

Matthew 5:17-32 Kingdom Commandments

Introduction

In the introduction of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged His audience with a set of virtues valued by God. These virtues are rewarded. The poor in spirit, the ones who mourn, the meek, the ones who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, people who exemplify these virtues are blessed. Their reward is related to participation in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus goes on. God not only values these virtues in individuals, He also expects these virtues to be visible to those outside the Kingdom. Disciples of Jesus are expected to be present in society and to stand out as different, unique. They are to be salt and light.

That's the introduction of the sermon: Kingdom values and Kingdom witness, Matthew 5:1-16. God favors or values certain virtues. And God expects His disciples to be visible in society in a way that reflects His goodness and glory.

The expectation that the people of God would reflect God's wisdom in society is not a new idea. Moses told the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:5-6,

⁵ "See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. ⁶ "So keep and do *them*, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'

What specific behaviors is Moses referring to? What actions are the other peoples going to see? What practical conduct by the Jews will prompt others to comment, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people?"

They are going to see the people living out the statutes of Torah, of the Mosaic Law. What are these statutes and judgments? Rabbis who studied and commented on the Torah counted a total of 613 commandments in the Mosaic Law. These dos and don'ts covered a wide range of criminal law, case law, family law, compassionate law, and ceremonial law; laws that addressed all areas of life including sexual behavior, food, hygiene, personal injury, theft, the sabbath, holidays, even retirement.

The sum total of these behaviors was to set the Jews apart as a special, unique people.

So if I am a Jew with Jesus on this mountain, I am naturally wondering, "Is this what Jesus is talking about?" He says, "Be salt and light." That must have something to do with living out the Law of Moses, right? By living the Law, we become a light. Or is He talking about something else?

What place does the Law play for Jesus?

That would be a natural question for a listener on the mountain. It is an even more appropriate question for those of us who come at the sermon by reading Matthew's Gospel. Matthew has set us up to see Jesus as a new Moses on the mountain. More than that, He is not only a Covenant mediator. Matthew has set us up to understand that Jesus is Messianic King. We should wonder, what kind of law is this King going to communicate?

He has told us what God values, poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and so on. But quite frankly, what our expected behavior is to be is not made clear by those stated virtues. There is a lot that's left to interpretation. He has told us to be salt and light, but how? What expectations does Jesus have for us? What practical instruction is He going to give us to direct our behavior? What does it look like to be salt and light to Him in society? If He is mediating a new covenant, what are the stipulations, the commandments, the dos and don'ts of this new covenant and how do those dos and don'ts relate to the dos and don'ts of the Mosaic Covenant?

That's where Jesus takes us next in Matthew 5:17-48. I am calling this section, Kingdom Commandments, and will address it in two lessons. The structure of this part of the sermon includes

an introduction followed by six statements of law. We will address the introduction and the first three statements of Law in this lesson. Let's start with just the introduction to Kingdom commandment in Matthew 5:17-20.

Kingdom Commandments Introduction (5:17–20)

¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ “For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus has just exhorted His listeners to be a Kingdom witness; be salt and light in the world. Okay, Jesus. Again, what is salt and light to you? Are you telling us to live according to Mosaic Law or are you telling us something different? Verse 17,

¹⁷ “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets.” Alright. As good Jews that's comforting. We know what Jesus is about. Jesus affirms the Law of Moses. And He affirms the Prophets that came after Moses. Jesus is not advocating against our Scriptures.

Maybe to be salt and light means to live according to the Law. But what does Jesus mean when He says, “I did not come to abolish but to fulfill”?

Fulfill. That's an interesting word. On the one hand, Jesus is not abolishing or putting aside the Law of Moses. But on the other hand He is going to positively fulfill the Law of Moses. What does it look like for one person to fulfill all 613 commands of the Law? What does Jesus mean by, “fulfill?” And why does He include the Prophets? Not just the Law, but the Law and the Prophets.

