

Matters of the Heart

Matt. 5:21-30

Intro. How many have played the telephone game? (I'm not talking your response to sales and political calls at suppertime.) I'm talking about the game where one person whispers something to the person seated next to them who then tries to whisper that same message to the person next to them and so on around the room. By the time the message reaches the last person, it's distorted and usually bears no resemblance to the original message. By transmission from person to person, the message is corrupted and the final version is often hilarious and makes no sense.

By the time Jesus came, God's Law had been in effect roughly 1,600 years. Even though God has supernaturally preserved His Word through the centuries, the oral tradition which interpreted and defined God's laws had become corrupted. Physicist and Bible commentator, Chuck Missler calls such distortion and interference, "*hostile jamming*." (I like that phrase...it sounds impressive.) Parts of the Torah, or God's law, were neglected while other parts were expanded in hundreds of regulations codified in the *Talmud* and the *Mishna*. These minute regulations replaced and actually became more important than God's commands. In **Mk. 7:8** Jesus said, "**You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.**" Like the current US Tax Code, all this defining, expansion and interpretation distorted and complicated God's law and left the average person confused and bewildered. Human nature was the culprit responsible for this. In **I Tim. 1:8** Paul wrote, **We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.** But given enough time, even the most perfect item will be corrupted in the hands of imperfect people. Have you figured that out?

People were astonished by the teachings of Jesus. **Matt. 7:28, 29** says, **When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.** Jesus spoke only the Word of God. He spoke eternal truth plainly, directly, and with love. His teachings were like X-ray or Ultra Sound. They cut through the all the trivia. They penetrated outward appearance and targeted matters of the heart.

Remember the men who dragged to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery? Whatever Jesus wrote on the ground, sent her accusers running like field mice from a flame! I think He wrote the name of each man...names of men He'd never met. When He stooped to write the second time, He may have written a woman's name next to each man's name...women these men had been involved with but weren't married to. By doing this, He fulfilled the prophecy of **Jer. 17:13 – O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water.** This event illustrates the power of Christ's Word whether spoken or written.

The reason Christ's teachings stood apart was that He taught as **One who had authority.** Of course He did! He is the Son of God...God incarnate! His Father wrote the Law and in Christ, the Law was fulfilled. In **Heb. 4:12, 13** the unique power of God's Word is declared. **For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.** The reason Jesus spoke with such authority and penetrating power is because He is the Word of God! From His field of vision nothing is hidden. Everything is uncovered and laid bare! And friends listen...each of us will stand before Him someday. Before Him every rationalization and self-justifying excuse will be dismissed and thrown out of court. This being the case...you and I are OK only when Christ says we are. **Prov. 16:2 - All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.**

In the crowd who first heard this Sermon on the Mount, there was a class of people who really felt they were OK. The Pharisees and Law teachers were intoxicated by their own self-righteousness. But they were victims of the telephone game. As far as the law was concerned, 1,600 years had passed and they were at the end of the line. The original message from God had been terribly distorted and misunderstood. Yet these men were confident they were right with God and qualified to guide others. 3 x's in Matthew's gospel Jesus called them "**blind guides.**" In **Matt. 23:23, 24** Jesus said, "**Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**" This indictment helps set the stage for the 6 teachings we want to begin to consider this AM. The Pharisees and law teachers had misunderstood and misapplied God's Law. Their understanding of righteousness and how it is obtained was wrong so what they taught others was wrong. In reality, they relied on their own energies to produce righteousness instead of relying on God who justifies the wicked. (Rom. 4:5) They majored on minors. They dedicated themselves to the many fine points they added to God's law while neglecting the more important matters. They were oblivious to the spirit of the law and God's original intention. Jesus said they were diligent when it came to tithing spices, but negligent in matters of justice, mercy and faithfulness.

As we've noted previously, the key verse in the Sermon on the Mount is **v. 20** where Jesus said, **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.** In other words, every person needs a righteousness that rises above the superficial / self-righteous / truth-dodging efforts of the Pharisees and law-teachers. We need a righteousness that is true, but we also a righteousness that proceeds from a pure heart. That's the only kind God can approve.

1. The truth about God's command against murder – vs. 21-26

- **What you've heard... v.21** - "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' We need to put ourselves in the scene here. Jesus was speaking not just to this audience, but through His Word, He still wants to speak to us today. He began with God's 6th command, "**You shall not murder**" (**Ex. 20:13**)

Now let me take a wild guess at what you might be thinking at this moment. You're thinking you just dodged a bullet. You're thinking, "*This is gonna be an easy day in church because I never killed anybody! No worries that my toes will be stepped on this AM...because I'm innocent!*" If my guess has any validity, you're thinking just like a Pharisee! Congratulations!

