

The Anger of Man

Matthew 5: 21–26; James 1: 19–21ⁱ

You Have Heard It Said.

At the beginning of Matthew, chapter 23, Jesus said to both the crowds, and to His disciples:

² “The scribes and the Pharisees... Matthew 23:2 ESV

(those who take responsibility for the teaching of the Law)

...sit on Moses’ seat... Matthew 23:2 ESV

It should be clear, then, both in Matthew 23, and in our text from Matthew 5, Jesus was not reacting to the teaching of the law per se. In our text we know this to be true by the words of verse 20, where He said to His disciples:

²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20 ESV

And, as we noted last week, the scribes and Pharisees were pretty good—at least in some respects—at keeping the smallest precepts of the Law, so good, in fact that Jesus opened his polemic against them in Matthew, chapter 23, with a backhanded compliment. He said, both to the crowds and to His disciples:

² “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, ³ so do and observe whatever they tell you... Matthew 23:2–3 ESV

So, again, the problem was not the Law. Jesus did not come to destroy but to fulfill the Law of God, and since

¹⁰ ...whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it James 2:10 ESV

we can safely say that Jesus never broke the Law of God; never. He never pushed its boundaries, nor did He ever speak a word against it. So, in our text, the complementary phrases, “You have heard that it was said to those of old...But I say to you...” cannot be understood as, “The Law of God says this, but I’m saying something different.” Rather, Jesus was proclaiming the true interpretation of the Law over and against “the false representations of it made by the Pharisees and the scribes.” “Indeed,” wrote Martyn Lloyd Jones,

the wording used by our Lord more or less clinches the matter. He says: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time.” He does not say “You have read in the law of Moses”, or “It was written and you have read”.ⁱⁱ

This matters, because when Jesus did quote the Law and the Prophets, as He did many times, He led with the statement, “It is written,” or “Thus it is written,” even stating on one occasion:

¹⁷ In your Law it is written... John 8:17 ESV

But throughout the rest of Matthew chapter 5 Jesus introduced each new point or illustration with the statement “You have heard that it was said...” and when He followed with, “But I say to you...” He was not subverting the law, rather He was establishing His own unique authority to provide His people with an accurate understanding of what was meant, as the Lawgiver Himself, and this in opposition to the very human understandings imposed by the scribes and Pharisees.

Furthermore, this is born out by the response of the people who first heard this teaching. They had been exposed on many occasions to the traditions that had been woven around the law, but “when Jesus had ended **these** sayings...” (the sayings that we know as The Sermon on the Mount),

²⁸ ...the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them **as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.** Matthew 7:28–29 ESV

Even so, we need to fully lay aside the idea that Jesus was diminishing the Law of God, or worse still, setting it aside completely. He was not, and, as we will see in each case as we go through Matthew, chapter 5, His interpretation and application of God’s Law to His disciples would actually demand more of those who would follow.

You Shall Not Murder.

We see this clearly in verses 21 and 22.

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. Matthew 5:21–22 ESV

Now, first of all, both of the phrases that Jesus was interpreting here can be found in the law. The sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” is found in Exodus 20, verse 13, and again in Deuteronomy 5, verse 17. The consequent, “whoever murders will be liable to judgment,” is possibly a paraphrase, or an allusion to Genesis 9, verse 6, where God said to Noah:

⁶ “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed...” Genesis 9:6 ESV

Very good then! On the surface the traditions of the rabbis seem to be born out by the words of God Himself. But it’s not what was being said by the scribes and Pharisees that was the problem. It’s what was not being said. Hendriksen wrote:

Their interpretation, though correct as far as it went, did not go nearly far enough. It was woefully inadequate. Imagine a present day minister of the Gospel preaching on this commandment and limiting his exhortations to a warning to be very careful when using [firearms], clubs, or automobiles. He might even warn against peddling drugs.ⁱⁱⁱ

(Hendriksen wrote in the early ‘70s, after all).

As long as he fails to point out *the spiritual cause that produces murder*, and warn against *that*, has he not missed the mark?^{iv}

It's the same old reductionist tendency that we see so often to this very day, to boil the Law—the Word of God—down to a mere external letter, while ignoring the spirit behind the command. But in Matthew 23, Jesus rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for the same impulse. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” He said,

For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. Matthew 23:23 ESV

And just in case later listeners might be tempted to say, “See, it’s all about the spirit of the thing. After all, ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’”; Jesus went on to say:

These you ought to have done...

(the justice, mercy, and faithfulness parts),

...without neglecting the others Matthew 23:23 ESV

(that is, tithing from the spice rack). See, the Pharisees were inclined to believe that as long as you didn’t pick up a Louisville Slugger and whack your neighbor over the head—as long as you didn’t literally kill someone by one means or another; as long as you stopped somewhat short of actual murder—everything was OK. You were keeping the Law of God. You were obeying the sixth commandment.

What they left out is “the spirit of the law”, which follows in verse 22 where the Lawgiver Himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God went on:

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. Matthew 5:22 ESV

Now, there are different ways of interpreting this trio of statements. Some have thought Jesus was saying that anyone who is angry with his brother will be held liable to judgment by a local court, while someone who says to his brother, “Raca” (understood to be an insult on the order of “empty head”, or, “no account”), would be liable to judgment by a higher court, and whoever says, “You fool” would deserve the most extreme penalty of all. But this seems to be engaging in the very kind of theological hair splitting of which Jesus is accusing the Pharisees.