So let's start just by acknowledging what Jesus meant when He said, “the Law and the Prophets,” what He is thinking about, what He is communicating to His audience. The Jewish Scriptures were called, “the TaNaK,” which is an acronym for the Hebrew words, “Torah,” “Nevi'im,” and “Ketuvim.” T,N,K – TaNaK. Those words mean, “Law,” “Prophets,” and “Writings.” Law refers to the books of Moses, the first five books in the Old Testament. Prophets refers both to the former prophets and the latter prophets. The former prophets are books we tend to think of history, but for the Jews it's God's perspective on history: it's prophecy - Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The later prophets are the books we tend to think of as prophets, longer books like Jeremiah and Isaiah and shorter books like Micah, Nahum, and Habakkuk.

In simple terms, Torah, or, the Law, is God's Covenant with his vassal people Israel in the context of historical narrative. It is more than a list of commandments. It includes history, blessings for obedience, consequences for disobedience, hymns, theological explanation, and yes, of course, those 613 commandments.

The prophetic books are all calling the people of Israel to Covenant faithfulness by pointing back to Torah and considering both the present condition of the nation and future implications. Whether they're faithful or unfaithful, what does that mean about the future?

Jesus does not mention the Writings here. He just says, “Law and Prophets,” not, “Law, and Prophets, and Writings.” The Writings would include hymns like the Psalms and Lamentations, books of wisdom like Job and Ecclesiastes, and other histories like Ruth and Nehemiah. It is not clear whether Jesus' reference to Law and Prophets was intended as shorthand to the whole, which would include the Writings, or whether he was limiting His comments only to Law and Prophets. I do think He intended to draw our attention to the Law and to the Prophets.

So, what does it mean to fulfill the Law and the Prophets? Is the emphasis on Covenant obedience? Does Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets by obeying all the commandments? And is that then what He wants us to do?

That may be a possible interpretation if we just take this verse without the rest of the context of Matthew. But it's not how Matthew has been using the word, "to fulfill."

Matthew refers to the Prophets 7 times before the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 1-4 using three different introductory phrases. Once he refers to something "written by the prophet." And another time he says something is, "referred to by the prophet." But five times he also uses the word, "fulfill," writing, "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet." Here is just one example. It is the first occurrence of the word, "fulfill," in Matthew, coming after the angel's proclamation to Joseph. Matthew 1:22-23,

²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US."

In each of these seven instances, Matthew is showing how Jesus's incarnation fulfills the promises of the prophets for a Messiah and a Savior. And that is not all. Matthew is going to give us another seven examples of Jesus fulfilling the prophetic promises after the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 8-28. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law. He came to accomplish the purpose of the Law by fulfilling the promises of the Law and the Prophets. That is what it means in this context for Jesus not to abolish, but to fulfill.

Our next verse depends on what you think it means to fulfill the Law. This is verse 18.

¹⁸ "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Again, there is a qualifier, "until all is accomplished." What does that mean? Jesus' listeners could not have known at this point, yet, in Jesus' teaching. If we are a good Jew listening to Jesus, we probably assume that He is talking about obedience to the commandments of Law. But is that what He is talking about? Well, again, not in this context. Matthew pointed us in his introduction not toward accomplishing obedience to commandments, but towards accomplishing the purpose and promises of the Law and the Prophets.

We do still wonder what relationship has towards obeying the commandments of the Law. And however we're going to understand that, we have to see that Jesus is communicating a very high view of the Old Covenant Scriptures. The New Covenant is not about rejecting, abolishing, ignoring, devaluing the Old Testament. The New Covenant is about completely fulfilling or accomplishing every last purpose, goal, and promise of the Law and the Prophets. And Jesus means completely. There is not one idea communicated by God in the Old Testament, not one word, not one letter, not the smallest letter or even stroke of a letter that will not be accomplished or fulfilled.

Moving on, Jesus comes to the language of commandment in verse 19.

¹⁹ "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others *to do* the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus makes this reference to commandments in the context of the Kingdom of Heaven. The point emphasized here is not about getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. The point here is about the value the Kingdom of Heaven places on obedience to a particular ethical code referred to as, "these commandments."

