

Text: Matthew 5:21-48

Title: You Have Heard It Said

Truth: Jesus teaches the spirit of the Law, as over against the mere “letter.”

Date/Location: Sundays April 25 and May 2, 2021 at FBC (Parts 1 and 2)
Wednesday May 5, 2021 at FBC (Part 3), Sunday May 9, 2021 (Part 4)

Introduction

This is a somewhat lengthy introduction to the message because it gives a broad overview of all 28 verses of the text.

We must keep in mind a couple of key points from the prior context.

1. This message is under the umbrella of the call of the gospel to repent (3:2, 4:17).
2. The concern of the Divine Preacher Jesus is clearly focused on internal spiritual matters. He is not concerned with mere external compliance. We see this with “poor in spirit” and “hungering and thirsting for righteousness” among the other qualities listed.
3. Jesus is not undercutting the Law of Moses nor the Prophets. To the contrary, He came to fulfill and complete what was taught in that body of literature (5:17). We know therefore that Jesus is not correcting the Law or saying it is inadequate, or even amplifying into a new realm which it did not reach before. He is expositing God’s intention for His people with it.

Then, there are a couple of things to keep in mind as we walk through these verses in 21-48.

4. Each of the next six sections opens with words like this: “You have heard that it was said...” We must understand who/what did the *saying* to understand this properly. Was it (a) the Law of Moses that was speaking or (b) the human authorities who were speaking from their traditions?

We know from 5:43 that it could *not* be the Law of Moses speaking, because the Law nowhere says, “and hate your enemy.” *That* is not a doctrine that you have to teach any sinner—humans innately do that with no prompting! The six statements therefore

are not option (a) the Law of Moses, so they must be traditional teachings that were initially based on the Law, but which morphed over time to fit man's self-righteousness and sinful desires and as such, fall short of the divine intention of the original Law.

5. In a couple of the sections, there is a phrase like it was said "by them of old" or "to them of old." This means either the saying was spoken **by** past generations of tradition-promoters, or it was said **to** previous generations of Jews, and those sayings had been passed down to us. These options do not seem mutually exclusive to me. Basically, the Lord is saying, "This is a traditional saying..."
6. Each of the six sections continues with these words: "but I say to you." If (a) above, then Jesus is saying, "Moses said X, but I say something different." That would be pitting the two authorities Moses—a divinely ordained messenger—and Jesus, the Divine Ordainer of the previous message—against one another. That cannot be the case, so we must dismiss option (a) for that reason as well. It must be that Jesus is referring to human teachers over the years who parroted these ideas as suggested in option (b). This fits well with Matt. 7:29. The people recognized that Jesus was an entirely different kind of teacher than what they were accustomed to hearing. They were used to hearing the scribes and Pharisees report to them what the elders and traditions said. "Rabbi so-and-so said that we must do this, and famous teacher thus-and-such said this other thing." This is a lot of what academia does today. Jesus was telling them directly what *God* says, with no middle-man. He had that authority in Himself to do that. We can imitate this by proclaiming precisely what the Bible says, so that we say, "Jesus says to you" or "God says to you." Leave the preacher out of the equation in the sense that he is only a reporter. He is no authority in himself.
7. The "Jewish supreme court" of lawyers was enjoying great power with its expansions, modifications, and contractions of the Law. But now the Divine Legislator—the Law giver, the author of the Law—has come onto the scene and He is going to tell the people what the Author's intention was for the Law. This is a major earthquake to the Jewish system. It ended up being an upheaval like they had never experienced before. Had they all received His

correction, things would have gone much better. But they became envious instead of humble (Matt. 27:18, like the patriarchs in Acts 7:9, and the Jews in Asia Minor at Acts 13:45, 17:5).

Illustration: The Protestant Reformation brought the Bible into the hands of the common person. He could then read it himself and see if what the priests were saying in the Latin-centered mass were in fact correct. It turned out the people found the priests were not even close to what the real gospel was. They had added all kinds of unbiblical doctrines and practices. They had complicated church so much it was more like a repeat of the Old Testament priesthood system than it was the church of Jesus Christ.

