



Matthew: The King and His Kingdoms

Series: The Manifesto of the King, Part 11: There's More to Murder Than Meets the Eye

Matthew 5:21-26

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Introduction In our last study in the sermon on the mount, as Jesus is preaching and teaching His disciples, He does so with the realization that the spiritual instruction which they had received before Him came primarily from the scribes and the Pharisees. His teaching was much different than the teaching that the scribes and Pharisees endorsed. The scribes and Pharisees were offended at Jesus' lack of concern for their rules and regulations and so they had begun accuse Him of trying to destroy God's Law, trying to overthrow the Law and that He did not take righteousness before God seriously. In light of that, remember that Jesus made two very profound statements.

Two Profound Statements by Jesus:

1. Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Jesus did not come to abolish the OT, nor could He. He is the very fulfillment of the OT. And what that means is this. As the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures, He is the one, in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, that can rightly interpret them. Then He said, regarding the nature of righteousness:

2. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called for a righteousness that exceeded the Pharisees not in degree but in kind. He called for a righteousness that is born of a regenerate heart, born of faith, born of love to God. True righteousness, Jesus says, is the outgrowth of a saved heart and soul, of a man or a woman made new by the power of God and the cleansing blood of Christ – a righteousness born of gratitude and love. It goes beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law.

Two Implications:

1. For the true disciple, the Law is spiritual and internal, not external only. It is written on our hearts by the work of God. In the New Covenant, the moral Law has not been abolished for us as believers, instead it has been written on our hearts through the work of the Holy Spirit. (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26–27) Enabled by the indwelling Holy Spirit and the grace of God we can now obey the Law that God created us to obey in the first place. It is not that grace gives us a pass on the moral law of God; it is that grace enables us, when we walk in the Spirit, to keep it. It is by the grace of God, whereby He gives us a new heart and saves us, that we can begin to be obedient from the heart to the commands of God given to us in Scripture.

2. The grace that saves is the grace that trains. (Titus 2:11–14, ESV)

With this text this morning, we will begin a familiar refrain for the next several weeks:

You have heard that it was said to those of old...Jesus is not giving a new moral code to supersede the moral law that had been given to the nation of Israel. He is instead describing and giving illustrations of how the true Christian, the one who has been given a new heart upon which the law has been written, acts. He is not correcting the OT but rather the misinterpretation of the law by the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus wants us to know that when it comes to righteousness,

1) There is more to murder than meets the eye (v. 21-22)

True righteousness and spiritual understanding involves more than fulfilling the letter of the law...The first of Christ's examples is based on the sixth commandment that said: "You shall not murder." For years, ever since the giving of the law to Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai, this commandment had been defined by most men, including the scribes and Pharisees, as the external act. They had taken the sixth commandment in Ex. 20:13 and combined it with a verse in Numbers 35 that demanded death for anyone who took innocent human life. The one who murdered would be worthy of judgment – the judgment of death. The clear implication was

that the commandment referred to nothing more than the act of murder. But Jesus was saying, there is more to this commandment than the letter of the law. The OT law forbidding murder has not been kept simply when no blood has been shed. That is a shallow view of this commandment. The law points to a more fundamental issue – man’s heart toward one another. The point of the Commandment forbidding murder is the sanctity and dignity of human life. That sanctity and dignity come from the fact that we are made in the image of God, unlike any other creature. Even with the reality of man's fall into sin marring the divine image in man, there remains the ruins of that divine image. It is so much so that God requires that if one person takes the life of another in an act of murder then his own life is to be taken as an act of divine judgment. (Gen 9:6-7). It is on the basis of the divine image that man is forbidden to murder his fellow man. But again, the spirit of the Law demands that we see that murder originates in the heart, not the hands. Murder begins with unrighteous anger. Now let’s make sure that we understand something:

