when the search for him was abandoned in late-September because of seasonal weather threat, another group of hikers brought his body out. Could he have cut off his own foot and survived? He had prayed and shouted. But to no avail. Jesus was a good teacher, and sometimes his lessons are very hard. Sin is serious, so serious that it's better to cut off a limb or pluck out an eye to avoid it. I still have all my limbs and both my eyes—I'm in trouble! I should have no limbs and no eyes!

A beloved Sunday school teacher of our daughter told her class about being raised in a condemning church that made her feel that she could never get to heaven. Clara knew she liked that teacher forever. Student and teacher discussed the reality that the Bible sometimes says no one can get to heaven, self-mutilation or no self-mutilation.

Maimed, Jesus? Maimed is good? Well, it isn't good, but it is *better than the only alternative we have to it*—disfigured by sin. Maybe we can get our heads around this. Let's see.... Maimed isn't good, just better than the alternative. What in the world is Jesus teaching here!

I said last week that the very name Gospel means good news. We read the gospels to hear good news. But how rough they can sometimes be to read, “Whoever hungers and thirsts for righteousness will be satisfied,”—that’s you, isn’t it—and that’s me. But I have never met anyone who hungered and thirsted for righteousness who didn’t also grapple with sin and guilt throughout life. And I’ve never met a sinner who didn’t also, down deep in their soul, long for their own just judgment by the God of supreme justice.

During the Iraq war two journalists’ lives were spared when they were given the choice between telling the world they had become Muslims or dying, and so on video they just said they’d converted to Islam, and, *voila!*, freedom. A concerned young child—this is true and isn’t funny--a 7-year-old child asked a priest at his Catholic school if that was okay. The priest told the child that it would have been better if the two had died for Jesus.

Well, perhaps it would have been better for Peter if he had died for Jesus on the night of his arrest, too, instead of denying Jesus in order to save his own life. Better if he had gone to his reward with the marks of torture than whole into the fire of grief that was his life after denying his Lord repeatedly. Yet if we read the whole gospel, and we always must read the *whole gospel*, despite Peter’s faithlessness Jesus made Peter the first bishop of the church. Peter would still get to die for Jesus, but he was not damned by Jesus when he did not die for him at the first opportunity.

Enough of this. The fact is that *life maims us!* Furthermore, *the life of faith maims us!* Struggling to be faithful to the deeper life Jesus gives us creates *strife* for us that can be crippling and certainly handicapping. Even on good days we carry heavy crosses that cripple us. Both our guilt and our struggle to love and serve God have and will maim us. We can so easily become disfigured after long years of trying to see Jesus, trying to be faithful to him and not quite getting it right. The mind can join the body in being maimed, for when you are constantly forgetting what lies behind and reaching for what lies ahead you lose perspective and a bit of reality orientation, as all disciples begin to realize. Religious zealotry isn’t pretty, is it—but our Jesus was a radical, a loving radical, and it maimed him

at the end, and it will us, too. Talk to the Nickel Mines Pennsylvania Amish community whose rural school was visited by a murderer who lined up the girl students in front of the blackboard and shot eight of the ten in the line and then killed himself with his gun. Five of the eight girls died. I wonder how the Amish in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, radically forgave the murderer as they steadfastly did.

In my love for movies I cite a powerful Robert Redford film, *The Horse Whisperer*, that tells the story of a family brought to profound healing through an accident that crippled both a girl and her horse, maimed them both physically and mentally. For quite some time before, her family life had been growing disfigured, so one grand irony in the plot was that the accident brought strange healing through contact with another family. The girl's parents had gone through years of marriage pain and they were brought into marriage therapy as a result of the accident, as well. But in the course of the girl's healing another important healing occurred for the mother, one that can be said to have maimed the mother through love. Jesus was a good teacher because he used the shock value of extremes in his examples. He taught using images and metaphors, strong ones. Be careful when you interpret the Bible literally—because, again, Jesus was not a Biblical literalist, but taught by poetic images as every good teacher does.

We can be healed, redeemed, from our wounds, spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional. Kathleen Norris wrote of her journey to Christian faith, “When I first began to attend church services as an adult I found it ironic that it was the language about Jesus Christ, meant to be most inviting, that made me feel most left out....I experienced Jesus only as a stumbling block and foolishness,” as Saint Paul described Jesus. But she went on to show that the joke had been on her, for others began to see that in her time with them how she was filled with the love of Christ.

It is in communion with maimed creatures, other maimed people, and with our friend and brother Jesus Christ, where we slowly grow in the goodness and importance of knowing that all the broken, selfish things that separate us from God wound us deeply, deform us, and harm our lives. But that is also where we gain *his woundedness* that hurts so good, *his* brokenness we seek that heals. For we seek the radical Son of God who seeks us first. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief! Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows!

What other sort of savior would be able to redeem our lives from the brokenness we create and from which we simply cannot save ourselves no matter how hard we try, and we try hard every day to save ourselves. His *phenomenal image* of cutting off our own arms or plucking out our own eyes is a perfectly fit one for the need of such radical action.

Yet we know we will *not* maim ourselves in order to enter the kingdom of heaven though we maim ourselves spiritually every day. Jesus was not a biblical literalist, however radical he surely was. But we will slowly learn the art of giving up ourselves, releasing our hard, tight, controlling grips on worldly outcomes in order to make the trade that gives us joy and hope and the promise of eternal life—the trade of his dying love for our broken lives. Arriving in heaven we may be shocked at first to see all the wounded ones with wounds similar to the ones we carry in, but healed and marked only with scars and with God’s eternal love. Amen.