There probably wasn't a Pharisee in the crowd who had actually taken life from another person. In nearly 40 years of pastoral ministry, I've had only one convicted murderer attend church. I see you looking around...relax, I'm pretty sure he isn't here this AM. He killed a man in self-defense. It was kill or be killed. (If you're cell phone is turned off and you're friendly to those around you, no one will get hurt) But here Jesus here affirmed the 6th commandment as well as capital punishment God proscribed for those who commit murder. In v. 17 Jesus said He didn't come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. This regulation given centuries earlier was still in effect. So far so good. We're OK.

- **But I tell you..v.22** - **But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.** So much for an easy time at church!

The verb tense of **is angry** is imperfect which signifies continuing action. It signifies anger that boils inwardly and refuses to be resolved. Somebody said, "*To store up anger is like stuffing parking tickets in your glovebox.*" Like those tickets, anger doesn't go away, it only matures.

There is a righteous form of anger or indignation that is appropriate for God's people. We should be angry about sin and social injustice. We should be angry when God's standards are ignored and God is mocked. I think many Christians are deficient in this department. Like the frog in the kettle, sin doesn't trouble us as much as it should.

But righteous indignation isn't in view here. Instead Jesus was talking about anger that results from some sort of personal conflict or offense. It could be anger aroused by envy / jealousy / a difference of opinion / an oversight / a misunderstanding / or some other irritating situation. The difference between what was commonly understood and what Jesus said is this... In **v.21** He said, *murderers will be subject to judgment* (OK, we know that) But **v.22** says *anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment*. In other words, murder and bitter resentment are in the same category. Both deserve the same penalty! The Pharisees and law teachers never taught that! Jesus wasn't changing or adding to the 6th commandment. He was simply correcting years of misinformation that ignored the spirit of the law and watered down God's command.

It should be obvious that murder or actually taking another person's life is worse than harboring a grudge against them. But in God's view, the angry attitude is as evil as the murderous act. The one is visible... committed by the hand. The other is invisible...committed by the heart. Cain was no doubt guilty of murder before he ever killed his brother. The attitude and the act are both contrary to the heart of God. Both sins leave a person guilty and worthy of judgment or condemnation. I'm sure you've heard the expression, *"If looks could kill..."* Well in God's sight, they can and they do! An angry look can be just as evil as physical violence. In the movie entitled, "A Few Good Men," Colonel Jessup's melt-down exposed the bitter resentment and ugliness in his heart. These harbored attitudes, says Jesus, are just as condemning as the act of murder.

From an evil disposition, sin often escalates to name-calling. **Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin.** It wasn't flattering to be called **Raca**. **Raca** means empty-head. It's equivalent to calling somebody thoughtless or mindless...a knucklehead...an idiot. Have you ever done that?

My mother tells a story from my childhood. It seems I got in the way of some grumpy old man in a grocery store. I returned to my mother crushed and almost in tears. I pointed his way and said, *"That man called me a crumb!"* (I was 23)

In Israel, slanderous speech was against the law. A person could be brought before the Jewish ruling council for name-calling. But how does God view slander and verbal assassination? Jesus continued **...But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.** The difference between **Raca** and saying, **you fool** is negligible and not the point. Instead of one being worse than the other, Jesus gave two examples of the same hurtful response. Experience has taught us all that words can heal and words can hurt. **Prov. 18:21** says, **The tongue has the power of life and death.** So in effect, Jesus meant something like this...*"Forget the Sanhedrin...if you call somebody a fool, you're in danger of God's judgment and Hell."* Why? Because God's standards are higher than you think they are. His view of righteousness is higher than human courts and higher than the status quo and higher than the standards you were taught. Unresolved anger that erupts in verbal assaults is just like murder. These volcanic words wound and destroy as effectively as a weapon in your hand.

If we turn this text around and work backwards from name-calling to hatred to murder (or the actual elimination of the person we dislike)...we discover the evil behind white supremacy / anti-semitism / radical Islam and every form of racial pride and bigotry. Why do these groups sponsor terrorism and murderous atrocities?...because they label and hate people who don't share their skin color or religion. The Bible says God loves the world, not just one particular person or race of people.

