

# Matthew 5:21-32 – “The True Intent of the Law”

---

## 1. A Review of the Law

Last week we ended in Matthew 5:20 where Jesus said, *“that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Now this would have been both a shock and concern to those listening on. There was a proverb that said if only 2 people were to make it to heaven, one would be a scribe and the other a Pharisee.

The scribes and Pharisees portrayed themselves as the masters of the law. But for such a long time the law was being abused, or misused. The Pharisees and scribes were looking to follow it to the minutest detail, and along with that they added their interpretations and traditions to it that it became an exhausting list of rules and regulations to follow. But in this pericope of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus seeks to bring people back to the true intent of the law because things had gotten so far from God’s heart for the law.

- The law had 3 categories to it:

**Ceremonial** – This was their instruction regarding the worship of God (the sacrifices and ceremonies and such).

**Civil/Judicial** – This was their instruction regarding their daily living, and carrying out just punishment for crimes and wrong-doings.

**Moral** – This was their instruction regarding their relationship to God and fellow man (the 10 commandments).

But the religious leaders began to complicate it and make it a heavy burden. They divided the law into 613 commandments by this time: 248 do’s and 365 don’ts. And then to further complicate things oral traditions were passed down on what it looked like to truly follow the law. These got codified in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. in the Mishnah. Commentaries known as the Talmud were then written to explain the Mishnah.

“Glancing, for example at *Shabbath* 3–6 in the Mishnah we note that a new lamp can be moved from one place to another on the Sabbath, but not an old one; hot food may be kept warm by covering with clothes, feathers or dried flax, but not by covering with damp herbs or straw—which could engender fresh heat (and thus ‘work’) on the Sabbath day. An ass may go out on the Sabbath day wearing its saddle cloth if this was fixed on before the Sabbath, but may not wear a bell even

if it is plugged (that would be work for the ass). Goats may go out with a protective cloth on their udders if it is to keep them dry, but not if it is intended to collect the milk ... and so forth. And all this was intended to preserve scribal righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

To give even more instances of how burdensome their interpretation of the law became: the command, “*Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy... In it you shall do no work,*” what constitutes work? So, they dissected this command to no end.

- You would have to take off a prosthetic limb or hand, or false teeth on the Sabbath because to walk around with it would be considered work. Anything heavier than a dried fig was seen as a burden, thus it was work.
- A woman couldn't look into a mirror because if she saw a grey hair and plucked it out she would be harvesting – work!
- If you spit on the Sabbath you had to do it on a rock, because if you spit on the dirt and it rolled in it to make mud you were plowing.
- You could only go a certain amount of paces from your house on the Sabbath, so the Pharisees would go and set up lean-tow's along the roadways and call them extensions on their home. That way they could travel a fair distance and never break their rules for the Sabbath.
- This kind of observation to their traditions and interpretations still exists today with Orthodox Jews. In early 1992, tenants let three apartments in an Orthodox neighborhood in Israel burn to the ground while they asked a rabbi whether a telephone call to the fire department on the Sabbath violated Jewish law. Observant Jews are forbidden to use the phone on the Sabbath, because doing so would break an electrical current, which is considered a form of work. In the half-hour it took the rabbi to decide “yes,” the fire spread to two neighboring apartments.

And for many, the scribes and Pharisees had it down. They were the righteous people of their day. Yet now they are told they need to have a righteousness beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees. You see the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was an external one. It was a life lived outwardly, yet their attitudes were corrupt. Jesus is beginning to show the Kingdom way is a matter of the heart. There needs to be a work done inwardly. And it goes back to the Beatitudes. Realizing we are nothing in ourselves. We have nothing to commend us to God. We are poor in spirit, but we hunger and thirst for Christ's

---

<sup>1</sup> Green, M. (2001). *The message of Matthew: the kingdom of heaven* (p. 93). InterVarsity Press.

righteousness, by which we are able to stand before God. We receive His mercy and grace and understand it's a work of His Spirit that brings about the transformation of the heart.

And so, Jesus begins now to go through some of their laws and show them the true meaning of the law; God's intent of the law. And He shows that it is a matter of the heart. It's been well said that the heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.

Jesus is going to take us through 6 examples of the law. And as He does He shows us what has been said about the law from an external level, but then leads us into the more weightier matters of the heart and seeing the more internal attitudes that were to be guiding the follower of Jesus.

One last thing, Jesus said He didn't come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (5:17). We like to say often times, *we're no longer under the law*, as though we're excused from the law. But we are not excused from the law, the law is good! We're just no longer under the penalty of the law. The law was that tutor to safeguard us and lead us to Christ.

- **Galatians 3:24–26**, *"Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup> But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. <sup>26</sup> For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."*
- So, in Christ fulfilling it, He fulfilled its demands. He's the only one able to live by it perfectly and righteously. So now our righteousness comes by our faith in Christ.

So again, Jesus looks to the law now. Not to contradict it, but to explain the fuller purpose of it.

These 6 examples are known as the 6 antitheses. Jesus is not contrasting His interpretation with Moses' teaching of the law, rather He's challenging the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees and looking to clarify the true intent of the law. Again, that it goes beyond the external to the internal.

