

## Matthew 5:21-26 (NKJV)

<sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.*'

<sup>22</sup> But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

<sup>23</sup> Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

<sup>24</sup> leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

<sup>25</sup> Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

<sup>26</sup> Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

Let's take time to review how we got here.

Jesus lays out the fundamentals of what a true follower of Christ is like. He lays out the attributes. It is very clear that this is a person who was **changed** from the **inside out**. God has gotten hold of this person and it has caused a **process that happens**, in one form or another, **to all believers**.

It starts with a deep and gripping realization of one's need. Then the person surrenders him or herself to Christ, who alone can meet the need. Then the person keeps **running back** to that Christ, **over and over again** with a compelling desire for more and more of Christ. And the overflow of that spirituality **spills onto those around** in some **predictable ways**, like mercy and grace.

Then Jesus tells us at least some of the **purpose** we are left on this planet. It is to **influence others**, to represent the **kingdom of God** to the **inhabitants of the world**.

The Jesus teaches us how to **think** about **the law**. Because it is very important that we understand the place of the law if we are to follow Him. Jesus **loved** the law. And He teaches us to **trust its every letter**.

But He tells us in no certain terms that **the Pharisees**, though they proclaim themselves to be the experts, **aren't getting it right**. What they say might be good at times. But how they put it into process is not so good.

That brings us to this morning.

Jesus is telling us, in the rest of the sermon on the mount, **HOW our righteousness** must exceed the **righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees**.

This is extremely helpful in our understanding of the rest of the sermon. It may help us to understand some of the **controversial misunderstandings** of this sermon.

We can look at it this way.

From **verse 21 to the end of chapter 5**, Jesus shows us what **proper exposition is of the law**. And it is a direct contradiction to the ways the scribes and pharisees taught it.

Then in **Chapter 6** Jesus teaches the **true nature of fellowship** with God.

This, too, is a direct contradiction to the way the experts of their day taught it.

Then in Chapter 7 Jesus teaches **how righteousness** changes the way **we see things**, again in contradiction to the popular teachers.

We can easily see how the rest of chapter 5 is divided.

**Matthew 5:21 (NKJV)**

<sup>21</sup> "**You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.'**

**Matthew 5:27 (NKJV)**

<sup>27</sup> "**You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.'**

**Matthew 5:31 (NKJV)**

<sup>31</sup> "**Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'**

**Matthew 5:33 (NKJV)**

<sup>33</sup> "**Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.'**

**Matthew 5:38 (NKJV)**

<sup>38</sup> "**You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'**

**Matthew 5:43 (NKJV)**

<sup>43</sup> "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'**

Now there is something that is very important for us to understand here. Where Jesus says "**to those of old**", it is impossible to know by the language he uses if it should be **TO** those of old or **BY** those of old. We have to rely upon context to determine which is best. And it seems easy to me to conclude by context that Jesus means **BY** those of old. Jesus is about to quote **exactly how "those of old"** in the Pharisaical tradition have been teaching these

concepts. This would fit in very well with how glowingly Christ endorses the **Old Testament** but how vehemently he disagrees with the **Pharisees teaching of it**. So I believe that it truly should have been translated **By** instead of **To**.

Jesus does not say, **As it is written**. He doesn't say you have read in the law of Moses. The teachings Christ is talking about come from **quotes about** scripture, but not a **reading** of the scripture. So it is most natural to understand they were the traditions of the elders.

I did not know this, but the common Jew in Jesus day could not read Hebrew, which is what the Old Testament was written in. So the common man would have trouble checking it out themselves. They had to rely upon the experts to tell them what scriptures said and what scriptures meant. It was much like when the Catholic church kept the Bible in the Latin language so that the common people were completely dependent upon them for hearing from God. That is why the reformers made such a **huge and costly push** to put the Bible in the language of the common man. It removed the power from people who might abuse their position and misrepresent God. In fact there is probably no one alive whose understanding of scripture does not, at some point, **small or large, misrepresent** what God says.

While Jesus is not handing out Bibles, He is giving **clear teaching** from the author of the Old Testament what it **really** means.

Notice too that Jesus also says **BUT I say**. This word "but" means he is **correcting** something. He is **refuting** something. Some take that to mean that He is **undoing** the Old Testament, that He is **refuting** Moses. But that is improbable based on the **glowing endorsement** He has just spoken of the law and the prophets. He is not **refuting** the Law. He is refuting the **teachers of the law** and their teachings of it.

Also when Christ says, "But I say to you" we see that Christ does not hesitate a bit to declare Himself **the absolute authority** on Old Testament interpretation and application. The Pharisees are **not** the authority. Christ is. The common person was probably thinking "**You're going to get in trouble**". They knew He was challenging the current leadership directly and flagrantly. The crowd would not have missed that. They might think, **who does this guy think he is?** Or they may have been intrigued to hear a **very different** version of God's word than the only way they had ever **heard it before**. It may have angered them to hear what they had **always believed** to be **challenged** so much. Or maybe they had a mix of all those things going on. But this all helps us to put ourselves into the shoes of the crowd. We can better imagine the situation.

