

Series Sermon on the Mount

Scripture Matthew 5:21-30

The Sermon on the Mount was teaching specifically targeted for the twelve apostles who had been chosen to represent Jesus after His death, resurrection, and ascension. These twelve men did not know what was in store for their lives, but Jesus did, and He set about preparing them for the future.

Jesus knew that the thinking of the Apostles had been shaped by centuries of misinterpretations of the Old Testament Law. If the Twelve were to be engaged in future ministry, they needed to be reoriented to the truth of God and to know how things worked in God's kingdom.

You will recall that Jesus began with a description of the character of kingdom people. This initial description, which we refer to as the Beatitudes, was given from the standpoint of insiders — people who were already members of the kingdom. This, of course, was the view that Jesus understood since He had come from heaven. As the God/man, He lived out the truths of the kingdom during His years on earth. It is important for us to remember that the Beatitudes do not explain how an individual becomes blessed and happy. Rather they describe the character of people after they come under the gracious rule of God.

Jesus taught the Twelve in the presence of many, many other listeners. The statements of Jesus came across to many of these listeners as radical and idealistic. The Beatitudes stirred up many questions in their minds, including their concerns about Jesus' loyalty and adherence to the Old Testament Law. In the previous message we thought about verses in which Jesus defended His adherence to the Law. He said that He had not come to abolish any part of the Law but, rather, had come to fulfill it in every respect. Jesus assured His listeners that no part of the Law would disappear, not even the smallest letter, until the end of human history.

Jesus did not back away from the shocking statements He had made about righteousness even though He would have noticed the raised eyebrows and recognized the reactions of His listeners. The concluding statement in the passage we thought about last week was undoubtedly the most shocking statement of all. He had said, "I tell you the truth, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Matthew 5:20*).

The listeners would not have been able to imagine that anyone could keep the law more strictly than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These religious leaders were the acknowledged experts of the Old Testament in Israel, and the ones who were most zealous about upholding the Law. They were the ones who had determined the course of Judaism through their interpretations of the Scriptures. How could Jesus say He was upholding the Law and yet condemn the religious leaders? How could He say that His followers had to have a righteousness which exceeded that of the religious leaders?

Today we are moving into the section of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus answered these questions. In the last half of Matthew chapter 5 Jesus gave six examples to back up His statement about righteousness. In these examples, we will discover that Jesus was concerned about two interrelated issues: first, the incorrect and misleading interpretations of the Law as taught by the religious leaders, and, second, the need of His listeners to have the correct understanding of the original and authentic intentions of the law.

There is a pattern in these examples which call attention to these two issues. Jesus introduced each example with the same distinctive words: "You have heard that it was said ..." Next, He cited the Old Testament command that He wanted to explain. Then He said, "But I say to you ..." and pronounced the correct authoritative meaning and application that the listeners needed to know.

Please keep in mind, as we study these examples, that Jesus, in His teaching, did not oppose the law itself, but the religious leaders' shallow and inadequate understanding of the true intentions and meaning of the commandments of the law. The religious leaders of Israel had reduced their obedience to the Old Testament commandments to a superficial and legalistic conformity to the "letter" of the law. Jesus taught that true obedience meant a deep, heart-felt, inward conformity to the actual intent of the law. Jesus was concerned about the "spirit" of the law.

Today we will focus on the first two examples.

Read Matthew 5:21-26

This first description concerns the sixth commandment; "You shall not murder" (*Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:18*). This would be a commandment that every religious leader could boast of having kept, or so they thought. For them, murder was the actual taking of a person's life.

The theme in these verses is "judgment." Everyone understood that a murderer was subject to judgment. The Old Testament law required the execution of a murderer (*Genesis 9:5-6; Exodus 21:12; Numbers 35:16-17; Deuteronomy 21:1-9*). Jesus, however, declared that a person was subject to judgment for three additional reasons. The first reason was "anger." Jesus said that "Anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Anger is, of course, the source of murder. When a person is inappropriately angry, there is the desire to deprive another person of rights, value, position, even identity. The ultimate form of deprivation is the taking of life.

According to Jesus, kingdom righteousness is not achieved simply by refraining from homicide. The religious leaders were technically correct in their understanding of the law, but their understanding did not go nearly far enough. The deep meaning of the law, as explained by Jesus, involved the attitude of the heart. Unimpeded anger is the spiritual equivalent of murder (*See I John 3:15*). The members of God's kingdom were not to harbor in their hearts the attitudes of anger and hatred towards others. The listeners on the mountainside would have considered this another radical point in Jesus' teaching.

The second reason a person would be subject to judgment is insulting another. The word, "Raca" was a term of contempt, usually translated into English as "empty-headed," or "idiot." Name calling was a highly unusual and serious offense in the Jewish culture because a person's name was associated with a significant characteristic of the person.

Let me illustrate this with some Biblical examples. Abram's name was changed from "High Father" to Abraham, "Father of a Multitude" after God promised that he would have as many descendents as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. Jacob was given the name "Heel-grabber" at birth but it was later changed to "Israel," meaning "Having power with God" after he wrestled with an angel. Elisha's name meant "God is My Salvation." Immanuel means "God with Us." In Jewish thinking, an insult stripped away a person's real identity and substituted it with the insult word. In our western society, an insult doesn't carry the same weight as in Biblical times or even in the Middle East today. *(However, we must remember that Muslims are easily offended when derogatory names are applied to Mohammed by Westerners.)*

Jesus stated that anyone who said to his brother, "Raca," was subject to the Jewish Sanhedrin court. This was another place of judgment.