Jesus is not dealing with righteous anger, but unrighteous anger...It is important to understand what Jesus is and is not saying. Jesus is not saying that all anger is wrong. We know from Christ’s own life and from the Scriptures that Jesus does not prohibit every form of anger. Jesus spoke in righteous anger against the hypocrisy of the spiritual leaders of His day. Paul was justified in his anger against the false teachers obscuring the gospel and trying to destroy the faith of the Galatians. David voiced righteous indignation in the imprecatory psalms. Faithfulness to Christ will sometimes demand righteous anger. There is a place for righteous anger at sin and injustice. There is a place for righteous indignation at false teachers, at those who would lead the sheep of God to slaughter. There is even a place for righteous anger when you are truly sinned against. For instance, if your husband or your wife is unfaithful to their marriage vows or sins grievously against you, an appropriate response would include anger, but not only anger and not anger that goes unresolved. That is not what Jesus is talking about here. What Jesus means for us to see is:

Unrighteous anger and its fruits = murder...The very real issues that Jesus is dealing with are far more than the act of murder, they are the heart of murder -- illegitimate, unresolved and unrighteous anger, wrath and contempt. Just look at Jesus’ words again: But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

What is the anger that Jesus is talking about? The word that is used here comes from the Greek word “orge,” and it describes a long-lived anger. It is an anger over which one broods and meditates. It means seething hostility. It means malice in the heart. It is when you bitterly hold a grudge against somebody. It is when you have hostile feelings toward someone every time you hear their name or see them. It is the kind of anger that sort of breeds and grows. What Jesus is speaking of here is our burning with indignation and anger at offenses to ourselves, real or perceived, without any willingness to forgive. We are often quick to anger when we are personally offended. We burn with petty offenses to our honor. We get angry when we feel that someone has spoken unjustly about us or to us. We get angry when someone neglects us or fails to act toward in a manner that we believe is appropriate, when someone fails to treat us with the level of respect or kindness, or deference, or patience that we feel we deserve. We become angry when we feel like our rights have been violated. The truth is that most often we are quick to anger at personal offenses and much slower to be angry at sin or when God is dishonored. Even what may begin as legitimate anger, righteous anger, left unresolved, not married to love and forgiveness becomes the corrupt form of anger that lies at the heart of murder. That’s what Jesus is getting at here.

It is expressed in a variety of ways. It is seen in the holding of a grudge, in the smoldering bitterness that refuses to forgive. It is the anger that cherishes resentment and refuses reconciliation. It manifests itself in lashing out at someone verbally or physically. It manifests itself in spiteful, venomous, hurtful actions and comments and attitudes. It shows itself both in ranting and raving at someone, but also in the passive-aggressive sort of thing where people avoid conflict but give people the cold shoulder and treat them with contempt as if they were unworthy of attention. Sometimes we see it not only in what is said and done but in what is unsaid and in what is deliberately left undone – for instance the withholding of affection or attention. This anger is the kind of thing that colors your entire perception of a person or of people.

The writer of Hebrews describes “a root of bitterness.” It affects every relationship, every action, every thought. You have seen people that suffer from this; I have been guilty of it. There is no joy in their worship, no depth to their fellowship with others, no intimacy with their husband or wife. An angry person is a miserable person regardless of the face they try to put on. Unrighteous anger never profits at all. It builds nothing of value or worth. How could it? (James 1:20, ESV) Instead, unresolved anger, unrighteous anger only destroys relationships. That is why Scripture counsels us: (Proverbs 22:24–25; Proverbs 29:22, ESV)

Jesus speaks of the thorough-going nature of such anger when he talks about the one who insults his brother and those who say 'You fool! The word for insult is the Aramaic word "Raca." It really has no direct translation into English which is why it is transliterated in most bibles. Now this isn't about, you know, messing around with your friends, joking around. That's not the issue. The term "raca" is a term of malicious abuse, of slander, of derision and arrogant contempt. "Raca" carries the idea of someone being empty headed, dim-witted, a blockhead. The word for fool is the word "more" from which we get the word moron. But the connotation is less about brain-power and it is more about moral character. It is the idea of someone being useless, hopeless, good for nothing, devoid of any redeeming purpose, a loser.

