

2. Unfaithfulness and the Ethic of the Kingdom (5:27-32)

Jesus' second example case is also drawn from the Decalogue and deals with the Mosaic prohibition against **adultery** (5:27; cf. Exodus 20:14). What is immediately noticeable about Jesus' treatment is that He cites the commandment exactly as it appears in the Decalogue without any addendum whatsoever. This is important for several reasons:

- First of all, it provides compelling evidence that Jesus' purpose in the larger context (5:21-48) was not to confront rabbinical embellishments or faulty interpretations of the Law of Moses. The fact that He here interacts with the commandment precisely as given to Israel at Sinai provides conclusive proof that His concern was to show how the Law *itself* has found its fulfillment in Him.
- Second, the way Jesus treated this particular law in relation to Himself ("... but *I* say to you,") clearly moved it beyond its Mosaic framework and boundaries. The seventh commandment prohibited the act of adultery; it didn't address spousal thoughts and attitudes. It is undeniable that, in this sense at least, Jesus was "going beyond what is written." Certainly His hearers would have concluded that He was altering (if not abrogating) Moses' instruction (ref. again v. 17).
- Whatever Jesus was doing in His treatment of the seventh commandment, He was obviously claiming authority over the Law of Moses and Moses Himself. Even if one concludes that Jesus was merely uncovering the core issue behind God's prohibition of adultery, that doesn't change the fact that He was taking the commandment beyond its Mosaic formulation. He didn't say, "You have heard it said..., and I'm here to reaffirm what Moses delivered to you." There's simply no way around the truth that Jesus was declaring His authority over the Law.

The multitudes would have clearly recognized that Jesus was claiming authority over the Law – even the Decalogue itself; what they needed to understand was that this wasn't authority to abrogate, but to fulfill. The Law (as all the Scripture) is in subjection to Jesus precisely because He is the one of whom it spoke. *The One who fulfills is greater than that which promises, and when that One comes He has full right – indeed, He has the solemn obligation – to take the promise up in Himself and demonstrate how it is fulfilled in Him.* This is exactly what Jesus was doing on that mountain in Galilee.

It cannot be overemphasized that Jesus' interaction with the Law was intended to show how the Law of Moses – in its particulars as well as its totality as Israel's covenant – has found its fulfillment in Him. He was not, as many suppose, simply fleshing out the deeper implications of the Law; much less was He recovering it in its purity and reasserting its moral demands. D. A. Carson's comments are helpful: "*The contrast between what the people had heard and what Jesus taught is not based on distinctions like casuistry versus love [that is, sincerity], outer legalism versus inner commitment, or even false interpretation versus true interpretation... Rather, in every case Jesus contrasts the people's misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points, according to his own authority as the law's 'fulfiller.'*" (Expositor's Bible Commentary)

Jesus had come to fulfill the Mosaic Law, not annul or overturn it, and His comparison/contrast approach highlights this by indicating both continuity and discontinuity in His relation to the Law. Each individual case example shows how a particular Mosaic prescription has been transformed (“christified”) in Him and now functions in the new creational “kingdom of heaven” over which He presides as king. In turn, these examples together provide an overall framework for understanding the general ethic of Jesus’ kingdom as it proceeds out of His fulfillment of the Law of Moses.

- a. And so, after stating the seventh commandment of the Decalogue, Jesus communicated to the multitude how it was to be transformed in Him (5:28). As Carson implied in the preceding quote, it is very easy for people to miss the fundamental fulfillment dynamic in Jesus’ words. Perhaps the most common misreading is to conclude that He was insisting upon “heart” obedience rather than mere outward conformity. (Similarly, some commentators, citing Jewish sources that maintain that *theft* was God’s concern in the seventh commandment – i.e., stealing another man’s wife, have concluded that Jesus was directing His hearers back to the real issue, which is spousal devotion and commitment.)

