

Matthew 5:21-48: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 16 February 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 48 You have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.
- 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.
- So, if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.
- 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. Truly I say to 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 say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away, for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.
- [1 : 1 2] And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away, for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell. It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.
- But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the grounds of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.
- But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.
- And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.
- You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.
- [2 : 2 2] And if anyone will sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.
- You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.
- For he makes his Son rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?

Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

In the second half of Matthew chapter 5, Jesus continues the teaching that he has begun in his statement that he has come to fulfil the law and the prophets. And this part particularly concerns the fulfilment of the law.

[3 : 30] Jesus goes through the second table of the ten words, the ten commandments, going through murder, lust, which is connected with the seventh commandment concerning adultery, divorce, which in the unpacking of the ten commandments in Deuteronomy, in chapter 24, is connected with the eighth commandment, oaths, which are connected with false witness, vengeance, connected with the tenth commandment, and then finally focusing upon the summary statement of the whole second table of the commandments concerning loving your neighbour as yourself.

How are we to understand Jesus' teaching concerning the law? It's often treated as a set of antitheses, with Jesus contrasting his more radical teaching with that of Moses. Moses is supposedly concerned with external action, but Jesus highlights the internal reality of the law.

And many Protestants have suggested that Jesus is radicalising the law in order to drive us to despair of our good works and to turn to Christ for the gift of righteousness. But I don't think that's what's going on here.

Against the suggestion that there is an internal-external opposition, Jesus typically focuses upon action, not merely upon an inner state. Jesus is calling for integrity, the marriage of internal and external, but he focuses upon particular proactive practices of righteousness by which we can pursue these things.

To understand what is going on, I think it's important to see the logic of Jesus' argument. It's generally read as antitheses. Jesus says that the law teaches X, but I say Y.

[5 : 06] Y is some more radicalised teaching of the law that internalises it or puts it beyond our reach. But that doesn't seem to be what Jesus is doing here in Matthew. Indeed, if we read it this way, it can often make some of the interpretations very clumsy.

Jesus does not give a prohibition much of the time, but states a fact. So there's another way to read it. The other way to read it is to think that Jesus is presenting the traditional teaching, he is then highlighting a vicious cycle associated with that teaching, and then finally presenting his transformative initiative.

And so what Jesus is presenting here is filling out what he means by a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees. So it addresses the internal state, but it does so in a proactive external manner, not just ordered around avoidance.

Another thing to notice here is the authority with which Jesus is speaking. I say unto you. He's speaking with authority, not just as one who's making a theological argument, but one who's speaking and addressing people with authority, making a claim upon their practice.

So the first teaching concerns murder. The traditional teaching is you shall not murder, but there's a vicious cycle here. And the vicious cycle is being angry with and insulting your brother. Now, when that is at root within your heart, it would be very hard to avoid that coming out in various ways that actually take the form of violence.

[6 : 36] And so what Jesus teaches is a response to the vicious cycle that fulfills the traditional teaching. And that response is a transforming initiative.

And it's found in being a reconciler and making peace. And this is where the imperatives are found, not in addressing it to the heart in a way that radicalizes it, but in addressing positive action to the problem.

Jesus identifies the problem of unaddressed sin in the heart. This is a seed that can grow into the sin of murder. Now, think about the story of Cain. Before Cain actually kills his brother, something else happens.

He's angry with his brother. And it's that anger that leads him to act. And God stops him. He stops him and he addresses his anger, says you need to deal with this. There's a beast crouching at the door.

And if you do not deal with it, it will seek to control you. And so he has to deal with that anger first. Now, how would Cain have dealt with that? By making peace with his brother straight away.

[7 : 39] By being a reconciler. By taking positive action in that way. Because as long as he did not do that, the sin within his heart would fester. So what is Jesus' alternative to the problem of this vicious cycle of anger within the heart?

To Cain, leave your gift at the altar. Be reconciled with Abel. And as you are reconciled, you'll find that that anger problem is dealt with. The response is proactive reconciliation and peacemaking.

And this, again, note, is acting redemptively. This is not just a righteousness for our own sake. A righteousness to get us merit before God or for God to look on us and approve of us.

This is about acting within the world in God's name to bring peace, to bring reconciliation, to bring love where hatred and animosity used to exist. To overcome hostility with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus then moves into teaching concerning lust. The traditional teaching is, you shall not commit adultery. But there's a vicious cycle here. Because if you look at a woman with lustful intent, you've already harboured that sin of adultery in your heart.