Ok, now I would like to ask you a question that I think will help us better understand how Jesus is teaching here. Some people have tried to say that Jesus was **undoing** the law. Some say this is a **new code of ethics** for His people that did not exist before. But that is not the case. This is the question. If you have dealt with teaching children, which is easier to do? **Is it easier to teach them not to push any other child, or to be kind to all children?**

I think we would all respond that it is easier to address an external behavior than an internal attitude. If you focus on a behavior, you can positively or negatively reinforce that behavior. Now suppose you are successful and your child never again pushes another child, have you instilled an attitude of love and kindness in your child? I guess we can't know for sure if they are no longer breaking the law of pushing another child, but I would not bet on it I wouldn't bet on it based on what I know of myself and based on all the children I have ever seen.

What is a child likely to do if they cannot **push** a child? Well they are just as likely to snatch another's toy when no one is looking. We all know that. That is why we keep looking.

Now which would a **child** rather be **held to**? Would they rather be held to a rule that says that, even though I feel some selfish things very strongly, I am not going to get in trouble if I don't push them? Or would they rather have the standard that **anything I do that is unkind will get me in trouble**? Or even anything that **displays** that I have an **unkind attitude** will get me in trouble? And which would you find easier to **enforce**? Would it be easier to maintain and enforce a bunch of **very clear rules** forbidding very **specific** behaviors? Or would it be easier to enforce a **restriction of an attitude** that can show itself in millions of ways?

What I am trying to make clear is the difference between the way **Jesus** dealt with the law and the prophets, and the way **the pharisees did**.

The Pharisees reduced the law to its **external manifestations**. What one **DID** became far more important than **Why** one did it. Technicalities to clarify what external behavior is exactly wrong became the **point of focus**. They were like the child who is forbidden to touch something so he picks up a stick and touches it with the stick. We are all legalists of the heart, seeking to avoid blame while not eager to change our selfish attitudes. It was the pharisees full time job to be more and more technical about what the violations of the law were.

The pharisees believed and taught that the **letter** of the law was the most important thing.

Then Jesus came along and, without doing harm to the **letter** of the law, taught that **the spirit of the law** was the greatest point of focus. Changing the **attitude** that causes the **sinful behavior** is more important and superior to simply avoiding the technicality of breaking the law **in our behavior**. Jesus taught how the **spirit of the law** helps us understand and interpret **the letter** of the law. Both the **action** and the **attitude** matter. The Pharisees missed that principle.

Jesus is about to teach that one can break the law **with attitudes** even though this same person might never **break the literal law** with a **physical act**. The **spirit of the law** can be violated without ever doing an external act. This had to be a bad day for a Pharisee when they heard that. Their whole focus is avoiding those **technical acts** that would make them guilty. Jesus is making the job of keeping the law perfectly **impossible**. Their whole house of cards would crumble on this principle.

Jesus is describing **law keeping** as doing the **right thing for the right reason**. It comes down to **pure motives** that only seek to **please God**. It is an **impossibility** for a man. The only man who can do this is one with a **changed heart**. And this is the kind of change that a man **cannot do** to himself.

The other thing we are going to see about the way that Jesus applies the law is that it points to **nobler way** to exist. The law is a positive influence. When we read the law forbidding adultery we see an **act to avoid**. By the time Jesus is done with it we will see a direction in scripture that would free us from even **the attitudes** that would **lead us** in that direction. The prohibition just points us in the direction of an attitude that is **completely pleasing to God**. It shows us how to **love righteousness** in that particular arena of our lives.

It is always foolish to measure our lives in terms of what we don't do. I quote Homer and Jethro as the experts in that when they say in their song, "We don't smoke and we don't chew and we don't go with the girls that do."

And yes, I know that most of you have no idea who Homer and Jethro are. They weren't theologians.

Anyway, that isn't how we are to think of spirituality, by what we **don't do**. Who we are in our **heart of hearts** is what is important because **that** is where our actions come from. And the **spirit of the law** helps us **please God** in our **heart of hearts**. It informs us of, not only what God does **not** like, but also what God **does** like. The law is good to a person with a heart that wants to please God.

I would like to add a quote here from brother Jones.

**Discipline in the Christian life is a good and essential thing. But if your main object and intent is to conform to the discipline that you have set**

for yourself it may very well be the greatest danger to your soul. Fasting and prayer are good things; but if you fast twice a week, or pray at a particular hour every day, merely in order to carry out your discipline, then you have missed the whole object of fasting and praying. There is no point in either of them, or in observing Lent, or in anything else that is meant to be an aid to the spiritual life, unless they bring us into a deeper relationship to God. I may stop smoking, I may stop drinking or gambling during these six weeks or at any other period. But if, during that time, my poverty of spirit is not greater, my sense of weakness is not deepened, my hunger and thirst after God and righteousness is not greatly increased, then I might just as well not have done it at all. Indeed I would say it would be very much better for me if I had not done it. All this is the fatal danger of making these things ends in themselves. We can be guilty of the same thing with public worship. If public worship becomes an end in itself, if my sole object in a pulpit is to preach a sermon and not to try to explain the blessed gospel of God that you and I, and all of us, may come to know and love Him better, my preaching is vain and it may be the thing that will damn my soul. These things are meant to be aids to help us, and illustrations of the Word. God forbid that we should turn them into a religion. 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.'<sup>1</sup>

Now we are ready to jump into verse 21 and 22

<sup>21</sup> **"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.'**

OK, what is the problem here? Is what they are saying true?