Now understand something here. Jesus is not putting out a sliding scale of consequences for different offenses. That is not it. Instead, He is giving to us multiple examples to drive His point home. The point is clear, isn't it? This kind of animosity, this kind of hatred, this kind of anger, is equivalent to murder and deserves the judgment for murder, which is death. You may have never murdered anyone, but have you hated? Have you ever wished someone were dead? Have you treated someone with contempt, assassinated his or her character, treated someone as worthless, nursed bitterness, cursed another human being? It is the same as murder. Unresolved and unrighteous anger lie at the root of murder and the same penalty as that for the murderer hangs over the head of the wrathful, spiteful, hateful heart. For that reason, Jesus is saying it has no place in the life of a disciple of Christ. But even more, not only does Jesus warn against anger, but He makes the point that His disciples must pursue the things that make for peace.

2) Two applications that demonstrate the priority and urgency of dispelling anger and pursuing peace (v. 23-26) Jesus gives two illustrations, one concerning how we relate to brothers and sisters in Christ and one concerning how we relate to the world, in order to provide insight into the importance of reconciled relationships.

The priority of reconciliation with brothers and sisters in Christ (v.23-24)

The word "so" indicates a conclusion to what Jesus has just said. He uses as an illustration someone who is coming to the temple to offer a sacrifice, to offer worship to God. He comes and realizes that he is in sin toward another brother. The conclusion is this: if you are in the

midst of worship and realize that your brother rightly has something against you, then you need to stop worshipping and you need to go to your brother and get things resolved. Jesus is placing a premium on reconciled, peace-filed relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ. He is saying that worship is a sham if a worshipper has committed an offense and a brother rightly has something against them.

Jesus is speaking of sin that we have committed against another brother or sister in Christ. He is speaking of a situation in which you or I are the cause of the fracture of the relationship, where you or I have either sinned against a brother in anger, acted in unrighteous or unresolved anger against them, and so they have a legitimate complaint against us, or through some other sin given cause for another's anger or resentment or bitterness.

Again, understand, Jesus is not talking about imagined offences or petty grievances. Some people are always upset about something, and it is usually for something silly. If you get offended over silly things, I counsel you to grow up. When Jesus said you remember that your brother has something against you, he means it is something substantial and real--not something silly. He is speaking of true sin, in which another would have a legitimate complaint against you, one of which the Holy Spirit convicts you, one that you know is there. Notice the priority of what is to take place. Leave your gift before the altar – worship can wait until the repentance and reconciliation takes place. Go – leave the pace of worship. Be reconciled to your brother – humble yourself, confess your sin, own what you have done, ask for forgiveness, seek to have the relationship with your brother restored. Then go and offer you gift, your worship, to God.

Jesus is telling us that we cannot be in a right relationship to God if we are in a fractured relationship with another child of God. The sin of anger and any other relational sin that we can commit toward a brother or sister in Christ, left unresolved, will kill our fellowship with God. (1 John 4:20–21, ESV)

Do you see how this matter is directly related to the gospel and to the work of our Savior? Wasn't His work that of establishing peace between us and God? Paul tells us in Romans 5 that "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," (v.1) and that "while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son," (v.10). And that peace is to

permeate our lives and our relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul says we are to “pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” (Romans 14:19, ESV) This is foundational to the gospel. If we look to Him as the One who made peace for us by taking our sins upon Himself and satisfying God’s charge against us, then how can we not be people who love peace and pursue peace at all times? How can we not desire to manifest the peace we have with God in Christ in all of our relationships?