But again, if that was all Jesus was doing, *He was effectively denying His own claim that He came to fulfill the Law as given to Israel*. Since the days at Sinai, the sons of Israel had understood that God demanded heart conformity to the Law; to simply reiterate that obligation didn’t in any way constitute fulfillment. (Again, to make *fulfillment* mean *reaffirmation* is to violate the sense in which Matthew everywhere uses this Greek terminology.)

Consistent with the previous case, Jesus was indicating that the marital ethic of the Law (the Law as prophetic *promise*) has found a counterpart (fulfillment) in the kingdom of the new creation. But the first step in understanding that counterpart is determining exactly what Jesus was saying in verse 28.

- The NAS and most English versions convey the idea that a married man who has a lustful attitude toward other women is guilty of committing adultery in his heart.
- But Jesus’ words can also be interpreted as saying that a man who seeks to draw lustful thoughts out of another woman has thereby caused her to commit adultery with him. His statement would then read: *Everyone who looks on another woman with the intent of causing her to lust for him has already, because of the attitude of his heart, made her an adulteress.*

In the end, both readings support the same general understanding, and both fit well with Jesus’ subsequent exhortation – “*If your right eye makes you stumble...*” In the case of the first reading, the emphasis is on the man’s lustful eye and his own stumbling; in the latter, it extends beyond him to also implicate the female object of his attention whom he has drawn into his own lust. Either way, the exhortation retains the same essential meaning and gravity.

Regardless of which reading is assumed, Jesus' treatment parallels what He revealed in the preceding case. As it is with murder, so it is with adultery: The act itself is secondary; the fundamental offense is the violation of the law of love. Every human being is entirely capable of refraining from committing the act of adultery. But of itself, this external marital fidelity means nothing in terms of the law of love: *A man may live his entire married life never seeking after or touching another woman and yet have never spent a single day loving his wife.* For the natural man, whatever the motivation behind his restraint – fear, guilt, pride, self-discipline, indifference, etc., it will never be grounded in love. All of Adam's offspring are characterized by the enmity of estrangement, no matter how sociable, considerate and “loving” they may appear (Titus 3:3).

Ironically, because of closeness and emotional attachment, people express this innate hatred most toward the people they “love.” This is easily seen when hatred is defined properly as the absence of authentic love. Sin is estrangement and estrangement brings isolation; isolation, in turn, results in self-centeredness. This self-fixation is defining and determinative, so that what people call *love* and *hate* are simply two of its responses to different situations (Matthew 5:43-47). In this instance, not “cheating” on a spouse seems to substantiate the claim of love, but Jesus was insisting that it means nothing in itself; the outwardly “faithful” husband or wife may actually hate the spouse through inward unfaithfulness.

- b. As with the issue of murder, the Law could neither address nor rectify this tragic dynamic. It could punish those who committed the act of adultery (Leviticus 20:10), but it had no jurisdiction over or power to correct marital lovelessness. As with its all of its demands, the Law of Moses could only point to a future day when the real violation would be addressed and remedied.

That day had now come; the One who is the human embodiment of love would soon be bringing forth a new humanity capable of and characterized by this authentic love. But, once again, this renewal brings with it a new and serious obligation. First, as it regards the sons of the kingdom, their new *capacity* to love establishes both their *responsibility* to love and their *accountability* to the God who has effected that capacity through His renewing power. But the new creation also places a new obligation upon the sons of this world: In light of what God has done in His Son, they no longer have an excuse for their lovelessness.

Accordingly, just as He did in His treatment of murder, Jesus closed His second example case with a grave exhortation issued in the form of a powerful and compelling metaphor (5:29-30). In the preceding instance, His call to be reconciled to an offended brother pointed beyond that narrow duty to the larger principle of ultimate, inescapable accountability to God. In the day of judgment, all men will appear before Him to receive their due recompense for how they responded to His Son and their obligation of faith (Matthew 25:31-46). So Jesus' exhortation to pluck out an offending eye or cut off an offending hand conveys the same urgent gravity in view of impending judgment.

