

**THE KING AND HIS KINGDOM, PART 9: “JESUS AND THE LAW”
MATTHEW 5:17-48**

Personal Introduction

Hi everyone!

If you don't know me, my name is Eric and I'm a pastor here, and it's my privilege to preach the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 9 of our sermon series called “The King and His Kingdom,” where we're going through the Gospel of Matthew together.

And today's sermon is titled: “Jesus and the Law.”

So let's get right into it.

Sermon Introduction

Are Christians good people?

In one sense, Christians ought to be the first to say, “No, we're not.” We recognize ourselves to be “poor in spirit”—spiritually bankrupt. We are sinners who have no righteousness of our own, and we honestly believe that God would be perfectly to just to condemn us to an eternity in hell.

But in another sense, through faith in Christ, we are not only forgiven of all our sins, but we are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit to become more like Christ each day. There is a profound difference between who we *once* were before knowing Christ and who we are *now* in him. By his grace, God has declared us righteous, and he is progressively making us more righteous.

So Christians are simultaneously sinners and saints—not good, and yet good.

But what does that actually look like? What does it mean to be righteous—not just in theory, but in the everyday reality of our lives?

That's exactly the question Jesus addresses in today's passage.

Scripture Introduction

Turn your Bibles to Matthew 5:17-48.

I'd encourage you to keep your Bibles open and follow along with the verses as they come up throughout the sermon. It will help you follow much more easily.

I'd highly recommend using a physical Bible, but if you don't have one, you can download the ESV Bible app, or just ask someone next to you, and I'm sure they'd be happy to share with you.

<pause>

Last week, we began Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he carefully *clarifies* what it *truly* means to *follow* him—to be his *disciple*, to be a citizen in his *kingdom*.¹

¹ R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: “The theme of this, Matthew's longest and most wide-ranging collection of Jesus' teaching, is indicated by the stated audience (see on 5:1–2); it deals with the character, duties, attitudes and dangers of the Christian disciple. It is a manifesto setting out the nature of life in the kingdom of heaven. The Sermon thus makes no claim to present an ethic for all men; indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code. It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with man in his obedience and devotion to God, not with a pattern for society. To interpret it legalistically as a set of rules is to miss the point; it represents a demand more radical than any legislator could conceive, going far beyond what human nature can meet, a demand for perfection (5:48). And central to it is the person of Jesus himself: for his sake the disciples are to be persecuted (5:11); he sets before them his own interpretation of the will of God (5:17–48: ‘I say to you ...’); their eternal destiny depends on their relation to him (7:21–23) and their response to his

He started with the *eight* beatitudes (or eight *marks*) of what it means to be truly “blessed”—that is, to have the relational favor, acceptance, and approval of God. These marks are *only* true of those who are truly his disciples.

Then, he gave *two* metaphors—salt and light—for the *effects* that his disciples are to have on the world. By our *distinct* lives—as expressed in the Beatitudes—we are to *restrain* corruption (or darkness) and *radiate* light, so that all people will glorify our heavenly Father.

In all of this, Jesus has essentially been telling his disciples, “This is who you are. This is how you bring glory to God—simply by being and not hiding who I’ve made you to be.”

In the rest of chapter 5, he begins to describe in greater detail *how* his disciples are to do that. In a word, they are to be *righteous*.²

But it’s not the kind of righteousness that they’ve heard and seen in the religious teachers of their day. He means something entirely different—something that God’s law has *always* required but has been deeply *distorted*.

And so, he wants to set the record straight on what God’s law demands and what true righteousness really is.

And that’s where we are as we dive into today’s passage.

Scripture Reading

Let’s read Matthew 5:17-48.

¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² 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. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if

teaching (7:24–27). The Sermon is thus far from being just a collection of moral precepts. It presents the radical demand of Jesus the Messiah on all who respond to his preaching of God’s kingdom. ‘The Sermon on the Mount compels us, in the first place, to ask who he is who utters these words.’”

² D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 22) writes: “What is this righteousness which we must thus pursue? ... Now, however, those who have studied Matthew’s use of the term increasingly recognize that “righteousness” here [verse 6] (and also in verses 10 and 20) means a pattern of life in conformity to God’s will. Righteousness thus includes within its semantic range all the derivative or specialized meanings, but cannot be reduced to any one of them. The person who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, then, hungers and thirsts for conformity to God’s will. He is not drifting aimlessly in a sea of empty religiosity; still less is he puttering about distracted by inconsequential trivia. Rather, his whole being echoes the prayer of a certain Scottish saint who cried, “O God, make me just as holy as a pardoned sinner can be!” His delight is the Word of God, for where else is God’s will, to which he hungers to be conformed, so clearly set forth? He wants to be righteous, not simply because he fears God, but because righteousness has become for him the most eminently desirable thing in the world.”

your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is God’s Word.

The Sermon on the Mount could easily be its *own* sermon series, with each paragraph being its *own* sermon—and many pastors have done just that.³

But since our sermon series is on the *whole* Gospel account of Matthew, we’ll need to move along more briskly, covering the Sermon on the Mount in just *five* sermons, Lord willing.

Overview

We’ll look at today’s passage in *two* parts, where we’ll examine...

Two questions:

- I. Do I still need to be righteous? (vv. 17-20)
- II. What does it mean to be righteous? (vv. 21-48)

I. Do I still need to be righteous? (vv. 17-20)

Look at verses 17-18.

[¹⁷ “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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.]

Jesus knows that throughout his ministry, he and his disciples will be accused by the religious leaders of *breaking* God’s law—whether that’s healing or picking grain on the Sabbath or not washing their hands before eating.

But Jesus *never* broke *God’s* law. He only broke the traditions of *men* that had *twisted* what God’s law always intended.

³ I’d highly recommend Martyn Lloyd-Jones’s two-volume book called *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. It’s a compilation of the *sixty* sermons he preached on these three chapters.

So at the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus gets rid of any notion that he takes God's law lightly.

In verse 17, he makes clear that he has *not* come to "abolish the Law or the Prophets" but to "fulfill them."

"The Law" and "the Prophets" refer to the entire *Old Testament*.⁴

So Jesus is saying that the entire Old Testament is about *him*. It all finds its climax in *him*.

Matthew has been signaling this from the opening chapters—Jesus is the son of Abraham, the son of David, the true Israel, the fulfillment of everything that the prophets spoke.⁵

Jesus says this himself in no uncertain terms in...

John 5:39, 42: You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and **it is they that bear witness about me**... For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for **he wrote of me**.⁶

Nobody spoke like this in *Jesus' day*. And *nobody* should speak like this in *our day*. You should find a new pastor immediately if I ever stand up here and say, "All of Scripture is all about *me*. I am the fulfillment of everything God has spoken."

That was the essence of what Jesus was claiming.

[¹⁷ "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. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.]

In verse 18, Jesus says that "not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished"—that is, accomplished in *him*.

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [London: IVP, 1972], 1:184) writes: "What is meant by 'the law' and 'the prophets'? The answer is, the whole of the Old Testament. You can turn up passages for yourself and you will find that wherever this expression is used it includes the entire Old Testament canon." D. A. Carson ("Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 142) writes: "Jesus' mission was not to abolish (a term more frequently connected with the destruction of buildings [24:2; 26:61; 27:40], but not exclusively so [e.g., 2 Macc 2:22]) 'the law or the prophets.'" By these words Matthew forms a new "inclusio" (Mt 5:17–7:12), which marks out the body of the sermon and shows that Jesus is taking pains to relate his teaching and place in the history of redemption to the OT Scriptures. For that is what "Law or the Prophets" here means: the Scriptures. The disjunctive "or" makes it clear that neither is to be abolished. The Jews of Jesus' day could refer to the Scriptures as "the Law and the Prophets" (7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16; John 1:45; Acts 13:15; 28:23; Rom 3:21); "the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44); or just "Law" (5:18; John 10:34; 12:34; 15:25; 1 Cor 14:21); the divisions were not yet stereotyped."

