

Are You Right With Your Brothers and Sisters?

Matthew 5:21-26

Introduction: 1) It is a popular proverbial saying: “The heart of the matter is the matter of the heart.” It is popular and proverbial because it is true. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard is right, “Actions do not emerge from nothing. They faithfully reveal what is in the heart....The heart is not a mystery at the level of ordinary human interactions. We discern one another quite well” (*The Divine Conspiracy*, 144).

2) Jesus has just informed us that, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). In other words unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of these religious experts who dotted every “i” and crossed every “t” of the Law, you can’t be saved. Of course the Bible is clear we cannot obtain such righteousness. It is a gift granted by God to the humble in Spirit (v. 3) and the pure in heart (v. 8). Such righteousness is fundamentally different than one that rigidly and legalistically follows a set of rules of “dos” and “don’ts” and thereby believes it has merited God’s acceptance. It is a righteousness amplified, clarified and expounded in the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with what is often called “the six antithesis” (5:21-48). Here Jesus contrasts the interpretation of the Law by the

scribes and teachers of the Law with His own. Surveying the contrasts by quick comparison is quite helpful and instructive.

<u>The Command</u>	<u>The Principle/Intent</u>
1) Do not murder	Do not even allow anger in your heart
2) Do not commit adultery	Do not even allow wrongful lust in your heart
3) Let divorce be done legally	Do not divorce except for sexual immorality
4) Do not swear falsely	Let you “yes” be “yes” and your “no” be “no”
5) Equal retribution is okay	Go the extra mile for your adversary
6) Love your neighbor and hate your enemy	Love your enemy and pray for them

Chuck Quarles, I believe, nails it when he says, “The antitheses...contrasts Jesus’ ethical demands with those of the Old Testament law as interpreted by the scribes. Jesus’ teaching and His interpretation of the Old Testament transcend the literal demands of the law. He surpassed the law by insisting that one should avoid sinful attitudes as well as sinful actions (5:21-30)...showing that the behavior of His followers is to be guided by God’s own character rather than merely by His commands (vv. 43-48)” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 106).

Matthew will continue to portray Jesus as a New Moses and “the fulfillment of the Exodus: he is the Son God has called out of Egypt (Matt 2:15); he passes

through the waters in his baptism (3:13-17); he is tested in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11); he expounds the law of God in the mountainous region (Matt. 5:11)” (Ferguson, *Sermon on the Mount*, 82).

This new Moses knows that it is the relationships of life where the rubber meets the road, and so that is where he begins (vv. 21-26). Issues of anger and reconciliation head the list He will address.

I. Watch your heart before it gives way to evil actions 5:21-22

1) “You have heard that is was said” or a similar phrase fronts each of the six antithesis (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Jesus begins with the Bible’s prohibition against murder, the sixth of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). He then adds “a summary of Old Testament teachings regarding the penalty for murder”: “Whoever murders will be subject to judgment.” Those who murder were to stand trial, and if found guilty, they were sentenced to death (Exod. 21:12; Lev. 24:17; Num. 35:12; Deut. 17:8-13)” (Quarles, 108). This has all the trappings of a criminal case in a court of law.

2) God, however, has more in mind than just prohibiting the evil act of premeditated murder. He is concerned both with murderous acts and murderous attitudes. He knows the issue is ultimately one of the heart.

Thus in verse 22 Jesus warns us about even allowing the attitude that could lead to murder. Again, He knows the issue is ultimately one of the heart. He warns us about even allowing the attitude of anger to get a foot in the door of our heart.

The Bible has quite a bit to say about anger in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is obviously an important subject to God and therefore it should be for us.

- 1) Psalm 37:8 – “Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret –it only leads to evil.”
- 2) Proverbs 14:29 – “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.”
- 3) Proverbs 15:1 – “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
- 4) Proverbs 15:18 – “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.”
- 5) Proverbs 22:24 – “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered.”

- 6) Proverbs 29:11 – “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.”
- 7) Ecclesiastes 7:9 – “Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.”
- 8) Ephesians 4:26-27 – “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.”
- 9) Colossians 3:8 –“But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.”
- 10) James 1:19-20 –“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this:
Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”

In this text Jesus stair steps his argument in a descending and intensifying manner.

- anger with your brother → liable to judgment
- insults his brother with “racca” (“empty-head”; idiot) → liable to the council (the Sanhedrin)

- calls him a fool (Gr. *mōros*; moran) → liable to God's judgment and to hell itself

Quarles points out the severity of the final insult and notes, “the use of *mōros* in Matthew's Gospel shows that it is far more severe than merely calling someone an idiot. The word is used in Matt. 7:26; 23:17; 25:2-3, 8 to describe those who do not truly belong to the Kingdom. Calling a brother “moron” was essentially calling him unregenerate and unsaved and consigning him to hell” (Quarles, 100-111).

The word for “hell” is the Greek word *gehenna*. This is the first time the word appears in the New Testament. Jesus said more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. In fact, the only time the word is used by anyone other than Jesus is in James 3:6. “Hell” is the New Testament word used for the place of eschatological punishment (Matt. 5:29-30; 10:28; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). The Greek word *gehenna* comes from the Hebrew *gehinnom*, “Valley of Hinnom,” a valley south of Jerusalem where Kings Ahaz (2 Chr. 28:3) and Manasseh (2 Chr. 33:6) offered child sacrifices to the pagan god Molech. Declared unclean by Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), it became the place to burn refuse and to dispose of corpses (Isa. 66:24; Jer. 31:40). The prophets proclaimed oracles of doom on it, and *gehinnom* became a

symbol of final judgment (Isa. 31:9; Jer. 7:31-32; 19:6). It is a place of unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12; 22:13; 25:30), and an eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). Only God has power to cast both body and soul into hell (see also Luke 12:5).