[8 : 48] And it's already at work. It's already germinating. It's already moving towards the surface to be expressed in dangerous ways. And so what is the alternative? The alternative is a transforming initiative of taking radical action to address the cause of the temptation in yourself.

Now, sexual immorality, Jesus highlights, is a sin of great seriousness. It puts your entire body in jeopardy of hell. And the alternative is to sacrifice members of your body so that the whole will not be lost.

And this is a focus upon the man's duty in this case. It's not denying that women should not purposefully excite men's lust. But Jesus is focusing upon the agency of the man here. It's very easy to blame other people for our sins.

To say, the woman that you gave me. Or something like that. But the point that Jesus wants us to grasp is that we have, within the realm of our own responsibility, causes of sin that are far more immediate to us.

So Jesus uses hyperbole here. The focus is upon changing practice. Cut out whatever it is that is causing you to engage in that sort of sin. Cut out certain contexts from your life.

[10 : 00] Avoid certain persons. Sacrifice certain things and pleasures and activities that you may find yourself led into temptation in. Jesus' focus is upon intimate obstacles.

Your own eye or your own hand. It highlights just how unsparing we should be in rooting out the sin. But Jesus' emphasis on causes of sin is no less important. Some people like to believe that sin is merely a matter of a lack of virtue.

But Jesus teaches here that we need to recognize our own weakness and remove things that tempt us to get rid of the obstacles that might stand in our way. So when you see yourself falling into the trap of the sin of adultery and lust, what do you do?

You deal with those things that are nearest to you. You recognize your own limitations. And you take radical action. Now Jesus is teaching here in part that we need to use wisdom in our struggle with sin.

We need to recognize those things that give sin some sort of purchase upon us in our lives, some sort of power over us, and deal with those little footholds that sin has in our lives radically and decisively.

[11 : 11] Jesus goes on to teach about divorce. He presents the traditional teaching and the vicious cycle, but not the transforming initiative here. What is the transforming initiative? Well, I think we find it in 1 Corinthians 7, verses 10 to 11, where Paul presents a transforming initiative as the charge of Christ himself.

He writes, What's the point of all of this?

Well, the point is not so much a sort of halakhic teaching concerning divorce, what cases is it legitimate in, what cases is it not legitimate in.

The point is not legalistic prohibition, but rather a presentation of the way of the kingdom, which restores and upholds the good intent of the original creation. So the contrast is between legal permission and positive action.

So you may have permission to divorce in this particular instance, but as those committed to the way of the kingdom, your duty is to seek reconciliation where at all possible, to heal wounds, not to allow these things to be undermined.

[12 : 28] God created marriage to be good and to be lasting, and so the way of the kingdom is to pursue that, and even when it's difficult, to seek reconciliation above all else.

Jesus moves on to oaths. The traditional teaching is do not swear falsely, but perform your oaths. Now there's a vicious cycle here. Oath making, particularly in a context of deceit and manipulation, simply multiplies and becomes a means of falsehood.

You can see this in Matthew chapter 23, the different escape routes that you could have for oaths. What oaths count and what oaths do not count? All of this is a way of avoiding truthful speech.

But the transforming initiative is to avoid oaths altogether, and to engage in truthful and transparent speech. Is this ruling out oaths under any particular situation?

No, it's not. There are plenty of oaths seen in the New Testament. Paul makes a number of oaths. Rather, the point is to address the root problem, which is a falsehood. When people who have been so used to speaking falsehood use oaths to bolster speech, to give it some sort of credibility, when it really has none.

[13 : 41] And I presume many of you have met people who are like this, who just compulsively speak falsehood. And then because everyone knows them to be liars, they will bring forward all these oaths to bolster words that are fundamentally empty.

They will swear upon their children's lives. They'll swear upon their parents' graves. They'll swear by God. They'll swear against hell. They'll swear against all these different things. And then you find that their words have no substance to them.

And the oaths are provoked simply in order to bolster something that has no substance. And Jesus is speaking a transforming initiative into this situation, that we should be people of truthful, forthright, and transparent speech.

So we do not need oaths at all. And so that when we do use an oath, it's used in its proper way. Not to veil falsehood or to bolster words that are fundamentally empty, but to accentuate truth.

And this is something that we see it used to do in the New Testament. From oaths, Jesus moves on to the subject of retaliation. And the traditional teaching is the law of retribution, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

[14 : 50] But the problem is there's a vicious cycle here. And that's resisting by evil means. Now this is translated as do not resist the one who is evil in most translations.

But I think that's not capturing the true sense of what's being said here. The point is rather that we should not resist in an evil way. What is the transforming initiative? The law of retribution was designed to limit vengeance, to prevent people from taking two eyes when they lost one.

