

Jesus Teaches Us to Love One Another

Bible Background • MATTHEW 5:21–32

Printed Text • MATTHEW 5:21–32 | Devotional Reading • GENESIS 2:18–24

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: **CONTRAST** outward conformity of obedience to God with inner purity; **REPENT** of the times we have obeyed God superficially; and **RESPOND** to the call of Jesus to take practical steps to live righteously.

In Focus

“Another African American teenager has been shot by a police officer on Chicago’s South Side,” the headline read on the TV screen.

“Man! When is this going to stop? Seems like every time we turn on the news, another brother is dead in the streets,” said Eli. “Seriously, it’s getting crazy out here.” Michael looked up to see the headline and then returned to cutting Eli’s hair.

“I’m telling you, I hear these news reports, and I get so angry. Then I got to go to class and sit there knowing some of those people think no more of me than that cop did of that teenager, or if I’m going to ‘fit someone’s description.’ It’s crazy!”

“So what are you doing about it?” Michael asked Eli.

“What do you mean? I’m just trying to live.”

“Yeah, but do you ever go to the Black Student Union meetings or United Student Caucus? They’re **DOING** something,” Michael said. “Even better, how many police officers do you know?” Eli looked confused.

“Listen,” Michael continued, “I’m not saying it’s going to solve everything, but if you just get angry, it will eat you up until you do something crazy. Believe me, God is watching all of this. He knows what He’s doing. We just gotta make sure we’re doing what we can in the meantime.”

There are situations where anger seems like the only way to react. Is there an experience where you had to take a minute to decide how you were going to respond to a situation that made you angry?

Keep in Mind

“So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God” (Matthew 5:23-24, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Adversary antidikos (Gk.) — Refers to an opponent in a lawsuit, enemy.

B. Fornication porneia (Gk.) — Refers to any type of sexual sin.

Say It Correctly

none

KJV

KJV Matthew 5:21 Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:

22 But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;
24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

25 Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison.

26 Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery:

28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

29 And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

30 And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.

31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement:

32 But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

NIV

Matthew 5:21 “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’”

22 But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

23 “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you,

24 leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

25 “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison.

26 And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.

27 “You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’

28 But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

29 So if your eye—even your good eye causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

30 And if your hand—even your stronger hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

31 “You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’

32 But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

The People, Places, and Times

Lust. In the midst of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes through most of the Ten Commandments to clarify and intensify the interpretation in contrast to the misinterpretations of the Pharisees. The Pharisees had done the utmost to make sure people caught in adultery would be punished; Jesus asserts that to lust, passionately desire, or covet another woman was just like the sin of adultery for the married man. The Old Testament commandments naturally set up an order to not take what was not allotted to us by God, whether by stealing, adultery, or jealousy. The command to not lust is a reminder to not covet in our minds or hearts what God has not given in the covenant of marriage.

Background

The Sermon on the Mount is an extension of the preaching with which Jesus launched His ministry, "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (from Matthew 4:17). However, the teaching does not present the way to salvation; instead, it outlines the way of righteous living and contrasts it with the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees.

The sermon begins with an explanation of eight moral characteristics that lead to true happiness and blessings and should be true of all believers. These characteristics both demand and describe. They demand proper attitudes of believers, and they describe the blessings from the right attitudes. The demands and descriptions are given in an if/then relationship. If we are poor in spirit, then ours is the kingdom of heaven; if we mourn, then we shall be comforted; if we are meek, then we shall inherit the earth; if we hunger and thirst for righteousness, then we shall be filled; if we are merciful, then we shall obtain mercy; if we are peacemakers, then we shall be called the children of God; and if we rejoice during times of persecution, then great is our reward in heaven. After His opening, Jesus launches right into the heart of His teaching. His audience knew that righteous living was required to enter God's kingdom (Psalm 24:3–6). However, they had been taught that the religious practices of the Pharisees were sufficient. Jesus challenged that belief with the statement, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Those who would be followers of Christ would not just be called to a different standard of living, but a higher standard of living.

How does Jesus call for His followers to hold even higher standards than the Law of the Old Testament?