If you say that the ethical code has no value and you tell other people it's not really important, "You do not need to follow this code of behavior, these things are not really serious," you will be considered least in the Kingdom of Heaven. If you keep this ethical code and you teach this ethical code to others, you will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven has an

ethical code. Your response to that ethical code determines how you are viewed according to the standard of the Kingdom, according to the King, and according to the community of the Kingdom. They will call you, “great,” or they will call you, “least.”

But what’s not so clear is what Jesus means by, “these commandments”. What is the ethical code of behavior that Jesus is referring to?

The most immediate interpretation that comes to mind is that “these commandments” refers to the commandments of Old Testament Law. Jesus referred to not abolishing the Law and accomplishing every little bit. But there is going to be another option for what Jesus is talking about. Again, the initial audience would not know this yet, but it is coming very soon in this sermon.

In verses 21-47 Jesus is going to say 6 times, “It was told to you [behave like this]...but I say to you [behave like this]...” Jesus is going to give His audience commandments. “But I say to you.”

Either Jesus is helping us to understand the full intent of Old Covenant commandments, or Jesus is giving us New Covenant commandments. Or it might be both. It might be that the New Covenant commandments given by Jesus help develop a fuller understanding of Old Covenant commandment, while also giving us a new set of marching orders.

That’s how I understand the commandments that follow. I understand these to be the stipulations of the New Covenant, they are Kingdom commandments. So, I interpret Jesus’ reference to these commandments not as a reference back to the commandments of the Mosaic code, but forward to the commandments of the New Covenant that He is now getting ready to communicate. The ones who teach these commandments will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven, and the ones who reject these commandments will be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven.

It seems to me that this interpretation lines up very nicely with the very last verse of the Gospel of Matthew, where Jesus is commissioning His disciples to make disciples of all nations by going, baptizing, and “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).”

“Teaching them to observe all I commanded you.” That’s the connection. Those who do the Great Commission are teaching these commandments. They are the ones called great in the Kingdom of Heaven. So what does it look like to be salt and light, to be righteous? Jesus is getting ready to tell us what it practically looks like. He is giving us His teaching, His commandments. And the standard of righteousness He is going to call us to do and to teach is going to be a very high standard, indeed. Verse 20 is the last verse of this introduction to Kingdom commandments. And it is a key verse.

²⁰ “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is about getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. How righteous do you have to be to enter the Kingdom? That was the theological question everyone was debating. Do you want to know how righteous you have to be?

Jesus, says, “Who do you consider most righteous in your culture? Who is trying the hardest to live according to the law of God? Who is keeping and teaching the law? Who are the most holy, the most spiritual, the most dedicated among you?” And everybody knew the answer. The Pharisees. Nobody knows the law of God better. Nobody tries harder. Great. All you have to do is be more righteous than the Pharisees. That’s how righteous you have to be. That sounds like a pretty high standard. A high bar to jump over. Jesus is getting ready to make that bar higher.

He gives us six commandments. Six examples of the kind of righteousness he expects from us. All six follow a similar three-part pattern. First, He introduces the commandment with a phrase like this, “You have heard that it was said...” Second, he adjusts the commandment beginning with a phrase like this, “But I say to you...” And third, he develops His commandment with examples of application.

He starts with murder. This is our first of six examples. Matthew 5:21,

Commandment #1: Do Not Murder (5:21-26)

²¹ “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’

This is a standard ethical behavior for most societies. Maybe you have heard somebody say, “I am a pretty good guy. I’ve never murdered anybody.” Well, I hope not. That’s a pretty low bar of moral behavior, not to kill anybody.

And it is worth making a distinction here. The commandment, “Do not murder,” is not meant to be a call to holiness. “Do not murder” is part of the criminal law code for Israel. There are other laws that call us to a much higher standard of morality, to love God and love our neighbor. “Do not murder” is not that kind of law. The criminal law code sets a pretty low bar. We are going for basic order in society. We are not requiring you to be good. You can keep the Law and still not be a good person. That’s not what criminal law is for. The Torah is not just a system of spiritual disciplines to make us moral. Israel was a civil society. Some of Torah calls us to a higher reflection of God’s nature. But not all of it. One of the purposes of Torah was to provide basic order for Israel.

