

ABOVE AND BEYOND
Matthew 5:20-48

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If you can't do any better than that, just forget it!

Those are the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:20.

Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of God.

He sets forth five illustrations to explain righteousness that goes above and beyond that of the Pharisees. In each of these cases we have a contrasting formula: "You have heard it said...but I say to you...."

He's already made it clear that He didn't come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill the Law. And now, He moves forward with exactly how the Law applies to His people. In this particular portion of the sermon, Jesus deals not with the cosmic powers but, rather, with human relationships.

The Pharisees had been so focused on outward obedience that they had missed an inward attitude. Jesus says that a right relationship with God is developed not by simply a list of "Do nots" but, rather, in a sense of being. It's not so much what we do, but who we are. It's our inner self that determines our rightness before God.

Then Jesus begins to give the examples.

I. It's not just the action; it's the attitude.

Matthew 5:21-24

You have heard the ancients were told, "you shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, "Raca," shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, "You fool," shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

If, therefore, you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Jesus is, of course, reflecting back to one of the Big Ten – Exodus 20:13, "Thou shalt not murder." It really doesn't say, "Thou shalt not kill." It says, "Thou shalt not commit murder." In fact, in

Exodus 21:12 it says that if someone commits murder, he shall be put to death. The commandments are not self-contradictory.

Maybe Jesus was saying something like this: **Having heard the familiar commandment against murder, I have something fresh and revolutionary to teach you. This new teaching is not only that you shall not commit murder, but that you must not be angry with your brother; for even if you only do this second thing, you will be guilty before the court. (Carl Vaught, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 64)**

The word for anger here comes from the word *orge*. It is not *thumos* – quick, flaring anger. This is a deep-seated anger, that smoldering, festering caldron from which violent action springs. We must get beyond the act of murder to the attitude of anger.

Clarence Darrow was so bold as to say, “I have never killed a man, but I’ve read many obituaries with great pleasure.” That’s a perfect portrayal of the sin of anger. Like Clarence Darrow, you and I have probably never killed a man. But how many times have we taken pleasure in their fall or their hardship? How many times have we been angry enough to wish that somebody didn’t exist? **Benjamin Franklin used to say, “Anger is never without reason, but seldom a good one.”**

Anger steals away the good moments of life and exposes our worst selves to an already broken and sinful world.

Perhaps you heard about the man who was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy boulevard. Suddenly, the light turned yellow just in front of him. He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he probably could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The tailgating woman hit the roof, and the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection. As she was in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into the face of a very serious police officer. The officer ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, finger printed, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. He said, “I’m very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the ‘Choose Life’ license plate holder, the ‘What would Jesus do?’ bumper sticker, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car.”

God’s people must not become imprisoned by *orge* – deep-seated, brooding, destructive anger.

The Aramaic here for *raca* is the sound one makes when one is hacking, preparing to spit on another. It is left untranslated as *raca* for us to get a first-hand sense of the word. If you have an inner anger that drives you to want to spit on someone, you have a murderous heart.

Or, if you call them a fool. The Psalmist has said, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1). Do not call your brother a *moros*, from which we get the word moron. If you declare that your brother is living as someone beyond even the fear of God, you have questioned his very right of being, and you are in danger of gehenna of fire - the smoldering garbage dump south of Jerusalem that came to stand for future punishment.

I want you to notice something in this passage. How many times do we hear the word “brother” used? Verse 22 – “brother.” “Brother” again in verse 22. Verse 23 – the word “brother,” and verse 24. He’s not speaking to the world. He’s speaking to the family of faith.

He advises that if we have anger in our hearts toward someone else, even before we come to worship, we ought to leave our offering at the altar and go our way and first be reconciled to our brother. The Mishnah taught that unless an offense against a neighbor is taken care of, not even a day of atonement will avail.

You know, sometimes when we reconcile with our alienated friend, the longer we talk, the more self-indulgent the discussion becomes. The more we prolong the encounter, the more intent we become on reliving the predicament instead of recovering the source of power that will take us back to the altar. What we need to say to our friend is, “This is what I’ve done. And I’m sorry I’ve done so.” All the rest is often verbiage of hurt. And verbiage that recreates the slight.

So it’s not just the action. It’s the attitude.