In a similar way, Jesus told the crowds the real meaning of the Law. They will see what it really was all about, not just what the “spin” version of it was.

8. We shall see that Jesus taught them that the Law was not focused on the letter or mere external obedience. God expects better from His repentant ones. He calls them to live a life of internal holiness. Anything that “sniffs” of murder or adultery, that makes deceptive oaths, or the other sins listed in this section, are things that Christ’s followers do not desire. It is not merely the act: it is the thought, the look, the feeling, the desire that is wrong. Restricting yourself from doing those activities amounts to a partial holiness, but it is not nearly enough to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

This teaching is *crucial* for us to cut through the questions that are raised today. “Isn’t it OK for me to have ____ desires as long as you don’t act on them?” Jesus’ answer is NO, it is NOT OK. Bad desires are another symptom of sin, and they are not to be indulged.

9. The traditions that Christ gives as examples are from Pentateuch laws. Several originated with Laws that were prohibitions: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not swear falsely. These commands, when interpreted in a “don’t do that” sense, are a far cry from positive holiness. God desires His people have a Spirit-guided desire toward holiness in all respects, internally as well as externally, and not just a list of do’s and don’ts.

I. Murder, 5:21-26

- A. The traditional saying that Jesus quotes originates in the 10 Commandments, Exodus 20:13. It is repeated in Deuteronomy 5:17. Indeed, anyone who murders would be liable to judgment. All true. But does it stop there? Are you really clean before God if you say, “Look, I’ve never actually *murdered* anyone. I mean, I have wanted to bump off one or two people, but I haven’t actually done it!” Or, “Murder? Not me. But there are some people that I just cannot stand. I hate them. As far as I am concerned, they could disappear and it would not bother me one bit.” Jesus brings up the point because the Pharisees did not deal with the heart attitude.
- B. The Lord responds to that kind of thinking by saying that if you hate a person, or are angry with them, or blaspheme them in your talk, you have the same species of “thing” inside of you as if you murdered that person. Mere external compliance is not a scribe-exceeding righteousness, and it is not a perfect-as-God-is-perfect standard.
- C. Language that is abusive, angry, hateful, and the like is an evidence of this kind of sin in your dark heart. Being angry with or without a cause at someone in this hateful way is not for the Christian. (I refuse to make a big point about “without a cause” because its place in the text is questioned by some textual experts. However, even if you take it to be there, to “be angry and sin not” is too tough to do.)
- D. Now, be careful not to make mechanical application of these things as if they are new “rules” to live by. For example, if it is always sin to use the word “fool” with someone, then Psalm 14:1 would be a sinful Bible verse because it calls practical atheists *fools*. However, the Scripture does not do so in a way that is angry and hateful and spiteful and so forth. It states true facts in a dispassionate way. It says someone who lives or believes there is no God is in fact a fool. But that is not the same as an angry outburst of a wife toward a husband or a husband toward a wife or parent toward a child.
- E. If there is a conflict, whatever side of the conflict you are on, you need to follow the kind of instruction of 5:23-26.

1. If you are about to begin worship and at that time remember that someone is feeling angry at you—or you are feeling angry toward someone—then you need to make that right before continuing to worship. You need to be reconciled to that brother. Granted, the picture here is of someone coming before the altar at the temple; but the same exact idea applies to us in Christian worship in the church, at the Lord's Table, at an evening prayer time in the home, etc.
2. If someone is so angry at you or you at them that there is a matter of law involved, you need to make reconciliation as quickly as possible. Make an agreement with them, fix up the problem, correct the issue, pay restitution, etc. Otherwise, you may have some bad consequences, whether you are in the right or not.