At-A-Glance

1. Abandon Unrighteous Anger (Matthew 5:21–22)
2. Consequence of Unrighteous Anger (vv. 23–26)
 3. Avoid Lustful Looks (vv. 27–29)
 4. Declarations on Divorce (vv. 31–32)

In Depth

1. Abandon Unrighteous Anger (Matthew 5:21–22)

Jesus calls on true believers to demonstrate a righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees. The phrases "you have heard" and "it has been said" do not refer to the teachings of Moses and the prophets but rather to the imbalanced interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees. The phrase "But I say" reveals Jesus' superiority to all past interpreters. The Old Testament prophets spoke for the Lord and began their pronouncements with the phrase "Thus saith the LORD" (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:5; Isaiah 56:1). Jesus, on the other hand, did not simply quote God as instructed, He spoke with the authority of God. In His discussion of the futile religious system of the Pharisees, Jesus gives six examples of how the Pharisees failed to fulfill the Law and

how believers are to succeed in fulfilling it. In the first example, Jesus quotes the sixth commandment: “Thou shalt not kill” (Mathew 5:21; Deuteronomy 5:17). The Law said that any person who took the life of another would forfeit their life in return (Leviticus 24:17) and then be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21). To the scribes and Pharisees, the act of killing meant the actual taking of a life. But Jesus says that anything leading to murder is wrong. Not only must the act of murder be avoided but the attitudes and emotions that lead to it are condemned. The physical act of murder is simply the last step in the process that began with envy, greed, anger, hatred, or fear in our hearts and minds.

How do you respond when someone makes you angry or offends you?

2. Consequence of Unrighteous Anger(vv. 23–26)

Verses 23–25 give an illustration to amplify Jesus’ message on letting go of anger and not letting it turn into sin that leads to death. He instructs that before anyone gives an offering to God to take care of any ongoing conflict with their neighbor. Jesus is making radical statements with a practical point via a common teaching method used by rabbis to make points and draw attention to the force of God’s commands. God desires that we be in right relationship with our neighbor before we even enter into His Temple to worship. God would rather we forgive offenses and release anger or seek forgiveness for wrongdoing before we end up in court, jail, hurt, or dead because of a conflict (Leviticus 19:17–18). We would be wise to apply this to ourselves today in understanding that we cannot worship and serve God with a pure heart at church gatherings while we hold grudges, offense, anger, and bitterness outside church meetings. Our worship is tainted by our festering conflict with our neighbor. Jesus argues that if we let it continue until we are in a court battle, we deserve to pay every penalty if we lose the case.

Do you have an experience of going through the religious motions when you knew you needed a change in your heart toward God or another person? Why did you go through the motions?

3. Avoid Lustful Looks (vv. 27-29)

The second issue Jesus confronts is again taken from the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Matthew 5:27; cf. Deuteronomy 5:18). Deuteronomy 5:18). He clarifies the meaning by saying, “But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The word adultery refers to a marriage breaking, the breaking of one’s covenant vows. Before Jesus explained the true meaning of the law, people believed they could remain true to their spouses by refraining from the physical act while entertaining tantalizing fantasies of illicit relationships. The “look” that Christ condemns here is not the notice of a person’s attractiveness or the sudden thought that the enemy might bring to a person’s mind. This lustful look is the approval of an immoral thought or desire. It is the contemplated desire for sexual pleasure that leads to the physical act of adultery. Therefore, the sin actually begins with the thought and ends with the act.

Why is entertaining lustful thoughts a problem for followers of Jesus Christ?

4. Declarations on Divorce (vv. 31–32)

After explaining how a person breaks the marriage vow through adultery, Jesus turns His attention to the subject of divorce. All any husband (not wife) had to do was write a bill of divorcement charging the wife with uncleanness (see Deuteronomy 24:1). Jesus argues that any man who divorces his wife for any cause except immorality “causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery” (Matthew 5:32). Jesus squarely places the onus for the adultery on the divorcing husband. He “causes” her to commit adultery. By divorcing her, the husband is forcing her to break the marriage vow. The point Jesus makes gets to the hearts of the hearers: Marriage is a life and death covenant that God takes seriously, and divorce is just as serious a teaching that Jesus expands on later in the Gospel (Matthew 19:1–12).

If the people were getting divorced to be with someone else, it was just as bad as committing adultery in the first place; our hearts cannot lust for someone else and then use a technicality in the Law to justify our sin. Fortunately God gives grace and can heal those who have experienced the cutting pain of adultery and divorce. Yet Scripture presents the institution of marriage as the spiritual fusion of two people (male and female) into one. Jesus teaches that fusion should be permanent (Matthew 19:6).

How can we respond to Jesus' teachings about divorce with such high divorce rates in our society?

Search the Scriptures

1. What emotion did Jesus compare to murder (Matthew 5:22)?
2. How is it possible to commit adultery without actually engaging in illicit sex (v. 28)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. In moments of frustration, have you learned to channel your energy into something that is more positive? What are some ways?
2. What is a time when you have had to "lay down" an issue?

