

“But I Say to You”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 • Sirach 15:15-20 • Psalm 119:1-8 • 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 • Matthew 5:21-37

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For the past couple Sundays we've been looking at some of the early parts of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. Today's reading from Matthew picks up where it left off last week. Jesus begins talking about some specific topics, beginning with anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths. In each case, he takes a verse or two from the Jewish scriptures, or from Jewish legal teachings, and offers some commentary on it. No, scratch that; it's not really *commentary* he is offering; it is more of a *re-interpretation*.

He begins with murder. “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’” The first part of that, “You shall not murder,” comes, of course, straight from the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The second part, “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment,” is not a direct quote from the Old Testament, but does encapsulate several passages that describe the punishment for committing murder, such as Leviticus 24:17, which says, “Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death.” In the ancient Jewish legal code, the penalty for murder was death. Now we could debate the arguments for and against capital punishment, but that is not what Jesus does here. Instead, he uses this teaching about murder as a springboard to talk about anger and insults: “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” When he says “if you are angry with a brother or sister” or “if you insult a brother or sister,” what he means is, if you are angry with or insult *a fellow believer*, another Christian. If you read through the Gospels, you will know that there were times that Jesus himself was angry – Mark says that quite clearly – and there were also times when Jesus issued harsh judgments and condemnations on other people, especially the self-righteous teachers of the Jewish law and others whose hearts had been hardened. So he's not saying that anger is *never* permissible, nor is he saying that people should not be held accountable for their wrongful deeds or attitudes. What he *is* saying is that there are *consequences* for our anger, and for our hurtful or insulting words. Just as God in the Old Testament told the ancient Hebrews that murder should be punished with death, so too is Jesus in the New Testament telling all of us that God will hold us accountable, if we are angry at or insulting towards a fellow Christian without justifiable cause. What we should do, Jesus says, is this: “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” If you have done something that is causing someone else to feel angry at you, or to utter harsh words against you; that is to say, if *you* are the one at fault, then it's incumbent upon *you* to go to that other person and try to work it out. Similarly, Jesus says: “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you

over to the judge and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.” If a fellow Christian is making a legitimate accusation against you, if you have done something that merits judgment, then it’s *your* job to try to resolve the issue – ideally, out of court. That way, you could avoid a big penalty; Jesus says you might “never get out until you have paid the last penny.” In more general terms, Jesus is saying that, to the extent we can, we should avoid doing harmful, hurtful things that will result in fellow Christians feeling justifiably angry at us, or wanting to utter harsh words against us. But if we *do* do something wrong that causes other Christians to be angry or resentful towards us, it’s *our* job to work to make it right again. The one who has done the wrong is the one whose job it is to *fix* it.

Next, Jesus talks about adultery. He says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” He is again quoting directly from the Ten Commandments. Adultery is one of the most hurtful of sins; it violates a sacred trust. But, like Jesus did with the teaching about murder, he expands beyond adultery: “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” His language was directed at men, but the teaching is just as true for women as it is for men. If you find yourself looking at another person with an unwholesome desire – someone who is not your spouse or significant other, or who could reasonably become your spouse or significant other – if you are objectifying that person, mentally stripping them or fantasizing about them, then you have crossed a boundary line that you should not have crossed. You haven’t committed adultery in the flesh – but you have committed adultery in your heart. It was not appropriate for you to look at that person in that way. Jesus continues: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members 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 of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.” He is speaking metaphorically; he is not actually advocating self-mutilation. But he *is* saying, if there are specific situations that are particularly tempting for you – if there are some places you go, or some shows you watch, or some things you do on your computer or with your cell phone, that indulge your lustful temptations, you should remove those from your life. Don’t go to those places; don’t watch those shows; put guardrails on what sites you can visit on your computer or your phone.

The third topic Jesus brings up is divorce. This is going to be a sensitive one for some people. Jesus begins: “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’” This is a reference to the first few verses of Deuteronomy 24, which begin: “Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house....” These verses make it clear that according to traditional Jewish law, a man was permitted to divorce his wife simply “because he finds something objectionable about her” or because he “dislikes” her. That context must be kept in mind; those were the rules that were in effect for the Jewish people when Jesus gave this Sermon. There was no provision in ancient Jewish law for a woman to divorce her husband. If she didn’t like him, or if he was mistreating her, well, too bad. But if a man wanted a divorce, all he had to do was give his wife a written certificate saying that they were no longer married. He did not even need to go to court. Jesus thought this was *way* too lenient, perhaps because it gave far too much power to the men, and far too little respect to the women. Jesus says: “But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” He is saying that a man can not divorce his wife for just *any* reason. If the woman had committed adultery, he could divorce her. A husband must

have *legitimate grounds* for initiating the divorce; the wife must have violated the marriage bed in some way. That is a dramatically higher standard for the men than the traditional Jewish law, and it demonstrates Jesus's care and respect for women. But what about the second part of what Jesus says: "whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" – what does that mean? Well, first of all, remember that the divorced woman was not divorced by her own choosing. Her previous husband had rejected her. Along comes another man who wants to marry her. I think Jesus is talking about a *married* man who wants to marry her. He divorces his wife so that he can marry this woman. That man has committed adultery *against his first wife*. The way Jesus words this, it is most definitely the *man* who commits adultery when he marries the divorced woman; it is not the woman. The woman may not have done anything wrong – but the *man* did, in leaving his first wife because – as far as he was concerned – something "better" came along. So in both instances here Jesus is holding the *husbands* to account. His teaching displayed a great deal of *compassion* for women. There is, of course, the question of how we should apply all this in *today's* world, which has different laws than what the Jews in the time of Jesus had, and different churches answer that question differently. The Presbyterian Church's initial stance, way back in 1647, was that there were only two legitimate grounds for divorce: adultery and willful desertion. Over the centuries since then we have broadened our understanding considerably, in the spirit of the *compassion* that Jesus displayed. We do not believe that Jesus ever intended for *anybody* – male or female – to be stuck in a miserable situation that could not be rectified. Wisdom and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are both necessary to determine when a marriage really does need to end, to allow suffering women or men a way out of their misery and pain.

Jesus's next topic is *oaths*, that is, a vow or a pledge that someone makes, sometimes invoking the name of someone or something. He begins: "Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'" This is a summary of several different Old Testament laws, like this: "you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God" (Leviticus 19:12) and this: "whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the Lord your God with your own mouth" (Deuteronomy 23:23). Traditional Jewish law allowed people to make oaths in the name of God. But just because something was *permissible* didn't make it *good*. Jesus says: "I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." Jesus specifically rules out swearing by any part of God's *creation* – not heaven, not the earth, not Jerusalem, not your head, nor, he implies, by anything else that God has created. As for swearing in the name of God – Jewish law allowed it, but Jesus's preference is that people don't do it. Perhaps he thought that people were invoking the name of God far too frequently for far too frivolous reasons. He says, "Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No.'" You shouldn't have to swear by *anything* for your word to mean something. Your *word alone* should be good enough. Honesty and integrity matter.

Jesus covers many other topics in his Sermon on the Mount. This is all we are going to cover for now; next week we move on to the Transfiguration of the Lord, and after that we enter the season of Lent. But you can interpret the rest of this chapter in Matthew's Gospel pretty much the same way as we did here today. The first, and critical, step is to make sure you understand the context. What were the specific Jewish laws that were in place at the time Jesus gave this Sermon? How does what Jesus say *build* on that, or *expand* it, or *modify* it? That's the most important piece. We can't properly understand Jesus' most important teachings without understanding the world that they originated in.

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