

Matthew Chapter 5:21-48 – The Law Properly Explained – Part 2

Overview:

For I say to you all that if your righteousness would not surpass more than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will absolutely not enter the kingdom of heaven.

The remainder of this record of the Sermon of the Mount builds from this premise. The Pharisees' interpretation and application of the Law are being contrasted to its proper interpretation and application.

This is sometimes called the six antitheses — “you have heard...but I say to you.” The problem of calling these antitheses is that Jesus is not saying anything contradictory to what the Law says. Jesus is not altering or changing the Law, He is fulfilling the Law (bringing it to its proper understanding). Jesus is contrasting the interpretation and application of the Law by the Pharisees and scribes with the true intent of the Law.

Hebrew Mindset:

Righteousness is used here as behavioral rightness that is in alignment with the behavioral standards that God gave to Israel in the Law of Moses.

The reason that the scribes and Pharisees are not entering the kingdom of heaven is that there was a problem with their belief and their actions. They appear to follow the Law, but there are at least 4 problems identified in Matthew.

Problem 1 – They rejected God and the Messiah

Problem 2 – They did not understand the intent of the Law

Problem 3 – They used the Law as means for power and glory from men

Problem 4 – Outside of the view of men they violated the Law

The people of Israel were dependent on the teachers of Israel, and these teachers failed the people. Jesus came to both explain the Law and give the true example of the Law as well as be their Messiah King.

Matthew 5:27-28 – Adultery Explained

In this section, we see that Jesus is explaining the prohibition on adultery. Jesus begins with the typical Hebraic statement that indicates that He is about to explain or expound upon the intention of the prohibition.

The explanation has caused quite a stir. The original prohibition was also intended to guard against lust, not just the act of adultery.

Is this new? Would those who knew the Law understand this prohibition? Exodus 20:14, 17 – The connection between adultery and not coveting is established in the Ten.

Why does this need to be explained? Obviously, if something needs to be explained, then the audience doesn't understand what has been stated.

Perhaps the fact that coveting or lusting is difficult to observe, and therefore, the religious authorities did not emphasize this provision because they could not police it.

Perhaps the people had become comfortable with coveting or lusting because getting caught was nearly impossible.

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Regardless, Jesus' teaching is vital to understand both the Law and its intent.

There are a few ideas that should be explored:

Adultery is not the same as fornication. The word for *adultery* is “μοιχεύω moicheuō (moy-khweh-ō)” and means a violation of the marriage contract by means of illicit sex. Fornication is “πορνεία porneia,” which refers to illicit sexual activity (Matthew 15:19).

Matthew 5:32 and 19:9 – Both say that to divorce one's wife was permissible because of fornication (immorality).

This is addressed to men, married men. This is not to diminish the woman's responsibility, but a woman was, in that society, at the mercy of her husband. The wife had very little recourse if she were to be mistreated by her husband or any man.

This lesson by Jesus places the responsibility of adultery at the feet of the men, and God holds them responsible if they commit adultery or lust.

The literal translation of verse 28 is “the one who looks at a wife (woman) facing toward (pros) the lust to her has already committed adultery to her in his heart.” This is not a one-time act but a character trait of the individual; they are a luster.

This does not excuse fornication; this is about adultery. The laws concerning adultery were intended to protect the innocent and demonstrate love within the marriage relationship as God intended. Who/What is being protected? To whom is love demonstrated?

1. Women
2. Family
3. Society – A sexually promiscuous society always becomes violent and self-destructs.

Matthew 5:29-30 – Better to be Maimed than to Burn

It must be noted that this statement is sandwiched between two adultery statements. There is a thought that the eye and the hand are instruments for immorality and adultery. Perhaps the context bears this out. But this statement is also used in Matthew 18:7-10 without the context of adultery.

The statement is considered brutal; does God desire one to self-mutilate to avoid hell?

Cause you to stumble – “σκανδαλίζω skandalizō” – this means to put up a stumbling block, cause someone to be impeded along the way. The word is a picture of someone tripping but also has a Messianic understanding. Matthew 16:21-23 – This stumbling block would impede Jesus from fulfilling His mission. Matthew 13:36-42, 8:6-9 – A stumbling block to entering the kingdom of heaven.

Hell - γέεννα geenna is not the location of hell or the spiritual location for lost souls. This is a location where trash and dead animals are burned. The concept is that of physical death and the desecration of the body being thrown into the burn pile rather than being buried.

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In conjunction with Matthew 18, we can see a common thought. Do they (the Israelites of their day) love the truth of God's Law and despise sin and evil? Do they strive to the point of shedding blood against sin (Hebrews 12:4)?

Would plucking out an eye or cutting off the hand really do anything for a person regarding sin and behavioral righteousness. I believe that this is a statement of hyperbole to express the thought that this generation needs to strive against sin.

Matthew 5:31-32 – Divorce Explained

This question about divorce is a typical argument in Jewish societies, even today. The main question revolves around Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Here is the 1st Century debate:

Mishnah Gittin 9:10

Beit Shammai, an early Jewish school of thought, says: A man may not divorce his wife unless he finds out about her having engaged in a matter of forbidden sexual intercourse [devar erva], i.e., she committed adultery or is suspected of doing so, as it is stated: "Because he has found some unseemly matter [ervat davar] in her, and he writes her a scroll of severance. And Beit Hillel says: He may divorce her even due to a minor issue, e.g., because she burned or over-salted his dish, as it is stated: "Because he has found some unseemly matter in her," meaning that he found any type of shortcoming in her. Rabbi Akiva says: He may divorce her even if he found another woman who is better looking than her and wishes to marry her, as it is stated in that verse: "And it comes to pass, if she finds no favor in his eyes".

Jesus was engaging in this debate, giving the true intent of the Law (Matthew 19:3-9).

Conclusion:

Righteousness is used here as behavioral rightness in alignment with the behavioral standards that God gave to Israel in the Law of Moses.

Jesus came to both explain the Law and give the true example of the Law as well as be their Messiah King.

As we have explained previously, this is not about going to heaven. In the spiritual state, will there be saints without limbs? The purpose of teaching the Law properly was to have them be prepared to survive the day of the Lord and enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Timeless Truth:

We know that one of the greatest problems in the believer's life is that of sexual sin. The emphasis in this text is one that we have learned from Ephesians 4 on Sundays as well. The root of sin is the futile mind of the flesh. We need to grow into spiritual maturity and avoid, at all cost, sexual sin, whether in the mind or actually physically manifested.

The principle of God's intent about marriage is here, but we cannot apply this to someone who has gone through a divorce. The problem in Matthew is that the Jews misunderstood and misapplied the Law to their benefit so that they could keep divorcing and marrying another. They were not loving, and they were not representing the character of God correctly.