No doubt Jesus' words sounded extreme and over-the-top to his listeners. They certainly do to us. Don't give in to the temptation to water them down! He meant to shock our dull sensibilities. Jesus states things purposefully in the extreme to make crystal clear that the expectations and standards of the Kingdom of God far exceeds those of this fallen, evil world and the standards set by sinful humanity. God is not just concerned about your external acts. He is concerned about the condition of your heart that is the source of those acts. Jesus makes the point again in Mark 7:20-23 when he says, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person." Watch your heart. Guard your heart. The stakes are very high.

II. Get right with your brother before you give your money to the Lord

5:23-24

- 1) The word “so” that begins verse 23 points to an important connection. The following verses (vv. 23-26) illustrate the strong words of Jesus in verses 21-22. Because of our differing historical contexts, there is not a one-to-one correspondence in the specifics details between the 1st century and our own. However, there are basic abiding principles that transcend all cultures that are true for all persons anytime, anywhere and under any circumstances.
- 2) There are two illustrations (vv. 23-24 and vv. 25-26). The first has to do with our financial giving to the Lord. You come to the temple to worship. A component of that worship is giving. You place your offering on the altar before the Lord but then your conscience reminds you that “your brother has something against you” (v.23). This is not some unreasonable, irrational grudge, but a true and legitimate grievance. You have genuinely hurt and wronged your brother or sister. There is a real problem that needs attention. What does the Lord expect? Verse 24 provides the answer: “leave your gift there before the altar and go. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (emp. mine). You cannot worship God with integrity without a clear conscience and right

relationships with your brothers and sisters. It is foolish and hypocritical to even try. Ferguson is right, “[Jesus] recognizes that our relationship with God is primary, but we always appear before God as those related, rightly or wrongly, to our fellow men. What we are before God involves how we are related to others” (84). Carson is even more direct when he says, “Forget the worship service and be reconciled to your brother; and only then worship God. Men love to substitute ceremony for integrity, purity and love; but Jesus will have none of it” (*The Sermon on the Mount*, 42).

3) 2 Corinthians 9:7 teaches us, “God loves a cheerful giver.” Matthew 5:24 teaches us, God loves a giver with a clear conscience. Matthew 5:9 tells us that citizens of the Kingdom are peacemakers. Our text before us calls us to be peacemakers before we worship, specifically, before we worship God with our giving. Otherwise, our gifts mean nothing as far as God is concerned.

III. Settle now if you can your differences with others and avoid bigger troubles later 5:25-26

1) Jesus introduces a 2nd illustration in verse 25. Interestingly the word “brother” is replaced by the word “accuser” or “adversary.” The issue, however, is similar. You find yourself at odds with another person. The

nature of the disagreement is of such severity that it appears the courts must get involved. This has all the components of a civil case, something Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians 6 in a manner very much like what Jesus does here.

2) Now, there is a key biblical principle that under girds what Jesus is teaching us. We find it in Romans 12:18 where the Bible says, “If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone.” From this instruction and in the context of Matthew 5:25-26, John Piper makes two helpful observations: 1) “We are only responsible for what others hold against us when it is owing to a real sin or blundering on our part. 2) We are responsible to pursue reconciliation, but live with the pain if it does not succeed. In other words, we are not responsible to make reconciliation happen” (“Getting Right with God and Each Other,” 3-10-92).

So, a problem arises that could go to court. It is possible you can take the initiative and avoid this happening. Work quickly and nip it in the bud! Seek to make the issue right and do so as fast as you can before it ever gets to court, you lose, wind up in prison (in that historical context) and you are forced to pay an even more hefty fine or payment, an obligation that will probably fall on your family or friends since you will be in prison. Settle now, probably pay less, and avoid all sorts of additional sorrow and headaches. The longer you wait to seek reconciliation, the more severe the consequences are likely to be.

Keep things from escalating. Act now. Spurgeon said it well, “a lean settlement is better than a fat law-suit...make peace with the utmost promptitude” (*Matthew*, 46).

3) So, we have some important questions to raise and answer.

- Are we responsible for any grudges someone has against us?
- Are we responsible for any anger someone has against us?
- Are we responsible for any bitterness someone has against us?
- Are we responsible for any hostility someone has against us?

If so, what are we doing about it? You see it is absolute hypocrisy to say that you are good with God but not good with others. Even if you are not the angry or offended party, if you know there is a problem, Jesus says seek to resolve it. God, who is the ultimate reconciler, has called us to a reconciling mindset, a reconciling heart.

Conclusion

1) Sinclair Ferguson is very helpful in summarizing this text of Scripture. He writes,

“Jesus is not telling us to “hang out our dirty linen in public,” but rather to deal urgently and fully with all breakdowns in fellowship before they lead to spiritual assassination” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 86).

2) God has called those of who have experienced the peace of God to be

peacemakers, in so far as we can, with others. God has called those of us who

have experienced reconciliation to be reconcilers, in so far as we can, with others. It requires humility. It requires reaching out and getting out of your comfort zone. But you will joyfully discover, it is worth it! Our God, in reconciling us through Jesus, thought it was.