⁵ D. A. Carson ("Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 143–144) writes: "The best interpretation of these difficult verses says that Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets in that they point to him, and he is their fulfillment. The antithesis is not between "abolish" and "keep" but between "abolish" and "fulfill." "For Matthew, then, it is not the question of Jesus' relation to the law that is in doubt but rather its relation to him!" (Robert Banks, "Matthew's Understanding of the Law: Authenticity and Interpretation in Matthew 5:17–20," JBL 93 [1974]: 226–42). Therefore we give *plēroō* ("fulfill") exactly the same meaning as in the formula quotations, which in the prologue (Matt 1–2) have already laid great stress on the prophetic nature of the OT and the way it points to Jesus. Even OT events have this prophetic significance (see on 2:15). A little later Jesus insists that "all the Prophets and the Law prophesied" (11:13).

The manner of the prophetic foreshadowing varies. The Exodus, Matthew argues (2:15), foreshadows the calling out of Egypt of God's "son." The writer to the Hebrews argues that many cultic regulations of the OT pointed to Jesus and are now obsolete. In the light of the antitheses (vv. 21–48), the passage before us insists that just as Jesus fulfilled OT prophecies by his person and actions, so he fulfilled OT law by his teaching. In no case does this "abolish" the OT as canon, any more than the obsolescence of the Levitical sacrificial system abolishes tabernacle ritual as canon. Instead, the OT's real and abiding authority must be understood through the person and teaching of him to whom it points and who so richly fulfills it."

⁶ And after his resurrection, it says this in Luke 24:27, 44: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, **he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself**.... Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that **everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled**."

The “iota” and “dot” are among the smallest strokes in the written language—think a comma or a period. Jesus is saying that every last detail of God’s word is important and will find its fulfillment in him (cf. 2 Cor. 1:20).⁷

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Before moving on, ask yourself: Is *that* how *I* regard the Old Testament?

Many Christians wrongly assume that it’s irrelevant. “It’s too hard to understand, so let’s just focus on the New Testament.”

But Jesus would be appalled by that. If *he* is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, you won’t properly understand *who* he is and *what* he’s done unless you understand what exactly he fulfilled.

As it’s been said, the New Testament is in the Old *concealed*, and the Old Testament is in the New *revealed* (Augustine).

<pause>

Look now at verses 19-20.

[¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.]

Verse 19 starts with “Therefore,” meaning that Jesus’ shocking declarations about *himself* are the *setup* for what he says next about his *disciples*.

Some *falsely* assume that *because* Christ has fulfilled the *law*, he replaced it with *grace*.⁸

And so, they pit *law* and *grace* *against* each other—as if the Old Testament is all *law* and the New Testament is all *grace*. But *both* are found throughout the entire Bible.

Grace doesn’t *abolish* the law; it *enables* true obedience to it.⁹

Our church’s statement of faith puts it this way in...

Article XII. The Harmony of the Law and the Gospel

We believe the law of God is the eternal and unchangeable rule of His moral governance. It is holy, just, and good. Fallen human beings are unable to fulfill the precepts of the law, which the Scriptures attribute entirely to their love of sin. A chief purpose of the gospel is to deliver people from this love and to restore them through a Mediator to a sincere obedience to the holy law. The visible church’s means of grace share this great purpose.

God’s law *exposes* us of our sin and *drives* us to the gospel—the good news of Jesus who perfectly fulfills God’s law on our behalf, entirely by his grace, not by *any* work of our own.

⁷ Daniel M. Doriani (“Matthew” in *Matthew-Luke*, ESVEC, vol. 8 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “Jesus also upholds the law by insisting on its permanence: it would be easier for heaven and earth to perish than for an “iota” or “dot” to pass from the law. The iota and dot are among the smallest strokes in Hebrew writing. The iota has the size of a comma and can often be omitted without loss of meaning, like a silent e. The dot is a small mark that distinguishes two letters with similar appearances, akin to *b/d* or *c/e* in the English alphabet. A careless reading of the law will not do! Indeed, no one who disregards the smallest element of the law can be great in the kingdom (v. 19). Jesus’ commitment to the law is complete.”

⁸ Perhaps quoting John 1:17: “the *law* was given through Moses; *grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

⁹ Using the word “therefore,” Jesus declares that *because* he fulfills and accomplishes the law on our behalf—which is grace, or the gospel—he now *expects* his disciples to take God’s law seriously and to teach others to do the same.

And when we respond with faith in the gospel, we are *delivered* from our sin and then *turned back* toward the law—except now, through a new heart and the indwelling Holy Spirit, we have a new desire and ability to obey that we never had before.

[¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.]

Notice also, in verse 19, that the responsibility we have isn't just to take God's commandments seriously *ourselves*, but we are to *teach* others to do the same.

Jesus makes clear that to be his disciple means to intentionally help *others* to follow him. Discipling others isn't optional; it's *basic* to what it means to be his disciple.¹⁰

In verse 20, Jesus then says something that would have *shocked* everyone listening: “unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

At the time, the scribes and the Pharisees were considered the gold standard of religious devotion. But as Jesus will soon demonstrate, their righteousness was only skin deep—it never penetrated to *heart*-obedience.

They made God's law *manageable* by distorting and lessening what it actually required. So rather than letting the law *expose* their sin and their need for a Savior, they were quite self-satisfied.

But the true righteousness that God demands begins with the heart that Jesus described earlier in the Beatitudes.¹¹

The scribes and Pharisees were the *antithesis* (or the *opposite*) of all that.

So yes, Jesus' disciples must be righteous—but not like the religious leaders. Our righteousness must *exceed* theirs.¹²

<pause>

So first, do I still need to be righteous? The answer is a resounding YES!

And second...

II. What does it mean to be righteous? (vv. 21-48)

Before giving into Jesus' six examples, here are *three* principles to keep in mind to help you understand them.

First, think not in terms of *exhaustive* teaching but *examples* to contrast with false teaching.

Jesus is not covering *everything* there is to know about anger, lust, divorce, oaths, retaliation, and love. For that, we need other Scripture passages for a fuller picture.

Instead, Jesus has specific false teaching in his sights, and he's correcting *that*.

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¹⁰ Mark Dever (quoted in Garrett Kell, *How Do I Disciple Others?* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025], 14) says: “If you say you're following Jesus but aren't helping others follow Jesus, I don't know what you mean when you say you're following Jesus.”

¹¹ It is someone who recognizes their spiritual poverty, mourns their sins, is meek, hungers and thirsts for righteousness, shows mercy, possesses a pure heart, makes peace, and is willing to be persecuted for identifying with Christ.

¹² And to be clear, the Beatitudes describe those who *already* belong to the kingdom of heaven, so Jesus is not saying that obedience to God's law *causes* us to become citizens of his kingdom. Rather, in contrast to the false righteousness of the religious leaders, true righteousness is *evidence* of those who truly belong to the kingdom.

Second, think not just in terms of *actions* but the *heart*.

Perhaps the greatest pitfall of the religious leaders was focusing *only* on the external *action* commanded or prohibited, while ignoring the thoughts, motives, and desires beneath it. God doesn't just want our external obedience—he wants our hearts.