II. Adultery, 5:27-30

- A. The saying quoted by Jesus is another of the 10 commandments (Exodus 20:14, Deut. 5:18). God viewed sexual purity as so important that He assigned the death penalty for those who violated this law (Leviticus 20:10). These three verses are the first three that use the word *adultery* in the Bible. The fourth is Prov. 6:32, and then a bunch in the prophets and New Testament.
- B. But once again, the prevailing view was that “it can’t hurt if you are only looking” or “I’m just window shopping” or whatever. That’s sin making an excuse for itself.
- C. The desires are where the act of adultery comes from, so Jesus says that if you are lusting after a woman you look at, then you are guilty. Remember, defilement comes from inside (Matt. 15:18-20). The outside act is an evidence of an inner problem. Long before the outward act, inward sin was festering like cancer for a long time.
- D. Note that since marriage is between one man and one woman, biologically born that way, that any relationship outside of that kind of marriage—heterosexual or homosexual—deviates from God’s holiness and is sinful and unacceptable behavior. Before

marriage, or after “gay marriage” or in between marriages or whatever, it does not matter: sexual activity is not permitted.

- E. The Lord gives strong medicine for this case in verses 29-30. Prescription: If your right eye/hand offends you, get rid of it, because it is so dangerous to give into such sin that it could be that which leads you down the path to Hell (Gehenna).
- This is not a recommendation for mutilation! It is hyperbole to teach this truth: deal with sin radically. Do what it takes to get rid of it. Think on other things. Learn self-control. Ask for help. Meditate on the Word of God. Go somewhere else. Avert your eyes. Focus all your attention and energy on your spouse. Get married instead of burning with passion.
- F. All of the world is *full* of adultery these days. Everywhere you look it is there, or temptations to it, or allusions to it, or innuendo about it.

III. Divorce, 5:31-32

- A. The Bible’s teaching on divorce is a concession to sinful humanity. It is not part of God’s ideal design for marriage and society. How do we know this? From Matthew 19:1-12, we learn that it was because of the hardness of the heart of man that God permitted people to divorce. The regulation was a way to regulate the sinful excess of people to keep sin kind of fenced in so that there would not be total anarchy.
- B. So it is true that “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” That was the legal prescription. That is what finalized the dissolution of a marriage and drew the line in the sand where the woman could go and find another husband without being guilty of being married to two men at the same time.
- C. But what comes before that is done is a **decision** to divorce in the first place. What comes before that is an **attitude** that divorce is OK. What comes before that is a growing **hatred** for one’s spouse. What comes before that is a **lack of love** toward your spouse, a **lack of obedience** toward God, a **glut of pride** in yourself, and a **lack of submission** to the Word of God. What came long before

that was—perhaps—**poor selection** methodology for picking a potential mate holding in mind the fact that marriage is designed to be permanent.

If you want to be happy, you need to follow God's plan for marriage, not quit and try to find happiness somewhere else!

- C. In addition to what I wrote just above about there being a lot to consider preceding the divorce certificate, there is another matter to consider after the divorce is finalized. Jesus elevates the divine instruction on marriage by moving our attention to what happens after you divorce. It is assumed, human desires being what they are, that a divorced person will seek another spouse. That being the case, both spouses will likely be remarried to others. What then?
- D. Jesu says that if you divorce your wife for any reason—any reason except for sexual immorality—then he is causing her to become an adulteress. Why is this? She remarries,
- E. There is a question about the sexual immorality clause. In the past, I have taken the view that this is a situation like Joseph and Mary. Joseph was not guilty for thinking the way he did; in fact, he was a righteous man. Many people take this to refer to a wider array of situations than just betrothal. And that is a reality that we have to deal with. A man who is faced with a persistently unfaithful spouse has to consider his testimony, his health, and his children when he thinks about whether to try to keep the marriage together or not. (That is the same vice versa as well.)

But even if you disagree with my estimation, the point stands that divorcing for *any reason* results in the causation of sexual immorality. Either adultery happened before the divorce, or it is going to happen after. Neither scenario is right. If adultery happened prior to the marriage, it will most certainly go on afterward as well. Who is to blame? If the husband was not providing what the wife deserved from him, he may be partly to blame for her indiscretion (and vice versa). She is not absolved from sin—make sure that is clear in your mind. But he is not absolved either.

