

COMMENTARY ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Matthew 5:21-26

We're in the world. And we're for it. But we're not *of* it. We don't march to it's beat. We march to a beat that transcends this city and its culture, this world and its ways. It's a beat from above. It's the beat of Christ's heart. Its rhythm is his timeless wisdom. Its tempo is his time-tested love. And the Sermon on the Mt is the song. In this Sermon, Christ teaches us to live the right way up, in an upside down world. This commentary, written by Terran Williams, draws from some of the best available sources. It will aid in individuals and groups in their study of Christ's teaching in his Manifesto of Life in the Kingdom, Matthew 5-7.

Outline of the Sermon on the Mount

- the life God blesses (5:1-12)
- the call to influence (5:13-16)
- love for the scriptures (5:17-20)
- radical love (5:21-48)
- spirituality before the audience of One (6:1-18)
- pursuing that which is worthy of our lives (6:19-24)
- overcoming anxiety about the future and preoccupation with not-so-important things (6:25-34)
- how *not* to help each other change (7:1-6)
- strong encouragements to pray and love (7:7-12)
- responding to the Sermon's call to radical living (7:13-29)

Matthew 5:21-26 - RADICAL LOVE (part 1)

Introduction: Christ empowers much more radical righteousness than any set of laws could.

- In verse 20 Jesus tells us that the righteousness he calls us to must exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes, who were limited to the law of Moses alone. Jesus is calling us to a far higher righteousness than the law of Moses, or any set of laws ever could.
- In verses 21-48 he then mentions six different laws of Moses and shows how the righteousness that he calls us to radically exceeds, outstrips and outclasses the righteousness that the laws of Moses demand of us. In these verses, six times we read the same wording: "You have heard that it was said ... but I tell you ...". Christ is comparing the way of life he calls us to with the way of life the law of Moses calls for. The way of Moses is the righteousness of the old order – a godliness that is guided by legislation. The way of Jesus is the righteousness of the new order – a godliness that springs from a transformed heart, a heart impacted by the leadership and grace of Christ, a heart experiencing his kingdom.
- We must remember that Jesus is speaking to his disciples. He does not call every person to live out these values. The teaching is directed solely at his disciples, those of us who are being transformed by his grace, wisdom and leadership. Each of his six points deal with a different value of the kingdom-impacted heart. The law of Moses was written on stone, but the law of Christ (if you can call it that) is written on our hearts, by the Spirit of God. From the time of new birth, the Spirit increasingly stirs up in us the nature of Christ, the very genetic of Christ. Apart from Christ's indwelling presence we could never conceivably follow Christ's teaching, or reflect his character.
- One common misunderstanding of verses 21-48 is that Jesus is giving his disciples a series of laws to live by – a code of ethics that needs to be strictly adhered to. But this is not true. Rather he is describing the way various kingdom attitudes and values work themselves out in our lives.

We're not to make laws of these teachings, but rather to make sure that we deeply own, nurture and evidence the values and attitudes of Christ's teachings.

- Here is an overview of verses 21-48:

Common challenging life situations	The not-so-radical laws of Moses' old-order righteousness	The radical values and attitudes of Christ's new-order righteousness
How do you deal with a person who really irritates you? And with someone who has taken offence at you?	Murder is wrong.	People and relationships need to be cherished, protected and restored.
How do you deal with a sexual attraction for a person who is not your spouse?	Adultery is wrong.	Sexual purity is to be fought for, starting with our thought life and the use of our eyes.
How do you deal with unhappiness in marriage?	If you divorce, give a certificate.	The marriage covenant is to be held high, and your spouse is to be loved and protected.
What do you do when you desperately want someone to believe something?	Keep vows or oaths made to convince.	Speech should be honest, non-manipulative and non-defensive.
How do you respond to someone who is hurting or taking from you?	Those who wrong us should be justly punished.	People who hurt us or take from us should be loved, not avenged.
How do you respond to someone who would hurt you if the opportunity arose?	Love your friends – hate your enemies.	Love everyone, especially those who seek to hurt or oppose us.

Murder

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Eliminate anger, contempt and insult in the way you relate to people.