Jesus will use *hyperbole* (or extreme statements) to make his point forcefully and memorably—like tear out your eye, cut off your hand, never take an oath, and always give to the one who beg. To take these as *absolute* commands is to repeat the same error as the religious leaders, focusing *only* on the actions.¹³

Instead, we must ask, “What is the *heart* that would *lead* to this kind of action?”¹⁴

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Third, think not just in terms of what we *shouldn't* do but what we *should* do.

The religious leaders thought that as long as they *didn't* do what was prohibited, they had obeyed the law. But Jesus insists that the *heart* of the law requires us not just to *refrain* from something but to actively *pursue* something.¹⁵

So always ask, “What does the *heart* of the law require me to *do*?”¹⁶

¹³ D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 40-41) writes: “[T]his categorical and antithetical way of speaking is typical of much of Jesus’ preaching, and reflects, I think, a semitic and poetic cast of mind. It is something we shall wrestle with repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount; but it is also found elsewhere. For example, in Luke 14:26, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” “Hate” is not to be taken absolutely. Jesus is saying rather that love and allegiance must be given in a preeminent way to himself alone; rivals must not be allowed to usurp what is not their due. But Jesus says it in this antithetical fashion (cf. Matt. 10:37), even though elsewhere he upholds the importance, for example, of honoring parents (Mark 7:10ff.). And indeed, it is important to let this antithetical and categorical form of statement speak, in all its stark absoluteness, before we allow it to be tempered by broader considerations. In Matthew 5:21ff., Jesus relates anger to murder: let that relationship stand before going on to observe that some anger, including anger in Jesus’ own life, is not only justifiable but good.” D. A. Carson (“Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 149) writes: “Jesus is a preacher who gets down to essentials on every point he makes. Thus for a clear understanding of his thought on a particular issue, one must examine the balance of his teaching. Compare, for instance, 6:2–4 with Luke 18:1–8. Similarly, to learn all Jesus says about anger, it is necessary to integrate this passage with others such as Mt 21:12–13 without absolutizing any one text.”

¹⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [London: IVP, 1972], 1:217) writes: “Conformity to the law must not be thought of in terms of actions only. Thoughts, motives and desires are equally important. The law of God is concerned as much with what leads to the action as it is with the action itself. Again it does not mean that the action does not matter; but it does mean very definitely that it is not the action only that is important.”

¹⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* [London: IVP, 1972], 1:218) writes: “The law must be thought of not only in a negative manner, but also positively. The ultimate purpose of the law is not merely to prevent our doing certain things that are wrong; its real object is to lead us positively, not only to do that which is right, but also to love it. Here again is something which comes out clearly in these six illustrations. The whole Jewish conception of the law was a negative one. I must not commit adultery, I must not commit murder, and so on. But our Lord emphasizes all along that what God is really concerned about is that we should be lovers of righteousness. We should be hungering and thirsting after righteousness, not merely negatively avoiding that which is evil. It is surely unnecessary that I should turn aside to show the practical relevance of each one of these points to our present condition. Alas, there are still people who seem to think of holiness and sanctification in this purely mechanical manner. They think that, as long as they are not guilty of drinking, gambling or going to theatres and cinemas, all is well. Their attitude is purely negative. It does not seem to matter if you are jealous, envious and spiteful. The fact that you are full of the pride of life seems to be of no account as long as you do not do certain things. That was the whole trouble with the scribes and Pharisees who perverted the law of God by regarding it purely in a negative manner.”

¹⁶ Here are two more principles I might add. Fourth, think not just in terms of *rules* but our *relation* to God. Why do Christ’s disciples obey God’s law? Not to earn anything from God, not for us or others to see ourselves in a certain way, but simply because we love him. The Christian does not view God’s law as burdensome, but he delights in it and meditates on it because it shows him more of *who* God is and *how* to live in a way that pleases and brings glory to him. We also understand that, as those who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we represent God in the world—such that everything we do says something to others about God. The Christian isn’t thinking so much in terms of *rules*, but he’s controlled by his relation to *God*. He doesn’t want anyone to think wrongly of God by his speech and conduct; he doesn’t want to dishonor the One he loves most. Fifth, think not just in terms of *what* is taught but *who* is teaching it. In each of the six examples, Jesus first presents the distortions of the Law from the religious leaders when he says, “You have heard that is was said,” and then he exercises his *own* authority by clarifying, “But I say to you.” *Nobody* taught like this (cf. 7:28-29). Jesus sets himself up as *the* definitive authority to interpret the law. He rests entirely on his *own* authority—nobody else’s. What would you think of me if I preached to you like this? “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you....” But if Jesus is the *fulfillment* and *culmination* of all of God’s word, where everything points to him, who is he really claiming to be? Isn’t all of God’s word about *God*? Could he be the one who gave the Law to begin with? Listen to how he speaks about God’s law. How can he speak so authoritatively

<pause>

With those three principles in mind, here are Jesus' six examples of what it means to be righteous.

The first example is in verses 21-26.

[²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² 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. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.]

Verse 21 is the sixth of the Ten Commandments—"You shall not murder" (Exod. 20:13). Nothing seems wrong on the surface. But the religious leaders taught that it *only* applied to the *act* of murder itself. So as long as you didn't *literally* murder anyone, you were obeying God's command.

But in verse 22, Jesus shows that the sixth commandment isn't just about the *act* of murder, but it's about the *heart* behind it—the anger, the attitude of contempt, the devaluing of another person.

The word "insults" literally says "Raca," which is an Aramaic term that means "empty." It'd be the equivalent of calling someone an "idiot." And calling someone a "fool" communicates the same—"you're worthless, good for nothing."¹⁷

Whether spoken or merely thought, these reflect a murderous heart—and they deserve judgment.¹⁸

about what it means? *What* Jesus teaches is extremely important, but don't forget to step back and ask the more fundamental question: "Who is this man who teaches with such authority?"

¹⁷ R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "Jesus goes behind the act of murder itself to declare that the anger and hatred which give rise to it, though not capable of being examined in a human court, are no less culpable in the sight of God. The continued validity of the sixth commandment is assumed, but a legalistic interpretation which restricts its application to the literal act alone is rejected. The three parallel statements of v. 22, the first part of each indicating the attitude Jesus condemns and the second its due penalty (each deliberately echoing v. 21, *liable to* ...), are making the same point in different ways, and should not be interpreted as dealing with different sins. Anger against a *brother* was already condemned in, e.g., Leviticus 19:17–18 (the 'neighbour' there being a fellow-Israelite; *brother* in the New Testament often indicates a fellow-disciple, but Jesus did not encourage parochial loyalty: Luke 10:29ff.). It expresses itself in such insulting language as 'Raca' (*insults* is literally 'says Raca to'; *Raca*, literally 'empty', is an Aramaic term of abuse, 'idiot') and *You fool!* These are not uncommon or particularly vulgar words (Jesus himself used the latter, 23:17; cf. Jas 2:20), but they suggest an attitude of angry contempt. This attitude renders a man *liable to judgment* (here the judgment of God; it is a favourite word of Matthew in this sense, and does not elsewhere refer to a human court except in v. 21 where it echoes Old Testament language), *to the council* (*synedrion*, either the supreme Jewish council or a local court, cf. 10:17, but in this context probably used to symbolize a more ultimate judgment) and *to the hell of fire* (*gehenna*, the name of the place where Jerusalem's rubbish was burnt, used regularly by Jesus, as by Jewish writers, for the place of ultimate punishment). So, in contrast with the human court's verdict on murder in v. 21, Jesus here threatens ultimate divine judgment on anger, even as expressed in everyday insults." D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 41) writes: "Some have tried to see in these three steps—anger, 'Raca,' 'You fool!'—a gradation; but it is difficult to believe that Jesus is stooping to such casuistry. Would he resort to hairsplitting distinctions between 'Raca' and 'You fool'? And could either be meaningfully spit out without anger? Jesus is simply multiplying examples to drive the lesson home. He is a preacher who makes his point and then makes his hearers feel its weight. He confronts his audience: You who think yourselves far removed, morally speaking, from murders—have you not hated? Have you never wished someone were dead? Have you not frequently stooped to the use of contempt, even to character assassination? All such vilifying anger lies at the root of murder, and makes a thoughtful man conscious that he differs not a whit, morally speaking, from the actual murderer. Similarly, it is doubtful that the three punishments—judgment, the Sanhedrin, and the fire of hell—are meant to be taken as a gradation. In the Old Testament theocracy, God himself stood behind the legal system of the state. Judgment, though civil, was also divine. Here, Jesus moves through the accepted system to the ultimate punishment to make it clear that the judgment to be feared is indeed divine, for it is based on God's assessment of the heart and can end in the fire of hell."