II. It is not just the deed; it’s the desire.

He gives another example (Matthew 5:27-28)

You have heard it said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

Though, of course, the act of adultery has more serious social consequences, the intentional desire to awaken lust is equally sinful in God’s sight. There is no well-marked boundary between desire and deed in the eyes of Jesus.

It may well be that these Pharisees, these religious leaders were so intent on punishing those who had been caught in the act of adultery that they were not prepared to give an account of their own desires, the blackness of their own hearts. Theirs was a preoccupation with the overt act, with little attention to the inward desire.

We have a similar scene in John’s gospel when the woman is caught in adultery and the Pharisees are ready to stone her. And Jesus, instead, says, “He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone” (John 8:6-7). Jesus again turns their attention away from the overt act of adultery by the woman to the deepest recesses of their own soul, for there is the fundamental dimension of sin.

Have you heard of “bleeding Pharisees?” Perhaps they acquired the name from the fact they so dreaded the possibility of adultery that they wore blindfolds, causing them to stumble in the streets until their heads and bodies bled.

The blindfold, of course, did no good, for it did not cover the mind. If you are going to wear a blindfold, He said, “you might as well pluck out your right eye or cut off your right hand.”

C. S. Lewis, who lived celibate most of his life, wrestled with the problem of lust and came to understand it well. In his literary work, he has his master demon, Screwtape, explain to the apprentice tempter Wormwood, “The trough periods of the human undulation provide excellent opportunity for all the sensual temptations, particularly those of sex.... The attack has a much better chance of success when a man’s whole inner world is drab and cold and empty.”

Jesus says, “Don’t be so proud you’re not committing the deed. Rather, look at the desires of your own heart.”

There is a third example He gives.

III. Move beyond swearing and go to simplicity.

Matthew 5:33-37

Again you have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.” But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, “Yes, yes” or “no, no”; and anything beyond these is of evil.

There are a lot of passages – Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – on the topic of vow-making. But the very existence of a vow introduces a double standard. If you must swear by someone greater than yourself, then your own character and your own words are not dependable. If someone needs to say, “I promise” four times – then you’ve experienced the fact that their single promise isn’t likely to be kept. Jewish tradition held that oaths using God’s name – if you swear by God – were binding, whereas those avoiding God’s name were not.

Jesus says that’s a misguided practice, because God is involved in all such transactions. If you don’t swear by God but by heaven, you need to realize heaven is His throne. And if you don’t swear by heaven, but you reduce it to swearing by earth – well, earth is His footstool and Jerusalem is His city.... You get the picture. What the followers of Christ are to do is simply answer yes or no and stand by their word.

Perhaps we’ve all been involved with somebody who didn’t do what we expected. And they might reply, “Well, I didn’t really promise I would do that.” Or the child who later shows his fingers were crossed behind his back. Or, “I didn’t say ‘Cross my heart and hope to die.’” Children speak that way. What they’re suggesting is that their own word is not good enough unless it is bolstered by swearing – by an oath or a vow.

God's people are to be children of truth. We all know who is the father of lies.

I came across a study by Robert Feldman which determined that men and women lie with virtually the same frequency. The work is from a social psychologist from the University of Massachusetts. But I found it interesting that even though both genders lie equally, they lie for different reasons. Women are more likely to lie to make other people feel better ("I really love your outfit"), whereas men lie to make themselves look better ("I brought in the big contract today"). (*On Mission*, Summer 2005)

According to Feldman, men have an innate tendency to build themselves up, while women have an innate tendency to build others up.

Let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

And our lies can cause us difficulty in all of our relationships.

Alice was going to bake a cake for the church ladies group bake sale. But she forgot to do it until the last minute. She baked an angel food cake, and when she took it from the oven, the center dropped flat. "Oh dear," she said, "there's no time to bake another cake, and I promised." So she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. Now, for those of us who make cakes, this is not a far-fetched plan or remedy. She found the solution in the bathroom – a small roll of toilet paper. She plunked it into the middle of the cake, then covered it with icing. The finished product looked magnificent.