- “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” This is the first of Moses’ laws that Jesus mentions. If a person murdered someone then they would be judged by the rest of the people – and would usually be executed as punishment.
- But Jesus calls us to so much more in our relationships than merely avoiding murder. He calls us to avoid ungodly anger, contemptuousness and verbal insults. The law of Moses has nothing to say of such things!
- “Anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” The rest of the Bible tells us that not all anger is sin (see Ephesians 4:26 which tells us that in our anger we are not to sin, thereby suggesting that a feeling of anger itself is not the sin, but rather what we do with that feeling). For example, it is possible to have a righteous anger toward injustice (see Nehemiah 5:6) and toward the people of God who poorly represent God to the world (see Matthew 21:12-13), and toward those who betray our trust, and so doing, wound us deeply. But there is a sinful anger too. For example, sometimes we’re frustrated with someone because they get in the way of what we want (see Esther 1:12). In this case our pride is wounded. Sometimes we feel we’ve been treated unjustly, but what really gets us incensed is the wounding of our pride. Sometimes it is an anger that is connected to jealousy – we’re jealous of another person (see 1 Samuel 18:8). The sinful kind of anger is usually associated with feelings of hatred, irritation, animosity, bitterness and offence. Jesus tells us that God will judge this kind of anger.
- “Anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin.” The accurate translation of this is that we will be answerable to “the council”. This refers to God’s council of judgment. The word “Raca” was an Aramaic word that expressed contempt for someone. It was like saying, “You’re worthless. I’m not even going to bother with you.” Contempt is worse than anger because in anger you can still affirm a person’s worth, whereas contempt is a denial of a person’s worth. To show contempt is to make a person feel worthless, as well as unworthy of belonging.
- “Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” Jesus refers to the destructive power of words, especially when coming from a bitter, angry attitude. In our anger we tend to openly insult people and this can be very damaging. Interestingly, Jesus called the Pharisees “blind fools” (Matthew 23:17) but his were not words connected to abusive, vindictive anger.

- Interestingly, one research agency in the USA explored the root causes of the breakdown in marriages that result in divorce. They found that the four most common causes are: 1) Withdrawal as a response to conflict; 2) Uncontrolled emotional outbursts; 3) Nurturing negative thoughts about the other person that aren't even true; and 4) Belittling your mate in an argument. Looking at this list, we realize the importance of taking seriously Jesus' teachings in these verses. If we were to take Christ's words seriously, divorce would all but disappear!
- What does it mean to be "in danger of the fire of hell"? The word "hell" here refers to Gehenna. Gehenna was the place of burning south of Jerusalem, where sewage and rubbish were burnt. Is Jesus saying that Christians who, given to bitter anger, fail to control their mouths could go to hell? Or is he saying that Christians who fail to control their mouths will experience God's purifying punishment? The verse itself does not tell us, but certainly the overall theology of the New Testament makes it clear that Christians cannot lose their salvation and go to hell, but that they will be purified by punishment. Hell, in this instance, is therefore a reference not to eternal damnation but to purifying punishment.
- Remember that in this section (v21-48) Jesus is describing how a person transformed by his grace and leadership will tend to respond to various situations. Essentially, he is not giving us new laws to live by (such as "do not get angry; do not show contempt; do not insult"). Rather, what Christ is saying is that as we're transformed in his kingdom, we won't take the way of anger, contempt and insult. That's why we shouldn't settle for anything less than peace, harmony and radical love.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Cherish, protect and restore relationships.

- These verses are a subsection of Christ's teaching that we must refuse to relate to people in an angry, contemptuous or insulting way (v21-22). Jesus, being the brilliant teacher that he is, gives two scenarios that flesh out his teaching about anger, contempt and insult.
- The first scenario (v23-24) tells us how to deal with someone close to you whom you have hurt or offended. Jesus refers to ancient Jewish life where bringing an offering to the temple was of extreme importance. But he tells them that even more important than ritual faithfulness is looking after one's relationships. There is nothing more important and

urgent than doing all you can to reconcile with people who feel hurt or offended by you.

- The second scenario (v25-26) tells us how to deal with an adversary who is intent on our destruction. Jesus tells us to “settle matters quickly” with them before things really get out of hand. The mention of being thrown into prison and not getting out till we pay our last penny illustrates the great cost of allowing damaged relationships to remain damaged.
- In the first scenario, Jesus reminds us that there is nothing more important than guarding our relationships with people. In the second scenario, Jesus warns us that if we allow damaged relationships to stay damaged that things will only get worse for us. Paul’s counsel in Romans 12:18 sums this teaching up: “As far as it depends on you, try to live at peace with everyone.”
- But why does Jesus put these two scenarios as subsections of avoiding anger, contempt and insult. The point is this: it is not only that anger, contempt and insult are wrong, but that relationships are to be greatly guarded and when necessary restored – and anger, contempt and insult are violations of relationship.
- Remember that in this section (v21-48) Jesus is describing how a person transformed by his grace and leadership will tend to respond to various situations. Essentially, he is not giving us new laws to live by (such as “always make amends before you do any spiritual activity; avoid going to court at all costs”). Rather, what Christ is saying is that as we’re transformed, we will radically uphold the value of relationships and reconciliation. We shouldn’t settle for anything less.

Sources used - Much reference will be made to these sources throughout this commentary. Each time the author and the page number is mentioned, but not the book title.

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