

Sermon on the Mount, part 9

The Heart of the Matter

January 20, 2008

Introduction:

Matthew 5:21-48

Murder

²¹"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder,'^[a] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' ²²But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother^[b] will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,'^[c] is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; 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 with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.^[d]

Adultery

²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.'^[e] ²⁸But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Divorce

³¹"It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.'^[f] ³²But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Oaths

³³"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.'³⁴ But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of

the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

An Eye for an Eye

³⁸"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ^[g] ³⁹But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor' ^[h] and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies ^[i] and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

From the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus focuses on what men and women are like in their minds and hearts. In this section (Matthew 5:21-48), the Lord reemphasizes the divine standards for living as followers of Christ... the divine standards already given in the OT Law.

Contrary to the external, superficial, and hypocritical “righteousness” that characterized the scribes, Pharisees, and teachers of the law, the righteousness God requires is first of all **internal**. If it does not exist in the heart, it does not exist at all. Maybe it had been long forgotten or just neglected by many Jews of Jesus’ day, this same truth was presented to them throughout the Old Testament. Let me give you a few examples:

1 Kings 8:39

Solomon prayed, “*Hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Forgive and act; deal with each man according to all he does, since you know his heart – for you alone know the hearts of all men.*”

1 Chronicles 28:9

In David’s last words to Solomon he said, “*And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts.*”

2 Chronicles 16:9

Hanani the prophet reminded King Asa, *“For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”*

Proverbs 16:2

“All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.”

Jeremiah 17:10

“I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”

Jesus knew that His hearers. Many of them were self-righteous and self-satisfied religious leaders who could not possibly understand what He was saying. He devoted much of the SOM to exposing the faulty principles and motivations of the Jewish legalistic system that had replaced what God communicated to His people in the Hebrew Scriptures (OT).

Look at how each of the six sections begins... Jesus used the phrase “You have heard it said” to introduce each section (see vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). The six sections deal with the specific subjects of murder, sexual sin, divorce, speaking the truth, retaliation, and loving others... yet they all illustrate the same basic principle, the principle Jesus says must be applied to every area of life... the principle I’d like you to remember long after we talk about it this morning: **righteousness is a matter of the heart...** [repeat] **righteousness is a matter of the heart.**

Remember, as we saw last week, Jesus is not altering the law of Moses, the teaching of the Psalms, the standards of the prophets, or any other part of Scripture. He did not come to nullify or change any of the OT. His teaching here in the SOM stands in firm agreement with every truth, even every word, of the Hebrew Scriptures.

What Jesus *was* doing was contrasting His teaching (and the true teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures themselves) with the Jewish written and oral traditions that had accumulated over the previous several hundred years and that had gradually and terribly skewed God’s revelation.

Jesus was preaching, **“Righteousness is a matter of the heart...** and I’m going to give you six illustrations to prove my point.” He went on to use foundational issues like murder, adultery, and divorce, which deal with both individual and social relationships. I think he chose these six because they would characterize many other issues... not because they were the only ones. Together, they affirm that every area of our lives should be measured by the standard of inner/heart righteousness.

Four basic principles summarize the central thrust of 5:21-48 and these will be my four brief teachings this morning:

1. **The first principle is that the spirit of the law is more important than the letter. The law was not given as a mechanical set of rules by which men in their own power could govern their outward living. It was given as a guide to the type of character God requires.**

ILLUS: I read a story recently that illustrates this point. A pregnant woman's baby is coming sooner than expected. The woman's husband throws the pre-packed overnight bag in the back seat of the car, helps his moaning-in-pain wife into the passenger seat and speeds off to the hospital. As he is exceeding the speed limit, a police patrol car flips on its lights and siren and pulls the car over. Coming up to the driver's side window, the policeman tells the man that he was going 55mph in a 45mph zone. The husband quickly explains the situation. The officer runs back to his car and proceeds to give the husband/wife an escort all the way to the emergency room entrance at the hospital.

As the husband is helping his wife into the wheelchair and the doctors whisk her away, the policeman taps the man on the shoulder and says, "Sir, you forgot something" and hands him the speeding ticket.

The officer is operating under a "letter of the law" assumption. The driver was exceeding the posted speed limit, so he gets a ticket. The husband is operating under a "spirit of the law" assumption. His wife was about to give birth and her safety – and the safety of the baby – are more important than the posted speed limit.

We could all think of hundreds of examples, both real and made up, that illustrate this point about the "Spirit of the Law vs. the Letter of the Law." It happens all the time. Jesus states in these six illustrations that "what you've heard said by others... even what they've written down and accepted as law is not as important as the heart behind the law."

Let me give you a couple examples...

1. When you hear **"Do not murder"** (for instance), don't think murder is simply the premeditated killing of another individual... think of it as hurting someone. "Do not murder" is a *principle*... it's a matter of the heart. We should be careful not to kill a person's spirit, harm their character, make up rumors, curse or slander or gossip. We should not hurt others in our hearts, thinking evil thoughts about them or wishing something bad would happen to them. All of this is murder and it happens in the heart before it ever happens outside the heart.

Or think of it this way... someone holds up a bank and shoots the bank president. Scenario #1: the bank president dies of the gunshot wound = murder. Scenario #2: the bank president recovers from his gunshot wound = not murder. Is God saying that if the guy actually dies then it's sin, but I guess if the docs can save his life or if the bullet didn't hit any vital organs or if the guy doesn't die but he suffers brain damage or the loss of a limb... then it's not sin. Of course not!

