

Matthew 5:17-26 "Love is the Fulfilling of the Law"

Read Matthew 5:17-26

1. (17) It would seem Jesus may be responding to an underlying critique around his approach to God's law. What do you think might be behind this?

This critique was likely on two fronts.

First – this was a culture where hospitality was central. Who you were hospitable toward, ate with, shared a roof with communicated something. It communicated that you approved of them, their lifestyle, thinking, and way of being. Jesus spent the bulk of his time with sinners and outcasts and the religious leaders were thinking – he can't do that unless he's gone soft on God's law.

Second – his approach to the Sabbath. The Sabbath regulations were to honour it, rest, do no work. It begged the question – what is work? The scribes had literally 1000s of laws around that question. They were fence laws, they would literally put a fence around the law so you couldn't get anywhere near breaking sabbath unless you first broke one of the fence laws. Jesus never broke Sabbath but he walked all over their fence laws.

They also debated between light and heavy commands. If two of God's laws came into conflict which one took precedent. For example if you encountered someone on the Sabbath who was in need of help, could you work to serve or save. In other words which was the heavier command, love of neighbour or Sabbath keeping. For Jesus love of neighbour took precedent, for the Pharisees it was Sabbath keeping. This difference led to significant conflict.

2. (17-20) How does Jesus invite his followers to approach the Hebrew scriptures?

To uphold them – all of them. For they are binding upon us until his kingdom comes in its fulness.

To abolish was to wrongly interpret the command so as to nullify it. To fulfil was to rightly interpret the command so as to live in step with it. His Kingdom would not be about relaxing the commands but about living in step with them.

Such obedience to the law would be central to how his kingdom advances. For unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will not enter the Kingdom. (vs. 20)

In the rest of chapter 5 Jesus will give 6 examples of how this works – what the righteousness of his followers will look like compared with that of the scribes and Pharisees.

3. (21) How did the Pharisees understand and apply the 6th commandment?

The Pharisees limited the law to simply referring to the physical act of murder. If you were to break the law the penalty would be being brought before the municipal justice system.

4. (22) What are the raw materials of murder that reside in our hearts?

Anger – in Gk. Orge – the kind of brooding anger – that stewes about what the other person and done or said to us. It is an anger we keep alive feeding our bitterness and resentment.

Insult – Raca – an almost untranslatable word that refers to a tone of voice more than anything else. Raca - an attitude of dismissive contempt.

You fool – Gk Moros - from which we get Moron – but this was not so much about insulting a person’s intelligence but about calling into question someone’s moral character – assassinating their character – running them down with others. It’s final expression is to say the world would be a better place without you in it – hell would be a better place for you.

You can see the building of consequence. Now at one level this is hyperbole but at another it is pointing the consequences God-ward. The true reason we should be repulsed by seeing the raw materials of anger in our hearts is that the other has infinite value – created in the image of God – should never be treated as an object of our scorn – treated as a means to an end.

5. (23-26) God’s commands even in the prohibitive form always enjoin and entail the positive – press toward right relationship. How do Jesus’ examples invite us to the work of restoring relationship?

(23) If you are offering your gift at the altar. There was only one altar – in the temple in Jerusalem and if you were offering a gift there it was an offering for the forgiveness of sins. Let’s say you were giving an offering for the forgiveness of stealing, while you drove to the temple in the Porsche that you stole. Jesus says that offering is null and void – God won’t forgive you – why? Because true repentance entails restitution. First return the Porsche then seek forgiveness.

Similarly if you are asking for forgiveness for a way that you have wronged another and you haven’t asked for forgiveness from them or sought to make it right – God won’t forgive you – why? Because true repentance entails restitution. First go make an attempt to bring peace, ask for forgiveness, then come back.

The exchange of the peace in our communion liturgy is meant to be this moment in our service. Go make it right!

(25) Come to terms quickly with your accuser otherwise it'll devolve from there. Every one of us has the experience of leaving a broken relationship unresolved and know that the longer we leave it the harder it is to restore. One commentator mused – 9/10 broken relationships could have been restored if they had been addressed right away.

6. How can the love of God expressed for us in Jesus lead us to live this way?

When we feed the fires of our Orge – our brooding anger – we are focusing on the other's fault, flaws, failings. As a result we avoid looking at ourselves, where we have contributed. The one who is rooted in the good news of Jesus, that we are sinners saved by grace, knows that as a sinner we most contributed to this – and his love allows us to see that and name that.

As the Spirit pressed that truth down we are given a true assessment of ourselves, cutting away any sense of superiority, banishing Raca's dismissive contempt.

As the Spirit continues to root us in the gospel, we come to see more and more that there was only one relationship in the history of the world where the blame lay squarely on only one parties shoulders. Humanity separated from God in sin and rebellion, and the blame lay squarely on our shoulders. Yet at infinite cost, and infinite risk to himself God came to us in Jesus, died our death, laid his life down in love, all so we might be restored.

When that gets into us, when that moves us, and to the degree it moves us by the Spirit – we will in turn take the initiative to make it right with others.

7. How did the teaching of Jesus speak into your own broken or strained relationships?

This is a personal question.

As a leader you can set the tone on this question. Your openness will move others to be open for the benefit of mutual accountability and prayerful support.

This question would be incredibly helpful to guide your prayers for one another.