She rushed it to the church. She gave her daughter some money, instructing her to be at the bake sale the first minute it opened to buy the faulty/fake cake and bring it home. When the daughter arrived at the sale, the attractive cake had already been sold to an early bird who came by before the opening bell. Alice was beside herself. Things got worse a couple of days later. Alice was invited to a friend's home where two tables of bridge were to be played that afternoon. After the game, a fancy lunch was served and, to top it off, the cake in question was presented for the dessert. Alice saw the cake. She started to get out of her chair, rush into the kitchen, and explain the horrible ordeal to the hostess. But before she could get to her feet, one of the other ladies said, "What a beautiful cake!" Alice sat back in her chair in disbelief when the hostess – a prominent church member and deacon's wife – said, "Why thank you. I baked it myself."

Or, if you have college students, you'd better be doubly beware. The next time a kid calls home from college, there is a 50-50 chance the student is lying. A study of University of Virginia college students found that when they talk to their mothers, the college students lie about once in every two conversations.

There is a little consolation: They lie even more to strangers.

The study participants recorded every conversation they had and what lies they told for a week. The group of 77 college students ended up telling more than 1000 lies over that short time period, and averaged about two lies per day per student. They lied 77 percent of the

time to a stranger. They lied 46 percent of the time to their mom, and 34 percent of the time to their boyfriend or girlfriend.

So, when they say a textbook costs \$60, it's probably about half that much and they want to pocket the rest of the money. When they claim they were staying up late for a test, no telling what they were doing. (Malcolm Ritter, "Study: College students often lie to mom," *Waco Tribune Herald*, 8/16/1995)

Let your yes be yes, and your no be no.

Here are some practical guidelines for our conversations.

- Make only agreements you intend to keep.

If you have no intention of keeping your word, don't say that you'll do it. If you're a tile contractor, do not say to someone, "I'll be there Tuesday morning at 8 to lay your tile," unless you intend to keep that commitment.

- Avoid making fuzzy agreements.

"I'll get back to you sometime on that" – which is another way of saying, "I want to put off telling you no. Just say no.

- Give the earliest notice when agreements must be broken.

"I need to inform you that the data I agreed to get you by Friday afternoon will not be ready until Tuesday at 5:00 p.m. Sorry, computer trouble made this impossible to accomplish."

Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

There is another example.

IV. Not retaliation, but release.

Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

Lex talionis dates way back with evidence from the 18th century B.C. and the law code of Hammurabi. It's found three times in the Old Testament (Exodus 31:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). The original intention of "eye for an eye" or "tooth for tooth" was to set the example that you couldn't do more harm than was done to you. It was actually a kind law that said you could not go beyond the wrong. If your neighbor cuts off your hand, you cannot in return take his life. You can only take his hand. You see the principle.

But Jesus says now, as God's people, we shouldn't be about retaliation but, rather, about release. Release your brother from the obligation. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

To be slapped on the right cheek by a right-handed man means that it is a backslap, which is the most hateful and insulting blow that one can receive. But turn the other cheek in non-retaliation and release.

If somebody sues you for your undergarment, give him your outer garment as well.

And remember that Simon of Cyrene was forced by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Jesus (Matthew 27:32). It wasn't unusual for a Roman soldier to demand the help – compulsory conscription, it's called – of a citizen for military purposes. If they ask you to carry it a mile, carry it two. No retaliation.

There is a final one.

V. It's not just the friend, but also the foe.

Matthew 5:43-46

You have heard it said, "You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same?"

Now, the Old Testament never says, "Hate your enemies." But that was how the Jews had interpreted various passages. In fact, Proverbs 2:12 says if your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he's thirsty, give him water to drink. But in Jewish life, hating your enemies was accepted – like in the community at Quram, which has in its writings to hate all the sons of darkness.

Love your neighbor. Who is my neighbor? "Even your enemy is your neighbor."

How do you love your enemy? Jesus gives us the answer: "Pray for those who persecute you." You cannot pray for God to bless someone and continue to hate them at the same time.

Who is that person who makes your blood boil? That person who causes you to become bitter, hardened of heart even upon the imagination of his or her image? Jesus calls you to do a hard thing. He calls you to the love of Christ – to love even those who hurt us.

So there you have it. "You have heard it said.... But I say unto you...." If you look at the Pharisees and can't do any better than that, then you're not really uniquely my people. You're not really God-like, for even the tax gatherer loves his friend.

"You have heard it said 'Keep the outward law.' But I say look at the inward attitude."