

Matthew 5:17-32

CENTRAL THEME: *Kingdom religion is about the heart, not external obedience*

Jesus has come to fulfil the OT Law. He explains that standards in the kingdom of heaven are higher than those of even the Pharisees. For while they were rigorous in outward obedience, God calls for heart obedience, not just box-ticking.

Context:

Jesus is teaching about life in the kingdom of heaven. He began with the beatitudes, exposing how radically different the values of heaven are compared with the kingdoms of earth. All of this begs the question of how Jesus' teaching relates to the OT Law – is he rejecting all that God had taught his people through Moses...?

1. Greater Righteousness (17-20)

'Matthew 5:17-20 are among the most difficult verses in all the Bible...' (Carson p.38) All evangelical scholars agree that there are elements of continuity between the Old and the New Covenants, and there are elements of discontinuity. Discerning the boundaries is the source of endless debate. What is clear from verse 17 is that while Jesus has not come to contradict the OT Law*, he has not come to leave it unchanged either. The Law will endure (1Peter 1:24-25), but he will fulfil it – bringing it to its intended goal. Indeed, the Law points to Christ just as much as the prophets: 'For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ' 2Cor 1:20

• How then does Jesus fulfil the law?

- i. perhaps the primary meaning here is that Jesus fulfils it in his *teaching*, as he unfolds the true meaning and direction of the OT commands. '*Jesus appears to be concerned with two things: overthrowing erroneous traditions, and indicating authoritatively the real direction toward which the OT Scriptures point.*' Furthermore,
- ii. he fulfils it in his *life*, as he lives out those commands in daily obedience.
- iii. he fulfils it in his *death*, as he bears the punishment due for breach of the law on the cross (Galatians 3:10-14).
- iv. he fulfils it lastly by enabling his disciples to keep it through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 31:3; Romans 3:31, 8:1-4; Galatians 5:16).

Jesus fulfilment of the Law affects different parts of the Law (or rather our relationship to it) in different ways:

The *Civil Code* of the law that regulated the life of God's people when they were a nation state do not apply to the Christian. They teach us about God's morality, but they don't bind us. What this means is that God's people no longer execute civil/criminal sanctions on those who break God's law. The church's sanction now is to excommunicate (1Cor 5:5)

Likewise the *Ceremonial Laws* relating to the *temple sacrifices* have served their function now that the reality to which they pointed has arrived – namely Christ and his final sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:1-14).

The following verses illustrate how we should relate to the *Moral Commands* of the Law. In verse 20 he is not teaching that even the Pharisees fall short of God's

standards, and so we must seek the righteousness that comes only by faith in Christ. That is true, but that is not his point. The following verses show that he wants us to understand that the kingdom of heaven requires a righteousness that is more than skin deep; a righteousness that concerns heart motivations and attitudes, not just external actions. God is concerned with the character from whom the act flows. As Sinclair Ferguson points out, '*the Pharisees had not only failed to understand the gospel... they had also misunderstood the law.*' (cf Luke 11:39-42)

Jesus demonstrates this by considering a number of commands (we will look at 3 this week, and 3 next week). The law had always taught that, but the teachers of Jesus' day had twisted and misapplied the law. The heart of the law was love for God and people (Mark 12:28-31). The Pharisees reduced it to 603 tick-box commandments.

*Authors of Scripture can mean a variety of things when they refer to '*the Law*'. From the fact that Jesus distinguishes the Law from '*the Prophets*' in v.17, and then refers to it as '*commands*' in v.19, it is apparent that he is speaking about the commandments which God gave to his people through Moses.

2. Murder & anger (21-26)

Jesus begins by quoting the 6th Commandment (Exodus 20:13). But then he drives it into the heart. The 6th Commandment was never just about avoiding killing people. It was always part of God's fundamental command that we love one another (Matt 22:37-39). Anger is therefore a serious matter. Jesus draws the link between the outward action (murder) and the inner attitude that drives it (anger). The first murder is a case in point. God challenges Cain about his resentful anger towards his brother (Gen 4:1-7). Cain however allows his anger to fester, leading him to commit the first murder – the murder of his own brother. Jesus is of course not condoning anger against unbelievers (those who are not '*brothers*'), as is made clear in vv.43ff. Rather, he probably uses the word '*brother*' here so we will hear the echo of Genesis 4. The second half of verse 22 shows that we must also avoid an attitude of contempt. The same heart attitude that lies behind murder is also evidenced by this kind of talk.

Jesus presses the point home in 23-24. It is more important to be reconciled with a fellow believer than to perform religious duty. Hypocrisy is of no value to God. Hands that offer to God while a heart hates other humans will not find God's approval. He finishes by turning from the spiritual reality to practical ones. In verses 25-26 he warns that allowing grievances to grow and failing to sort them out may lead to unpleasant consequences on earth too – such as a losing a court case and being thrown into a debtor's jail. Romans 12:18 is helpful in reminding us that it's not always possible to reconcile, even when we want to. But Jesus' words impress on us the importance of trying!

