

Matthew 5:21-32

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[0 : 00] So, murder, adultery, divorce, heavy stuff. I can't say I have enjoyed studying this passage, not so much because of the serious and difficult topics, but because of the reality of what these verses say and what they expose.

Because when I was asked if I would be able to preach on this passage, I had that kind of, oh, I don't want to feeling that I recognize meant that I should probably do it.

You see, I'm pretty much a good person, or at least I'm not a really bad person. I'm fairly respectable. I've never murdered anyone.

I've never committed adultery. But this passage says otherwise. I am guilty. So, it's not necessarily enjoyable to study, but it has been worthwhile.

And I trust it will be just as worthwhile for us as we look at it together tonight. So, in this passage, we have the first three of six sayings of Jesus that start with, you have heard it said.

[1 : 30] And when we look at these verses, I feel that we need to do it in light of verse 20. So, if you look back at that, you see that Jesus says, for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And I think that verse really sets us up for what Jesus says about murder, adultery, and divorce. So, let's start with murder.

This is the sixth of the Ten Commandments. And Jesus says, Now, the Pharisees would have been totally on board with this.

This was one of the Ten Commandments. They would have totally agreed with this. And if they found somebody guilty of murder, then they would have been quite happy to make sure that he was punished accordingly.

But Jesus goes on to say, But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, Raka, and this is kind of a, seems to be a Hebrew or Aramaic swear word that kind of means like empty-headed, you know, really sort of saying that that person is worthless.

[3 : 02] Okay, if they say that, they are answerable to the court. And anyone who says, You fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Now, I would like to say that this is not actually new. If we look in the Old Testament, we see that God has always desired this.

If we look at Jeremiah, chapter 17, verse 10, it says, I, the Lord, search the heart and examine the mind to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve.

Okay, it's never just to mean about actions for God. God cares about our desires and our thoughts. If we think back to Cain and Abel, okay, that very well-known story of the first murder, the Bible tells us that Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord.

But Cain also brought an offering, fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering, he did not look with favor.

[4 : 14] So Cain was very angry. And his face was downcast. Okay, here we see what's going on internally with Cain.

He's not murdered Abel yet. He's not got there, but he is very angry. And the Lord said to Cain, Why are you angry?

Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door.

It desires to have you, but you must rule over it. Okay, Cain has given this warning from God. Okay, it matters what's going on in his mind. Sin is out to get him.

He needs to be ruling over his thoughts and bringing them in line with what God wants. But he doesn't. And we see Cain goes to his brother Abel, tells him, Let's go out to the field.

[5 : 32] And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. If we let our thoughts of anger and hatred, if we let these things build and grow, then inevitably bad things will happen.

If we look at the many mass shootings that there have been, there was another one just the other day.

Very often these are seen to be carried out by people who are filled with rage and hatred. It all starts with thoughts and feelings.

Thoughts that will no doubt have started small and will have grown. So what should we be doing? Okay, and then, well, Jesus tells us that we should be making a priority of being reconciled to others.

Jesus places this even above offering a gift to God. And notice in verses 23 and 24, the focus has shifted slightly.

[6 : 47] It's not if you have something against someone. It's if they have something against you. And this harks back to verse 9 of our chapter, which says, Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

We need to be asking ourselves, have we wronged someone? If we are to blame, have we done what we can to be reconciled?

If not, are we willing to do what we can before we come back together next Sunday? For Jesus, doing what we can to fix our human relationships is extremely important.

Then in verses 25 and 26, we have some very practical advice. Some very practical advice in a very literal sense.

It's better to stay out of court if you can. Okay, the verses say, Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

[8 : 14] Truly, I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. And I'm sure most of us can think of stories we've heard of about people who could and should have settled things out of court, but instead went to court and lost even more than they would have.

Perhaps you've heard of families stories of families who went to court over an inheritance to get what they thought they should rather than agree a compromise.

And what's happened? Well, they've just lost everything in legal fees. So this is practical advice in a very literal sense, but it also applies to us and God.

If we are not reconciled to God, we will be judged and thrown into an eternal prison. It should be noted that prisoners in Jesus' time had no opportunity to earn money in jail.