Jesus, though, is going to call us to a higher standard of ethical behavior. Now I will read verse 21 again along with verse 22,

²¹ “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ ²² “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.

“I’m a pretty good person. I’ve never committed murder.” Have you not?

According to Jesus, murder is on a continuum. At the far side is the extreme action. “I disdain your life so much that I am willing to remove it for my own benefit.” Moving along the continuum of murder, there are less extreme actions of disdaining someone else’s life. “I disdain your life so much that I will beat you to get what I want from you. I will spit on you. I will scratch you. I will pull your hair.” Violent actions like these that disdain life and cause a certain amount of harm do still make it into the criminal code under the categories of assault and personal injury. Moving further along the continuum, we might find that some words belong in the criminal code if those words of slander create a significant amount of financial or reputational harm.

But Jesus keeps going. He is not talking about actions or words that cause a criminal amount of damage. All harsh words that disdain the life of another human being fall on this continuum. According to Jesus, when you call another person a fool, “You good-for-nothing person, you idiot,” it counts as murder. And Jesus is not saying this lightly at all. The just punishment for this level of murder is Hell.

Jesus goes further, still. Not just words, but what is in your heart? Do you desire harm to come to someone else? Do you hate in your heart? Do you disdain another human being? What’s your response when you are cut off in traffic, when you are put down in front of others, when you’re slighted on social media, when you are intentionally left, when you’re disrespected or dishonored? What’s your response? Do you disdain the person who has slighted you? That’s murder. For that you will be found guilty by the court of Heaven and you will receive the penalty, which is Hell.

How far does the continuum go? I think it is fair to make a distinction between the arousal of anger as a reflexive or subconscious response and the embrace of anger. Somewhere in there is where the struggle lies, somewhere between uncontrollable emotional response and willful embrace of that emotion. That is where guilt begins. If your anger leads you to degrade, disdain, hate, injure another person in your mind or in your heart, then you have murdered. There is inherent dignity in every individual human life. When we disdain another human being, whether with actions or words, or

internal desires and imaginings, we are disdainful of the image of God. And we are breaking the law, “Do not murder.” We have taken life and so our life is forfeit.

Your righteousness is to be higher than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. How high? This high. This is the bar for entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus moves on to practical application, giving us two examples.

²³ “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Jesus does not want us to pretend that everything is okay between us and God when something is wrong between us and a fellow human being. We can’t just play religion and ignore relationships. If we have a problem here among each other and we are not willing to do anything about that problem, we have a problem with God.

Notice also that Jesus raises the bar even higher. He does not say, “if you have something against your brother, then go and reconcile,” but, “if your brother has something against you.” Maybe you know your brother has something against you and you know you are in the wrong. That’s a little more obvious. You feel guilty. You go and reconcile. But the way Jesus worded this leaves open the question of whether or not you are in the wrong, or whether you were only partially to blame, or whether you did anything wrong at all. It doesn’t seem to matter.

You might think, “Think, what’d I do? She totally misunderstood the situation. Everything’s good on my side. If she has a problem, that’s on her. And I didn’t say that. I didn’t mean that. I didn’t do that.” According to Jesus, if she has something against you, it *is* your problem. If you claim to be in a relationship with God, then you have an obligation to do what you can do to resolve conflict with those who have something against you, as far as it depends on you. It is on you to initiate.

It’s not easy to be salt and light. But that’s what salt and light looks like. And this is why it stands out. Our horizontal relationships with people are vital to our vertical relationship with God. We can’t be good with God and ugly towards people, or dismissive towards people, or even passive towards people. To be good with God we are to be proactive in resolving conflict with other people. We don’t disdain life. We seek to give life, restore life.

What did Jesus say in His introduction? “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.”

Jesus gives a second example in verses 25-26.

²⁵ “Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ “Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

I take this to mean: “Don’t be so sure that you are the one in the right.” When there is conflict, it is easy to feel like you have been completely wronged by the other person or mostly wronged by the other person. It was all their fault. We know that is rarely the truth, but in the moment we can get so frustrated by the other person, it is easy to paint the core of the issue as black and white. Their sin is quite clear to me.