The Lord intended this imagery to be graphic and shocking, but He clearly wasn't calling for literal self-dismemberment. If plucking out an eye or severing a hand could solve the problem of human stumbling, Jesus could have easily avoided the cross by simply setting up medical clinics around the world dedicated to performing amputations. To the contrary, He (and the New Testament writers) everywhere affirmed that incitement to sin arises in the immaterial human soul, and this faculty is inaccessible to a scalpel (Matthew 12:33-35; 15:1-20; cf. Luke 6:39-45). Extrication and amputation remove only amoral tissue and bone.

The point of Jesus' language was to emphasize to His audience the seriousness of the sin of lovelessness and the severity of the judgment it incurs. For this reason it must be addressed drastically and with the utmost urgency. (Note Jesus' reference to the *right* eye and *right* hand as representing the greater of the corresponding members.) This sort of startling treatment was absolutely necessary for a people accustomed to thinking of righteousness in behavioral categories.

The sons of Israel thought of their obligation to God in terms of their conformity to the particular demands of the Mosaic Law, and centuries of rabbinical obsession with the Law's minutiae helped cultivate a hyper-scrupulousness in them. The end result was that the Jews "missed the forest for the trees." To the extent that they recognized the greater demand of love, they related to it through the grid of their fundamental estrangement and sense of self-righteousness (ref. Matthew 9:9-13, 12:1-7); it was as easy as it was convenient to miss the truth that they were incapable of meeting the obligation of love apart from a divine work of inward renewal and transformation (cf. Matthew 19:16-26; John 3:1-21).

- c. Jesus next turned His attention to the matter of **divorce** (5:31-32). The abbreviated form of His introduction suggests that this brief context is an extrapolation of vv. 27-30, and this conclusion is substantiated by the subject matter and the Lord's treatment of it. Divorce, like lust, can constitute adultery.

In this example case Jesus moved away from the Decalogue and two of its capital crimes to a prescription that was only indirectly associated with the Law of Moses. The Law itself nowhere dealt specifically with the matter of divorce, but Moses addressed it as God's prophet and law-giver (Deuteronomy 22:13-30, 24:1-5), and the sons of Israel regarded his divorce/remarriage instruction as an authoritative component of their covenant law. Nevertheless, by the time Jesus was born in Israel, Moses' teaching had been altered and enlarged so much that some of the rabbis taught the lawfulness of divorce for virtually any reason.

Moses had allowed for a husband to divorce his wife in instances where she "found no favor" because of indecency (note that no provision was made for a wife to divorce her husband), but over the centuries rabbinical interpretation had so focused on the divorce criterion of "losing favor" that the specific reason Moses gave for this displeasure was either lost or redefined. (In Jesus' time, "indecency" effectively became a matter of the husband's personal judgment.)

Divorce was rampant in Israel, and yet Israelite men were able to congratulate themselves that this practice didn't at all affect their "righteous" conformity to the Law because Moses had sanctioned it. The only obligation they had in the matter was to provide their wife with a formal certificate of divorce (5:31; cf. also Deuteronomy 24:1-5 with Matthew 19:1-7).

Once again, Jesus responded to this prevailing notion and practice by highlighting the fact that the real matter of violation wasn't divorce as such, but the lack of love that lay behind it. The core issue in the Jews' understanding of marriage (as in every aspect of their existence under the Law) was their fundamental and defining lovelessness. That inability to love – indeed, to even truly perceive what love is – resulted in a perspective on adultery that Jesus cleverly used as the springboard of His confrontation and exhortation.

