

Red Letters | The Sermons of Jesus Christ

Two Kinds of Righteousness

Matthew 5.20-26

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2.13.22

"For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER ' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

We're looking at the best known of all the sermons of Jesus Christ, The Sermon on the Mount. It's in Matthew's Gospel (CH 5-7) and condensed in Luke (CH 6).

At the very start is a phrase we might not even notice: "His disciples came to Him." (5.1) It's the thing. The Sermon on the Mount describes the Administration or Government of Jesus. And in this Inaugural Speech it's clear that His citizens or disciples COME to Him because it can only be lived out in a relationship of ongoing reliance ON the King: "His disciples come to Him."

After that throw-away phrase (that's actually crucial) comes the description of His disciples and the citizens of His Kingdom – a series of blessings for things that no one wants – poverty, grief, weakness, hunger – "Blessed are you when you do a moral inventory and find the cupboards bare – blessed are the poor in spirit because THEY know they NEED Me! They look outside themselves...outside this world!" Then last week we came to the theme of the whole Sermon on the Mount – v. 20: "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the clergymen you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven." The Pharisees and Scribes do their best but it's synthetic/artificial/surface-level goodness. They obey God's rules by external, merely behavioral compliance AND from the wrong motives.

Then, so as NOT to be misunderstood, Jesus gives six simple examples of what He has in mind followed by a seventh, final, compound illustration.

Today, we look at the first of these seven illustrations – how does Jesus Christ fulfill the Sixth Commandment AND equip His disciples to live the truly good life – not only an artificial, surface, counterfeit good life?

1. Murderous Machinations
2. Excellent Exposure
3. Following a Fool (and loving it!)

We've mentioned before that something can be known about a culture's priorities by looking at its vocabulary and especially what words have the most synonyms... e.g. Inuit or Eskimo people have like 40 words for snow. We have a lot of words for anger.

Here's a run through the thesaurus: acrimony, agitation, annoyance, animosity, belligerent, biting, bitterness, blistered, blowup, bluster, boiling, burning – that's just the "As and Bs"! ('Want the Cs?: caustic, censorious, churlish, crabby, cranky, cross, cutting...') disgust, exasperation, excited, frenzy, furor, fury, indignation, irritation, outburst, passion, resentment, temper, – you get the picture. Anger is rampant in our modern society (and that really ticks me off [skipping down to the Ts]). And Jesus Christ is saying that He – on Mount Sinai – to Moses, gave the Law against murder which was always meant to govern NOT only our outward behavior but also our inward motives and hearts. "And YOU, Pharisees, Scribes, clergymen and you seriously religious people have only been able to keep the Law against murder by limiting its application to very specific, extreme, unusual cases. "You've taken the Sixth Commandment against murder and you've murdered it... you've gutted the command and taken the core/heart right out of it.

"You've actually taken GOD right out of it as if the only way to break the command is to get caught by people. You've ingeniously invented all these Murderous Machinations...all these moral maneuvers whereby you "technically" keep the command in your behavior but commit murder in your hearts... And if people could see what goes on in your hearts – you'd be guilty at the lower court, you'd lose your appeal at the Supreme Court and you'd be condemned at the throne of God and you'd pay for your sin – even the sin that NO OTHER human being had witnessed – you'd be sentenced by the True Judge – to death, eternal death.

"And I, as the Law-Giver from Mt Sinai, have come to THIS mountain to put the heart back into the Law... to fill it up with the meaning you've drained from it."

You can't read the Hebrew Bible and fail to see the emphasis on the heart... Externalism is criticized and denounced again and again... God says repeatedly: "I don't want outward obedience and worship and sacrifices – I want your heart.

The sacrifices are moments when you can see both what your sin deserves and how I will provide a substitute to TAKE what you deserve – in other words – the sacrifices are to touch your hearts! They're NOT a religious system of bribing God (like the pagans do!)"

Here's one example of literally dozens in the Hebrew Bible. God says in Isaiah 66 that He made all the stars...all the galaxies...White Dwarfs and Black Holes and Super Nova's and millions of light years... wonders we haven't even imagined... He says, "My hand made all these things..."

Then He says, "But to this one will I look..." as if to say... All the galaxies and solar systems are more magnificent than humanity will even know...but what I REALLY LOVE TO GAZE UPON among all the celestial bodies... (Here I'll quote) 66.2 " My hand made all these things, thus all things came into being,"

declares the LORD. "But to this one I will look, to the one who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."

