

You Said, But I Say – Part 2

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not murder; and whosoever commits murder shall be liable to the court. . . . But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.”

– Matthew 5:21-26

In his book “The Most Holy Place”, the great English preacher Charles H. Spurgeon comments, “I dread very much the tendency to do Christ's work in a cold, mechanical spirit; but above even that I tremble lest I should be able to have warmth for Christ's work and yet should be cold towards the Lord Himself. I fear that such a condition of heart is possible – that we may burn great bonfires in the streets for public display, and scarcely keep a live coal upon our hearth for Jesus to warm His hands at.”

For the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus continues to shatter the Jews' illusion of self-righteousness. In fact, all that follows from this point on is essentially an exposition or illustration of Matthew 5:20, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Our Lord has been contrasting the Pharisees' false interpretation of the Mosaic Law with its true meaning. As A.W. Pink states, the Lord's intent here was to “raise aloft the claims of Divine righteousness, and meet, with repressive and determined energy, the corrupt tendencies of human nature.” He now gives six practical examples that the ‘surpassing righteousness’ of Matthew 5:20 goes far beyond the ‘public display’ – beyond the external.

As the chosen custodians of God's Word, the Jews should have known that God commands heart-righteousness, not just an external, legalistic behavior. “Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part Thou wilt make me know wisdom” [Ps. 51:6]. They had perverted the true meaning of the Law, and had elevated oral traditions as equal in authority with the Scriptures, therefore contaminating its teaching. In the first case, Jesus introduces the subject of murder.

Of all known sins of which the Pharisees believed they were not guilty, it was murder. To the Pharisees (as well as rabbinic tradition) murder was limited to the act of physically taking of a person's life. Jesus begins by stating their erroneous tradition, “You have heard that it was said”, and then follows with the shocking phrase, “But I say unto you”. He was saying, “Just because you have not committed the physical act of murder don't think you are justified before God.” Murder originates from the heart, not with the hands, and begins with evil thoughts: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders” [Mk. 7:21].

Every Jew was familiar with Exodus 20:13, “You shall not murder.” However, it is clear from many Scriptural accounts that capital punishment, just warfare, accidental homicide and self-defense were excluded. The commandment was given to prohibit the intentional killing of another human being for personal reasons, no matter what the reason. Jesus insists here that the commandment prohibited not only the actual act of murder, but every evil working of the heart and mind which led to it, including unjust anger with contempt and provoking language. He was saying in effect, “If you are angry with or hate your brother, you are the same as a murderer.” Scripture enforces this precisely: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” [1Jn. 3:15].

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court.” It should be noted that not every form of anger is prohibited: “Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” [Eph. 4:26] Often misunderstood and misapplied, faithfulness to Christ will sometimes demand righteous anger. “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil” the Psalmist says [Ps. 97:10]. Jesus on one occasion referred to the Pharisees and teachers as “blind fools”. God Himself is “angry with the wicked every day” [Ps. 7:11]. Appropriate anger proceeds from a love and zeal for righteousness, holiness, purity, and always has the person's very best in mind. Mark portrays Jesus “looking around with anger” at the religious leaders, but “was grieved at their hardness of heart” [Mk. 3:5]. Luther defined righteous anger thus: “It is an anger of love, one that wishes no one any evil, one that is friendly to the person but hostile to the sin.” In any case, the guideline for anger is this, “Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger” [Ja. 1:19].

Jesus' reference here is to unrighteous anger, the anger of pride, vanity, hatred, malice and revenge. William Barclay refers to this as “the anger which broods, the anger which will not forget, the anger which refuses to be pacified, the anger which seeks revenge.” This is the one who is the murderer in desire and intent. Our anger must only be against sin, not with the sinner; for the sinner there is to be sorrow and compassion. Aristotle put it this way: “Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy.” That is our challenge.

"If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Much could be said regarding the remaining verses, however, a brief summary should be sufficient. The suggestion here is that anger and bitter feelings can lead to harsh words – "Raca" and "thou fool" – which can too readily lead to violence. "Raca" was a common epithet – a discrediting and disrespectful name used in a slanderous way. One has defined the word as "brainless idiot." Jesus is saying in effect that to offer our Christian service and worship, it is all vanity and displeasing to Him if we have had angry thoughts toward our brother or sister. A.W. Pink states, "If you have treated him in some way inconsistent with the fraternal relationship, if he be conscious that you have wronged him, then you must seek to right that wrong, no matter what the cost may be to your pride and interests. . . . Peace has been disrupted, and God requires you to do everything in your power to lawfully restore it." Leave your service and worship and be reconciled to your brother.

This again should have come as no surprise to the Jews for Scripture was clear, "What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?" says the LORD. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood" [Is. 1:11,15]. The performance of any outward service unto God is displeasing to Him if it be separated from sincere love of the brethren [see 1Pe. 1:22]. "Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely. . . and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name?" [Jer. 7:9-10]

The teaching is clear: make every effort, without delay, to make our relationships with our brother right, and our relationship with God right, maintaining the integrity of the fellowship, and avoiding the chastening of God.

– Article submitted by Chuck Wetzel
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