- F. The bottom line is this: if a marriage ends before death, and then there is remarriage, it amounts to adultery. No Christian ought to want to wade into the cesspool of adultery. It even causes the third party to be guilty of adultery because he is entering into a relationship with a woman who was already spoken for!
- G. The practical outworking of this is exactly what Paul said in 1 Cor. 7:10-11. If all of the above is true—and it is—then no Christian minister can advise a person to divorce and then remarry because he would be therefore saying adultery is OK. They are to remain unmarried or be reconciled to their spouse.
- H. I do not take it that a spouse's infidelity in pre-divorce adultery "frees" the other spouse from the adultery charge. I also do not take it that a remarried person is guilty of adultery repeatedly or all the time. Once the new marriage is consummated, it should be maintained faithfully. The initial entry into that marriage is adultery, but it is not in an ongoing sense. This is particularly clear if the spouse has repented of their sins.
- I. Attempts to "work around this" teaching arise from—guess what?—the hardness and pride of people's hearts.
- J. This is difficult topic, especially with so many who have had a divorce in their past. The cross-work of Christ cleanses us from *all* sin, not just "small" sins. Confess your sins, and He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Count on that, dear ones, as you think about the sins of the past, forget them, and move on to serve the Lord Jesus.

IV. Oaths, 5:33-37 (Part 3)

- A. The swearing of oaths had become a dirty business in Israel. They had some cultural practice where you could make an oath by some things and not be obligated by it, and by other things and you would be obligated to keep it (Matt. 23:16-22). In both cases, you were representing to the other person(s) that you *would* keep the oath. It is like making a promise with your fingers crossed. It is like the picture of a guy with his left hand raised and his right hand behind his back with his fingers crossed! These "oaths" were

outright lies, deception intended to bring some advantage to the false swearer of the oath.

- B. The Law clearly said not to swear falsely. See for example Lev. 19:12, Num. 30:2, Deut. 23:21, 23 (and notice v. 22!) and Eccl. 5:4. Examples of breaking this law are found in Jer. 5:2, 7:9. The sin in this is that a vow to God, when broken, shows that you have a low view of our great God. You promise to Him and in His name, and then ignore the importance of God's name.

Jesus upgraded our understanding of the meaning of this by teaching that because the thing by which you swear the oath (if not God) cannot do anything to enforce the oath anyway. Whether you swear on your weapons, or a bear's head, or a tiger's head, or by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or whatever, all of that belongs to God and none of it can enforce the oath if it is broken.

- C. What if you make an oath and then for some reason cannot keep it because of some other circumstances that come up outside of your control? It is still a sin, but you can be forgiven for it, just like any other sin.

In this world, we ought to understand when others have unavoidable problems that cause them to miss obligations. But if it is happening for silly reasons or no discernible reason at all, then we should call out our friends for not being people of their word.

- D. The solution to all of this is to not swear oaths at all. Just say yes or no, and mean it. We should be people known to keep our word. Our word is good. We do not even need to do a handshake, much less a written contract.

- E. Anything other than this is evil, from the evil one. There is too much of a possibility of evil in making an oath, so it is best to avoid it altogether.

- F. You may avoid swearing an oath in a courtroom setting by saying, "I (solemnly) affirm that I will tell the whole truth..." or "I do so affirm" or something to that effect. That is your way of letting the court know that your "Yes is yes and no is no."

V. Vengeance, 5:38-42

- A. One of the world's great difficulties is that people want revenge against their enemies—individual, family, or national. They will not rest until they are satisfied that the just desserts of sin are visited upon those who did the sin. This often leads to a cycle of unending violence between groups of people because the one is wronged, then retaliates, then the first retaliates for the retaliation, etc. This cycle often continues inter-generationally.
- B. The problem is that vengeance is in the human heart. But humans are so prone to over-do this that justice is often lacking.
- C. “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” The eye for eye law *is* in Scripture—Exodus 21:23-28—as an upper limit on what could be done to an offender. If he knocked out your tooth, you could not take his life! It was also a law of proportionality by which a punishment had to be appropriate for a crime. Therefore, it was also somewhat of a lower limit in the sense that taking away someone's ability to work would mean that an commensurate payment would be required.