Instead, we can understand that there is really no gradation of punishment intended here. Rather, Jesus was simply saying that anger, together with all outward expressions of anger, is worthy of the same scrutiny—the same judgment—as murder. This is consistent with the use elsewhere in Scripture of the Greek word “krisis” [κρίσις], translated in verses 21 and 22 as judgment.

It is also consistent with the principle that Jesus advanced in all six of the examples that He used as illustrations here in Matthew chapter 5, namely, that the source of all sin is in the heart. He expressed this openly in Mark 7, when He said:

¹⁸ ...“Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) Mark 7:18–19 ESV

which is really good news for those who may have enjoyed a plate of bacon and eggs this morning. But more importantly, He went on to say:

²⁰ ...“What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” Mark 7:20–23 ESV

The righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees held that only the fruit—only murder itself—actually mattered to God, But Jesus said that the one who is angry with his brother, whether that anger is expressed by careless insult or calculated slander, will be liable to the same judgment, now and in eternity, as the one who kills his brother.

Righteous Anger?

But someone will say, what about righteous anger? and it's a good question because some versions of this text in Matthew read:

²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother **without a cause** shall be in danger of the judgment... Matthew 5:22 NKJV

Furthermore, wasn't Jesus himself righteously angry when He cleansed the temple of the money-changers, and when He confronted the Pharisees in Matthew, chapter 23? And weren't David, Asaph, and others, righteously angry when they wrote the imprecatory Psalms, calling down God's judgment on evil doers? What about the apostle Paul when He expressed his wish that the legalists disrupting the Galatian church might just as well “mutilate themselves”?

The answer, of course, is yes. Those just mentioned including Jesus himself, and others in Scripture as well were righteously angry. But the anger reflected in those texts is nothing less than a reflection of God's own wrath against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, and those who wrote and acted accordingly with zeal for the glory of God, and are not implicated by Jesus' statement here in Matthew 5. “But,” as James Montgomery Boice wrote:

it is not very often that our anger is like that; and if we are honest, we must admit that far more often we are angry at some wrong done against ourselves, real or imaginary...^{vi}

In other words, far more often, our anger springs from a different source and is aimed in a different direction. A practical check on this would be to pay attention to the words of James, who wrote:

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. James 1:19–20 ESV

Anger, in other words, is not fruitful soil, at least not for the righteousness of God, although it may be fertile ground for a root of bitterness that may spring up to cause trouble and defile many. “Therefore”, James exhorted,

²¹ ...put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. James 1:21 ESV

That is, for example, the word that instructs us in Ephesians, chapter 4:

²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths... Ephesians 4:29 ESV

(No “corrupting talk” like “Raca”, idiot, moron, “thou fool”)

...but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God... Ephesians 4:29–30 ESV

(which is what such talk does)

...by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Ephesians 4:30 ESV

Instead,

³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:29–32 ESV

Put away these destructive things then, and, as James said,

...receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. James 1:21 ESV

Righteous Anger.

And do it quickly. Within the context of the Old Covenant sacrificial system, Jesus said,

²³ ...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. Matthew 5:23–24 ESV

We should note here that Jesus’ change from the second person plural earlier in the passage, to the first person “you”, ought to emphasize for us that this is a word directed to each one of us as an individual. Don’t hear this exhortation for someone else, then. Don’t say in your heart, “Well, so-and-so really needs to hear this.” We all need to hear this. Of course, since we are all sinners, I have a feeling that if we all put this into practice literally at this very moment, it might be that the sanctuary would be suddenly empty, but we have to

acknowledge a certain hyperbole here. Jesus was making the point that there is a certain urgency to this need for forgiveness and reconciliation, just as, when dealing with lust in the next section, He would go on to say,

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away... Matthew 5:29–30 ESV

Now, just to be clear (and I want to be very clear), Jesus was not (and we are not) advocating for anyone to do these things in a literal sense (more on that next week, if the Lord is willing). Still, there is urgency here.

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. Matthew 5:25–26 ESV

So, as I said already, there is urgency. That's why Paul wrote,

²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity... Ephesians 4:26–27 ESV

(no place, no territory, no ground on which to sow a root of bitterness)

...to the devil. Ephesians 4:26–27 ESV

In other words, righteous anger is anger that does not remain unaddressed; anger on which the sun is not allowed to set. Unrighteous anger, on the other hand, corrupts and destroys; it kills and covets, for this is its very nature. Still, the grace of God is greater than all our sin, so we need not be overcome by evil. These, wrote Lloyd-Jones, “are the terms,”

...utter, absolute confession and repentance; everything that we can do by way of restitution; and an acknowledgment that we are forgiven only as the result of the grace of God manifested perfectly in the loving, self-giving, self-sacrifice of the Son of God upon the cross.^{vii}

May God give us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. Let us pray.

i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

ii D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Volume One* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 212.

iii William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 297.

iv Hendriksen, *NTC*, 297.

v Cf. Galatians 5:12, *New American Standard Bible, 1995 Edition* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

vi James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 107.

vii Lloyd-Jones, *Studies*, 231.