

# **“FROM MATTHEW’S POINT OF VIEW”**

## **A JOURNEY THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW**

### **SESSION SIX – THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

#### **The Intro: Matthew 5:17-20**

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

The Law and the Prophets is how Jesus and the people of his day referred to the Hebrew Bible – our Old Testament. “The Law” is the first five books of the Bible, often called “The Books of Moses.” Jesus sometimes uses the short form, “Moses says,” to refer to these books. They comprise the legal code of the Hebrew people. They also contain the Ten Commandments, as well as lengthy sections of religious ceremony and rules of conduct which establish both Temple worship and personal conduct.

“The Prophets” refers to the section of the Bible from Isaiah to Malachi, the end of our Old Testament. The Prophets call for the teaching of the law to be observed by the nation, as well as the consequences of failing to do so!

Jesus is quite carefully laying out the rationale between the Law as it was being taught, and the Law as it was intended to be. When Jesus says, “*unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law,*” he is clearly implying that their application of the law is inadequate. So how do we interpret the Law of God? How do we, as disciples, live in the light of the law and the teaching of Jesus?

#### **Murder – Matthew 5:21-22**

*“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.’ 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 court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.*”

Jesus sets the pattern for what he will do throughout – move from the legal observation of the law, to what lies at the heart of the commandment. The root cause of murder is unresolved conflict and anger; this too is a cause for judgement, whether or not you act upon it. Another root cause for murder is to treat another with contempt, to regard them as of no value. This too, Jesus says, is worthy of judgement, regardless of the actions taken. “Your thoughts and your contempt of another are where murder begins, regardless of where it ends.”

### **Forgiveness – Matthew 5:23-24**

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

Following up on the murder prohibition, Jesus intensifies it further: “Don’t bother trying to please God through worship if there is unresolved anger or contempt between you and another.” Gifts at the altar were for worship and for forgiveness of sin. Jesus warns against seeking forgiveness of God without also seeking forgiveness from others.

### **Adultery – Matthew 5:27-28**

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

Again, Jesus goes to the root cause – lust! Adultery is simply the final manifestation of the disease. Lust – desiring another – is damaging to a relationship whether or not it is followed through. These are challenging concepts regarding the prevalence of pornography in our society.

### **Divorce – Matthew 5:31-32**

*“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”*

As with murder and forgiveness, Jesus expands upon a consequence of lust – divorce. Custom had soon taken the force of law – divorce could be initiated and obtained for any reason – by the man. The woman would be left penniless, making her “the victim of adultery” – unless she had already destroyed the integrity of the relationship through infidelity. Divorcing simply in order to marry another is regarded here as adultery, regardless of the proper paperwork. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that, “Just because it is legal, doesn’t mean it is right.”

It is interesting that the disciples regarded this as a particularly difficult teaching of Jesus – one of the few to which we hear their objection (Matthew 19:10) *The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”* Jesus’ response is that marriage isn’t for everyone – but neither is singleness.

Continuing with Matthew 19: “*Why then,*” the Pharisees asked, “*did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?*” Jesus’ reply is profound: “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.*” Moses didn’t command divorce; he permitted it, because of the inability of people to cope with their marriage situations.

### **An Eye for an Eye – Matthew 5:38-42**

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

Jesus is quoting the law from Leviticus 24:19-20: *Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.* This concept of justice is based entirely upon personal revenge, and the instinct towards it can still be powerfully seen in popular movies.

Jesus counters this with a challenge to counter inter-personal offenses with generosity. On the personal level, the disciple’s first responsibility is to reverse the dynamic of the situation from taking to giving. If someone offends you, do not seek to offend them back, but generously exercise patience, while still engaging with them. This non-violent response was the cornerstone of the Independence for India campaign under Ghandi, and American Civil Rights movement under Martin Luther King.

With the other examples Jesus gives, he underlines that it isn’t about getting even, or always getting – and keeping – what is ours. For Jesus, everything belongs to God, and our exclusive claim to property is simply a source of misplaced desire. Forgiveness (rather than anger), fidelity (rather than lust) patience (rather than revenge) and generosity (rather than possessiveness) is to characterise the disciple.

### **Love Your Neighbour – Matthew 5:43-45**

*“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, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”*

Jesus quotes again from Leviticus (19:18) - *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”* This is a summary of the sermon up to this point, but it also illustrates Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisaical attitude, to “hate your enemy.” That phrase cannot be found in Scripture, so it is clearly a criticism of the false extension of the law. God is said to hate evil, but “hate your enemy” is an inappropriate second step.

