

Lection referenced: Matt 5:21-37

These first four of six antitheses — where Jesus poses traditional law versus God’s law of Love that he came to fulfill — are more fruitfully understood through the interaction of the two pillars of Mimetic Theory,¹ a biblical anthropology. The first pillar is that human beings desire according to the desiring of others, which leads to reaching for the same objects of desire (*vis-à-vis* “Mimetic Desire”) and thus sows the seeds to human conflict. The second pillar involves the sacrificial logic that founds and shapes human culture: attempting to substitute a lesser or sanctioned violence for the unwanted violence arising from our mimetic desire. The violence ensuing from mimetic desire threatens to unravel human community; sacrificial violence is what we trust to cohere human community.

Jesus fully understands this biblical anthropology; Mimetic Theory unpacks it for modern ears such that we can make use of it in more fully understanding these antitheses between traditional human law and the fulfillment of God’s law in love. A deeper understanding of the Ten Commandments can also assist with understanding these antitheses. Human beings are always at jeopardy of breaking the final commandment against coveting, the law against desiring according to our neighbor, because we are hard-wired for mimesis. Breaking the Tenth Commandment increases our risk to break the others, because the rivalry generated by Mimetic Desire results in increasing envy, resentment, lust, and anger (and ultimately violence). So in the First Antithesis Jesus poses the anger caused by mimetic rivalry (coveting) as on a continuum with slandering our neighbor (Ninth Commandment) and even murdering our neighbor (Sixth Commandment). Likewise with the Second and Third Antitheses, lust is akin to the breaking of the Seventh Commandment on adultery, of which divorce is the humanly legal extension.

The problem of human violence must be addressed at its root. The ultimate solution is the Greatest Commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. In other words, the only solution to mimetically catching our desires from each other is to catch the desire of God the Father’s “complete” love (Matt. 5:48), which is fulfilled in Jesus through the communication of the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, we are left to continue our sacrificial solutions of human law based on human councils of judgment (5:22) and on sacrificial solutions — both in the frightening image of the fires of Gehenna where Jeremiah 7 tells us that God’s people resorted to the fires of ritual child sacrifice, and the more comically characterized lesser sacrificial violence of cutting out one’s own hand or eye. Any solution less than following the complete love of the Father coming into the world through the Son — such as the anthropological powers of sacrificial logic that lead to state-sanctioned sins like divorce (adultery) or execution (murder) — is from the “evil one” (5:37) . These lesser solutions characterize all of our lives if not for the “complete” love of the Father of Jesus Christ which graciously rescues us.

¹From Stanford scholar René Girard. For more on Girard see my essays in this volume: Lent 1A for the first pillar; Epiphany 2A for the second.