He then goes on to say, "Whoever comes WITHOUT that heart attitude to worship Me...and offers sacrifices but NOT with a humble heart and a contrite spirit – I'll look at his worship as just more sin (QUOTE) "But he who offers an ox is like one who slays a man; he who sacrifices a lamb is like the one who breaks a dog's neck; He who offers a grain offering is like one who offers swine's blood; He who burns incense is like the one who blesses an idol. As they have chosen their own ways, And their soul delights in abomination." (66.3)

Is the heart important to God? More important than the action... If the action is right but the heart is NOT then God says (one of dozens of references) God says, "Your sacrifices and worship sicken Me." So... here we sit... 20 centuries after these words were spoken by Jesus Christ... living in a society eaten up with rage...with rudeness...with annoyance ...agitation...people on edge AND with all kinds of outward expressions of that anger in actual, physical violence... and Jesus Christ is saying, "Hatred and irritation and cranky inward dispositions... ain't nothin'! It's sin against God and it will be judged and not excused because, 'Hey, at least I didn't act on it!"

All of their murderous machinations didn't excuse the religious people of old...and won't excuse us...So what do we do...or better... what will God do to rescue us from our anger...our hatred (I know we don't CALL it hatred [we learned from our moms... TO LIE!] – we call it dislike or irked... or some other nicer-sounding synonym!)

Well, God brings about an EXCELLENT EXPOSURE. He puts human anger and hatred on display. He comes in Jesus Christ to fulfill the Law – "I didn't come to abolish the Law and say 'Now murder is ok – as long as you don't get caught..."

BUT INSTEAD to tell you and show you that anger is just murder that hasn't had opportunity to express itself...and I want to FREE you from the power of your murderous machinations and your clever maneuvers that only make things worse! I'm going to let you take out all your anger... on ME." At the Cross of Jesus Christ...all God's holy and just anger at the sins of His people was poured out on one Person...a Last Adam... Jesus Christ.

He pays for all the murders among His people like Moses and the Apostle Paul – who committed actual, physical murder – and for many more of His people who were either too afraid to do what their hateful hearts WANTED to do...or were somehow thwarted from following their anger to it's logical conclusion... Jesus Christ was punished on behalf of hateful people and God gave to Him what I deserved... He fulfilled the Law for ME by taking the penalty God requires of angry, irritated, annoyed people and other murderers...

But not only did Jesus Christ face the anger and justice of God against sinners... He also faced the UNJUST anger that sinners have toward God.

“But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. (Mat 27.20)... But they cried out all together, saying, ‘Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!’ (He was one who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection made in the city, and for murder.)” (Luk 23.18-19)

It’s humanity’s anger at God... for the wars and the diagnoses...and the unfairness...and natural disasters and car-wrecks... and divorces...and all our twisted irritations at the injustices that we and others have traced back to God from the start: “It was the woman...whom YOU gave me!” (Gen 3.13)

And on the Cross, Jesus Christ is facing the hatred that human beings have toward God. You hear it the interrogator’s mocking tone: “Then Pilate said to Him, ‘Do You not hear how many things they testify against You? And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so the governor was quite amazed.” (Mat 27.13-14)

Jesus Christ was treated like a murderer...and Jesus Christ was treated like the fool...He plays “dumb” or mute (all those horrible words we use to describe people who can’t speak) Jesus was “like a Sheep that is silent before it’s shearers so He did not open His mouth.” (Isa 53.7)

And in exposing our hearts...in facing BOTH the just anger of the broken Law and the unjust anger of human hate for God...Jesus Christ NOT only paid for the sins of murderous, miffed, annoyed people...He gave us an example to follow AND the resources we need TO follow... From First Peter CH 2:  
For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

Because of this...when believers in Jesus Christ are actually believing (which isn’t always – we’re often unbelieving believers!) BUT when the gospel is before us and we believe it, when we get a sense of indescribable relief - of sins forgiven and peace with God... We begin to see that this person we hate or who annoys/irritates us... is made in God’s image.

He is beautiful and broken like WE are... My actions toward him will either push him in God’s direction or away from God... I have a role to play. I see my forgiveness as BIG... and then my opponent’s sins look smaller... (Matt 18.23ff)

When I AM believing the Gospel... the Spirit of God is at work on my heart... etching love into my very motives (“I will write My Law on their hearts and they will keep my statutes...” ) We follow the Fool – the foolishness of God in Christ enables me to stop defending myself and demanding my rights.

We see that in this situation where I’m really annoyed... probably I’m a lot more to blame than I think I am... I become less self-confident and more confident toward what God has done for me in Christ. It makes me less afraid to own up to my anger when I see Jesus Christ facing it FOR me and the Spirit declaring me forgiven and delightful in the sight of God because of the life Jesus lived FOR me and His atoning death and victorious resurrection.

We put a very high priority on relational hygiene and when we come to worship we see that if my heart isn't right then worship doesn't atone for my anger or hatred or bad-feelings toward "that" person – my grudge-holding will nullify my worship so I repent – God LOVES it when I repent (better than He loves the stars and planets!) – so I become soft and pliable to the complaints of others...

The New Testament writers said it: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men (Rom 12.8)... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." (Eph 4.31-5.2)

If you need help in working through anger or maybe you're even willing to call it hate and unforgiveness or grudge-holding – maybe you're angry with God...come up and pray with someone after the service... Maybe God will liberate you in a way you didn't think possible – with God all things are possible.