¹⁸ D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 41-42) writes: "Someone may well ask, 'But didn't Jesus himself get very angry sometimes?' Yes, that is true. He was certainly upset with the merchandising practiced in the temple precincts (Matt. 21:12ff. and parallels). Mark records Jesus' anger with those who for legalistic and hypocritical reasons tried to find something wrong with the healings he performed on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1ff.). And on one occasion Jesus addressed the Pharisees and teachers of the law, 'You blind fools!' (Matt. 23:17). Is Jesus guilty of serious inconsistency? Indeed there is a place for burning with anger at sin and injustice. Our problem is that we burn with indignation and anger, not at sin and injustice, but at offense to ourselves. In none of the cases in which Jesus became angry was his personal ego wrapped up in the issue. More telling yet, when he was unjustly arrested, unfairly tried, illegally

<pause>

There are many ways to murder a person in our *hearts*.

- We can crush others with our excessive fault-finding.
- We can destroy reputations through gossip and slander.
- We can allow resentment to fester into contempt.
- We can think to ourselves, “That person is good for nothing—I want them out of my life.”

According to Jesus, that heart, left unaddressed, is deserving of hell.

<pause>

In verses 23-24, Jesus describes a situation where a person is offering a sacrifice at the temple but suddenly remembers that he has offended his brother. Jesus insists that he stop immediately and go be reconciled first.

When we realize that we’ve wronged someone, it’s tempting to make up for it by doing something good, hoping that it will balance things out.

But Jesus doesn’t allow for that kind of self-justification. “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam. 15:22). You cannot cover up or make up for disobedience—you must repent and pursue reconciliation.

<pause>

In verses 25-26, Jesus extends the application. Even when dealing with an accuser in a legal dispute, don’t delay resolving the wrong you’ve done.¹⁹ With the reality of standing before God as Judge one day, do not wait on repentance and reconciliation.²⁰ The opportunity is now.

So if you’ve spoken harshly to your spouse or child or colleague, take time to grieve your sin and then don’t delay in confessing it and asking for their forgiveness.

Kids, have you gotten angry with anyone recently? With your parents, siblings or friends? What did your anger look like?

For some, anger erupts; for others, they go cold and distant. But Jesus condemns the angry heart—not just the outburst.

However your anger shows itself, be sure to repent of it and take steps right away to apologize and ask for forgiveness.

<pause>

beaten, contemptuously spit upon, crucified, mocked, when in fact he had every reason for his ego to be involved, then, as Peter says, “he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats” (1 Peter 2:23). From his parched lips came forth rather those gracious words, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Let us admit it—by and large we are quick to be angry when we are personally affronted and offended, and slow to be angry when sin and injustice multiply in other areas. In these cases we are more prone to philosophize. In fact, the problem is even more complicated than that. Sometimes we get involved in a legitimate issues and discern, perhaps with accuracy, the right and the wrong of the matter. However, in pushing the right side, our own egos get so bound up with the issue that in our view opponents are not only in the wrong but attacking us. When we react with anger, we may deceive ourselves into thinking we are defending the truth and the right, when deep down we are more concerned with defending ourselves.”

¹⁹ In the previous example, you were dealing with a “brother,” but in this example, you’re dealing with an “accuser,” but the basic situation is the same—you’ve done wrong to someone. And the basic prescription is the same—take immediate action to resolve the issue.

²⁰ R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: “A further illustration stresses the urgency of reconciliation. A grievance unsettled can lead, in human terms, to court and to prison. But in this context it is improbable that Jesus was giving no more than prudential advice. The solemn *truly, I say to you* (see on 5:18) suggests a less trivial purpose; the parallel in Luke 12:58–59 is in a context of eschatological urgency, and the other parable of debt and imprisonment (Matt. 18:23–35) is also concerned with God’s punishment of the unmerciful. Following the stress on God’s judgment on anger in v. 22, this short parable (it should not be taken as a detailed allegory) warns that neglected grievances can have irrevocable consequences, and time may be short. *The last penny* (the *quadrans*, the smallest Roman coin) indicates that God’s judgment, if not forestalled by repentance and reconciliation, knows no half-measures.”

The second example is in verses 27-30.

[²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.]

Verse 27 is the seventh of the Ten Commandments—“You shall not commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14). Again, the religious leaders reduced this to just the physical *act*, and left the *heart* entirely out of it.

In verse 28, Jesus draws out the *heart*—“everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” It’s not just the *act* that God condemns—it’s the adulterous *desire*. Whether the act follows or not, the lustful thought is sinful and deserving of hell in itself.

All the commandments are concerned not only with *actions* but with the *desires* that produces them.²¹

“For out of the *heart* come *evil thoughts*, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19).

Every evil *act* begins with evil *thoughts*.

Therefore, *guard* your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of everything you do and say (Prov. 4:23).

And that’s exactly what Jesus tells us to do next.

[²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.]

Verses 29-30 are clearly *figurative*. If we *literally* tore out our right eye and cut off our right hand, we’d still have a left eye and a left hand—and even without eyes and hands, the heart can still lust.²²

Jesus chose the eye and hand intentionally though.

Once you *see* something, you cannot *unsee* it—and the imagination can then be hijacked to indulge in what you’ve seen.

And the *hand* begins to turn lustful *thoughts* into lustful *actions*.

So Jesus says, “Take drastic action to prevent yourself from being in a position to lust!”

- Don’t watch those shows or movies.
- Don’t bring your phone into your bedroom.
- Don’t use your laptop when you’re alone.

Cut off access points entirely. Like Joseph fleeing from Potiphar’s wife, *run* from temptation rather than *flirt* with it (Gen. 39).

Consider what’s at stake here. Jesus repeats it twice here—“it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell”—and twice more in Matthew 18:8-9.

²¹ Here, Jesus weaves the tenth commandment—“Do not covet”—into a right understanding of the seventh.

²² The right hand and right eye were considered more important, so in one sense, Jesus is saying that we ought to be willing to sacrifice what is most precious to us for the sake of guarding our hearts from lust.

Four times in *one* Gospel account. Jesus wants us to take lust with absolute seriousness, because if taken lightly, it has the potential to condemn you eternally in hell.

