

Jesus' Stretch Goals

Matthew 5:21-37 | 2/12/2017

Atul Gawande is amazing. In addition to being a surgeon in Boston, he is a professor at Harvard Medical School and a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Plus, he has written three bestselling books and has received a MacArthur fellowship -- a "genius grant." He is married with three children. In his free time, he directs a center for health systems innovation. He is also the chairman of a nonprofit organization which works to make surgery safer around the world. Gawande's latest book, *Being Mortal*, is "wise and deeply moving," according to the late Oliver Sacks, who was a physician and best-selling author.

On top of this, Gawande is humble. "I have never been a facile writer," he admits. "For me, the words come only slowly and after repeated effort." He thanks his wife Kathleen for helping him to find the right words.

Gawande is great at everything. When confronted by such accomplishments, most of us feel inadequate. Even Charles Duhigg, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist who writes for *The New York Times*, can feel this way. He should have been proud of the fact that his book, *The Power of Habit*, was a bestseller. But when he looked at some people around him, he realized he wasn't doing as much as he could.

Duhigg was especially awestruck by Gawande, and he confessed that "I felt like I was playing in the kiddie pool," said Duhigg, "while Atul was swimming in an Olympic."

Duhigg could have kept on splashing around with the little kids. Nothing wrong with that. But instead, he looked into how some people are able to tackle so much, and wrote the book, *Smarter Faster Better: The Secrets of Being Productive in Life and Business*.

One piece of advice is to *stretch yourself*, he says. The reality is that the more ambitious you are, the more you'll do. Duhigg recommends creating "stretch goals." "A stretch goal is a huge ambition," he says. "It inspires our motivation and dreams. But it can create panic." To avoid panic, Duhigg says that we should break stretch goals down into shorter-term goals that are more achievable. Big stretches are best achieved one small stretch at a time.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers us some very ambitious stretch goals. He speaks to his disciples and a crowd of people, and Matthew reports that they are "astounded at his teaching" (7:28). These listeners realize that they have all been splashing around in the kiddie pool while Jesus is swimming in an Olympic pool.

Point is, the people listening to Jesus as he taught were fascinated by his teaching. And many of them wanted to jump into the big pool with Jesus. They wanted to follow Jesus.

So what are some of the stretch goals that Jesus sets before us? In his teachings about anger, adultery, divorce and oaths, Jesus creates a contrast between yesterday's kiddie-pool living and tomorrow's Olympic-pool attitudes and actions. As we wrestle with each one, we move closer to our stretch goal of swimming with Jesus. The only way to get there is one small stretch at a time.

Concerning anger, Jesus says that the rules of the kiddie pool are "you shall not murder" and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment" (v. 21). These seem like completely sensible rules, especially since no one wants to swim in a pool in which people are drowning each other. The slogans "Black Lives Matter," "Blue Lives Matter," and "All Lives Matter" remind us that we all want a world in which people can live without fear of being murdered.

But Jesus wants us to stretch ourselves to swim in the Olympics. This is where the rules are harder: "If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment" (v. 22). For Jesus, avoiding murder is not enough. We are also supposed to control our anger.

Two years ago, a Jordanian pilot was burned to death by the Islamic State, and the news was full of angry talk. "I demand none of them amongst us be kept alive," said the pilot's grieving father. "I demand the revenge be greater than executing prisoners." A politician in Jordan said, "Let's kill their children! Let's kill their women!"

Such anger is understandable, but revenge and punishment will not bring peace to the Middle East. Violence is a cycle deeply rooted in human nature, and revenge killings have kept this wheel turning for thousands of years. You may be aware that the maxim "an eye for an eye" is actually an attempt to break the cycle by declaring that you can *only* take an eye from a person who has taken your eye -- you cannot kill their women and children.

For Jesus, the goal is not revenge but reconciliation. "When you are offering your gift at the altar," says Jesus, "if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift" (vv. 23-24). In a similar manner, Abraham Lincoln advised that the best way to destroy an enemy is to turn him into a friend, and Mahatma Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." All of these leaders knew that revenge never succeeds in breaking the cycle of violence.

Concerning adultery, Jesus says that the rule of the kiddie pool is that "you shall not commit adultery" (v. 27). This is a very sensible rule, since faithfulness in marriage is the glue that holds families together. When the covenant of marriage is broken, people suffer -- men, women and especially children. But Jesus is not content to enforce the rule against adultery. Jesus says that "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (v. 28). Jesus is warning us that it is not healthy to do one thing with our minds and another thing with our bodies. Instead, we are to keep the two together.

Bromleigh McCleneghan, the author of a book called *Good Christian Sex*, believes that the rise of "emotional affairs" proves that Jesus knew what he was talking about. When you hold mind and body together, says McCleneghan, "you don't actually have to commit adultery to sin against your partner." This is a tough goal, for sure, but it leads to healthier relationships between marriage partners.

Concerning divorce, Jesus reminds us of the kiddie pool rule: "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" (v. 31). This rule seems reasonable, although it does make divorce a rather easy thing for a man to do. But in the Olympic pool, Jesus says that "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery" (v. 32). Here, Jesus is saying that divorce should not be an easy thing for a man to acquire, because marriage is one of the foundations of family and community life.

In the time of Jesus, marriage was essential to the well-being of women because they had very few economic or legal rights apart from men. And, in both ancient times and today, divorce can have a negative impact on the welfare of children. According to census data, nearly 40 percent of single-parent households in the United States were under the poverty line in 2010, compared with just 10 percent of married-family households. So you might say that Jesus is hard on divorce because he cares so deeply for vulnerable women and children.

Does this mean that divorce among Christians should never be permitted? No, not at all. There are times when divorce is the best way out of a terrible relationship. But working for the health of marriage is one of the stretch goals of a follower of Jesus.

Finally, *concerning oaths*, Jesus notes that the rule of the kiddie pool is that "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord" (v. 33). Once again, this is a very sensible rule that encourages people to keep their promises. But Jesus offers a higher challenge -- a stretch goal -- to anyone who wants to swim with him: "Do not swear at all" (v. 34). Instead, "let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one" (v. 37). Jesus is saying that all words should be truthful, not just words spoken under oath. Everything we say should be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth -- not just the things we say with our hand on a Bible.

Anger, adultery, divorce and oaths. The words of Jesus on each of these can challenge us, stretch us and sometimes make us feel inadequate. But the good news is that Jesus is always swimming right beside us, helping us to make it across the Olympic pool. He will stretch us a little more each day, until we are able to achieve the goals he sets out for us: Working for reconciliation, being faithful to our partners, strengthening our marriages, and speaking the truth.

We won't be great at everything. But we'll be swimming with Jesus, which is always amazing.

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