

LOVE IN ACTION

MATTHEW 5:21-48

Key words for Worshippers in training: Perfect, Neighbor, Obedient

1. Review and Introduction

Beatitudes 5:1-12

Kingdom living is contrary to the world and our fallen nature

If Christ is in you He is coming out of you!

The command to work out what He has worked in. Matthew 5:13-20

As disciples we are commanded to be salt and light

Glorify God not self

The law accomplishes all that it was given to do.

Christ Jesus fulfills (completes) all of the Law

Teach the law. Live it out. If it is written on your heart then it will be natural to love it, keep it, teach it, and trust it to accomplish its goal.

Unless your righteousness exceeds... **(Matthew 5:20)**

Righteousness which goes beyond the legal correctness of the scribes and Pharisees

We are to be “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” **(Matthew 5:48)**

Today’s Text: **Matthew 5:21-48**

Jesus uses antithesis to drive home His point:

“You have heard that it was said to people long ago” (vv. 21, 33)

“You have heard that it was said” (vv. 27, 38, 43)

“It was said” (v. 31).

In each case His citation is based on an identifiable passage or theme of the Pentateuch, though the form in which it is quoted is sometimes more paraphrase than exact citation.

We must remember that the dialog partner is not the OT law as such but the OT law as currently (and sometimes misleadingly) understood and applied.

Jesus is not criticizing or negating the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted. Example: Deuteronomy 23:18 hire of a harlot or price of a dog.

Cursed Ham.

What Jesus *says* (“But I tell you”) is being contrasted with what the disciples have *heard*, a superficial and potentially misleading reading of the OT texts as rules of conduct, whereas Jesus is now going to indicate the right (and deeper) interpretation using those same God breathed texts.

His teaching promotes an “inward” concern with motive and attitude above the “outward” focus on the visible and quantifiable observance of regulations.

It goes behind specific rules to look for the more far-reaching principles which should govern the conduct of the people of God.

It is concerned not so much with the negative goal of the avoidance of specific sin but with the far more demanding positive goal of discovering and following what is really the will of God for his people.

Such a radically searching reading of the will of God in the light of the OT law establishes a righteousness of the kingdom of heaven which is in a different league altogether from the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees—and of any other religious traditions which understand the will of God in terms of the punctilious observance of rules.

In every case Jesus contrasts the people’s misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points.

Jesus goes far beyond its outward observance (which can be observed and judged) to the thoughts and attitudes which underlie the action, whether they are carried into effect or not.

His teaching is according to his own authority as the law’s “fulfiller”

No human court can judge the thoughts and intents of the heart like the Word of God!
(Hebrews 4:12)

2. The Antithesis (Murder, Adultery, Divorce, Oaths/Vows, Retaliation, Love of Enemies)

A. Murder: **5:21-26**

Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17

21 The direct quotation of one of the ten commandments leaves no doubt as to who were the “people long ago” to whom “it was said.” Jesus is going to the heart of the Mosaic law itself

The “brother or sister” is to be understood as a fellow-disciple rather than a literal family member

22. The deliberate paradox of Jesus’ pronouncement is thus that ordinary insults may betray an attitude of contempt which God takes extremely seriously

The principle of v. 22 is that the actual committing of murder is only the outward manifestation of an inward attitude which is itself culpable, whether or not it actually issues in the act of murder. Angry thoughts and contemptuous words which come from “the heart,” deserve equal judgment.

“The Lord looks on the heart,” and in his court its thoughts are no less culpable than the act itself

v. 23-26 the importance of right relationships demands decisive action

Do not allow bad relationships to remain unresolved

There is divine judgment on those whose earthly relationships do not conform to the values of the kingdom of heaven.

B. Adultery: **5:27-30**

27. The commandment is quoted from **Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18**

The visible and punishable act forbidden by the commandment is only the outward expression of an inward desire which is, in this case, adultery “in the heart”

28. The focus is not (as some tender adolescent consciences have read it) on sexual attraction as such, but on the desire for (and perhaps even the planning of) an illicit sexual liaison.

29-30. The theme of correction is given with the ultimate goal of salvation, and the importance of eliminating these desires at all costs, a theme which could have many different applications to relationships, activities, mental attitudes and the like, certainly not only to sexual temptation.

Sight (eye) and touch (hand) implying the gratification of our sensual nature. As “removable” parts of the body they serve to make the point that any loss, however painful, is preferable to the total lostness of *Hell*.

C. Divorce: **5:31-32**

Deuteronomy 24:1-4. This, the only pentateuchal passage which directly speaks of divorce

Divorce was, of course, purely a male prerogative, which required no legal hearing, merely the husband's decision; Jewish law made no provision for a woman to initiate divorce

Two schools of thought weighed heavy on the Jewish culture regarding divorce and Jesus is addressing the topic and correcting their followers

“hard-line” position of Shammai that only “unchastity” was a valid ground for divorce
the “liberal” position of Hillel which allowed a man to divorce his wife for such a trivial offense as spoiling a meal, or even simply because he had found someone he preferred (cf. the “hate” of Deut 24:3)

Jesus' quarrel with current ethical teaching is that it is basing its standards on an assumption of failure (Moses' provision only for “your hard-heartedness,” 19:8) rather than on God's original purpose for marriage.

His condemnation of remarriage as adultery is simply on the grounds that the divorce (unless for adultery) was not legitimate and so the original marriage remains valid in the sight of God.

God opposes the human tendency to make it easier to “separate what God has joined together.” (19:6) The destruction of marriage set aside in favor of a bold reassertion of the way God intended things to be, lifelong faithfulness in marriage.