Parents, with so many access points—smartphones, streaming services, and social media—children are being exposed to images they cannot unsee at younger ages than you may expect. We need to be aware and proactive in protecting our children have access to. And we'd be wise to be having age-appropriate conversations with them about this topic.

I'd recommend a book called *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures*, or *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures Jr.* by Kristen Jensen. Reading books with your kids that wisely bring up topics can be a great aid to you in discussing and teaching your kids well.

Let me also just say that the sin of lust is a struggle for *both* men and women. Do not struggle alone, but I'd encourage you to read a book called *More Than a Battle* by Joe Rigney and establish accountability with those who will truly love you enough to help you *figuratively* tear out your eye and cut off your hand for the sake of your *heart*.

Both those books are available in our library, so I'd encourage you to check them out.

<pause>

The third example is in verses 31-32.

[³¹ "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.]

Verse 31 is based on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, a law meant to uphold the sanctity (or sacredness) of marriage and protect women from being divorced for *trivial* reasons.

But the religious leaders had turned it completely on its head—using it to make light of marriage and divorce for any reason at all.

Some taught that a husband could divorce his wife even for accidentally burning his meal and then just marry someone else.²³

It was such a low view of marriage and a way to use the law for satisfying their lustful desires without technically committing adultery.

In Matthew 19, when the religious leaders ask Jesus, "Why then did Moses *command* one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" Jesus corrects their misrepresentation. Moses never *commanded* divorce—he *permitted* it, and only because of their hardness of heart.

²³ R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "The words are based on Deuteronomy 24:1, but are not an exact quotation of it. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 the main clause is not reached until v. 4, the prohibition of the reunion of a divorced couple after the woman has remarried and her second marriage has ended (by divorce or the husband's death). The original divorce, with its formal certificate (v. 1), is simply assumed, but neither here nor elsewhere in the Old Testament is divorce explicitly approved. This passage was, however, universally accepted among Jesus' contemporaries as permitting a husband to divorce his wife (not vice versa); 19:7 shows that not only the certificate (as here) but the divorce itself was regarded as 'commanded' by Moses. This hardening of the Mosaic acceptance of divorce as a fact into a legal precept was a logical deduction, legalistic but not illegitimate. The permissible grounds for divorce were debated: while the school of Shammai restricted the 'some indecency' of Deuteronomy 24:1 to refer only to a sexual misdemeanour authenticated by witnesses, actual practice was governed by the school of Hillel, who reputedly took it of any cause of complaint, even including burning the dinner. (Mishnah *Gittin* 9:10. For actual practice, see Josephus, *Ant.* iv. 253; *Vita* 426.) No court decision was required, only unilateral action by the husband." D. A. Carson ("Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 152) writes: "The OT passage to which Jesus refers (v. 31) is Deuteronomy 24:1-4, whose thrust is that if a man divorces his wife because of "something indecent" (not further defined) in her, he must give her a certificate of divorce, and if she then becomes another man's wife and is divorced again, the first man cannot remarry her. This double restriction—the certificate and the prohibition of remarriage—discouraged hasty divorces. Here Jesus does not go into the force of "something indecent." Instead he insists that the law was pointing to the sanctity of marriage."

Divorce is a *concession* (or allowance) due to *sin*, not God's original *design*.²⁴

Here in verse 32 and in Matthew 19, Jesus gives sexual immorality as a legitimate ground for divorce. The apostle Paul gives another in 1 Corinthians 7—abandonment by an unbelieving spouse.

Jesus and Paul are not contradicting each other, but when you bring in other passages like Exodus 21, we see that it's an explicit *breaking* of the marriage covenant—including adultery, abandonment, and abuse—that is a legitimate ground for divorce.²⁵

²⁴ Andy Naselli ("What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage," *DBSJ* 24 [2019]: 18-19) writes: "The ESV translates ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχευθῆναι (5:32) as 'makes her commit adultery.' But the NIV is probably more accurate here: 'makes her the victim of adultery.' The voice of μοιχευθῆναι is passive. Craig Blomberg, a member of the NIV Committee on Bible Translation, explains, 'In English we don't say 'to be adulterated,' at least not if we mean that someone else has committed adultery against us. [R. T.] France has searched in vain for any examples of a deponent passive with this verb, inside or outside of the New Testament, in ancient Greek, i.e., in a context in which the passive form could be translated actively. Modern grammatically tagged databases with all known ancient Greek texts digitized make such searches possible for the first time in history. So that rules out the common 'makes her commit adultery.' The updated NIV nicely captures the passive sense with its 'makes her the victim of adultery.' It is also the first major English translation to do so. One confirming historical argument is as follows: While many women whose husbands divorced them in the ancient Roman world sought to remarry, not all did. So in what sense did those who remained single commit adultery on the common rendering of this verse? But men who initiated divorce in the ancient Roman world did so for one reason only—to legally remarry another woman. It makes sense, therefore, to say that the wife left behind has been made the victim of adultery. It also makes sense of the shift in the next clause to the demonstrably deponent-like middle form *moichatai*—'and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery,' which should be treated as equivalent to an active voice.' The translation 'makes her commit adultery' leads some to conclude that the non-adulterous spouse is guilty of adultery if they remarry. But if the translation 'makes her the victim of adultery' is correct (and I think it is), then that removes another argument for the 'never remarriage' views (views 1 and 2 in fig. 1)." He further argues that a divorced couple is no longer married in God's eyes: "Jesus says in Luke 16:18, 'Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.' Piper infers, 'Evidently the reason a second marriage is called *adultery* is because the first one is considered to still be valid.' I agree with DeYoung: 'Marriage is not indissoluble. This means marriage really can end.

Now, usually they shouldn't. But they can. The covenant can be severed. When Jesus says, "What God has joined together, let no man separate" he implies that the couple can be separated. I mention this because sometimes people will argue against remarriage saying, "She's still married in God's eyes." I don't think that's the right way to talk about the situation. Divorced couples are divorced. They are not married in God's eyes. The question is whether they should still be married and hence, they ought not to be with another man or woman.' A divorced couple—whether the divorce was legitimate or not—is no longer married in God's eyes. Jesus's reply to the woman at the well illustrates this. He does not say, "You *have* five husbands." He says, "You are right in saying, 'I *have* no husband'; for you *have had* five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true" (John 4:17b–18, emphasis added)" (19-20).

²⁵ Craig L. Blomberg ("Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage, and Celibacy: An Exegesis of Matthew 19:3-12," *Trinity Journal* 11 [1990]: 187, 191–92) writes: "What evangelicals have not wrestled with very much at all is how Paul, even under the guidance of the Spirit, could feel free to introduce a second exception to Jesus' prohibition of divorce unless he realized that pronouncements like Matt 19:9 were not absolutes.... The question that few people ask but which may lead to a way out of the impasse is 'What do Jesus' and Paul's exceptions have in common?' Is it possible that Paul believed he could add a second exception to Jesus' apparently absolute statement because he recognized a more overarching principle of which both exceptions were particular illustrations?" Andy Naselli ("What the New Testament Teaches about Divorce and Remarriage," *DBSJ* 24 [2019]: 35-37) writes: "Πορνεία and physical desertion are not the only grounds for divorce (see §§1.10 and 4.4). According to Exodus 21:10, a husband is responsible to provide for his wife: "He shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights." And one can argue from the lesser to the greater: if that was the case for a husband's slave wife, how much more is that the case for his free wife? Exodus 21:10 demonstrates that God deeply cares about a vulnerable wife when her husband is not providing for her, and there is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that Jesus's fulfilling the Mosaic law nullifies a wife's rights and a husband's responsibilities. To the contrary, what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 parallels Exodus 21:10:

- Those who are married should regularly have sex with each other (1 Cor 7:2–5). "The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.... Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control" (7:3, 5).

