

Jewish Leaders' Misinterpretation of Commandments of the Law

Matthew 5:17-30

Matthew 5:17-20 - *"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. ¹⁹ Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means 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 in danger of the judgment.'* ²² *But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. ²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* ²⁸ *But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*

Background Notes

A logical question about the Law of Moses would have come up in the minds of the disciples and those who had participated in John's Baptism: if the King is here and the kingdom is at hand, does that mean that the Law of Moses will be changed, or set aside? The Lord assured them that He had not come to do away with the Law and the prophets - in fact, He had come to **fulfill** the Law and the prophets. The "Law and the Prophets" refers to the entire Old Testament.

What did the Lord mean when He said, *"For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled"* (v18). The yod ("jot") is the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and it looks something like an English apostrophe. The *"tittle,"* or stroke, is just the part of a letter. Sometimes just a

small missing part of a letter can change it to a different letter, and thus change the word - and even change the meaning in some cases. For example, in English, what's the difference between the words "pest" and "rest"? The complete down stroke left off the beginning of the letter "p" makes it appear to be an "r."

Matthew 5:18 has something to say about the inspiration of Scripture, doesn't it? Inspiration is the process by which God superintended the writings and writers of Scripture. To what degree or level is the Scripture inspired? Matthew 5:18 would indicate that the level of inspiration was not just the writer's thoughts and concepts, but right down to the very words and the very letters penned on those original documents!

Our Lord's point here, of course, was that every single prediction and promise in the Old Testament would be fulfilled. The Lord Himself would obey the Law perfectly. In addition, He would fulfill all the Messianic prophecies - and those that haven't been fulfilled yet will be fulfilled in the future when our Lord returns.

So, the Lord had not come to do away with the Law and the prophets, but to fulfill the Law and the prophets. In doing so, the Lord would show that the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees had wrongly interpreted the law, and misused it for their own selfish purposes. Verse 20: *"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."* The self-righteous attitudes of the religious leaders demonstrated that they were not ready for the kingdom. In fact, the righteousness of anyone prepared for the kingdom must exceed the righteousness of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. The righteousness that God demands is not just external, but internal as well – based on truth, faith and conversion. The Lord showed how the scribes and Pharisees had misinterpreted the Law - and missed God's true intent of the Law with their unbiblical traditions, regulations, and practices.

Doctrinal Points

1. Hate is the seed of murder.

Verses 21-26: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' ²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. ²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."*

Over the years, the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day had watered down the commandment, "Thou shall not murder." It was so badly watered down that they taught that it was OK to be angry with people that you didn't like, or call them derogatory names, or even damn them in words - as long as you didn't actually kill them! As long as you didn't commit the act of murder, you could hate all you wanted.

That was the position of the scribes and Pharisees. No, said the Lord Jesus - you have misinterpreted the Law! You have missed God's true intent of the Law. The commandment "Thou shall not murder" extends beyond the external act itself to the **internal attitude** behind the act.

Hate is the seed of murder. In the kingdom that the Messiah was offering to the nation, not only would the act of murder be judged, but hateful attitudes and actions would be judged as well. Calling your brother "Raca," that is, empty headed or numbskull, would be serious enough to bring you before the Supreme Court in Messiah's kingdom. Calling someone a fool would be considered equivalent to saying, "God damn you!" to someone today. The scribes and Pharisees practiced such talk. The Lord said that this was sin, and could take you to hell.

In verses 23-26, we see that these wrong attitudes should be made right. When there are misunderstandings, friction, differences, personality clashes, or attitudes of anger, the citizens of Messiah's kingdom should do everything they can to be reconciled - and not go to court. All such negative attitudes and actions should be checked and corrected quickly, because hate is the seed of murder.

2. Lust is the seed of adultery.

Verses 27-28: *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

Once again, over the years the commandment "You shall not commit adultery" had been twisted, distorted, misapplied, and misinterpreted so much that the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus' day said that you could look and lust all you wanted - as long as you didn't commit the actual act of adultery. Some people take that position today! "Wrong again!" said the Lord Jesus. The correct interpretation of this commandment was to realize that God not only condemned the act of adultery, but the **internal attitude** of lust behind the act as well.

Lust is the seed of adultery. Notice that the Lord didn't say that the attitude of lust is the **same** as the act of adultery. No! He said that **both are sinful!** The scribes and the Pharisees were wrong to condemn only the act, but not condemn the attitude of lust. The intent of the Law, correctly interpreted, is that not only is the act itself sinful, but the steps leading up to the act are sinful as well. And by the way, if anyone uses this Scripture to say that since they've sinned with the attitude of lust, they might as well go ahead and commit the act - those people are ripping this Scripture way out of context, and badly misinterpreting the Lord's words.

Verses 29-30 teach us that **drastic action** must be taken if you have a problem with lust! *“If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”* ³⁰ *And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”*

The Lord didn't mean that we should actually mutilate our bodies if we have a problem with lust. He meant that we must take **drastic steps** to deal with lust. It would be better to get rid of your computer and TV if you can't regulate what you view. Throw out the magazines and movies that are causing a problem. Job 31:1 says, *“I have made a covenant with my eyes. Why then should I look upon a young woman...?”* Lust is the seed of adultery.

Practical Application

Don't have a litigious spirit!

A litigious spirit!? What does that mean, anyway? *“If you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison”* (v23-26).

A litigious spirit is a contentious, argumentative, belligerent attitude. A litigious spirit holds a grudge – and is even prone to engage in lawsuits. That's the kind of spirit the Lord condemned in verses 23-26. We should try to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters. Believers should try to settle differences without going to court. In fact, 1 Corinthians 6 says that it is wrong for Christians to fight one another in court. Other believers in the fellowship can help in practical ways to mediate and defuse litigious situations.

Notice that both the “innocent person” and the “offending person” are told to take the first step in reconciliation. Sometimes we take the attitude that if we've been offended, the other person is responsible to take the first step towards reconciliation! Notice that the Lord did not say that if you come to the altar and remember that you have something against your brother, go and be reconciled. That should be obvious! But the reverse is true as well! If your brother has something against **you** - rightly or wrongly - **you should take the first step** towards getting the situation right again! Be reconciled with your brother or sister - and then come back to the worship service!

Has a brother or sister offended you? Are you willing to take the first step toward reconciliation - even though you think they should take the first step? Don't have a litigious spirit.