D. Oaths: 5:33-37

Two different but related subjects are at issue here. *Oaths*, invocations of God or of some sacred object to undergird a statement or promise, shade into *vows*, solemn promises to God of an action to be performed.

These provisions should never have been needed if people practice the uncomplicated truthfulness which is what God desires

Oaths normally invoked God as the guarantor of the person's word

Jews had already developed the habit, which underlies much of our “social swearing” today, of finding more innocuous substitutes for the actual name of God; here Jesus lists oaths by heaven, earth, Jerusalem and one's own head, late on he will add a further list (the temple, the gold of the temple, the altar and the gift on the altar).

37. Jesus' prohibition of swearing is based on the assumption that God requires truthfulness. A simple Yes or No should be all that is needed. As soon as it is necessary

to bolster it with an oath in order to persuade others to believe what is said, the ideal of transparent truthfulness has been compromised

Jesus' absolute pronouncement sets out the true will of God, but in human life that will is not always followed, and there is still a place for legal oaths (as for divorce regulations) to cope with the actual untruthfulness of people, even sadly sometimes of disciples. They should not be needed, but in practice they serve a remedial purpose in a world where the ethics of the kingdom of heaven are not always followed

E. Retaliation: 5:38-42

Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21

The principle of proportionate retribution is a judicial guideline, not a license to get one's own back. It is the principle of leaving vengeance to God, not exacting it oneself

Non-resistance leaves no room for the calculation of proportionate retribution.

Jesus' position is shockingly radical: not only no retaliation, but even no resistance to one who is admittedly "bad". The startling teaching of this passage is that these are bad people, intent on getting the better of the disciple, but even their admitted badness does not justify the disciple in resisting them. The issue, then, is not whether one should stand up for good in principle (or as it affects other people), but whether one should stand up for oneself when under threat.

The series of four personal examples which make up vv. 39b-42, illustrate the principle of not even standing up for one's own rights, of not defending one's own honor, of allowing others to take advantage. They portray an unselfish and uncalculating benevolence which thinks only of the other's needs or desires, not of protecting one's own resources or even one's honor.

More than anywhere in this section we need to remind ourselves that Jesus' aim is not to establish a new and more demanding set of rules to supplant those of the scribes and Pharisees. It is to establish a "greater righteousness," a different understanding of how we should live as the people of God, an alternative set of values. In place of the principle of retribution he sets non-resistance; in place of the defense of legal rights he sets uncalculating generosity; in place of concern for oneself he sets concern for the other.

Instead of therefore dismissing Jesus' teaching a starry-eyed utopianism, a proper response to this challenging section is to ask in what practical ways Jesus' radical principles *can* be applied in our life. If our answers are true to Jesus' teaching they will

represent an essentially non-self-centered approach to ethics which puts the interests of the other before personal rights or convenience.

to slap the *right* cheek required (if the assailant was right-handed) a slap with the back of the hand, which was far more insulting and would entail double damages. This is more a matter of honor than of physical injury, and honor required appropriate recompense.

In a culture which took honor and shame far more seriously than ours, this was a paradoxical and humiliating demand.

The second illustration is even more clearly located in the law-court, with the opponent suing for possession of the disciple's "shirt." To forfeit the shirt would be bad enough, but the disciple is to voluntarily give up his "coat".

The third illustration takes up a specific grievance of subject people under the Roman occupation

All of these examples (like the beatitudes) challenge us to unnatural behavior, and all must seem crazy to a secular world (and indeed have often been denounced as such). The point they are making is that in the kingdom of heaven self-interest does not rule, and even our legal rights and legitimate expectations may have to give way to the interests of others. It is for each disciple to work out for themselves how this principle can most responsibly be applied to the issue of giving and lending in the different personal and social circumstances in which we find ourselves.

F. Love for enemies 5:43-48

The general use of "neighbor" in the OT suggests that Lev 19:18 has this restrictive sense, applying specifically to fellow-members of the Israelite community.

Jesus plays his strongest ethical card: to love those who do not love you is not offered as a piece of pragmatic wisdom, but as a reflection of the character of God himself

The purpose of the whole of the discourse so far has not been to provide a suitable ethic for getting along alright in the world but to challenge those who have accepted the demands of the kingdom of heaven to live up to their commitment by being different from other people.

It is to live on a level above that of ordinary decent people, to draw your standards of conduct not from what everyone else is doing, but from your heavenly Father

"love" in the NT is not only a matter of emotion but also of an attitude which is reflected in our behavior, acting for the good of the other

His concept of love is apparently not at the level of simply being nice to people and of allowing error to go unchallenged. Love is not incompatible with controversy and rebuke.

3. Fulfilling the Law: Summary (5:48)

48 So you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The disciple's lifestyle is to be different from other people's because it draws its inspiration not from the norms of society but from the character of God

Not via laws read as simply rules of conduct but rather by looking behind those laws to the mind and character of God himself. Whereas any definable set of rules could, in principle, be fully kept, the demand of the kingdom of heaven has no such limit—or rather its limit is perfection, the perfection of God himself.

The wording of this summary recalls the repeated formula of **Leviticus 19:2**

God's people were to reflect his character, and the same is now true for those who are subjects of the kingdom of heaven

The goal of the teaching is not moral flawlessness, but spiritual "maturity. Learning to rely on the righteousness of Christ and His fulfillment of God's standard of righteousness instead of self reliance, self sufficiency, and self righteousness.

It is thus a suitable term to sum up the "greater righteousness" of v. 20, a righteousness which is demanded not only from an upper echelon of spiritual elites but from all who belong to the kingdom of God. It is in the promotion of this standard of perfection, going far beyond the literal requirements of the OT law, that Jesus "fulfills" it. The perfection of the Father, the true eschatological goal of the law, is what all disciples of Jesus pursue.