- Spouses should not abandon each other (7:10–16). "But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved" (7:15).

- The husband is responsible to provide for his wife and family (7:32–35).

Since Paul repeats the requirements of Exodus 21:10 and since Exodus 21:11 allows for divorce when those requirements are not met, the principle still applies: divorce is legitimate when those requirements are not met—that is, when one breaks the marriage covenant. Breaking the marriage covenant is a ground for divorce. (That does not mean that divorce is necessary but only that it is permissible.) The two clearest grounds in the NT are πορνεία and physical desertion. But the same logic applies to other grounds:

- refusing to fulfill conjugal rights
- a husband's failing to provide for his wife (i.e., material neglect)
- a husband's failing to protect his wife (i.e., cruelty such as physical abuse)

Each of those patterns is a way a spouse may break the marriage covenant and thus desert the other spouse. That desertion or separation may not be spatial—that is, the spouses may still live in the same home. But the desertion or separation is still real because the sinful patterns abandon the one-flesh union that is essential to the marriage covenant.

Objection 1: But 1 Corinthians 7:15 refers only to spatial separation—not to relational separation. In reply, "relational separation" makes it sound like a husband merely hurt his wife's feelings. The point, however, is that the husband has broken the marriage covenant. Instead of protecting his wife, he is brutally beating her. One can argue from the lesser to the greater: How can a

But even then, divorce is *permitted*, not *commanded*.

This takes a lot of case-by-case wisdom, which is why God has placed you in a local church where you and your spouse are known and where you can receive godly counsel in such painful situations.

The point Jesus is making is that you cannot treat marriage as just a contract to exit whenever you're unhappy. Marriage is a one-flesh union that God has joined, which is not to be separated until death. That is *literally* the vow you take in marriage.

And perhaps it is such vows that prompt his next topic.

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The fourth example is in verses 33-37.

[³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.]

Verse 33 is likely based on the third of the Ten Commandments—“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain” (Exod. 20:7)—and several other Old Testament passages on keeping vows to the Lord (e.g., Lev. 19:12; Num. 30:2; Deut. 5:11; 6:13; 23:21-23; cf. Psalm 50:14; Eccl. 5:4).

The purpose of these passages is to prevent lying.

Vows, oaths, or covenants were meant to *assure* others of truthfulness in the most serious matters—not to be taken lightly or often.

But the religious leaders developed an elaborate system for determining when oaths were or were *not* binding, depending on how closely it was related to the Lord's name.

- Swear by the *temple*? Not binding. By the *gold* of the temple? Binding.
- Swear by the *altar*? Not binding. By the *gift* on the altar? Binding (Matt. 23:16-22).
- Swear by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem? Not binding. *Toward* Jerusalem? Binding.²⁶

The system became absurd—all focused on precise wording rather than on the *heart* behind an oath, which was *truthfulness*.

husband's spatially departing from his wife be a ground for divorce but a husband's physically brutalizing his wife not be? Both actions break the marriage covenant.

Objection 2: But the NT explicitly mentions only two grounds for divorce—πορνεία and physical desertion. In reply, the same logic in §2

applies here. Mark and Luke do not repeat the exception clauses that appear in Matthew 5 and 19 because everyone would have assumed the exception clauses. The same logic applies to not providing for your spouse, especially in light of Exodus 21:10.

Further, those two grounds for divorce—πορνεία and physical desertion—come from separate texts. So we cannot interpret either text to mean “This ground for divorce is the only one” without contradicting the other text. Similarly, the texts do not require us to conclude that there are two *and only two* grounds for divorce.

As I mention at the end of §1.3, this may raise practical questions about how to discern when a spouse's actions may be a ground for divorce when it is not physical adultery or spatial desertion. It is a wisdom issue—just like church discipline for such behavior is a wisdom issue. Churches and their elders should deal with such situations on a case-by-case basis.”

²⁶ D. A. Carson (“Matthew,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 8 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 153) writes: “The Mosaic law forbade irreverent oaths, light use of the Lord's name, broken vows. Once Yahweh's name was invoked, the vow to which it was attached became a debt that had to be paid to the Lord. A sophisticated casuistry judged how binding an oath really was by examining how closely it was related to Yahweh's name. Incredible distinctions proliferate under such an approach. Swearing by heaven and earth was not binding, nor was swearing by Jerusalem, though swearing *toward* Jerusalem was. That an entire mishnaic tract (*M Shebuoth*) is given over to the subject (cf. also *M Sanhedrin* 3.2, *Tosephta Nedarim* 1; SBK, 1:321–36) shows that such distinctions became important and were widely discussed. Matthew returns to the topic with marvelous examples in the polemical setting of 23:16–22.”

They were using *oaths* to justify *lying*, which is the complete opposite of what oaths are for.²⁷

So in verses 34-36, if *that's* how they're going to use oaths, Jesus says it's better not to take an oath at all.²⁸

In verse 37, Jesus says that his disciples should be known for such honesty that oaths are largely unnecessary. People know that your "Yes" means Yes, and your "No" means No.²⁹ If people are frequently asking you to make promises to ensure your word, or if you find yourself making frequent promises, that's probably not a good sign.³⁰

To be clear, Jesus is *not* making an *absolute* ban on oaths here. He himself spoke under oath (Matt. 26:63-64), the apostles swore oaths (Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10; cf. 1 Thess. 5:27), and God himself swears oaths or covenants with his people (Heb. 6:16-18; cf. Deut. 10:20).

What he is demanding is a *heart* and reputation of *truthfulness* that makes oaths generally unnecessary among those who know you.

There are many ways we compromise the truth.

Some lie to avoid conflicts—a "white lie" seems to keep the peace, so they tell it and move on.

Some *exaggerate* or *omit* key information to make themselves look better or others look worse, they end up communicating something *other* than the truth. Perhaps we didn't *mean* to deceive, but that's exactly what we've done.

Some make commitments *carelessly*. They'll say, "I'll have it done by Tuesday," but Tuesday comes and goes without anyone hearing from them.

Consider what all this lying does to your gospel witness. If people can't trust your word in everyday matters, why would they trust you when you tell them the most important news they could ever hear? You can't credibly proclaim the truthfulness of the gospel with a reputation for untruthfulness in your daily life.

And lying devastates relationships because relationships are built on trust. You may be surprised to hear that in cases of marital unfaithfulness, what is often most difficult to forgive isn't the act itself—it's the sustained deception behind it.

The question looming in their minds is, "How can I trust you again, knowing that you've been lying to me this whole time?"

<pause>

The fifth example is in verses 38-42.

[³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as

²⁷ Just like using divorce as a way to commit adultery without "technically" breaking the seventh commandment, they were using oaths to lie without "technically" breaking the ninth commandment.

²⁸ And then he shows that it doesn't matter what you swear by. Heaven, earth, Jerusalem, your own head—they're *all* connected to the Lord, because he is Lord over all. An oath is an oath, and the Lord will hold you to it. However, the LORD is so gracious that he made an explicit provision in the Law to take back rash vows (or oaths). Leviticus 5:4-6 says: "or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin."

²⁹ Jesus also says that anything *beyond* truthfulness is from "evil"—or "the evil one." When you lie, you resemble Satan, who is "the father of lies" (John 8:44). When you tell the truth, you resemble your heavenly Father "who *never* lies" (Titus 1:2; cf. Num. 23:19; Heb. 6:18).

