



## Week 2

### Day 1 - Matthew 5:21-26

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

### Understanding the Passage:

This week, we're looking at a section of the Sermon on the Mount commonly called the Antitheses (plural of antithesis). In each antithesis, Jesus presents a commandment from the Old Testament, or a thesis, and then reinterprets and, in most cases, strengthens that commandment in light of how he expects his disciples to live. There is an affirmation of what the Old Testament says, and then a radicalization of what it says – a thesis followed by an antithesis.

Jesus is stepping into his role as the Messiah. The only person who cannot only add supplementary material to the Hebrew Bible, but also command a new interpretation of the sacred texts and make his interpretation a directive straight from God. Only the Messiah can add Scripture to Scripture based on his interpretation of Scripture.

There are six antitheses in total. When taken with Jesus' teaching directly beforehand in 5:17-20 about him coming not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (which is a kind of antithesis itself), that makes for seven. In Jesus' culture, the number 7 symbolizes completeness and perfection. Matthew, the writer of this gospel, is signaling to his audience

that Jesus' teachings offer a perfect picture of what life in the Kingdom movement is supposed to look like.

So here, in 5:21-26, Jesus affirms what the Old Testament says about murder – “You shall not murder” from Exodus 20:13 and “Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment,” which doesn’t show up verbatim in the Old Testament, but its essence shows up in several places e.g., Exodus 21:12 and Leviticus 24:12. Then, Jesus radicalizes those commandments – you shall not be angry, you shall not insult, and you shall not call anyone a fool. We read this and think, “There’s a big gap between murdering someone and being angry with them,” but that’s the point. If you want to be in the Kingdom movement of Jesus, the expectations are really high. Not only are we responsible for our behaviors that cause physical harm, we’re responsible for our words and emotions. We will be held accountable for them.

So what does this look like in the real world? Before you drop a dollar in the offering plate, go and make peace with that person you can’t stand. Don’t let church or religion or anything get in the way with you making peace with someone. Don’t wait another moment – go and make peace now, or you will be held accountable for the anger in your heart. No reason is a good reason not to make peace with someone.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. What is an “antithesis”? Think of your own definition.
  2. How is Jesus fulfilling his job as the Messiah in these passages?
  3. Who are you angry with? Who would you like to insult (or have insulted!) today?
  4. What is stopping you from making peace with that person?
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### **Day 2 - Matthew 5:27-32**

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.”

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

### **Understanding the Passage:**

These are two of the six antitheses in this section. They deal with two separate commandments from the Old Testament; Jesus commands a new interpretation of each one. But there is a theme that unites both: there is no room in the Kingdom movement of Jesus for the objectification, exploitation, or abuse of another person.

"You shall not commit adultery" comes from Exodus 20:14. Strictly speaking, this verse commands total fidelity in marriage for both women and men, though in practice when people were caught in infidelity, it was normally the woman who was punished (see John 7). Jesus gives a new commandment: not only is infidelity forbidden, but so are lustful thoughts about another person. It is remarkably counter-cultural that Jesus singles out men for having lustful thoughts when usually adultery was blamed on the woman, though it should be said that women are not excused from this teaching. The intention is that no disciple will objectify another human being and see them as a tool for sexual gratification. Sexual exploitation by using another person merely for the purpose of fulfilling desire is not allowed.

"Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" is a summary of Deuteronomy 24:1-4. It gives a man the authority to divorce his wife for any reason; he simply must cite something "objectionable" about her, put it in writing and give it to her, and then ask her to leave the house. In practice, a man could divorce his wife just because he didn't like her, or because he wanted to marry another woman, leaving the first wife alone without a home, food, or income. Her only real recourse in life is to marry another man, which is technically adultery in the Old Testament, but she wouldn't be in that situation if her husband hadn't divorced her! Again, Jesus takes the counter-cultural stance of protecting women. He will not allow men to divorce their wives for any reason whatsoever and kick them out into the cold. Divorce is an acceptable though regrettable course of action for disciples of Jesus, and so the threshold for divorce should be high.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. How are these antitheses a way of protecting people?
  2. Take a moment and confess to God when you have fallen short of the commandment not to lust.
  3. Take a moment and pray for friends and family who have been divorced or are going through a divorce.
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### **Day 3 - Matthew 5:33-37**

"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one."

### **Understanding the Passage:**

The Old Testament allowed for people to swear an oath in the name of God (Leviticus 19:12, Psalm 50:14). Reasons for doing so would not sound so foreign to us; if you've ever had to serve as a witness in court, you are asked to swear in the name of God that you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth. When you swear in the name of God or in the name

of anyone else important to you, you're saying that what you're about to say is as true and pure as the person you just cited.

But there's another way of looking at it – shouldn't you just tell the truth anyway? Why would you have to swear by someone else for your words to be true? Doesn't that mean we should assume someone is not being truth if they don't swear by someone's name?