2. When you hear **"Do not commit adultery,"** don't think that everything but the actual act of sleeping with another person's spouse – or cheating on your own spouse – is all that's

involved. Adultery is lusting after someone else. Adultery is coveting a person who is not your spouse. Adultery starts with the heart and emotions before it ever reaches the bedroom.

3. Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce
4. Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord
5. Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth
6. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy

The spirit or principle of these laws is much more important than the letter of the law. Jesus is by no means nullifying the OT law here, he is both explaining and broadening their meaning.

2. The second principle is that the law is positive as well as negative. Its purpose is not only to prevent sin but to promote righteousness.

ILLUS: The first time I remember hearing a teaching on God's design for sex was in college. I was at a conference where the main speaker was a man by the name of Josh McDowell. He challenged the entire group of us to abstain from sex outside the context of marriage and he used several Scripture passages to show that this was God's will for our lives.

Most of us thought at that point that God was this great cosmic killjoy... that God didn't want his followers to have any fun. Not surprisingly, McDowell's next session addressed this issue. He told the simple illustration of a child who was reaching for a hot stove. "Which of you," he asked, "would not slap the child's hand away from the stove in order to prevent him from burning his hand?" Of course we all agreed that we would. McDowell told us that God has to sometimes be strong with us in order to prevent us from hurting ourselves. His commands regarding sex were not just a prohibitive... do not _____ and do not _____ and do not _____ as so many people characterize the Scriptures. They were designed to **protect** us and **provide** for us.

In the hot stove example, when you slap the child's hand away, you are protecting the child from the searing, burning heat of the hot stove... and you are providing the child with safe environment of no pain, no scars, and no tears. Think about God and why he says what he says. He truly wants to protect us – sometimes from others, from evil, from the world... and sometimes from ourselves and our own dumb decisions. He wants us to live in an environment of no pain, no scars, and no tears.

This section in the SOM might seem like a bunch of do's and don'ts to the casual reader of the Bible, but I don't want it to be that way for you. What if you looked at a section like this one and said to yourself, "This is the section where Jesus outlines how he is going to protect me and my relationships with others... and how he is going to provide for me the life I always wanted, the one I always dreamed about!"

As we go on to the third principle in this section, let me ask you a question...

*Why is it that we should try to live like God/Jesus commands us to live?
Why do we try to abide by the 10 Commandments and the general principles we read about in
Scripture or hear about in church?*

3. The third principle is that the law is not an end in itself. Its deeper purpose goes beyond purifying the lives of God's people. Its supreme purpose is to glorify God Himself.

I remember we talked about this for a few minutes at Christmastime when I referred to the Wise Men and how they brought gifts to Jesus that first Christmas. At Christmas, we usually associate the giving of gifts to each other, but that first Christmas the Wise Men brought gifts to Jesus! They weren't about what they could *get*, but about what they could *give*!

The same is true about the Law. We should obey God's commands because in the obedience it brings glory to Him. We all know the difference between obeying out of love and obeying out of obligation or duty.

- Some people go to church because they feel obliged to do so... not because they're truly in love with God and want to bring glory to him.
- Some people obey the speed limit because there are cops around or possible speeding tickets... others because they believe it's safer for all drivers if we abide by the laws of the road.
- Some people don't cheat on their spouses because they could get caught... others because they love their spouse and family and would never want to get in a situation that could hurt them.

I know what this is like. It's hard to find people who maintain their integrity when nobody's watching... when nobody would know if they didn't.

ILLUS: Landcruiser story.

This owner of the shop did what was right even though he didn't have to. He obeyed God's law of telling the truth and maintained his integrity, even though it cost his shop a lot of money. Why did he do it? I don't know... maybe I'll ask him... but I'd like to think he did what was right because that's what God wants from us.

Obedience to the law is not an end in itself... the supreme purpose for obeying the law is to bring glory to God.

4. The fourth principle is that every human being is commanded to live up to be perfect. Because that command is impossible for human beings to fulfill, God Himself has provided fulfillment through His Son Jesus Christ. The one who demands righteousness is also the Divine Giver of righteousness.

I could never emphasize this principle enough and I believe that it is inextricably interwoven throughout the SOM. It's as if Jesus is saying, "Here's how to live... Can't do it? Join the club. That's why you need God and his redeeming work in Me. I am the only one who can change your hearts."

What's funny is that I've talked to people about what they believe and sometimes I hear someone say, "I'm not all for that Evangelical Christianity or doing every little thing commanded in the Bible... I just try to live by the Sermon on the Mount." What a laugh! Okay, just the Sermon on the Mount? Try this one: Be perfect.

Did you ever think that one function of all the do's and don'ts we see in Scripture was simply to help us realize that there's no way we'll ever measure up on our own? It might seem kind of silly, but sometimes God has to treat us like children so we'll get the point.

Mark 10:17-21 Rich Young Ruler.

¹⁷*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

¹⁸*"Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother. ^[d]'"*

²⁰*"Teacher," he declared, "all these I have kept since I was a boy."*

²¹*Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack," he said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."*

Yes, it's conceivable that you have obeyed the 10 Commandments your whole adult life... but let's take that murder one for a minute... have you ever talked to someone in a harsh manner? Have you ever thought, "I wish that person would just get lost."? Have you ever given someone the finger in traffic? You have? Okay then you've broken the spirit of my commands. If your heart is sometimes in the wrong place, you're guilty like everyone else.

James 2:10

For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

James' point is the same as Jesus': The law is there, in part, so you'll know how far the apple of humanity has fallen away from the tree of God's righteousness. Once we acknowledge our need for God's grace, we're on our way to living the righteous life God wants for us.

Prayer/Introduction of Communion