But church, we need to hear this...a family who would never tolerate murder but tolerates racism is a family that practices godlessness! It doesn't matter how much church they do. Jesus said heart attitudes can be as evil as pulling a trigger or detonating a bomb. So if anyone thought they had a pass this AM because they never killed anybody, Jesus has news for us all. There isn't a person among us who hasn't been guilty of murder as God views the crime. There isn't one who hasn't harbored anger or resentment or resorted to evil speaking! The telephone game has misled us. The fact is, we're all guilty and worthy of the death penalty!

- **Therefore do this or else – vs. 23 -26 - "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.**

Aren't you glad God never leaves us guilty and without remedy. His grace provides forgiveness and cleansing. But He asks those who trust Him to confess sin, repent of it, and take action to correct wrong attitudes and behavior. Notice how serious this sin is to God. It's so serious, Jesus says we should suspend worship until we've made things right. If someone brings a free will offering to the Temple altar and there remembers a brother is angry with him about something, he should hit the brakes. He should stop what he's doing, leave his gift in front of the altar and go find his brother. Notice, the situation here involves somebody who has been offended by something the worshipper said or did. In other words, somebody is upset with you. Somebody has been offended by you.

The situation is reversed in **Matt.18**, where the offender is to be sought out and confronted. In either case, the one concerned about obeying the Lord must go and seek reconciliation. The Lord is the great example of this. Christ never offended anyone, but He came to earth and He comes to us as individuals. His mission is to reconcile us to God. The Jews should have known this principle because the OT says to obey is better than sacrifice. (**I Sam. 15:22**) God can only accept worship and service that proceeds from hearts that are pure and at peace with others, as far as that's possible.

If **vs. 23, 24** relate reconciliation to worship and life in the church, **vs.25, 26** relates reconciliation to litigation and life in the community. **"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.** In short, Jesus instructs us to **settle matters quickly.** **Eph. 4:26** echoes this principle when it says, **Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.** Make every effort to work things out. Do your best to find a way to defuse anger and make peace. Seek a path to reconciliation even when none seems apparent.

v. 26 has a sense of *"do this or else."* There's mercy to be found among the people of God or at least, there should be. In the Church there's forgiveness / reconciliation / and healing the world knows nothing about. By the grace of God things can and should be worked out. But it isn't that way in civil courts. The law is often merciless / harsh / and unforgiving. Decisions are handed down, money exchanges hands, but rarely is there forgiveness and reconciliation between rival parties. If we refuse to settle offenses in a humble God-honoring way, the courts will settle them for us. But Jesus says beware of going into that environment...you may not like the outcome. You may go in thinking you have an airtight case. But the arguments may not go your way. The judge's decision may burst your bubble and send you away penniless and disgraced.

So this is how the Lord views His 6th command. You shall not murder proceeds from the holy character of the God who is love. Murder is ungodly because it proceeds from a heart ruled by anger and hatred. These evil heart attitudes are condemned by God even though the actual taking of a life isn't carried out. In principle, the same applies in the next matter Jesus addressed.

2. The truth about God's command against adultery – vs. 27-30

- ***What you heard... v. 27*** - "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'

The 7th commandment of **Ex. 20:14** says, "**You shall not commit adultery.**" **Adultery** is translated from the Greek word *moichea*. The Greek word *porneia* is a broad term that includes many forms of sexual immorality, but *moichea* is specific. *Moichea* or **adultery** is unlawful sexual relations by or involving someone who is married to another person. If the 6th commandment was given to protect the sanctity of human life, the 7th command was given to protect the sanctity of marriage. Like the penalty for murder, God's law required death for the man and the woman caught in adultery. (**Lev. 20:10**) Can you imagine how seriously the US population would be reduced if these death penalties were enforced? Adultery is rampant in our society.

Based on the penalty declared in **Lev. 20:10**, a woman was brought to Jesus...a woman caught in adultery. According to **Jn. 8:4-6** they said, "**Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?**" **They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.**" These religious men hoped Jesus would contradict the Law of Moses. If He did, they'd have a substantial charge against Him...a charge that would rile people up. But isn't it strange they didn't bring the man? Their whole focus was on the guilt of the woman. They said, "*the Law commands us to stone such women.*" Let's read that law again because I think some "*hostile jamming*" may have affected their interpretation of God's law. **Lev. 20:10** - **'If a man commits adultery with another man's wife--with the wife of his neighbor--both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.**

Some have wondered if her lover was among the accusers? Perhaps they trapped this woman the same way they hoped to trap Jesus. Or, were men given a pass in "indiscretions" like this? Was there a double standard...one for women and one for red-blooded men who can't help themselves? This double standard has been around a long time. Excuses are often made for guys deployed / guys whose wives are pregnant / and guys whose wives have chronic headaches or whatever. But does God buy excuses like these? Does He hand out passes for those with extenuating circumstances? I think not. Whatever the case, the Jews seem to have ignored half of God's law while rigidly adhering to the other half. Once again, something was lost in transmission.