If they didn't have the money to pay the fine, they would not slowly be paying it off in prison. No, instead, they would require someone else from outside to pay.

[9 : 33] And we'll come back to that thought at the end. Let's move on to adultery then. Let's see how Jesus tackles the seventh of the Ten Commandments.

And we'll see a similar pattern. You have heard that it was said, you shall not commit adultery.

Okay, the people he was talking to, they already knew this commandment and I'm sure they would have agreed with it.

But Jesus goes on. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Again, Jesus is talking about obeying the spirit of the law, not just the letter of the law.

If we think of David and Bathsheba, we see how his sin will have started with a lustful look. One evening, David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace.

From the roof, he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful. And David sent someone to find out about her. When David saw Bathsheba, if he had not had that lust, that desire to have her, then that would have been the end of it.

[10 : 59] But those lustful thoughts took hold and I'm sure you know the rest of the story. And today, Jesus' words clearly speak against pornography.

There is no way we can justify thinking that looking and not touching is okay. It is adultery. Then Jesus gives us some advice in verses 29 and 30.

Now these are not to be taken as practical, literal advice. For he says, if your right eye causes you to stumble, gorge it out and throw it away.

It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

This is not literal advice. Blind people can still lust. But it does show us the seriousness of the issue. And it shows us that we need to do whatever we can to stop our sin.

[12:18] Are there places we shouldn't go? Things we shouldn't watch or read? Because they will lead us to stumble?

If so, what are we going to do about it? And really, it is our desires that cause us to stumble.

It is the desires of our heart and our mind. But if we cut those out, what's going to happen?

And again, we'll come back to that at the end. So the last bit of our passage then. Divorce. It has been said, anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

[13:28] Some rabbis in Jesus' time essentially taught that divorce could be for any reason whatsoever. Not unlike today's laws on divorce.

but Jesus shows the seriousness of marriage and divorce. And he shows us that Moses' law should not be used to justify divorce.

It was there to put limits on divorce. Our desire in marriage should be for it to be lifelong as God intended.

we shouldn't treat it as a simple contract that we can cancel if we feel like it. Again, Jesus is looking for people to follow the spirit of the law rather than just the letter of the law.

We should not be interpreting things to suit ourselves and our wrong desires. So what can we do about all this?

[14:36] If we know that our righteousness cannot surpass that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law then we know we can't enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus showed us it's impossible for us. who here could say they're not guilty?

This is the bad news of Jesus but thank God we have the good news of Jesus. His righteousness alone surpassed that of the Pharisees.

He did not hate and condemn people even when he was hated and condemned. He is the faithful husband to an unfaithful people.

He came to reconcile people to God and to pay our debt to keep us out of prison. So I guilty as I am I'm putting my trust in Jesus and his righteousness.

[16:00] I'm trusting not in what I can do but in what he has already done. His death paying the price so I don't have to.

His resurrection giving us the sure hope that the price has been paid. But having Jesus is not a license for me to live however I feel like it.

We can't neutralize or correct the Pharisees' legalism with license. They are not opposites.

Legalism and license are two sides of the same coin.

We can't please God by just trying to tick some boxes. Done that, done that, not done that. Instead, God is pleased when we are pleased with him.

We need Jesus to be transforming us from the inside out, giving us the new heart and the new mind that we need, creating in us the desire to love God and to love his ways and to trust that God's rules really are the best ways to live.

[17:34] Psalm 37 verse 4 says this, Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.

may you delight in the Lord. May you desire him and his ways and may he give you himself.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. God, no matter how uncomfortable it may make us feel, no matter how difficult it may be to swallow.

Lord, we thank you for it because we know in it there is life and there is goodness. Lord, I pray that these words we have read and thought about already will bring us life.

And as we discuss things together, Lord, I pray that you would be with us and you would help us and you would help us to help each other.

[19:00] Lord, I pray that we would be fanning that flame of desire for you. And we thank you for Jesus and all that he has already done for us. And I pray that our trust would be fully in him. We pray this in his name. Amen.