

“Understanding Murder and Adultery”
Matthew 5:21-32
August 2, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Jesus has just said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The law of God has a necessary place in the good work God does in our lives. But if this law is not used correctly, it will bring harm rather than good. So for the balance of this chapter, Jesus takes examples from the Old Testament law and shows how they are to be properly interpreted.

You may have noticed that each law Jesus discusses here is introduced with the formula, “You have heard it said... but I say to you.” Before we can go any further, we must understand what he is contrasting. Some have misunderstood him to be contrasting the Old Testament law as a whole with the new and different law Jesus is bringing. That is clearly not the case, because Jesus has just said that he has not come to abolish the Old Testament law. Also, several of the laws he brings up are not found anywhere in the Old Testament, such as when he says here that it has been said that we are to hate our enemies. Nowhere does the Old Testament include such a law. What Jesus is contrasting here is the popular misinterpretation of the law with the correct interpretation that he supplies.

Imagine that a family from two-hundred years ago time travels to our day. Upon arrival, one of the first things they encounter is the smart phone. It is obvious to them that it is some sort of tool, but they can’t seem to understand its intended use. The father notices how hard the glass front and metal back is and how easily it fits into his hand, and he speculates that it must be some sort of hammer. The mother pushes the button and notices that it lights up. She reasons that where there is light, there is also heat, so she thinks that maybe it is some fancy kitchen device that is designed to be dropped into a pot of water to heat it. The son notices the clean edges and the pleasing weight of the device—not too heavy and not too light—and thinks that maybe it is to be used in hunting small animals by throwing it at them like a disk. You see this family struggling to understand this tool, and you step in to explain to them the purpose and uses of the smartphone.

Jesus is doing something similar in this chapter. As the Son of God, he is the law-giver. But he is now witnessing those who are completely misusing that law. It was given to draw God’s people close to God, and they are using it to feel better about themselves, effectively straying further from God. They were doing so by reducing its requirements to the bare minimum and then feeling superior because they were keeping this minimal standard. Such an attempt will have the same results as trying to use a smartphone to heat a pot of water, leaving

the water unheated and the smartphone ruined. When we misuse the law of God, it doesn't make us feel better, and it leaves unfulfilled the purpose God had in mind for it all along. So let's sit at Jesus' feet today and listen to his explanation of the meaning of two of the Ten Commandments, the sixth commandment against murder and the seventh against adultery.

I. Against Murder

The sixth commandment forbids the unlawful taking of human life. Our sinful tendency is to rewrite God's law in such a way that leaves us just barely on the right side of the law. We are like those who first shoot the arrow and then draw the bulls-eye around wherever the arrow hits. We have seen an example of that just this past week in two items reported in the news. The first was the three videos showing the efforts of some Planned Parenthood centers to sell body parts of aborted babies. The second was the report of the American dentist who shot the famous lion, Cecil, in Zimbabwe. What was striking to me was the outrage some expressed over the shooting of the lion and silence over the aborting of millions of babies in our nation. The president of the national organization PETA called for the lion killer to be hanged. The line that is drawn to define unlawful killing changes depending on one's own behavior, with the line located where we are always standing on the right side of it. It is safe to condemn lion-killing when one has never killed a lion.

It is this tendency to avoid sin by minimizing and redefining the law that Jesus addresses here. There were some who had defined murder as only the outward act of unlawfully taking a human life. Jesus says that this external view of murder is a misunderstanding of the sixth commandment. He intensifies the command in three ways. First, he extends it to the heart, saying that anger in the heart toward another is also condemned by the sixth commandment. Such anger is often expressed in name-calling, indicated by the two words *Raca* and *fool*. The first is translated in our versions as insulting someone. It is roughly equivalent to calling someone stupid. The second word is translated "fool" and expresses contempt not for someone's intelligence, as with the previous word, but for their character. Such personal anger basically wants to be rid of someone, to wash one's hands of them and write them off. Jesus is saying that this heart attitude, while not the same as the outward behavior of unlawfully taking a human life, is also a violation of the sixth commandment.

Let's consider an analogy that will help us understand this. When you see a shark swimming in the ocean, you will sometimes see only its dorsal fin above the water. It's just a small triangle, and you may think, "I'm not afraid of a small triangle; it can do me no harm." Of course, it's not the triangle that has the potential to harm you, but the shark that is attached to the dorsal fin below the surface. Similarly, the really dangerous part of our sinful human

nature is the part that others don't see, the heart. Why do people get angry? Anger is an expression of self-will. It says, "My will is supreme, and if you don't bow to my supreme will my heart will flare up in anger." So if another driver delays you just a few seconds by doing something improper, there is an automatic burst of anger. If a spouse inconveniences or challenges you, supreme self-will responds with anger.

Jesus not only intensifies the nature of the command by extending it to the heart, he also intensifies the penalty. To be angry with your brother and call him a fool makes one **"liable to the hell of fire"** (v. 22). The third intensification of the command, in addition to extending it to the heart and intensifying the penalty, is to apply it to a positive behavior. Not only does the sixth commandment forbid murder and the heart attitude that is required for the murder to take place (even if the outward act never occurs), but it also requires the positive behavior of love for others. If you believe what Jesus says about the damaging effect of anger in your own life, then you should also be concerned about anger in the lives of others. So Jesus says, **"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"** (v. 23-24). Helping your brother avoid anger is your responsibility if his anger involves you. This is not an easy thing. If you go to someone who has something against you, you can know that you will be criticized in some way when you go. Whether the criticism is justified or not, it's not easy to be criticized. Jesus' second illustration is similar. Settle a dispute quickly, he says, before it has time to mature into a ripe anger on the part of your brother.