³⁰ Those who know you best should feel no need to ensure your word through promises and oaths. However, for those who don't know us well, there's nothing wrong with making oaths or entering contracts to ensure the *truthfulness* of our word.

well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.]

Verse 38—“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”—comes from Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21.

It's important to know that this was a *civil* law, designed to *restrict* punishment to match and not exceed the crime.

It was to guard against the escalating personal vengeance that often happens in much gang and tribal violence—where one stolen sheep leads to a severed hand, which leads to a killed brother, which leads to a massacred village.³¹

But the religious leaders misapplied this *civil* law to *personal* relationships, using it to demand the maximum personal retaliation for any offense—after all, it was their legal *right*.

Rather than serving as a *restraint*, it was now being used to *fuel* bitterness and vindictiveness.

“An eye for an eye” is a sound principle for *civil* law, but it is a destructive principle for *personal* relationships.

Imagine if every personal relationship operated on that basis.

- You said something harsh to me, so I'll say something harsh to you.
- You disappointed me, so I'll disappoint you.
- You didn't listen to me, so I won't to listen to you.

The damage would be devastating—especially within the church, among people who claim to have been graciously forgiven by God through Christ.

So in verses 39-42, Jesus gives four illustrations of a *different* principle.

In verse 39, being slapped on the *right* cheek was a *back-handed* slap, which was less about physical violence and more about personal insult and humiliation.³² And Jesus says that his disciples aren't enraged by such an insult, but they're willing to endure even more.

In verse 40, although the law forbade anyone from having their cloak taken away (Exod. 22:25-27), his disciples ought to be willing to give up even what is legally theirs to keep.³³

³¹ Daniel M. Doriani (“Matthew” in *Matthew-Luke*, ESVEC, vol. 8 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “As an element of Moses’ penal code, it offers a clear and just principle for punishing wickedness while forbidding vendettas and vengeful excess (Gen. 4:23–24). Its perfect justice is manifest, for example, in the law that requires a perjurer to suffer the very punishment his lie would have caused another to bear (Deut. 19:16–21). It stipulates that a thief is not maimed or slain, as other ancient codes dictated. Rather, thieves pay back double, so they lose exactly what they would have gained, and their victims gain precisely what they would have lost. Beyond that, Romans 13:4 says that magistrates ought to punish evildoers. Privately, however, the *lex talionis* can foster vindictiveness, as victims dream of making a foe suffer everything they have endured. In that context, Jesus says, “Do not resist the one who is evil.”” See Exod. 21:33-22:15, but note that there were various amounts of restitution required in different cases, considering other factors, such as the severity of the crime, the thief’s attitude, and the impact on the victim’s livelihood.

³² R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: “To *strike on the right cheek* was ‘a blow with the back of the hand, which even today in the East expresses the greatest possible contempt and extreme abuse’ (Jeremias, *NTT*, p. 239); as such it was punishable by a very heavy fine (Mishnah *BK* 8:6). The situation envisaged is thus one of insult rather than of physical violence.” D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 51) writes: “The first concerns a sharp backhand slap to the cheek, a gross insult. The follower of Jesus is to be prepared to take another one rather than retaliate. There are famous stories of the transformed characters of people like Billy Bray, the pugilist, or of Tom Skinner, leader of the Harlem Lords, when they were converted. Once tough, hostile and belligerent, they meekly accepted insults and blows (and thereby deeply impressed some of their assailants).”

³³ Daniel M. Doriani (“Matthew” in *Matthew-Luke*, ESVEC, vol. 8 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “[I]f sued for an inner garment, the disciple gives up the outer as well (5:40). The law permitted seizure of the tunic, the inner garment, but not the outer cloak, since that was the heavier, more essential covering (Ex. 22:26–27; Deut. 24:12–13). This seems like hyperbole (cf. Matt. 5:29–30), since it would be both indecent and unsafe to give up every garment. The point is that disciples do not spend their energy defending themselves. As Paul writes, it is better to suffer fraud, better to let God handle the defense (1 Cor. 6:7; cf. Rom. 12:19–21).”

In verse 41, a Roman soldier could force a civilian to carry their baggage for up to one mile. But rather than *resent* them for it and *refuse* to go one step further than one mile, his disciples are to carry their baggage an *additional* mile.³⁴

In verse 42, his disciples are to give to those who beg and want to borrow from them.³⁵

Again, these are not *absolute* commands to be applied in every situation without wisdom.³⁶

But the *heart* of what Jesus is teaching here is that his disciples are not to be constantly defending their personal rights in their personal relationships.

Instead, what would it look like to overlook an offense, to absorb a wrong, to endure loss—for the sake of loving and serving another person?

Does that not better picture the One we claim to follow?³⁷

<pause>

The sixth example is in verses 43-47.

[⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?]

³⁴ Daniel M. Doriani (“Matthew” in *Matthew-Luke*, ESVEC, vol. 8 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “Roman soldiers had the power to press Jews to travel with them, carrying their equipment, for a thousand paces, rounded up to a mile. The situation was galling—Roman soldiers who subjugated and defiled Israel could compel Israelites to travel with them as assistants. Jesus orders his disciples to respond with loving kindness, carrying the load a second mile (Matt. 5:41). These commands urge followers to resist their natural tendency to protect themselves and to stop fighting for honor and rights. Such is human nature, but it is Jesus’ nature to trust God for vindication.”

³⁵ Daniel M. Doriani (“Matthew” in *Matthew-Luke*, ESVEC, vol. 8 [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021]) writes: “This last command shifts from handling mistreatment to showing kindness. At one level, Jesus simply restates Moses, who told Israel to lend generously, without limit, to brothers in need. Their enslavement in Egypt and knowledge of God’s compassion taught them to be generous (Ex. 22:21–27). Likewise, Jesus’ disciples should give to the needy. The command is unlimited, which prompts questions about potential abuses. To be sure, no one should give until his family lacks food (1 Tim. 5:8), and heedless giving can foster dependency, but these points must not erase the call to generosity. The Lord is generous; his people are too.”

³⁶ We must ask, “What is the *heart* behind all these examples? What do they have in common?” In contrast to the insisting on personal rights that the religious leaders taught, Jesus is using hyperbole to show that his disciples are *not* to insist on their personal rights. In each example, he’s not only describing what they should *not* do (that is, don’t retaliate or hold tightly to your rights or your possessions), but he’s also describing what they *should* do (that is, love and serve them). Sometimes, the most loving thing to do is to *not* enable sin or unhealthy dependency—which may mean fleeing violence (Acts 9:23-25; 14:5-6; 17:10, 14; 21:30-36; 23:23-24), pursuing legal means to protect others (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-29), or declining to give to someone able but unwilling to work (2 Thess. 3:10; Eph. 4:28). Also, God *has* given governments legitimate authority for good reason, and there *are* matters that ought to be dealt with at the level of *civil* law. (Rom. 13:1-7).

³⁷ And does it not powerfully demonstrate that our security rests not in what we possess, in how others treat us, or in having our rights upheld—but in *God* himself: in what he says of us, what he’s given to us, and in the world to come where he will right every wrong?

In verse 43, the first half comes from Leviticus 19:18—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But the second half—"hate your enemy"—appears *nowhere* in the Old Testament.³⁸ This was perhaps the religious leaders' most blatant distortion of God's law.

The natural tendency of the world is to *limit* love to those who love us back. Loving enemies makes no worldly sense. Wars are fought against enemies.