Liberating Lesson

Jesus challenges us to look at the motives behind our actions and thoughts. Having the wrong heart toward God and others gives birth to sin. We often are hurt and surprised when it gets to the point of obvious individual and collective sin such as murder or systemic racism. But what Jesus challenges us to do is deal with our sinful thoughts and feelings toward our neighbors before we see the sinful action. Much of the murder, adultery, lying, stealing, cheating and so on we see around us can be traced back to lack of love and respect for God's ways, and lack of love and value for ourselves and for other people. What are some motives behind sins you see in your community? How are they not Christ-like? How can we work to serve as examples of living according to Jesus' teachings?

Application for Activation

Take time this week to evaluate where you may struggle with sin. Ask yourself, "Am I spending too much energy trying to do just enough to get by in my relationship with God, or am I really letting God deal with my heart in the matter?" Is there someone you are holding a grudge against? Is there someone you need to ask forgiveness? Are you acting in hurtful ways toward other people and still acting as though you can worship God guilt-free? Pray about how to approach those ongoing conflicts and listen to God. Let God show you where you are cultivating sin in your heart so it can be dealt with before it becomes actions that hurt you and other people. Pray for God to help you have a clean heart so you can worship in spirit and in truth with clean hands.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Matthew 5:21–3

21 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: 22 But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.

Although the Law was to remain in force, Jesus called His disciples to move from external obedience to internal submission to the Law written in their hearts. He begins by explaining some of the basic tenets of the Law. The first principle He explains is the law against murder (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). The Lord uses the phrase “Ye have heard” because most of the common people of His time knew the Law only by its public reading and the exposition of the scribes that accompanied the readings. To them the scribes’ interpretation carried the same authority as Scripture itself. The phrase “but I say” speaks with greater authority than other Jewish teachers and scribes claimed because they would generally cite another authority.

Jesus teaches that the external act of murder results from an inner emotional state and describes three degrees of offense and respectively three different degrees of punishment. Silent rage, described as unjustified anger, was punishable by judgment. The Law of Moses provided for the appointment of judges (Deuteronomy 16:18). This tribunal was known as the judgment, and they were elders who determined the case of the manslayer (see Joshua 20:2–5). In determining the manslayer’s case the elders might confine the man in one of the cities of refuge, or order him stoned to death. The second degree was contemptuous speech, such as calling someone Raca (Gk.rah-KAH). This word is an expression of contempt of uncertain derivation thought to mean “empty-headed” or heretic. This internal act of murder was punishable by a trial before the Sanhedrin, or council. The Sanhedrin was the chief court of the Jews, and common people held it in great awe. The third degree was bitter reproach as evidenced by calling someone a “fool.” To the Jews a fool is not a person who is mentally deficient but one who is morally perverse. David described the fool as a corrupt person who does abominable deeds and no good works. Worst of all, He denies God in his heart (Psalm 14:1).

The third punishment goes beyond human jurisdiction. It is the final punishment— being cast into hell. Gehenna (ge’enna, GEHen- nah), the Greek word translated “hell,” is derived from the name Hinnom—a deep, narrow valley, lying southeast of Jerusalem. The Greek word Gehenna, which we translate as hell, is first mentioned in Joshua 15:18 (in the Septuagint). It is the place where idolatrous people worshiped the god Molech by offering human sacrifices in the fires of Molech. Two Jewish kings burned their children in the valley as sacrifices (Ahaz, 2 Chronicles 28:3; and Manassah, 33:6). This horrible practice of human sacrifice caused the valley to be associated in the mind of the Jews with sin and suffering and led to the application of its name which, in the Greek form, is the place of final and eternal punishment. Human sacrifice to Molech was entirely destroyed by King Josiah, who polluted the entire valley making it unfit for even heathen worship (2 Kings 23:12–14).

The key to this passage is that while sin has stages, God takes note of it from the time it first begins to evolve in the heart, and a person’s soul is put in danger long before his feelings bear their fruit of violence and murder.

23 Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; 24 Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

The altar in question here is the Temple altar, and the gift is the offering being brought for sacrifice. This teaching underscores the priority of forgiveness in two ways. First, it warns us against the hypocrisy of pretending to be at peace with God when we are at odds with others. If our faith is genuine, God’s forgiveness

of us in Christ transforms us and makes us willing to pursue reconciliation with others. Secondly, Jesus is saying forgiveness is so important that we need to pursue reconciliation, even in situations when others—not ourselves—are the angry ones. Note that it is not the worshiper who is harboring unforgiveness; it is a brother. And Jesus doesn't even discuss whether or not the brother's anger is justified. Unforgiveness is so dangerous that we are responsible to make sure we don't tempt our brother to sin by leaving conflicts unresolved. This is not to condone abuse or suggest a relationship with those who pose danger to us. But we must do everything in our power to eradicate the poison of resentment from our lives as well as the lives of others God has called us to be in relationship. Our faithfulness to do so is far more important than even the most solemn act of worship.