- ***But I say to you – v. 28*** - **But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** A noticeable outbreak of squirming may have followed this statement. When Jesus said murder and stored up anger are equals in terms of God's condemnation, discomfort moved through the crowd like "the wave" at a sports stadium. Just when the crowd began to settle down, Jesus dropped this bomb shell on them...**anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.**

The phrase **looks at a woman lustfully**, needs explanation. Jesus wasn't talking about momentary thoughts of a sexual nature. He wasn't talking about a guy who notices an attractive lady and turns his head for a second look. He wasn't even talking about the temptation to think lustfully. Temptations like these are common...they come up all the time. When speaking at Moody Bible Institute, a student asked the late Dr. Vance Havener, at what point in his life was he unaffected by sexual thoughts and temptations? Havener responded... "*At some point after 87.*" He was 87 at the time. Temptation isn't sinful by itself, though the devil would have us think otherwise. What Jesus was talking about was the deliberate decision to give in to temptation...to fixate on someone who isn't our life partner and to fantasize about having sex with that person. He was talking about engaging our imagination...creating a scenario in our minds in which a sexual encounter takes place. It's an old adage but it's still very true... "*We can't prevent a bird from landing on our heads, but we can prevent one from building a nest there.*" What Jesus was talking about here is sexual fantasy.

Even though such things didn't exist at that time, Jesus certainly includes fantasy stimulated by gazing at pornography / watching x-rated movies / and by reading sexually explicit romance novels. Like murder, adultery is a matter of the heart. God sees and promises to judge the lust in a person's heart and mind even though the immoral act never happens. Listen to His words again... **anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** The word, **already** suggests the progression of sin from evil desire to the act itself. James wrote, **...each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (Jas. 1:14, 15)** What begins with evil desire within is met by temptation. Then temptation when we give into it, results in sin. Then sin when it isn't judged but allowed to continue, results in death. The Jews were taught adultery was sinful. But Jesus went beyond the act to inform us that sexual fantasy is just as evil and just as worthy of death.

But nobody should read **v.28**, throw up their hands and reason this way... *"I've had lustful thoughts so I might as well commit the act. I'm guilty either way."* The consequences of sexual immorality are very heavy. **Prov. 6:27-29 say, Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.** In the NT, Paul echoes the evil of sex outside and against the bond of marriage. **I Cor. 6:18 - Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.** Even though the fantasy and the act are equally sinful in God's sight, the act invites terrible consequences and lasting shame.

- **Therefore do this or else – vs. 29, 30 - If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge 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 sin, 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.**

Here Jesus again acknowledged the progression of sexual sin. Sin begins with something our eye sees that lures us into sin. That's **v. 29**. Then in **v. 30**, sin progresses from looking to touching by the **hand** or the act itself. The progression from stimulation to the immoral act explains the strength of what He said next. Jesus says it would be better to deliberately gouge out an eye we can't keep from wandering, than face the judgment that casts entire bodies into Hell forever. The same is true with regard to a hand we can't control. And notice, Jesus specified removal of the **right eye** and amputation of the **right hand** because these are dominant in most people.

The point here is often misunderstood. Jesus wasn't encouraging physical mutilation. I once read about an Iranian thief whose fingers were chopped off. When he continued to steal, they chopped off his hands. He eventually was executed for grasping something in his teeth and trying to make off with it. In the same way, a blind man can have lustful thoughts. So what we need most isn't amputation. We need regeneration. We need new hearts. That's where the Sermon on the Mount leads us. From Jesus, we learn that God's law is far more demanding than we ever thought. Each of us is guilty and condemned by the righteousness of God's law. But from this same authoritative teacher there's good news. From Jesus we also learn that God has grace that far exceeds our sinfulness.

But don't miss this...Even though God has grace enough to save those who have failed the most, He wants us to know that sin is serious and must not be tolerated. Jesus calls for decisive action...for amputation if necessary. He doesn't advise sinners to slack off, He advises sinners to stop! To the woman caught in adultery. He said, **"Go now and leave your life of sin." (Jn. 8:11)** Later John wrote, **No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him. (I Jn. 2:6)**