These are hard demands of the law, so hard as to be impossible for broken sinners like us. This is where the law is intended to bring us close to God. It shows us our true nature in such a way that we draw near to Jesus for his cleansing and his empowerment. We come to God as guilty of violating the sixth commandment, but Jesus brings forgiveness. We come to God not only for forgiveness, but for his help to empower us to begin keeping his law. By his power, we can actually come to love our brother enough that we are as concerned about his anger as we are about our own. In this way, the law drives us to seek refuge in God. The law is intended to bring us close to God.

II. Against Adultery

The next commandment in the Ten Commandments, the seventh, forbids adultery. Jesus goes about explaining this law along the same lines. The common understanding of this commandment was that it only forbade outward adultery. Jewish men actually had an option open to them that made it even easier to avoid this sin. They could divorce their wives for any reason at all, which is why Jesus mentions that next. They could simply say, "I find fault

with you,” and thereby secure a legal divorce. There would be little need for adultery in such a situation of easy divorce.

So Jesus expands this law first by speaking of the heart attitude that must accompany the behavior that refrains from 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”** (v. 28). The act of adultery is a clear violation of the seventh commandment. So is the viewing of pornography. So is imagining what it would be like to be married to a different person.

There is some uncertainty about the words that are translated “with lustful intent.” D. A. Carson thinks it more likely that the phrase should be translated “so as to get her to lust.” Perhaps it is a case where both meanings are correct. It is a violation of this commandment to lust after someone to whom you are not married, and it is also a violation to cause others to lust after you. There is a difference between dressing attractively and dressing seductively. There is a difference between being friendly and flirting. It is just as wrong to want someone to desire you as it is to lust after another.

As in the command prohibiting murder, Jesus intensifies the penalty by warning those guilty of violating this commandment, whether in deed or thought, that it leads to hell. He is not saying that no adulterers will be present in heaven. King David was guilty of this sin. Rather, he is saying that unrepentant adulterers are on a path that leads to hell. So he urges repentance in verses 29-30, using very graphic language. If it is the eye that is the cause of sin, gouge it out, Jesus says. If it is the right hand, cut it off. There have been those in the history of the church who have interpreted this literally. Most famously, the early church scholar and ascetic, Origen of Alexandria, interpreted this passage literally and castrated himself. Not long after that, in 325 A.D., the Council of Nicea forbade all self-mutilation. We know Jesus is not talking about literal self-mutilation, because the truth is that doing so does not remove the temptation to sin in this way.

Jesus is speaking figuratively here about repentance. Whether it is the sin of adulterous behavior, or addiction to pornography, or wanting others to desire you, the answer is repentance. Jesus’ words suggest two features of this repentance. The first thing we learn about repentance concerns the importance of the eye. The reason Jesus singles out the eye is the importance of vision and imagination. What your eye sees as a desirable future determines the course your life will take. When someone falls into adultery, they are seeing a future they think will be better without the spouse they currently have. When someone falls victim to pornography, the eye is seeing an experience of sexual satisfaction without the relational challenges of a real marriage. In both cases, the future the eye sees is formed by a deep belief that God cannot be trusted. He or she believes that God did not know what he was doing when he gave the spouse he gave. When we repent, we don’t just repent of hurting other people

through our lust or adultery. We repent of hurting God by telling him that we don't trust the life he has provided for us, and we think we can do better. Figuratively speaking, we gouge out the eye by repenting of the future we create in our hearts, and seeing instead the goodness of God and his future for us. To speak more specifically, I do two things when tempted by some woman who has made a poor choice in her seductive dress. First, I give thanks to God for the wife he has given me, a choice that has been proven many times over the 35 years of our marriage to be filled with God's wisdom. If you're single, you can thank God for the gift of singleness or thank him for the spouse he will one day give you. Second, I pray for this woman to know the love of God in such a way that she doesn't need men to admire and want her.

The second thing we learn from Jesus' language is that repentance of these sins will involve some pain. The gouging out of the eye and the amputation of the hand would involve some intense pain. If there is an addiction to pornography, repentance is going to involve the pain of acknowledging it before others, dealing with the pain of shame accompanying that acknowledgement, and inviting others who love you to hold you accountable. Repentance from the sin of adultery will also involve some pain. There is the pain of the loss of intimacy in two relationships—your marriage and with the one with whom the adulterous relationship has occurred. In the midst of the pain accompanying repentance, we need to remember that Jesus says it's worth it. There is a far greater joy that comes, the joy of drawing near to God through trust in Jesus and the joy of a cleansed conscious through the blood of Jesus.

CONCLUSION:

When Wendy and I were on vacation, we saw the Pixar animated movie *Inside Out*. It's a children's movie with a very adult message about our inner life. The movie portrays the inner life of a little girl as a control room with such emotions as joy, sadness, anger and fear. Only one of those emotions is allowed to work the controls of the person's life. Joy is at the controls of the little girl's life for much of the movie. Anger is at the controls of the dad's life and fear with the mother. While there is a place for all these emotions, we all want lives where joy is the dominant emotion. Jesus wants that for us too. The law has a critical place in bringing that about. It humbles us about our sin that we might come to the place Jesus spoke of in the first beatitude, the blessing of being poor in spirit. In our spiritual bankruptcy, we are so bold as to come to Jesus with the expectation that he will forgive and cleanse. And when we feel powerless to live the life of love these laws require, we go to Jesus again for his power, and he is eager to give it to us. In this way, we draw near to God through his law.