



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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But I Say To You

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In my Paper, “This Business of Resurrection”, I suggested that, in addition to the usual ways of understanding, we could see resurrection as something that is of this life – here and now living. Jesus said himself, “I am the resurrection and the life.” In the context of this making that statement, as well as at other times, he could have been speaking of our options as to how we live this life. If he was – or if we choose to interpret that he was – then how he lived and what he taught points us to how to live the resurrection life during this life. Both in that Paper, and this, I am inviting you to look at scripture and belief from this new perspective. It may not be new to you, but it is different from the points of view I usually hear.

Jesus has always impressed me as a person who viewed life from a different perspective than most people. It wasn’t so much that he was committed to seeing things differently, as it was that he saw things the way he did, and was willing to say so. If it happened to coincide with what the majority saw, that was well and good. If it did not, he, nonetheless, stated it as he saw it to be. And, when he said how he saw things to be, “he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.” (Mt. 7:29)

Nowhere in Scripture is this more evident than in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus quoted the Law from the usual point of view (the letter of the Law), and then said, “But I say to you.”, seeking, I believe, to encourage people to respond to the intent and purpose of the Law in their own daily life.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, did challenge the standard interpretations. He first stated those interpretations, and then went on to say what he understood the intent and purpose of the Law to be. The portion to which I refer in the following quotes (from the New Revised Standard Version) is Matthew 5:21-48.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’”

You are forbidden to murder. If you do, you will be harshly judged and punished. So says the Law. No matter how you feel, nor what the provocations, nor the intent of your heart, if you go around killing people, you will be punished. Just don’t do it. That seems perfectly clear.

“But I say to you,” Jesus continues, “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. ...first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ...Come to terms quickly with your accuser.”

Jesus’ interpretation seems more harsh than the letter-of-the-Law one. And, if we stay in the contest of punishment imposed when you break the Law, it is harsher. But Jesus is not in the contest of punishment. He is in the contest of consequence, and of the basic importance of relationships. Anger toward your brother or sister kills you. Acting on that anger kills you. Your anger destroys the quality of the relationship – even the

relationship with God. You can't go on with the other parts of your life as if the anger didn't exist. It does, and it kills you.

If you want to live to the fullest, confront the anger first. Go work out the problems, whatever they may be. Clear the air. Remove the barriers. Your life is at stake. The person with whom you are angry will survive. He or she may suffer incredibly because of your anger, but will survive. In the long run, you won't. Nobody is judging and imposing punishment. You are choosing death yourself, because unresolved anger ultimately means death.

Feeling angry rises out of feeling helpless. I feel most helpless when people do not behave as I want them to, and when situations are different than I want them to be. Things happen to me, and in my life, that I do not want and can't change. Then I feel helpless and angry.

If I choose to hold on to my anger until people change and situations are as I want them to be, I eat myself up with my anger. My alternatives are to alter my beliefs and my reactions, and so release myself from my anger. Notice how I have written that – I release myself from my anger.

Releasing myself from my anger doesn't mean that I no longer care. It doesn't even mean that I no longer want people and situations to be different. It does mean that I focus on how I can see things differently, and what I can do to contribute to the betterment of the situation and the relationship. And I do it so that I can live, as well as to make whatever positive contribution I may be able to make.

Let me simulate an illustration.

You don't read the Papers I write. Or, if you do, you never give me any feedback as to your reactions to what you read. I am angry about that. I feel my anger and let it interfere with my concentration. I even let it interfere with my writing. I think vindictive thoughts. I fault and judge you without any real reason for doing so. I distance from you. I plan ways to get back at you because you are not doing as I want you to. I make no effort to see or understand from your point of view. I just let my anger get more intense.

I expect you have no difficulty seeing where that way of reacting leads.

Now suppose that I decide that I want to release myself from my anger.

First, I release you from having to do as I desire. Of course, I continue to want you to read my Papers and to react to them, but it isn't something you must do.

Second, I recognize that you function from your own values and priorities, and that that is exactly how it needs to be. I continue to function from mine, too. I remind

myself of the value to me of our relationship. I find that I no longer fault and judge you, nor think vindictive thoughts.

I have not set aside my needs and my desires. I have set aside the demand that you meet them in ways that I prescribe. I have chosen to meet you where you are, and to accept you there. I have ended the destruction within me. I have restored my ability to concentrate, and to get on with my writing.

And you, of course, are benefited, even if you have never become aware of my anger, or what brought it on.