The urgency of reconciliation with those in the world. (v.25-26) Next Jesus applies these words to the way we interact with the world. The picture here is of an accuser taking you to court – that is the tip off that we are talking about relationship in the world. It is not a brother but an accuser, not the temple but the court. Don’t try to read too much into this illustration. Jesus is not giving a list for how to deal with legal issues. That is not the intent. The point of the illustration is the urgency with which we should seek reconciliation. In Jesus’ day, putting someone in debtor’s prison was a common practice. Though in prison, the debtor had no way of earning money he needed to pay the debt, the hope was that his family or friends would pay the debt and have him released. The point is that debtor’s prison was to be avoided at all costs because you didn’t get out till the debt was paid. So, if you were being taken to court, it was an urgent situation that required you to act quickly. That’s the idea here. If you or I have wronged someone in the world if we have acted in unrighteous or unresolved anger toward that person, not necessarily a brother or a sister in Christ, we must be quick to address that debt, that sin.

The reason why, I think, is clear. It is matter of God’s glory and the believer’s testimony. The gospel is at stake. To leave a debt of sin hanging, let’s say you act callously or angrily toward someone who is not a believer, will give Satan even more opportunity to harden hearts to the gospel around you. The way that we act, the way that we interact with the world will say volumes about the gospel that we profess. Jesus shows us the urgency of real reconciliation.

Jesus shows us that the sixth commandment, the spirit and intent of it, is much deeper and stronger than the prohibition against murder – it is an issue of the heart. So what must be our response this instruction from Jesus?

3) We must examine ourselves in the light of these words. Paul wrote to the Corinthians these words: (2 Corinthians 13:5, ESV) We must pray for God to show us our hearts. We need to cry

out with the Psalmist: (Psalm 139:23–24, ESV) We need God to show us our hearts, we need to examine ourselves, we need to repent of sin and we need to seek peace.

Do any of these ring true with you?

Do you tend to have difficulty remaining close to people?

Do you tend to be judgmental and overly critical of people?

Do you often fail to see that your words or actions hurt other people?

Do you have a hard time forgiving others when they hurt or frustrate you?

Do you nurse grudges?

Do you have a generally rotten attitude about people?

Do you often overreact to what others say or do to you?

Do you often feel that you've been cheated out of important areas of life, that everyone is out to get you?

Are you combative, getting into fights and arguments?

Do you not really trust anyone other than yourself?

Do you manipulate people by giving and withholding affection as it pleases you?

Do you see yourself there? I have and still sometimes do. Those characteristics are evidence of unresolved anger in your life, the fruit of an angry heart. Let me be candid with you. Jesus is talking to you today.

Don't be done with these words as I sit down. Ask God to reveal your heart in this matter. Is there any situation you need to resolve? Are you aware of anyone who has something against you in this congregation? If so, what are you going to do about it? If you do not care about your brother and if you do not want to be reconciled with your brother that is a spiritual sign that your heart is not right with God.

Here is the truth. Jesus' command here exceeds our natural capacity to follow. No one has ever kept this command, the heart of these words perfectly. We have failed and sinned. The depth and the breadth of Christ's warning and commands here makes us to see again that our only hope is Christ who fulfilled all righteousness in our place and through His gospel death and resurrection to redeem us, and Who gives His righteousness to us as our own by grace. Jesus' radical demand is first meant to drive us to him for grace and for forgiveness and for perfect righteousness, a righteousness that we could never earn before God. It is meant to drive us to him for salvation. It may be these very words of Christ that show you the depth of your sin and that your heart is far from Him. It may be these very words that God uses to show you that you are still lost in your sin, but there is hope and that hope is Jesus Christ. There is grace for you if you will cry out to God for forgiveness, repent of your sin and trust Christ as Savior and Lord.

But 2nd, for believers who know they are Christ's, they are meant to drive us to grace in Christ, to drive us you to Him continually in prayer and dependence upon Him, that the Spirit might kill sin and produce righteousness in us as we pursue holiness by grace. We need the grace of Christ in sanctification, and so examination according to the law drives us back to Christ that we might depend upon Him and the work of the Spirit in our lives to conform us to His image.

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