The law became misappropriated to the level of personal retaliation where it encouraged, on a personal level, if you were slapped, to punch back harder, or refuse to help someone, etc.

- D. Instead, the Lord Jesus teaches His people to turn the cheek, give your cloak also, go the extra mile, give, lend, and do not turn others away. These kinds of actions are not mechanical prescriptions for various situations, but represent an entirely different mindset than vengeance. They represent patience, submission, care, love, compassion, etc. They will apply at some point somehow, in your life.

When the Lord teaches us not to resist an evil person, he is not approving acts of war against you, or other criminality. The government is supposed to handle those kinds of things. He is talking about us as individuals. I do not believe this should be read to prohibit self-defense in the case of criminal behavior. The evil that we should let go are interpersonal offenses, speech, and the like.

I do believe the slap in the face is literal, but we can also apply it figuratively. Someone does something to you that is outrageous, and you say, “What a slap in the face.” This does not mean that you must do the same back to them. Just ignore it and move on.

- E. There will be an appropriate vengeance at some point—but it will come from God—Deut. 32:35, Romans 12:19, Heb. 10:30, Prov. 20:22. One of God’s agents is the government, which as a corporate body executes the wrath of God upon evildoers—or at least it should. Even still, “vengeance” will not happen completely in this life, because God will judge men after they die, and then the appropriate punishment will be delivered to those not in Christ. To those who have come into Christ, He took their punishment upon Himself.

VI. Loving Neighbors, 5:43-48 (Part 4)

- A. This one is incredible. Tradition had gotten so far off the track that the teachers of the Law said it was OK to “hate your enemy.” What?! That was the sin nature of the people coming through loud and clear. So when Jesus told them that “You have heard it said...” it was clearly *not* the Law of Moses He was citing. It was a traditional teaching loosely based on that Law, but expanded upon by the sinful teachers of the Law. After all, there is no need to teach depraved sinners that they should “hate their enemies.” They would think to do that all on their own without any help from a so-called teacher. To be sure, they would not mind having reinforcement from their teachers on that point!
- B. The command to love your neighbor is clear in Lev. 19:18: do not take vengeance, and do not bear a grudge, but instead love your neighbor as yourself. This law is repeated several times in Scripture. Matt. 22:37-40 is probably the most well known. But there is also Matt. 19:19, James 2:8, Gal. 5:14, and Rom. 13:8-10. It is clearly the standard of our conduct toward fellow humans.
- C. The Law did not allow hating your neighbor. But, like the lawyer in Luke 10, the Pharisaical tradition probably went something like this: We are supposed to love our neighbors, yes, but then those who are *not* our “neighbors” we are free to think of them however

we want. So, *who* is our neighbor, anyway? Read Luke 10:25-37 and notice that your neighbor is probably the person you *do not think* is your neighbor! You might also ask, “Who is my enemy?” in a way to try to categorize people into one group or the other. All that violates the spirit of what Jesus is talking about here. There are enemies, but you do not look at them in that old way when you are a child of God.

- D. I found curious this statement by commentator R. T. France (Matthew, NICNT, p. 223): “Jesus’ contrasting statement goes far beyond the purview of Lev 19:18 and introduces a concept of undiscriminating love which cannot easily be derived from the Pentateuch at all.” He later points out a few verses that indicate care for outsiders, but his value judgment that it cannot be easily derived is a over-stated.

Looking at Exodus 22:21, 23:4, 23:9; Lev 19:10, 33-34, 24:22 (same law for both); you will see that *love* for enemies was the order of the day even in the Old Testament Law, even if the passage uses words other than *love* to express it (but see Lev. 19:34 for the word *love*). Beyond that, Prov. 24:17, 25:21-22 add a clear statement about treatment of enemies, which is echoed in Rom. 12:14, 17, 19-21.

- E. Jesus clarifies that the real intention of the Law was that you would be like God and love your enemies, bless, pray for them, do good to them, pray for them, etc. The Law was truly full of grace—it was not a “blasting” Law of harsh retribution and “letter of the law” kind of thinking. It was not a law that encouraged or allowed people to hate others. This would be a violation of the commandment against murder already discussed.