But hold on! Think for a minute. Do you really want to bring this grievance before the court of God? Are you really so sure that you are completely innocent in the matter? Wouldn’t it be better to work things out before going to court? Wouldn’t it be better to own some of the responsibility yourself? Self-righteousness rarely comes away justified when God is asked to evaluate the matter.

This is the warning from Jesus. As you are on the way to the court of God in the Kingdom of Heaven, in your mind, and you’re going to go and give complaint for the wrongs done to you, are you absolutely sure you want to step into that courtroom? That you want to cast judgment on another

person? That your self-righteous anger is fully justifiable? You have done no wrong yourself that you might come out in court that you might be liable for. You are free from self-conceit. You have not coveted. You have not shaded the truth. You have not despised with your own heart. You have not been judgmental. You have shown empathy, and understanding, and mercy, and compassion. You are sure that you are fully justified. And you need to be sure or you might find yourself in a court of law that is going to hold you accountable for your part. Maybe your opponent is found guilty. But maybe you also find yourself thrown into prison.

Why not resolve the issue personally without claiming your own self-righteousness before a court that might have a standard too high for you to vindicate yourself?

Jesus also said in His introduction, "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

Commandment #2: Do not Commit Adultery (5:27-30)

The next issue Jesus addresses is adultery. Another one of the Ten Commandments. He addresses this commandment using the same three-part pattern, "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." and an example. Verse 27,

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY';

Again, that's a pretty low bar. I can guarantee that my wife is not happy with me as long as I just don't commit adultery. "Hey, honey, I'm home! Guess what? I didn't commit adultery at all today."

Like that's the bar of marital happiness. I can look as much as I want. I can say whatever I want. I can develop ignore my wife. I can develop close friendships with as many women as I want, as long as I am not committing adultery, everything's fine. Right?

Wrong. "Do not commit adultery" is an extreme on the continuum of sexual unfaithfulness. I have entered into a legal covenant with my wife. That covenant includes sexual commitment. To have sex with another women would be a brazen act of unfaithfulness to that covenant commitment. It's a low bar designed to maintain order in society. Jesus raises the bar. Verse 28,

²⁸ but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Have you committed adultery today?

We start with the extreme action of sex with a person who is not your spouse and then move along the continuum. Kissing, hugging, touching, joking, intimate sharing, flirting, watching pornography, billboards, women walking by.

Jesus keeps moving along the continuum all the way into the heart. Lustful desire is adultery. It is not limited to married people. "Everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Jesus may focus His words onto the man who looks at a woman, but no one doubts that His words are also meant to include the woman who looks lustful at a man. She has also committed adultery in her heart.

This is an incredibly high standard of morality. You are accountable for your lustful desires and thoughts.

As with hate, I think there is room here to make a distinction between uncontrolled arousal and embracing that lust inside; a distinction between temptation and what we do internally with that temptation. That is where the battle line is drawn.

There is a chemical response that goes off in the brain. You just have to see a certain silhouette, or smell a smell, or think of a romantic situation and your body can become aroused. But then what do you do with that sexual desire? Do you embrace it? Do you let your imagination go a little? Do you play a full length scene in your mind? Or do you put that arousal in its place? Call it what it is, a temptation to embrace sexual unfaithfulness – that's what it is – and then you resist it. That's the place of struggle I believe Jesus is calling us to.

And Jesus gives this illustration to drive home the seriousness of His words. Verses 29 and 30.

²⁹ “If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ “If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell.

How serious are you about engaging sinful desires in your heart and mind? Jesus points to the ultimate consequence. Just as with hate, the final consequence of lust is Hell. This is incredibly serious for Jesus. And if Hell is the consequence, what would you do to avoid Hell?

If you found yourself alone in the woods, foot caught in a bear trap, would you have the grit necessary to cut off your foot to save your life? Are you willing to give up something that you consider very dear to you if that thing is going to turn gangrene, corrupt your blood and kill you?