## The Command

Do not murder.

Do not commit adultery.

Let divorce be done legally.

Do not swear falsely.

Equal retribution is OK.

Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

## The Principle/Intent

Do not even allow anger in your heart.

Do not even allow wrongful lust in your heart.

Do not divorce except for sexual immorality.

Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Go the extra mile for your adversary.

Love your enemy and pray for him. <sup>2</sup>

## 2. Murder and Anger – 5:21-22

**5:21-22 - “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.**

Each of these 6 antithesis statements begin with these words (or a form of it): **You have heard that it was said**... Remember, so much of what people received and were taught were teachings passed down from others.

In this case Jesus points out the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment from Exodus 20:13, **you shall not murder**.

---

<sup>2</sup> Akin, D. (2019). *Exalting Jesus in the sermon on the mount*. Holman Bible Publishers.

Now people were familiar with this of course but they interpreted it by thinkin as long as I don't end a life I'm good. I could harbour some pretty murderous thoughts, but as long as I don't pull the trigger I'm good.

- "When God gave the sixth commandment, He did not just want people to refrain from murdering one another. He wanted them to refrain from the hatred that leads to murder. Murder is only the external manifestation of the internal problem. The scribes and Pharisees dealt only with the external act. Jesus showed that God's concern ran much deeper. Refraining from homicide does not constitute a person righteous in God's sight. Inappropriate anger renders one subject to judgment at God's heavenly court "since no human court is competent to try a case of inward anger." (Constable quoting from Stott)

Jesus is pointing out what the law said and the extent of where people carried out the law, but now He begins to show the true heart of the law. And He does it by saying:

***But I say to you...*** This was a loaded statement. In saying this Jesus was declaring His power, His authority, and His deity. Rabbi's in this day would never speak on their own authority, rather they would repeat sayings and teachings from others. They would pass things on saying, *"There is a teaching that..."*. So, when Jesus comes and says, *But I say to you...* that immediately got the attention of His listeners.

If there were Pharisees there listening in, they would have been dealing with some anger in their hearts right at that moment. Which is fitting because Jesus is going to deal with this subject.

Again, Jesus looked at a portion of the law that the religious leaders could follow outwardly. They would do everything but just come short of killing someone. But Jesus begins to show now the inward standard of God's righteousness. It's not only murdering someone outwardly that can bring judgment, but it's having an anger inwardly towards another than can lead to judgment.

We look at murderers and wonder, *'How could they ever be driven to do that?'* But the very anger that led them to do that is the very anger that pops up in our hearts from time to time. You see, Jesus is showing us that it's a condition of the heart that we need to look at.

Most of us can look at the law and say, *'I've never murdered anyone, I'm doing alright.'* But it's the attitude of the heart. When we have a root of hatred in our

heart, we are in a same standing before God as a murderer – condemned under the law, in need of a Saviour.

Now the Bible says, “*be angry and do not sin*” (Ephesians 4:26). There is at times a righteous anger that we can have when we see injustice, corruption, and sin. However, most of our anger does not fall into that category. It is an anger born out of selfishness and sin. Jesus gives a couple examples:

**Raca** means ‘empty-head’. A very disrespectful term in that day. It was an assault on one’s intellect.

And saying to someone, **you fool**, was even harsher in that it was an assault on one’s character.

- Who are we to cast such accusations? Are these not the people Jesus died for? Are these not the people that Jesus wants to reach with His love? And when we come into the picture with words of anger and hearts of hatred, we’re hindering the work of God. We are cutting them down and placing ourselves in judgment. We are murdering a part of them when we call them a bonehead or idiot; when we speak judgmentally of them.

There are times where we need to show a righteous anger. But again, it’s anger in control. Jesus is addressing an unrighteous anger here, because it’s there inwardly that murderous acts are birthed outwardly.

And it’s these things that can lead to judgment and danger of hell fire.

- Jesus used the word *Gehenna* for **hell fire**. It’s the first time it’s used in the N.T. “The Greek word gehenna comes from the Hebrew gēy hinnom, “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 Kgs 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 gēy hinnom 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 eternal punishment (Matt 25:46).”<sup>3</sup>
- Some have thought hell is not real and Jesus only spoke of it figuratively. But that’s not the point at all. Jesus used a literal place to give an illustration of what a literal hell will be like.

People thought judgment would only come by being caught in the outward act. But Jesus says judgment begins by what you harbour in your heart.

<sup>3</sup> Akin, D. (2019). *Exalting Jesus in the sermon on the mount*. Holman Bible Publishers.



**5:23-24 - *Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.***

The Jews would bring their gifts and sacrifices as an act of worship for God's goodness and forgiveness. But if you remember an offense with a brother, go first and make that right. Don't ask God to do for you (forgiveness) what you won't do for another.

- Does this mean we need to backtrack and go find every person we've wronged in our life? No. Be led of the Lord. If a brother is on your heart, leave your gift and fix the relationship. God is more interested in us being reconciled than in performing a religious duty.
- Don't hang on to anger and do your best to make things right with those perhaps angry with you.
- Many see these verses speaking of how we're to be quick to go to believers and keep family ties at peace. But the next verses seem to focus on our relationship with unbelievers (***your adversary***).