- Sometimes we trip up over Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount because he speaks in such an 'extreme' and unnuanced way. For example, is not godly anger a good thing? Jesus is using a deliberately punchy teaching style, designed to shock us and ensure we feel the force of his message. It is right to apply some nuance from other texts, but only when we've let his words hit home properly. (A good example of Jesus' teaching style is seen in the comparison between his teaching in Matt 15:1-9 and 10:37-38 / Luke 14:25-26).

3. Adultery & lust (27-30)

The second example considers the 7th commandment, which condemned adultery. Adultery merited the death sentence in the OT Law (Lev 20:10). That is unthinkable to most in the modern west. Yet our society is full of evidence of the damage and destruction wrought by adultery. It is far from trivial. So Jesus addresses the heart attitude behind it – lust. With murder his point was that anger leads to it. Here he says that lust does more than just lead to adultery. It is a form of adultery – adultery of the heart. It is however true too that we are much more likely to commit sexual sin with our bodies when we have grown used to sinning in our hearts and imaginations.

Jesus moves on to some of his most famous and shocking words. The early church leader Origen famously took verse 29 rather literally and had himself castrated. That can't be right. If Jesus meant us to take it literally, he'd have told us to pluck out both eyes if looking at things was a problem! Jesus is warning us in the strongest possible terms that sin is to be avoided at all costs. We are to deal with the root of sexual sin, and we are to take drastic action. I am amazed by how often people tell me that they are struggling with looking at porn on their smartphones, but when challenged to get rid of their smartphone, or to have a house rule that they never have it in the bedroom, they respond with something about the inconvenience... A right response to Jesus' teaching from those struggling with lust will mean taking actions that feel as extreme as chopping off one of my own limbs!

4. Divorce & Remarriage (31-32)

Discussion of adultery leads naturally on to a consideration of divorce and remarriage. It is important to recognise that this is not the only passage which addresses divorce and remarriage. In Mark 10 Jesus permits remarriage in some circumstances. Jesus' purpose here is not to provide comprehensive teaching on divorce but to correct a terrible mishandling of God's law. The men of the culture had concluded that because the Mosaic law provided a mechanism for divorce, that they could divorce for any reason, so long as they followed the procedure. (Perhaps the link with the previous verses is that rather than commit adultery, a man might just divorce his wife so he can hook up with his lover).

So Jesus' teaching here is not aimed at providing a full answer to when and why divorce and remarriage might be permissible, but at warning us against a lax attitude to divorce which is utterly incompatible with the God who views marriage as a picture of his permanent, faithful commitment to his people (Ephesians 5:31-32). These words should sober those thinking about marriage or who think that marriage is easy, as much as they should warn those who think it is a small thing to walk away from a difficult marriage.

APPLICATION

These are not difficult verses to apply. They teach us that true religion is a matter of the heart, and they should lead us to examine ourselves, particularly in the matters of anger and lust. They should also lead to deep rejoicing as we recall that we are saved by Jesus obedience and sacrifice, not by our obedience to his words. If we feel condemned, we need to turn to 5:3-4!

QUESTIONS

Verses 17-20:

- How does Jesus relate to the OT Law?
- In what different ways might Jesus be said to obey the OT Law?
- From what you know, what was the Pharisees' righteousness like (look to Luke 11:39-42 for help on this)?
- What might Jesus mean by a '*greater righteousness*' than theirs?

Verses 21-26

- What is the link do you think between murder and anger? Perhaps turn to read Genesis 4:1-8 to demonstrate this.
- How do the contemptuous insults of verse 22 relate to Jesus' point?
- What is the scenario in vv.23-24?
- What principle can we draw from Jesus' teaching here? What does it teach us about God? (cf v.20)
- What might this mean in practice for us?
- What motivation is there for reconciliation in vv.25-26?

Verses 27-30

- Do most people in our society think lust is wrong?
- What is the problem with lust according to Jesus?
- What is Jesus' remedy for lust?
- If we're not meant to take Jesus' teaching in vv.29-30 literally (after all, I can lust with my left eye as well as my right), then what is his point? [*Drastic action that deals with the roof*]
- What might this look like in practice in our lives today?

Verses 31-32

- How nuanced is Jesus being in this whole section? We need to remember that as we read these verses too. They are not a comprehensive treatment of divorce, but aimed at addressing one particular issue.
 - From v.31, what seems to be the attitude to divorce in Jesus' day?
 - What is the force of Jesus' teaching?
 - What attitude to marriage does he have? How does this fit with vv.27-30?
- What does this passage as a whole teach us about the character and concerns of God?
 - Spend a few minutes thinking what specific actions you need to take as a result of what Jesus teaches.
 - How do these commands lead you to appreciate Jesus all the more?