But in verse 44, Jesus says that when the law says, "love your neighbor," it *includes* your enemies (cf. Luke 10:29-37).

He even specifies a way to love them—pray for them. And this creates a mutually reinforcing cycle—the more you pray for someone, the more you will love them; and the more you love them, the more you will pray for them.

In verse 45, Jesus gives the reason: when his disciples love their enemies, they resemble their heavenly Father, who shows his common grace—his providential care—to all without distinction, "mak[ing] his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send[ing] rain on the just and on the unjust."

He expects all his children in Christ to do likewise. By the depth of our love, others are meant to see the family resemblance—that we carry our heavenly Father's spiritual DNA.

In verses 46-47, Jesus asks three rapid-fire rhetorical questions that really come down to one: "What *more* are you doing than others?"

Tax collectors love their tax collector friends. Gentiles love their Gentile friends. Everyone loves those who love them back.

If Christians only love those who love them, what's different about us?³⁹

Christ's disciples are called to do *more*—to love those who are hostile towards us, who have hurt us, who are different from us.

³⁸ John R. W. Stott (*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*, The Bible Speaks Today [Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985], 116–117) writes: "It is quite true that the scribes and Pharisees may have adduced as biblical warrant to hate their enemies either the Israelite wars against the Canaanites or the imprecatory psalms. But if so they misunderstood both these wars and these psalms. The Canaanites are known from modern near eastern studies to have been utterly corrupt in religion and culture. So nauseating were their abominable practices that the land itself is described as having 'vomited them out'. Indeed if Israel were to follow their customs, she would share their fate [Cf. Lev. 18:25, 28; 20:22]. 'The wars of Israel', wrote Bonhoeffer, 'were the only "holy wars" in history, for they were the wars of God against the world of idols. It is not this enmity which Jesus condemns, for then he would have condemned the whole history of God's dealings with his people. On the contrary, he affirms the old covenant. But from now on there will be no more wars of faith.' As for the imprecatory psalms, in them the psalmist speaks not with any personal animosity but as a representative of God's chosen people Israel, regards the wicked as the enemies of God, counts them his own enemies only because he has completely identified himself with the cause of God, hates them because he loves God, and is so confident that this 'hatred' is 'perfect hatred' that he calls upon God in the next breath to search him and know his heart, to try him and know his thoughts, in order to see if there is any wickedness in him [Ps. 139:19–24]. That we cannot easily aspire to this is an indication not of our spirituality but of our lack of it, not of our superior love for men but of our inferior love for God, indeed of our inability to hate the wicked with a hatred that is 'perfect' and not 'personal'."

³⁹ D. A. Carson (*The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978], 53) writes: "Tax collectors may have a bad name today; but it is nothing like the reputation they earned in first-century Palestine. The Roman Empire used a tax-farming system. The government would specify the amount to be collected from a certain area, and appoint a man to gather it. This man would in turn appoint men under him, who would appoint others under them. Each appointee had to obtain his quota, and whatever else he got he could keep. The potential for bribery and corruption all the way up the tax farming ladder was enormous, and every avenue was assiduously exploited. Naturally, the Jewish tax collectors were loathed, and doubly loathed among the Jews because they came into contact with the Gentiles, the Roman overlords, and thus became ceremonially unclean. But even these low, traitorous, disgusting people enjoyed friends—other tax collectors, for a start! So how is a disciple of Jesus in any way superior to the despised tax collector if he only loves his friends?" R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "A parochial concern is characteristic of the world. If a disciple is to find his reward (see on 5:12), he must not just be on a level with other men; he must *do more* (cf. v. 20, where the same root *perisson* is used, and the ultimate development of this *more* in the *perfect* of v. 48). *Tax collectors* and *Gentiles* (see on 6:32) are bracketed together again in 18:17. The (Jewish) tax collectors, as an ostracized minority (see on 9:9–11), formed a close-knit group. Jesus' positive attitude elsewhere to tax collectors (9:9–13; 11:19; 21:31–32) and Gentiles (8:10–11) contrasts with the pejorative use of the terms here and in 18:17; their use as colloquial expressions, readily understood in current Jewish society, for 'outsiders' or 'undesirables' cannot therefore be pressed into an endorsement of the very type of discrimination which it is the aim of these verses to condemn. *Brethren* will in context denote primarily fellow-disciples, as generally in Matthew: the love Jesus requires extends outside the 'in-group' to its opponents."

The depth and breadth of our love is to be *the* distinguishing mark as Christ's disciples. As Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Look now at verses 48.

[⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.]

This is the conclusion and summary statement of all six examples. It's another way of saying what Jesus said earlier in verse 20—that your righteousness must *exceed* that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The word "perfect" here means "whole" or "complete." Paul uses it later to describe being "mature." So it's not a claim of moral perfection, but of a righteousness that is whole or complete—both internal and external, flowing from the heart.⁴⁰

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "be perfect, as *God* is perfect," but he says, "be perfect, as your *heavenly Father* is perfect."

That's incredibly encouraging because it means that we are sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, and we *will* come to resemble him more and more.

The Sermon on the Mount was not meant to set an impossible standard but to describe what is possible and expected of all Christ's disciples.

We *can* have this *whole* or *complete* righteousness because we've been born again, given a new heart and nature, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit who enables us to delight in and obey God's law from the inside out.

Conclusion

As we close, I want us to see something important. *Before* Jesus shows us what he's made *us* to be, he is ultimately describing who *he himself* is.

- He never committed murder in his heart, but he gave his life to reconcile others to himself.
- He never committed adultery nor divorced his bride—the church—but he has always been faithful to us even when we are unfaithful to him.
- He never lies, but he always keeps his oath—or covenant—with us.
- When he was mistreated, he didn't retaliate in return.
- But he laid down his rights to love and serve his enemies, so that we might become his friends.

The righteousness Jesus describes in this passage is not a ladder we climb to earn acceptance with God. It is ultimately a portrait of the One who perfectly lived it in our place, so that by grace through faith in *him*, we might be clothed in *his* righteousness—and by *his* Spirit, slowly but surely, we begin to look more like *him*.

Let's pray.

⁴⁰ R. T. France (*Matthew*, TNTC [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008]) writes: "The 'greater righteousness' demanded in v. 20 has been illustrated in vv. 21ff., and is now summed up (*therefore*) in one all-embracing demand. The demand is that disciples (*you* is emphatic, in contrast with the tax collectors and Gentiles of vv. 46–47 and the scribes and Pharisees of v. 20) must be *perfect* (*teleios*). This is the 'more' required in v. 47. Cf. 19:20–21, where again *teleios* (its only other use in Matthew) indicates God's requirement which goes beyond legal conformity. (There too Lev. 19:18 is superseded by this more radical demand.) *Teleios* is wider than moral perfection: it indicates 'completeness', 'wholeness' (cf. Paul's use of it for the spiritually 'mature' in 1 Cor. 2:6; 14:20; Phil. 3:15), a life totally integrated to the will of God, and thus reflecting his character. It is probably derived here from the LXX of Deuteronomy 18:13, which, with the repeated formula of Leviticus 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26 ('You shall be holy, for I am holy'), is echoed in Jesus' words. The conformity to the character of God, to which Israel was called in their role as God's special people (see especially Lev. 20:26), is now affirmed as the goal of the disciples of Jesus. It is an ideal set before all disciples, not a special status of those who claim to have achieved 'sinless perfection' in this life; neither here nor in 19:20–21 is there a suggestion of a two-level ethic for the ordinary disciple and the 'perfect'. (Cf. *TIM*, pp. 96–97.)"