It seems to me that Jesus is urging his hearers to come to terms with their anger, and to release themselves from it. The alternative – “You will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

“...paid the last penny.” Not a cost imposed upon me by “law enforcement” nor any other agency, but the cost to me – within me – for clinging to my anger. The letter of the Law doesn’t even deal with this dimension of life.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’”

Surely, the Law is clear on this point. “You shall not commit adultery.” is the renowned Seventh Commandment. Whatever was meant when the Law was given, and in Jesus’ time, we believe that the letter of the Law is that intercourse with a partner other than a spouse is adultery.

Jesus appears to have seen more in the Law than that. He said, “But I say you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” And then he goes on to talk about a member of your body causing you to sin. “It is better for you to loose on of your members,” he said, “than for you whole body to be thrown into hell.”

The letter of the Law focuses on the act itself, saying it is wrong and should be punished. That may well be how it is, but Jesus focuses on the intent of the heart in all behavior, and in all relationships.

“Lust” is seen as one of the seven deadly sins. A mild definition is, “to desire, with an intent to use.” The stronger the desire and the more determined the intent, the more destructive is the thought. Lust, then, goes far beyond sexual encounter, and has to do with the intent of the heart in any relationship toward any person.

Again, the person upon whom I look with lust – unless I act upon lusting – is not likely to be harmed. But I am. When I discount and devalue another person in such a way, I also discount and devalue myself. If I insist on holding on to my lust as a way of relating, I have chosen death for myself. Jesus said, “Your whole body (being) is in

hell.” There are far more constructive ways to relate in both intimate and casual relationship than to lust after another.

And then there are those thorny words of Jesus about divorce. “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

In those days, women were property and had no means of providing for themselves. If a man had not learned loving and caring relationship as God intended, he would tend to see a wife as property for him to use as he chose. If she were unchaste, it meant that she was impure, obscene, wanton, more than that she was sexually active with someone other than her husband. She simply was not functioning as a wife. Divorcing her meant to declare that this was the case, and that he had been unable to alter the situation. For another to marry her meant to enter into that same using relationship with her.

I don’t resolve destructive relationships by re-establishing destructive relationships. I don’t serve anyone very well if I continue what is already destructive. I only contribute to destroying.

The letter of the Law allows divorce. The intent of the Law suggests that people seriously confront the quality of the relationship and correct its problems for the sake of both. If he – or she – will not do this, the relationship is broken.

“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.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all... Let your word be “Yes, Yes’ or No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

The letter of the Law says swear – but not falsely – and carry out what you swear. An oath binds you to perform as you have sworn.

But Jesus suggests, in effect, that there is something the matter with a relationship that requires people to swear to each other before their word can be trusted, or be binding.

There’s a lot of truth in what Jesus says, isn’t there? Taking an oath presupposes lack of trust. In our society, it appears that we assume lack of trust, and insist that agreements or contracts be legally binding. The way our society works, it is naïve not to see to it that agreements and contracts are legally binding. There doesn’t seem to be much trust among people today. There is something the matter with our relationships, isn’t there?

I can’t do a whole lot about other people. I can deal with them as they present themselves to me. Where indicated, I will get the legally binding signature. And I will sign, and so be legally bound.

But I will be clear with myself that my word is my bond. I have to live with me.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer...turn the other cheek...give your cloak...go the second mile.”

Be a wimp. Is that what Jesus means?

It isn't likely that Jesus meant for people to be wimps. It just may be that going the second mile is a more courageous thing to do than not to. He seems to be pointing out that an eye for an eye perpetuates conflict and destructiveness. Not resisting evildoers, turning the other cheek, giving your cloak is not exactly a wimpy thing to do.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Wow!

If I love as God loves, what do I do in the presence of evildoers? What do I do with enemies? Do I protect or defend myself against them?

Jesus didn't. Does God?

I can't tell you what to do. I know that I have no sense that I am perfect. I am prone to be afraid and guarded. Very often I think I must protect myself from evildoers and defend myself against my enemies. At those times, it doesn't occur to me to pray for those who persecute. But deep down in the core of my being, I want to love as God loves. I do not want the destruction that eventually goes with loving only my neighbor, nor with being vindictive toward those who persecute me, nor with being vindictive toward those who persecute me, nor with perpetuating the concept of enemy against enemy.

Can I love as God loves? Can I be perfect as God is perfect?

I do not know. I want to be. I set it as my ultimate goal in life.

“But I say to you.” Jesus teaches me that it isn't a matter of the letter of the Law. It is a matter of the intent – the intent of the Law and my intent.