

MATTHEW 5:21–48. (EHV, alt.)

“You have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be subject to judgment; whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will have to answer to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of hell fire. So if you are about to offer your gift at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother. Then come and offer your gift. If someone accuses you, reach an agreement with him quickly, while you are with him on the way. Otherwise your accuser may bring you to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen I tell you: You will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ but I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, causes her to be regarded as an adulteress. And whoever marries the divorced woman is regarded as an adulterer.

“Again you have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not break your oaths, but fulfill your vows to the Lord.’ But I tell you, do not swear at all: not by heaven, because it is God’s throne; and not by earth, because it is his footstool; and not by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your own head, since you cannot make one hair white or black. Instead, let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes,’ or ‘No, no.’ Whatever goes beyond these is from the Evil One.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evildoer. If someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone wants to sue you to take away your shirt, give him your coat too. Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Indeed if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even tax collectors do that, don’t they? If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the unbelievers do that? So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

You probably didn't have any problem picking up the pattern of Jesus's preaching in this part of his Sermon on the Mount. He starts by saying, "You have heard that it was said..." Then he quotes a Bible passage from the Old Testament, in one instance combined with a modern interpretation. Then he continues, "But I tell you..." When he does that, he isn't saying, "What you heard was garbage. Erase it from your mind and start over with me." No, in each case he validates the scriptural part of what they heard, but he also explains it and expands on it. He knows that in many cases, his audience was understanding the commandments only on the surface level, or was failing to distinguish between the civil law and the moral law. So he overturns their conventional legal wisdom. In so doing, Jesus fills up and fills out the law of God.

In the first section, Jesus isn't saying, "You thought it was wrong to plunge a knife into your neighbor's heart or to throw a rock at his head or to poison his food. But I tell you, those things are just fine. Here's what God actually forbids." No, he's saying, "You thought that murdering consisted *only* of plunging a knife into your neighbor's heart or throwing a rock at his head or poisoning his food or the like. But I tell you, murder takes place in God's eyes long before any of those things happen, and even in cases where none of those ever happen."

Jesus then gives a string of things that usually aren't thought of as murder, and he is saying that all of them deserve judgment just like murder does, especially before God's judgment seat. He mentions unjust anger in your heart. And how do you know if your anger is unjust? How do you know if what you feel toward the guy who just cut you off in traffic, or the guy who just insulted your family, is righteous or not? It is often evident in the words that you speak, perhaps only to yourself. Jesus gives two examples—saying about a person, "Raca!" which is like calling him a dummy, idiot, or moron, and saying about a person, "You fool!" which in Jesus's day was to insult his moral character, not just his intelligence. Basically, Jesus is saying, "If you want to know if your anger is unjust, see if your anger prompts you to insult him—whether you insult his person or his character, his intelligence or his morality. If you do, you've already murdered him in God's eyes."

Jesus then tells us how serious this is by telling us to reconcile our differences with anybody we may have differences with, as far as we're able to, because if we don't, we'll end up in the ultimate punishment of hell, as long as it takes to pay back the last penny, so to speak. And that will take eternity. That's how serious God is about murder that takes place here in the heart, even before it takes place here with the hands.

In the second section, Jesus talks about lust and divorce. Regarding lust, how often aren't we told that it's okay to window shop as long as we don't make any purchases? How often aren't we told that we're free to do anything until we have a ring on our finger? How often don't we hear the excuse, "I'm married; I'm not dead!" How often aren't we told that having fantasies and acting them out is actually a healthy release of internal tension? How often isn't the concept of abstaining from physical intimacy until marriage laughed to scorn? And how often don't all these excuses and more come not from outside of us, but from inside of us as we attempt to excuse or justify our behavior, even as we try to hide it?

This is a serious problem in our society today. As of 2018, just 55% of adults 25 and older believe pornography is wrong. Most teens and young adults from 13–24 believe not

recycling is worse than viewing pornography. And 64% of men and 15% of woman—who call themselves Christian—say they watch pornography at least once a month. 56% of divorce cases involved one party having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites. Our lust is ruining marriage and the family, which is the foundational building block of society.

This is a serious problem, and Jesus takes it seriously. It is no coincidence that, after talking about lust, he goes on to say, “If your right eye causes you to fall into sin, pluck it out and throw it away from you. . . . If your right hand causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away from you. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”

To avoid adultery, many in Jesus’s day thought there was a simple solution—divorce and remarriage. Jesus says, “No, it’s not that simple.” Translators debate what follows in this section—whether Jesus is saying that divorced people who enter into new relationships and those who marry them are committing adultery, or that they are simply regarded as adulterers. But let’s not miss the point. Jesus is saying, “You think it’s okay to just get a divorce, but it’s not. Just because a divorce is legal doesn’t automatically mean that it’s right in the eyes of God.” While God does permit divorce in cases of sexual unfaithfulness, Jesus is making it clear that we should be spending much more time wracking our brains and our hearts thinking of how to preserve marriage rather than dreaming up scenarios and reasons for getting out of it.

Jesus then talks about obsessing with swearing and oaths, which doesn’t mean using four-letter words (though Jesus has sharp words to say about that elsewhere), but rather calling upon God to testify that you’re telling the truth. Jesus says that if we’re constantly having to solemnly verify the truth of our words, then we’re calling our truthfulness into question. When we say Yes and No, that should be good enough, because our honest character should be unimpeachable.

Jesus concludes by how we treat our enemies. Here too it’s easy to adopt conventional wisdom: “You can only kick a dog so many times before it bites back,” “Rudeness must be met with rudeness,” and so on. But Jesus reminds us: What if God were to act that same way toward us? We would all not only experience not a single moment’s happiness or pleasure on earth, but we would all be destroyed, including eternally in hell.

And here’s where our comfort lies. For as we listen to Jesus filling up the law of God, we can’t derive any comfort from our own obedience. We can only hang our heads and expect eternal punishment in hell. But if we have a God who is perfect in love and compassion, who sent his Son to fulfill his law on our behalf and to pay for all our sins by his suffering and death—to pay for all our anger and hatred, all our lust and unfaithfulness, all our flippant speech and abuse of his name, all our impatience and vengeance and hypocrisy, and to do so when we were still his enemies—then we have hope and forgiveness and peace and salvation and eternal life. Then we also have strength and motivation to do everything in our God-given power, to make use of every God-given resource at our disposal to fight against sin and temptation and to honor God our Savior with our lives. Amen.