The third additional reason for judgment was the result of using the word, "Fool." This insult was similar to the word "Raca" but it had moral connotations. Jesus said the person who used this word when addressing another person also deserved to die.

Jesus was not just thinking of physical death. The reference is "the fire of hell." The person who has attitudes of resentment, anger, and hatred in his heart faces everlasting punishment. The religious leaders put the emphasis on the outward act, but Jesus emphasized the inner disposition of the heart. God has never wanted people to merely obey rules; rather, He wants them to be as holy as He is, to value what He values.

In verses 23-26 Jesus gave two illustrations to explain the seriousness of anger. The pronouns in these verses change to second person singular ("you") because Jesus wanted to apply these illustrations directly to His listeners. The first illustration involved an offering on the altar, which would be in the temple. So important was the issue of anger and so urgent was the need for the listeners to be reconciled with the people that they had offended, that Jesus instructed them to "leave their offering there in front of the altar" and immediately seek reconciliation. Note that Jesus said that the person who had given offense was to initiate the reconciliation. The primary responsibility to seek reconciliation is with the one who had wronged someone else. In real life it seldom happens that way.

The context of the second illustration was a dispute over money. In this case, Jesus instructed His listeners to settle matters before the beginning of legal action, before the outcome became irreversible. It is obviously too late to resolve a dispute after judgment has been pronounced. The point of both illustrations is to deal with anger issues before the time of judgment. Jesus wanted His listeners to understand that each person was accountable for his or her angry attitudes, not just for external behaviors.

To put this teaching in the broadest spiritual context, Jesus was emphasizing the need of His listeners to not think or do anything which would stand between their relationship with the heavenly Judge. Anger and unresolved malice toward others will bring everlasting judgment on a person. Jesus implied that reconciliation was an urgent matter, because a person could never know when their lives might come to an end, and if they had to stand before God on the day of judgment without ever dealing with their heart attitudes, they would face “the fires of hell.” Compared to the common interpretation of the law, Jesus was presenting a radical truth.

The second example that Jesus gave in His comparisons between the interpretations of the religious leaders and the righteousness demanded by the law concerned lustful attitudes of the heart.

Read Matthew 5:17-30

The Old Testament commandment to not commit adultery is in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. In the Jewish culture, adultery was considered to be a matter of theft; that is, it was one man stealing another man’s wife. Jesus, however, considered adultery to be a matter of purity of heart and mind, hence the word “lust” was the best way of describe it. Also, notice that Jesus did not limit His teaching to thoughts toward another man’s wife, but broadened His application to lust toward “women” in general.

Jesus explained that it was not enough to only avoid actual improper sexual behavior. He said that adultery in the thoughts of the heart was as bad as the actual act. “When any (married) man looked at a woman lustfully,” he had, in his thoughts, replaced his wife with another woman. Jesus thus insisted that the purity of the marriage relationship included mental and emotional fidelity between husband and wife.

In the Jewish culture, the emotions, desires, will, and personality of a person were centered in the heart. This was the place where a person made choices, where actions originated. The sin of adultery, like other sins, sprang from the heart. This concept overlapped with another of the Ten Commandments. “Coveteousness” was another form of wanting something in a way that was displeasing to God.

There was a second reason why the subject of adultery was considered one of the most serious offenses of the law. Throughout the Old Testament period, the Israelites frequently followed the practices of pagan religions and gods. The unfaithful practices of the Israelites which led to the broken relationships between God and His people were often referred to as adultery. For example, God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel to say, “How (much) I have been grieved by the adulterous hearts of the people, who have turned away from me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols” (*Ezekiel 6:9*).

Jesus illustrated the seriousness of lust through two extraordinary statements: “If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out,” and “if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” These statements were deliberate exaggerations for the sake of emphasis. Jesus was not calling for literal self-mutilation, but He was indicating that rigorous self-discipline was required of the people who wanted to please God. Kingdom people were expected to deal radically with their lustful fantasies and imaginations. They were to avoid mental stimulations which sprang from improper desires of the heart. Jesus stated that individuals who allowed their thoughts to go in improper directions would be judged and cast into hell. Jesus’ listeners needed to know that it was better to suffer significant but minor losses willingly than to suffer everlasting loss unwillingly.

Once again Jesus reinterpreted the common understanding of an Old Testament commandment, giving the deeper meaning. Once again, He shifted the understanding of the listeners from the external act to the inner attitude. Once again Jesus called attention to the radical standards of conduct and character of kingdom people.

The listeners on the mountainside undoubtedly recognized that Jesus was describing spiritual qualities which were beyond attainment by human effort. However, we, as New Testament people, can experience the blessings of heaven here on earth. The Apostle Paul concisely explained the human dilemma and the heavenly solution in these words: "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law. Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known. ... This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Then Paul asked, "Do we nullify the law by this faith?" His answer, "Not at all. Rather, we uphold the law" (that is, "we meet the requirements of the law") (*Romans 3:20-24*).