Instead, disciples are to *“love your enemies.”* Connected with *“turning the other cheek,”* the cycle of hatred can only be broken with forgiveness and love. But how are we to love our enemies? The answer is in the following phrase: *“pray for those who persecute you.”* I have personally found that when I find myself hating someone, praying for them can help my heart to change towards them over time. I still may disagree even profoundly with their actions, but I am not personalizing my hatred. Nor am I being burdened by it!

### **Sidebar: Personal versus State Responsibility**

The Sermon on the Mount is a call to personal conduct. The call to non-violence and generosity of property is challenging on a personal level, but considerably more difficult on the societal or state level. If we are called to non-violent resistance, what is a country to do if attacked? Do Christians have the “right” to kill in situations where the lives of innocent people may be saved? Or must we always “turn the other cheek?”

The German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer thought hard about this; he was eventually imprisoned by the Gestapo and killed as a co-conspirator in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Bonhoeffer gave the following illustration to answer his pacifist critics:

*“If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can't, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.”*

Even given that illustration, Bonhoeffer did not make the decision lightly: *“Only those genuinely committed to peacemaking, who devote and even risk their lives, who are clearly acting for the sake of others, have the moral authority to resort to violence as a last resort.”*

But how does killing someone in prevention of a violent crime or in prevention of the harm of the innocent fall into line with turning the other cheek? While “love your enemy, turn the other cheek” means sometimes choosing to allow ill to fall upon us without retaliation, preventing someone in carrying out a violent act is an act of love: love not only for the victim, but for the attacker as well.

As I heard several times from various prison inmates, serving life sentences for committing violent crimes and even murder, “I wish someone would have stopped me. Even if it meant the end of my own life. I wish someone had stopped me from killing those people.”

Bonhoeffer was a key figure in the formulation of The Barmen Declaration, a statement of German and Swiss churches in opposition to Nazism, was adapted and adopted by the Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1954 as “The Declaration of Faith Concerning Church and Nation.” In part, it states (The entire text can be found here - <http://presbyterian.ca/downloads/36795/>):

God has ordained the Church to serve him in the proclamation of his word, in the administration of his sacraments, and in the life of faith which works by love. He has also in his grace ordained the State to serve him in the administration of his justice and benevolence, by discerning, formulating, and enforcing, such laws and policies as will promote the well-being of all its citizens and curb license, discord, and destitution. He commissions the civil authorities with the right and duty of using force under law against internal disorder and external aggression.

It is high treason against the Lord Jesus, and deadly both for the Church and for the Nation, to attribute to any man, group, or institution, the total power that belongs to Him. God alone is absolute Lord of the bodies and consciences of men, and he demands that we obey him against all authorities, whether civil or ecclesiastical, whenever they claim absolute power, especially the power to control men’s thinking on right and wrong.

It is the Church’s duty to denounce and resist every form of tyranny - political, economic, or ecclesiastical - especially when it becomes totalitarian. A citizen is not barred from disowning any government or organ of power which usurps the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, and indeed may be obliged by God’s word to rebel against it. But if involved in such action, the Church must remember that the weapons of her warfare are finally out of this world.

We reject any doctrine which misconceives the Church as the religious agent of the State. We reject any doctrine which misconceives the State as the political instrument of the Church. We reject all doctrines which assume, whether on sectarian or on secular grounds that the Church’s life should be or can be completely dissociated from the life of the Civil State.

The Church must not merge or confuse her Gospel with any political, economic, cultural, or nationalistic creed. She owes a manifold service to the State. Her preaching, sacraments, and discipline confront the Nation with Christ’s judgment

and grace. In discharging her commission to evangelize she promotes righteousness and peace among men. In fulfillment of the law of Christ, she engages in special work of Christian love. Her members take full share as their Christian calling in commerce, politics, and other social action.

Christians must always do their utmost to honour the civil laws, and to fulfil all statutory obligations whether financial or personal, as unto Christ the Head. Nevertheless, no citizen is thereby relieved of his constant responsibility to work for the remedy of any unjust statute, or iniquitous assessment, or violation of conscience.

In its ordained service of God, the State has a three-fold duty to the Church.

- It has the duty of establishing public peace and providing protection, guarding impartially the rights of every citizen.
- It owes to the Church in all her branches, without partiality, the recognition of her office and of her consequent right to due resources, time and opportunity, for the public worship of God, for the education of her children in his truth, and for the evangelizing of the Nation.
- It must pay serious attention whenever its office-bearers are addressed by the Church in the name of the Lord Jesus concerning the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

It is a challenge to live as disciples in a society often antagonistic to the teaching of Jesus. But so was the society in which Jesus taught! It is the tension between “the world as it is” and “the world Jesus is bringing into being.” It is why we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” When we live the Sermon on the Mount, we live God’s Kingdom in our world.