- Consistent with their overall approach to the Law, the sons of Israel viewed the Decalogue's prohibition of adultery in external, behavioral terms. As long as a married person refrained from sexual intimacy with someone other than his spouse, he remained blameless under the seventh commandment. But Jesus was now declaring that this commandment spoke ultimately to the obligation of love; violation at that level is independent of the commission or omission of a particular action.
- And if it is true that adultery is really concerned with the violation of love, it follows that the crime of adultery is broader than what the Law of Moses appeared to indicate. *Other expressions of lovelessness related to marriage should also constitute adultery, and Jesus showed how that is precisely the case with respect to divorce: Except in instances of unchastity (sexual immorality), divorce leaves both partners guilty of committing adultery should they remarry. And if the divorced parties are adulterers, so are those whom they take as new spouses (5:32).*

At this point the discussion often takes a side track as Christians and Christian ethicists attempt to precisely define Jesus' exception and even determine whether it is legitimate. (The fact that some related passages in the gospels don't include this exception has led many to speculate that it is a later addition to the text.)

- For those who accept the authenticity of Jesus' exception, the focus is usually on the meaning of *unchastity*. In one sense, this is understandable, for if this particular sin constitutes the sole biblical ground for divorce, it is important to try to define and bound it properly. (This is no easy task since the Greek noun encompasses a whole range of sexual impurity.)
- For those who hold that there is no biblical basis for divorce, one common conclusion is that Jesus was actually removing the exception of unchastity rather providing it. His meaning is then: *"Everyone who divorces his wife, including for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery..."*

But however one concludes (and there is no sound biblical basis for eliminating Jesus' exception), what is most important is that the Lord's principal point be clearly understood. In their effort to deal with the exception issue, many miss Jesus' real concern, which is the obligation of love as it applies to marriage. *In that sense, divorce and the reasons for it are not the issue*; just like so many today, the Jews made them the issue and Jesus was challenging them for it.

As it falls within the ethic of Jesus' kingdom, marital "righteousness" consists in spousal fulfillment of the obligation of love. Again, it cannot be overemphasized that the inauguration of the kingdom of heaven means the introduction of the fullness of human authenticity, beginning with Jesus Himself as the Last Adam. Thus the substance of the kingdom's ethic is a life of integrity with respect to that authenticity. For those who share in Jesus' life and likeness through His indwelling Spirit, their obligation is to live into that transforming union, and that means living a life of love (Ephesians 4:17-32; Colossians 3:1-14). *As it pertains to marriage, the life of love is **faithfulness** – the sincere, unqualified and unrelenting commitment and devotion of the two spouses to one another.* If this core responsibility of the new creation were met in marriages, all other marital issues would take care of themselves.

Whereas Jesus *allowed* for divorce for reasons of sexual immorality, loveless hearts readily find an "out" – if not a mandate – in His words. He recognized that the desecration of the marriage bed constitutes a profound violation of the one-flesh union marriage establishes. In some instances that violation is so grievous that there is no recovering from it; divorce then is permitted, though not demanded. But always the ethic of love looks for repentance and is eager to grant forgiveness and seek restoration. *Those who jump at the opportunity to divorce an offending spouse (or worse yet, seek to provoke such offense as a way to end their marriage) have violated the law of love and incurred guilt before God regardless of whether their divorce fits the "letter" of Jesus' instruction.*

The same violation of love is behind the attempt to define *unchastity* so broadly that it effectively allows for divorce for even the most minor offense. Taken together with Jesus' teaching in vv. 27-28, some insist that any sort of attracted look at a member of the opposite sex satisfies the definition of "heart adultery," which violation is then regarded as fulfilling the "sexual immorality" criterion for divorcing the offending spouse. Carson's insight is helpful at this point: *"This is not a prohibition of the normal attraction which exists between men and women, but of the deep-seated lust which consumes and devours, which in imagination attacks and rapes, which mentally contemplates and commits adultery."*

But those who have the mind of Christ recognize that the spouse who withholds himself physically or emotionally or seeks an excuse to dissolve his marriage is as guilty as the one who violates it through sexual immorality. Both are guilty of the same hard-hearted selfishness that underlies unfaithfulness; both are equally guilty of despising the kingdom's law of love (Matthew 19:3-8).