That's the stance Jesus takes. You shouldn't have to swear at all. Just be truthful. In the Kingdom community of Jesus, people tell the truth without having to qualify it. It's a call to integrity. Tell the truth, nothing more and nothing less. Don't bring God or anyone else into your truth-telling to make it more true, or else we'll have reason to suspect you would not have told the truth otherwise.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Telling the truth must be important for Jesus to include it in the Sermon on the Mount. Why do you think that is?
  2. Are there situations when it's appropriate to withhold the truth? Why or why not? What do you think Jesus would say about those situations?
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### **Day 4 - Matthew 5:38-42**

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

### **Understanding the Passage:**

Here is the passage on which all the civil rights and non-violence movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century rest – Jesus' commandment to turn the other cheek.

The Old Testament commands a policy of complimentary retaliation (see Leviticus 24:19-21). If someone does some kind of harm to your person, family, or property, you are entitled to return the harm in equal measure or demand payment of equal value. For example, if your neighbor accidentally kills your goat, you are entitled to a goat or compensation in equal value to a goat. Or if someone strikes you in the face, you are permitted to strike that person back with equal force. It's a policy that was intended to restore justice without excessive force. You can't demand two goats for the loss of one goat. You can't take an arm if someone slaps you in the face. It was supposed to limit violence while at the same time ensuring justice was done.

But Jesus commands a policy of non-complimentary retaliation. If someone offends you or harms you, you are not entitled to return the offense or harm in equal measure. Instead, you respond with an act of non-violence that humbles the offender and starts to restore peace between the offender and the offended.

If someone sues you for your coat, go ahead and give them your cloak (more valuable than a coat) because such an act of generosity will humble them and force a new conversation about forgiveness and friendship. If a Roman officer tells you to carry his pack for him (as was common in Roman occupied territory), go ahead and go two miles because it will humble him and force him to see you as a human being instead of a pack mule.

There is a big difference between non-violence and submission. Jesus is not telling us to submit to the people who harm us, wound us, offend us, or wish us ill. Instead, he's calling us to a new way of seeing things. To paraphrase Dr. King: don't try to beat back the darkness with more darkness. It will only lead to more darkness. Instead, try beating back the darkness with light. That's what non-violence is. It's an active form of working for justice without adding to the harm already done.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Why do we feel the need to "get even" with people? Have you ever acted upon that need? What were the consequences?
  2. Have you ever seen someone turn the other cheek and respond to violence with love? What was it like?
  3. What's the difference between non-violence and submission?
  4. What role does forgiveness play in this?
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### **Day 5 - Matthew 5:43-48**

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

### **Understanding the Passage:**

Jesus ends this section of the Sermon on the Mount with a bang. Enemies are not to be hated and persecutors are not to be despised. They are to be loved. If you're a disciple of Jesus, your only permissible response to enemies and persecutors is love.

What we must understand about the Sermon on the Mount is it both *prescribes* behavior for the world as it is now and *describes* the world to come. So we are to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors now – that's a prescription for life today. But why?

Because in the world to come, when the Kingdom of Heaven has blanketed the earth, there will be no enemies and persecutors. There will be no us and them; there will be only us. How do we get there? Jesus gives us the procedure – love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. That's the core strategy in the Kingdom of Heaven playbook, because when

you love an enemy and pray for someone who would never pray for you, you reverse the curse of hate. Hate ceases to gain territory and starts to lose it. You start to see your enemy not as an enemy but as a fellow human being who, if life had turned out differently, could be your friend. You start to see your persecutor not as a persecutor but as a flawed person just like you, someone not beyond the capacity to love and be loved. Jesus' commandments serve a much higher purpose and they point the loftiest vision of all – they are a means, a mission plan, of spreading the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

One day, the entire world will be perfect. The Greek word for “perfect” is *telos*. It means “complete” or “whole.” God’s strategy in restoring the world to a status of completeness and wholeness is by working through people who live as if that day has already come. The more and more we live that way, and the more people who sign up for this way, the more turf for the Kingdom God will have won.

### **Questions for Discussion and Reflection:**

1. Who is your enemy? How can you love them?
  2. Who is your persecutor? How can you pray for them?
  3. The problems of the world are so big, and the Kingdom of Heaven can feel so far away. What are the small ways you can choose to live differently as if the Kingdom were already here?
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### **Video Questions:**

1. What is an antithesis? What is Jesus trying to do in these teachings?
2. What does it mean that Jesus is calling his disciples to be “more Jewish”?
3. What about these antitheses would make Jesus unpopular among the scribes and Pharisees?
4. Dr. Pace gave an illustration about building a headboard with his daughter. What was the intention behind this illustration?
5. What are the three types of antitheses?
6. In the conversation about retaliation, Rev. Horton brings up a 1:0 ratio. What does that mean?
7. David says Jesus loved his enemies and died for them, and that is how Jesus is the fulfillment of the law. What about for you? How is Jesus the fulfillment of the law for you?
8. Dr. Pace provides a quote from Frederick Buechner. What does that quote say about Jesus and our need for help?
9. What is the contrast between Jesus’ way of living and your way of living? Where could you make some changes?
10. Notes, reflections, and prayer requests.