- F. (verse 45) Such love makes you to be like God Himself, who shows such kindness on His enemies that it is hard to fathom. He gives rain, sunshine, food, peace, a measure of prosperity, and all of life’s good gifts like spouses and children and friends and love and...salvation (Romans 5:10). God loved His enemies; He asks us to do the same to be children like their heavenly Father.

Say it another way: what seems completely counter-intuitive—loving enemies—is exactly what God does. But it only seems

paradoxical or counter-intuitive to us because God is very unlike us. We have a way to go to come to the moral perfection that is desired by God.

We would agree that Jesus is the perfect example of God on earth. He was loving toward His enemies, exemplified in how He treated those responsible for His crucifixion. Thus, we know that love can coexist with rebuke, because Jesus often rebuked people that were wrong (Pharisees, for example, Matthew 23) or even the sons of thunder (Mark 3:17, Luke 9:54-55). Love in the Biblical sense is not the squishy kind of “don’t say anything strong” kind of idea that is promoted today.

- G. (Verses 46-47) It is not surprising or super special that people love their friends—that is baseline human behavior even for wicked people. It is when Christians show compassion for their enemies that it is remarkable.
- H. Let us pause and ask if there are some people that you have on your enemies list. Or maybe you should ask yourself why you even have such a list? Whether written down or in your head, it needs to be deleted. Instead, you need to love your neighbors and love your enemies. If you do that, you will be like God (v. 45). If you forgive others, you will be like God (Eph. 4:32).

Conclusion for now...

If properly keeping the Law before Christ’s death meant this kind of God-like behavior and internal battle against sin—and it did—how much more is it the case that in this age, with the completed revelation of the Bible and ministry of the Spirit that we enjoy. If they were expected to live under this kind of moral code, so are we!

Will we engage the inner struggle against sin as well as the outer one?

Next, I want you to ponder the masterful structure of the sermon up to this point. Jesus has introduced blessings upon those who repent and the call for them to be different than the world.

In verses 17-20, Christ said that He came to fulfill the Law. Evidently, doing that means His followers will be involved in that as well. That

fulfillment is not merely “appearing to do what you are told” but being internally the kind of person who keeps the Law in all its depth and richness. Verse 20 says that unless our righteousness exceeds the Pharisees, we will not get into the kingdom of Heaven. Jesus gives six illustrations of how that looks in life. These make clear the true intention of the Law, which is not merely external or religious. It is a matter of the heart. It is also a matter of practical righteousness.

1. Murder is a sin primarily of the mind, and you are guilty of it long before the life is extinguished, if it ever even is.
2. Adultery is also a sin of the mind, and you again are guilty of it long before any outward actions.
3. Marriage is a sacred responsibility. This is where practical righteousness comes in. Stay married, be faithful, love your spouse, make society a better place.
4. Oaths are not permitted, rather plain, honest speech is. And speech arises from the...mind again. Our speech has to be practically righteous.
5. Vengeance is to be left to the Lord. Instead, we have a humble attitude that looks to help instead of hurt.
6. We are to love our enemies and do good to those who use us.

Then, Jesus summarizes his teaching in v. 48 (which connects back to verse 20) by saying that we are to be morally perfect as God is perfect. This sounds a lot like Leviticus 19:2 and 1 Peter 1:16. That is the basic point of what He has been saying all along. What a high calling! Notice that I said morally perfect. In those ways in which humans can be like the Lord in our character and behavior, we are called to be that. In other areas where God has perfections of an infinite variety, we simply cannot attain to those. They are not included in this command.

God does not—and in fact cannot—lower His standard of righteousness for us. Rather, our level of righteousness needs to be lifted up to His. Since we cannot do that heavy lifting, we must appeal to Christ to do it for us!

True as it is, this is an impossible standard. We all fall short of this.

And the Sermon on the Mount should help us recognize this and seek to find a righteousness that is beyond ourselves to meet the requirement of God. Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Believers must have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, else they are not acceptable before God.

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