Well the ten commandments does include the statement, "**You shall not commit murder.**"

Now how about, whoever murders will be in danger of judgment. Is that true? Numbers 35:30,31 says this:

<sup>30</sup> **Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not *sufficient* testimony against a person for the death *penalty*.** <sup>31</sup> **Moreover you shall take no**

---

<sup>1</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D. M. (1976). [\*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount\*](#) (Second edition, p. 224). England: Inter-Varsity Press.

**ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death.**<sup>2</sup>

So technically they were correct that the act of murder does put a person into the danger of being condemned to death **by the civil authority**.

But what they do by combining these two passages of scripture is to **reduce the scope of the command** and to reduce the **repercussions** of violating it. It is essentially saying that the command “You shall not murder” is limited to never committing an act of murder **because** if you **technically commit** an act of murder you may be **killed by the civil authorities**”

There are two problems with joining those two statements together.

First it is how they apply the **guilt** of murder.

Second is how they apply the **penalty** for murder.

First is how they assign the guilt-

So if a person were to strike someone in hatred, and the victim teeters on the edge of life and death, but they recover, all is good. There is nothing at that point to confess or to concern yourself with. As long as the guy’s heartbeat does not stop, you have **no guilt**. Now if it stopped, well then you have really gone and done it. Now your life is over.

Would anyone think that God really looks at it that way? Would not putting that man’s life in danger not been a **clue** that something is **amiss in our hearts**? Does it really make that much difference to God if the pulse stops or continues? Should we not look for the problem of what would drive a man to such an act? Might there be **guilt** here even if technical murder is not committed?

That kind of guilt was beyond the scope of the pharisaical application of the law.

Second is how they apply the **penalty** for murder.

Look at what they were concerned about. Don’t murder because it might cut your life short. Where is **God** in that concern?

That is like saying I should be kind to people because they will not like me if I am not. While the consequence might be true, it does not capture the **proper relationship** we should have with God. It makes the law something in the realm of human give and take, instead of an act of worship to God.

The reason not to murder is because **there is a God**.

---

<sup>2</sup> [\*The New King James Version\*](#). (1982). (Nu 35:30–31). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It all starts there. The great command is to **love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength**. The Pharisees had that **figured** out, but it did not **play** out in their real theology.

Why do we not commit murder? Because we have a God that made all the human beings in His image, and it is **He** who determines **how** we should treat them. They are **His** creatures. He **owns** them. And He has a right to tell us **how** to regard them. If we love **Him**, we will regard them like **He tells us to**. Murder is the ultimate negative extreme on a **continuum** of how to **best** treat them and how to **worst** treat them. God owns the continuum.

Now who is most to be feared if we were to commit murder? The **civil authority** or **God**? We might get a good lawyer and get off on some technicality in **civil** law. But God sees our heart and does not miss a trick on the details. No lawyers get stuff kicked out of **His** court. There is no defense attorney if we are not In Christ.

And God is the one we should fear most because a man can take our life but only God can cast into hell.

**Luke 12:4-5 (NKJV)**

**4 "And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.**

**5 But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!**

The pharisees are missing the point.

In the positive sense, they could have used the command to **not murder** to emphasize **love**.

In the negative sense, they could have used the prohibition to challenge anyone with a **different attitude** to **repent** of their state of being. They could have appealed to it to challenge people to **get right with God**. Because the civil authorities were the **last thing** they needed to be afraid of. Murder is a display of disdain toward God. It is a rebellion against His rule. And ultimately it may be a display of our spiritual state that might damn us to eternity. It is not the **murder** that damns us but the state of **being in rebellion against God** that damns us.

So to teach that you should not murder because it ends your physical life shows **no spiritual understanding** at all. It misses the whole greater point. It speaks of the crime and punishment in a **man** centered, **man** controlled environment. It does not point to **God**. It does not point to **faith**. It just says **don't jump on the bed because you will hurt your head and that's what you get for jumping on the bed**.



Ultimately the scribes and the pharisees great sin is that they did not understand **the glory of God**. And they did not **glorify Him**. They separated that "**God that is**" from the writings He inspired. And they deified and then interpreted the writings in their fleshly attempts to make the writings serve their purposes. And the greatest purpose is that they would **never** find **themselves** guilty of violating the law. They missed the point.

The God "**that is**" provided the law to reveal Himself. He provided it to show people that they **cannot possibly** live up to His perfect standard after the fall in the garden. But when **that** hurdle is overcome by a person receiving the grace of God at the cross of Christ, then **the law** can **show them** how God is **most pleased**. Sure, it takes some scholarship to find out what still applies and what is fulfilled by Christ. But that is no big deal when we consider the price Christ paid for our salvation.

I hope this introduction to the section on murder has **whet our appetites** to hear all the implications to our day to day lives that are contained in the simple command, **You shall not murder**.