**5:25-26 - *Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. <sup>26</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.***

In this day the plaintiff had to go and track down the defendant personally and take him to the courts. Jesus says while you are on the road with your adversary make a deal. Reconcile the situation. Be quick to apologize for your own good. Because if you are stubborn, you may end up in prison and you will be there until you pay the last penny. However, if you are imprisoned, how can you make any money? You will be trapped and unable to pay.

- There is a real good lesson for us in this. Many people have allowed anger to get the better of them. They have refused to be humble and apologetic. They have fought their case and been unforgiving. The only problem is that their anger has imprisoned them. They have come to the place of being trapped, unable to live the life of freedom and joy, the life of blessing and happiness that God has for us.

Jesus says it's not just about murder outwardly; it's the condition of the heart inwardly. Anger will lead to danger. Keeping the law is not just an external thing it

is an internal thing. And we see that we are all guilty of breaking the law. But this is what Jesus wants people to see. We are guilty, but He is gracious, we are sinners, but He is a Saviour. The heart of the law is to lead us to Jesus. He has perfectly fulfilled the law, that we might be justified through Him. Amen!

### 3. Adultery and Lust – 5:27-28

**5:27-28 - “*You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’<sup>28</sup> But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*”**

Jesus again shows it is a heart issue. Righteous living is measured by what’s internal, not external.

I’m sure we’ve all looked with lust in our hearts before. In the Lord’s eyes, we’re in the same camp as adulterers. But we’re just confirming what Romans 3:10 says, “*There is none righteous, no, not one!*”

- Jesus is not saying that the act of adultery and adultery in the heart is the same thing. Fornication in the head may not have the same consequences as fornication in the bed, but what Jesus is showing us is that they are both sin and are in violation of the law.
- The Pharisees were afraid of coveting or lusting, so they would walk with their heads down. Sometimes because of such a desire to not break the law they would walk into things. They were the original ‘head bangers’. They thought if they’re going to remain pure, they need to cover their eyes. But Jesus reveals next that the eyes are not really the problem.

**5:29-30 - *If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.<sup>30</sup> And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.***

First of all, Jesus is speaking in hyperbolic language here. If this was something we were to truly apply to our lives, we’d all be showing up next Sunday with patches over our eyes and hooks for hands.

- The early church father Origen took this verse literally and castrated himself. What Jesus is showing us is that the hand is not the cause of sin. The eye is not the reason for your sin. These are the instruments that execute the action of sin externally, but the attitude of sin began well before that. It started in the heart.



Murder was not the only sin itself, it was the result of sin that was brewing through anger internally.

Adultery was not the sin itself, it's what your lustful thoughts led to. Sin began well before the act.

You could remove an eye, or remove a hand, but guess what, you're still going to be left with instruments capable of sin. You could remove everything until you're just a torso being wheeled around, but you still have a heart capable of wickedness and a mind prone to thoughts of evil. This is why we need to be born again. Nothing fixes our problem unless you're surrendering everything over to Jesus and allowing Him to make you new! This is the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

What Jesus is communicating to us is that we need to be ready to deal with sin. It needs to be confessed and dealt with seriously because of its deadly effects. We don't go to hell because we failed to follow an aspect of the law perfectly, we are sentenced to hell because we've not confessed sin and received Christ's righteousness. Deal seriously with sin and be right with God. For the believer this is more to do with discipleship than salvation.

#### 4. Divorce and Consequences – 5:31-32

**5:31-32 – “Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup> But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.”**

The Pharisees and Sadducees had 2 schools of thought regarding divorce. Some believed that Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was speaking only of sexual immorality – adultery (which was a capital offence). Others however felt that Deut 24:1-4 referred to anything that your wife did that wronged you.

So 2 camps formed following 2 first century Jewish scholars:

- Rabbi Shammai – he was conservative. He said divorce can only be granted because of uncleanness, which was interpreted as sexual immorality – adultery.
- Rabbi Hillel – he was liberal. He said it's not just being unclean sexually, it was if your wife did something that upset you; if she caused you to sin it brought uncleanness. It got so ridiculous that this group would say If your wife burned your toast for breakfast, you could divorce her. If she spoke

negatively of your parents, you could divorce her. If you found one that was more virtuous than your wife, she would be unclean by comparison, so you could divorce her.

Now we're going to cover marriage in a little more depth elsewhere in Matthew.

We know from Scripture that God hates divorce. These verses are not meant to give a way-out clause for marriage but rather to show the permanence intended for marriage. It is to be the lifelong union between one man and one woman.

- Some believe that the purpose of a certificate of divorce was only meant for a couple that was betrothed and where one was found to not be a virgin. Such was the case with Mary and Joseph. They were betrothed (seen as husband and wife) but the marriage was not consummated until their wedding night (up to a year after their betrothal).
- However you may view divorce, there are consequences that ensue. Nobody gets off unscathed.
- No matter what has happened in a marriage, even sexual immorality, there's always opportunity for reconciliation. That's God's heart and it should be ours too.