Jesus is speaking metaphorically about tearing out an eye or cutting off the hand. The metaphor points to the seriousness of the issue.

The wages of sin is death. Lust in your heart is sin. The wages of lust is death, eternal death, eternal separation from all that is good; Hell.

Fight against sin at its point of origin. What can you practically do? Remove things from your life that cause you to lose the struggle of sexual temptation. Are you willing to cut off your free use of the Internet by putting software on your computer that prevents you from logging in to pornographic sites you struggle with, or to only use your computer in a public space? Are you willing to cut off or limit your entertainment freedom by putting controls on the content you are allowed to view on streaming devices, or refusing to go to movies of a certain rating?

Are you willing to put in place sensible boundaries with colleagues of the opposite sex so that you will not be tempted to seek in a colleague the kind of intimacy only appropriate in marriage? Are you willing to put boundaries in your dating life to avoid being alone in your apartment because you know where that is going to lead? Do you need to break off a dating relationship that has already become sexual already and boundaries just don't work any more? Are you willing to put yourself into an accountability relationship where you speak openly of your struggles and failures to a fellow believer?

What does it mean for you to tear out the eye or cut off the hand? What behaviors do you engage in that feed the sexual images in your mind and the lust in your heart?

On the one hand, Jesus has raised the bar so high that it may seem unattainable. On the other hand, He questions whether we are bothered about righteousness enough to practically engage in the struggle.

Commandment #3: Giving a Certificate of Divorce (5:31-32)

The third issue Jesus addresses is divorce. He does not say a lot about divorce here, so I am going to limit my comments to what Jesus does say here and just a little to further comments made later in Matthew. We just get the first two parts of the pattern in this example, “It was said...but I say to you...” without any further example to develop the command. This is Matthew 5:31-32,

³¹ “It was said, ‘WHOEVER SENDS HIS WIFE AWAY, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE’; ³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Jesus is not this time quoting one of the Ten Commandments. But He is quoting a Mosaic Law. There was a debate in the Judaism of Jesus' day about the grounds of divorce involving the Old Testament phrase, “indecency.” Here is the first part of the law in Deuteronomy 24:1.

When a man takes a wife and marries her, and it happens that she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts *it* in her hand and sends her out from his house...

The debate in Judaism was divided on how serious an indecency must be committed for a husband to legally divorce his wife. D. A. Carson writes in his commentary on Matthew,

Both the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai permitted divorce on the grounds of “something indecent,” but they disagreed on what “indecent” might include. Shammai and his followers interpreted the expression to refer to gross indecency, though not necessarily adultery; Hillel extended the meaning beyond sin to all kinds of real or imagined offenses, including an improperly cooked meal.¹

Jesus may or may not be weighing into debate about valid grounds for divorce. Let’s consider the main emphasis of Jesus’ command, then consider the possibility of grounds for divorce in Jesus’ command, and end with how Jesus’ command relates to Old Covenant Law.

This is what Jesus says.

³² but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The main emphasis of Jesus’ command is a rejection of divorce. If we are not convinced about that here, we will be in chapter 19. I’ll go ahead and read what Jesus says there to help our interpretation here. In that chapter, Pharisees are going to try to draw Jesus into the debate about grounds for divorce, asking, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?”

⁴ [Jesus] answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created *them* from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE,⁵ and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH’?⁶ “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate” Matthew 19:4-6.

Jesus is requiring a higher standard than that which is required by the Mosaic legal code. The logic of our current text requires us to assume what Jesus states more explicitly later. Divorce is unlawful according to the higher law of the Kingdom of Heaven. “Let no man separate what God has joined.”

That being true, a man who divorces his wife is causing her to commit adultery. That is more true in Jesus’ day than our own. We might imagine a divorced woman never marrying again. That would not have been practically possible in Jesus’ cultural context. For reasons of protection, security, acceptability in society, a divorced woman would have to find a man to live with, and to have any respectability at all she would have to marry him. However, when she has sex with her new husband, she commits adultery, because in God’s eyes she is still married to her husband who unlawfully divorced her. And not only does she commit adultery, but whoever marries her commits adultery, because in God’s eyes she is still married. The way Jesus phrases this commandment, the woman is not primarily to blame, but the husband who sends her away, he makes her commit adultery.