Jesus advocates resisting vengeance, but accepting rather than giving the second slap. Arresting the process of vengeance before it ever gets started. When people use the process of vengeance, often what happens is it just spirals out of all control.

And the point of the traditional teaching was to arrest the process of vengeance, not to give warrant to it. And so Jesus teaches that we should arrest it before it ever begins.

Think of the teaching in John chapter 8, where Jesus draws attention to the person who cast the first stone. Once the first stone has been cast, every successive stone is so much easier to cast.

[15 : 59] And a similar pattern can be seen in the case of vengeance. Once one person has avenged themselves upon someone else, that other person will seek vengeance in return. And as a result, you have these cycles of vengeance that just cannot be broken.

And just as Jesus teaches that we are to be people who make peace and reconcile with others, that we are to be people who remove any obstacle to faithfulness, that we are to be people who speak truthfully and reconcile when there is division in our relationships.

Jesus teaches here that we should prevent the development of a cycle of vengeance. The final teaching that Jesus gives in this chapter concerns loving your enemy. Now the traditional teaching is love your neighbour.

This is the teaching that sums up the entire second table of the law. Love your neighbour as yourself. But attached to this in many people's mind is the teaching, love your neighbour but hate your enemy.

Or the question, who is my neighbour? This person isn't my neighbour, is he? And Jesus challenges that. The transforming initiative is to love your enemies and pray for them, so that you may be like God in heaven, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

[17 : 12] Jesus has earlier declared, blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. And here he's stressing that teaching again. Once again, there is a vicious cycle. There's no reward for those who merely love those who love them.

That's not true love. True love must take the initiative. And once again, we're seeing the characteristic of this true righteousness is a righteousness that takes the initiative, that goes out, that brings peace, that restores things that are broken, that brings reconciliation, that seeks to be reconciled with people we're divided from, that seeks to root out any obstacle, anything that might cause bitterness, that seeks to deal with sin in a radical way.

It's that pursuit of righteousness that distinguishes the true people of God from the scribes and the Pharisees and their hypocrisy. And this is the righteousness that will fulfil the law.

This is the way in which we truly love our neighbour. This is the way in which we rise to perfection. Now, the use of the language of perfection here is referring to maturity. We fulfil the intent of the law, not merely the external form.

Now, the external form of the law can be fulfilled in a legalistic way. But the intent of the law had always been to bring new life, to bring delight to the heart in the law of God, to bring people to meditate and rejoice at God's judgments, to bring them to express those judgments in healing practice, in ways that restore relationships, that make things whole again, and ways that bring peace where there's conflict.

[18 : 47] Now, that is what it means to fulfil the law, and this is the sort of practice that Jesus calls his disciples to. This is how they will be perfect. This is how they will be like their Father who is in heaven.

This is the way of the kingdom. Jesus began by saying that he came to fulfil the law. As we go throughout the Old Testament, the law is always straining towards a fuller expression of itself, an expression that is truly from the heart, that is characterised by positive practice, not just negative prohibitions.

We see this in the Psalms. The Psalms bring the law into song, so we delight in the law of God. We sing about it. It's seen in the book of Deuteronomy when the laws are unpacked and we see wisdom within them, and we see the way in which they're leading us towards positive practices.

So we love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. That's what the law was always pointing towards, not just prohibitions. Likewise, we fulfil things like not coveting by practising thanksgiving, practising contentment and generosity.

And so when Jesus speaks about fulfilling the law, he's not speaking about some cold legalism, but the fresh, clear air of a new liberated life, a life that's free to express the law of God from the heart by the Spirit.

[20 : 10] And this is what he's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. This is what God's righteousness looks like when it comes. It brings forgiveness, and it brings restoration, and it makes us part of that process of bringing forgiveness and restoration.

We are part of the means by which God's righteousness is being expressed in the world. And the fact that this chapter ends on the note of being perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect, and being sons of our Father is no accident.

That language is not common in the Old Testament at all. We see it from time to time, but it is uncommon. Here we find it coming to the forefront, and it's because God is acting through Christ in the world at this time in a way that forms people in his likeness, that makes them participants in bringing a new order of peace in such a profound way that in those acts they are seen to be his children.

A question to consider. As we read the description of what it looks like to fulfil the law, our minds may be drawn to Jesus Christ himself and his practice.

What are some of the ways in which we see Jesus as the exemplar of what it looks like to live out the law and fulfil righteousness in this manner?■■■■■■■