25 Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. 26 Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Jesus ends His interpretation of the sixth commandment by discussing the urgency and wisdom of forgiveness. The Greek phrase translated “agree with” (isthi eunoon, EESthe ew-no-OHN) is a two-part verb. One part communicates an imperative command; the other part means “to be peaceable or amenable to.” The Greek word translated “adversary” is antidikos (an-TEE-dee-koce) and refers to an opponent in a lawsuit. Because of the preceding verses, we know that Jesus is not speaking only of legal affairs, but is using a legal situation as an example to make His point. He is talking about our need to reconcile as quickly as possible in a conflict. Just as in the preceding situation with the brother, who is right and who is wrong is irrelevant. The word translated “farthing” is kodrantes (Gk. koh-DRANTace), and it referred to the smallest Roman coin. Unresolved conflict creates situations in which others may seek to get every last penny from us. Failure to reconcile quickly can have dramatic, painful, and even permanent consequences. It is a foolish and unnecessary risk to let a matter wait. The best time to attempt reconciliation will always be right now!

27 Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: 28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Jesus returns to the Ten Commandments for His next teaching. As in the case with murder, Jesus again teaches against the thought that motivates the act. Lust here, in the Greek epithumesai (eh-pee-THOO-meh-sie), means to desire or long after. Therefore, the look of lust is a leering stare with immoral intent. The seedbed of sin is the heart and the seed bag of the heart is the eye. Those who allow lustful leers to lead them to immoral imaginings and lustful desires are just as guilty before God as if they had committed the act. The teaching method Jesus is using is called “building a fence” around the Torah or Law, in other words putting rules in place that keep one from even getting close to disobeying God. The declaration is intentionally intense to force the listener to take it seriously and obey the teachings of God. The natural result of disobeying God or committing sin is death, the same way that the natural result of walking off a cliff is to fall. According to the Old Testament, sin ultimately negatively affects everyone in the community, not just the individual (Leviticus 16:15–17; Ezekiel 11:2–12).

31 It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: 32 But I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.

In His next teaching Jesus refers to Deuteronomy 24:1. Under Jewish law in the time of the Pharisees adultery only referred to the woman's illicit behavior, not the man's. Jesus' teaching on adultery, where He specifically refers to the man's adultery, proves that He did not share or endorse their view. Because the specific law He is dealing with here refers to the woman, Jesus deals only with the issue of the wife. The law of divorce permitted the husband to put away the wife when he found “some unseemly thing” in her (Deuteronomy 24:1). Jesus explained that the divorced woman is forced into a state of adultery. The mere fact of divorce did not make her an adulteress, but it brought her into a state of disgrace from which she invariably sought to free herself by

contracting another marriage. This other marriage, which was due to her humiliating situation, drove her into a state of adultery. “Fornication”—from the Greek *porneia* (por-NAY-ah), from which we derive our English word pornography—refers to any type of sexual sin. In a marriage, this fornication (extramarital sex) would be considered adultery. Jesus’ words here are as strict as in verses 27–28, and continue those verses’ focus on adultery. Jesus’ exception here for the case of fornication could be interpreted as not to give a justified cause for divorce, but to give the reason for the wife becoming an adulteress. She could have become an adulteress by her own action, or by her husband divorcing her.

Jesus would later explain that this law was given by Moses on account of the hardness of the people’s heart; that is, to prevent greater evils (Matthew 19:3–12). In that discussion, Jesus more clearly limits the right of divorce to cases of fornication. It is implied that divorce for marital infidelity breaks the marriage bond, and it is therefore held almost universally that the innocent party to such a divorce can marry again. Of course, the guilty partner could not. No one is allowed by law to reap the benefits of his or her own wrong.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Obey Judicial Rulings at Once
(Deuteronomy 17:8–11)

TUESDAY

Handling Temptations
(Mark 9:42–48)

WEDNESDAY

Living With Neighbors
(Leviticus 19:11–18)

THURSDAY

Living With Believers
(1 Thessalonians 5:12–18)

FRIDAY

The Unbreakable Marital Bond
(Mark 10:2–9)

SATURDAY

Let Yes Be Yes; No, No
(Matthew 5:33–37)

SUNDAY

Commit to Love Each Other
(Matthew 5:21–32)