Does Jesus provide an exception, a lawful ground for divorce?

It appears He does when He says, “everyone who divorces his wife, except for *the* reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery.” That phrase, “except for the reason of unchastity,” might not be an exception. It could be intended to shift the blame from the husband to the wife. If he divorces her and she has not committed adultery, then it is he who causes her to commit adultery. But if she has already been unfaithful, he does not cause her to commit adultery when he divorces her. She is already an adulteress. It is possible that this issue of blame is all Jesus intends here.

But it seems to me He is saying that the divorce itself is legal in God’s court if adultery has occurred. And if that is true, the non-adulterous party would be free to marry again without committing adultery. I think that is implied, but it goes beyond what is clearly stated here. We would need to do a more comprehensive study on divorce and remarriage to come to a firm biblical opinion and that study is beyond the scope of our present endeavor to follow the logic of the Sermon on the Mount.

¹ D. A. Carson. *Matthew in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8), F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984) 411.

I have said that the main emphasis of Jesus' commandment is a rejection of divorce on any grounds, with the possible exception of adultery. And that commandment seems to be a rejection of the Mosaic Law that allows for divorce, making this example different than the two previous examples. There Jesus takes the Mosaic commandments all the way into the heart. The commandment, "do not hate," does not overturn the commandment, "Do not murder." It agrees with that commandment and then elevates it to the higher standard of words and heart attitude. The same is true with, "Do not commit adultery," and, "Do not lust." There is no contradiction between the higher law of Jesus and the criminal code of Moses.

But here, to summarize the law in Deuteronomy, Moses says, "If you send your wife away, you must do so with a certificate of divorce and you cannot remarry her." But Jesus says, if you send her away, as allowed by Mosaic Law, you are making her commit adultery because you are not in fact lawfully divorced in the eyes of God.

That's not an elevation of Mosaic Law. That seems to be a disagreement with Mosaic Law. In chapter 19, the Pharisees pick up on that and push back against Jesus' teaching. In Matthew 19:7

⁷ They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE AND SEND *her* AWAY?"

Jesus responds in verse 8,

⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way. ⁹ "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

"I say to you." "Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives." That is really interesting. Not, "because of God's approval of divorce, but because of your hardness of heart." That statement provides an important insight into how Jesus views at least some of the Mosaic legal code. And we need to tease that out a bit, just not right now. We need to be done with this lesson. I will start the next lesson thinking about how does this idea of hardness of heart give us an interpretive principle to help us understand Jesus' use of Old Testament command. And I'll add a couple of other principles that we have already covered. That would take too long right now so let's save it for next time. But we'll go ahead and end this lesson with this third commandment about divorce.

I want to conclude with one final observation from chapter 19. Our modern culture definitely feels Jesus' moral standard for marriage is too high. You can't really expect a man and woman to stay married if they have fallen out of love.

It is not just our culture. The disciples agreed. They responded in Matthew 19:10 this way to Jesus' discussion with the Pharisees, "If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry."

"Jesus, if you're telling us that, what God has joined together let nobody tear apart, that divorce is not an option, we shouldn't get married. Your standard for marriage is extremely high, Jesus." Yes it is. Jesus' standard is high, very high. His ethical standard for how we respond those who challenge or hurt us is very high. "Do not call him a fool. Do not hate in your heart." If you do, the penalty is Hell. His standard for lust is very high. If you look at a man or woman and lust in your heart, the penalty is Hell. The standard for marriage is high. If you send away your husband or your wife, you are forcing them into adultery because the Kingdom of Heaven does not recognize your divorce. Being legal is not the same thing as being good. The criminal code does not make you righteous. Your righteousness has to exceed that of the Pharisees if you are going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus is being very serious. He has raised the bar incredibly high. And He is getting ready to push it higher. We will address three more commandments from Jesus in our next lesson, Matthew 5:33-48.