

Matthew 5:20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Righteousness is that which satisfies the demands of goodness or law. It is doing what is right. To be called righteous means that one is in a right standing with God. The Jews primarily thought of righteousness in terms of keeping the law.

The scribes and Pharisees were the religious teachers in Jesus' day who to the average Jew had reached the highest level of righteousness possible in keeping the 248 commandments, the 365 prohibitions of the Mosaic Law (Stott, 74) and the thousands of rules in their own legal system. Therefore, for Jesus to demand even greater righteousness must have left His hearers gasping in dismay and conscious of their own sinfulness.

Verses 21-47 explain how the Pharisees' and scribes' righteousness should be surpassed. True righteousness is to exceed Pharisaic righteousness in *kind* rather than *degree*. True righteousness is from the heart rather than mere outward observance. It is not enough to be content with an external and formal obedience, for the righteousness that is pleasing to God is inward righteousness of mind and motive (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 9:6; Phil. 3:3). 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "The Lord looks at the heart." Jesus said, "Blessed are *the pure in heart*, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).

This is the righteousness foreseen by the prophets as one of the blessings of the Messianic age (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:27) when God would put His law and His Spirit within us. Without this righteousness, none shall enter the kingdom of heaven.

In verse 17 Jesus made Himself the One who fulfills the OT (see notes there about the various ways He fulfills the OT). In verse 21 and following He illustrates how the OT law is fulfilled in His teaching.

Matthew 5:21-47 is divided into six blocks of material, each in the format "You have heard ... but I say to you" (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). The thing that "was heard" is often not the OT law as such, but the law as it was understood and applied. As Moo says, "the formula used by Jesus suggests He is quoting the OT *as it is usually heard by His audience*. Whether that 'hearing' involved interpretative elements not properly a part of the text can be determined only by carefully studying the actual quotations and Jesus' response to them" (Moo, *Jesus and the Mosaic Law*; *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 20 (1984), p.18).

In light of verses 17-19 it must be remembered that "Jesus is not primarily engaged in extending, annulling, or intensifying the OT law, but in *showing the direction in which it points* on the basis of His own authority" (Carson, 144). He is not rejecting the OT but is contrasting "what was said" with His own more demanding ethic. He is showing how one's righteousness is to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees – a necessity in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

France (197) points out that each of the blocks of material in Matthew 5 are treated a little bit differently by Jesus, but there are some commonalities to them all as follows:

- 1) Jesus promotes a concern for *inward motive* above the outward, visible, quantifiable observance of regulations.
- 2) Jesus goes beyond rules to *principles* that govern the conduct of God's people.
- 3) Jesus is not as concerned about the avoidance of sin as much as He is in *discovering and following the will of God*.
- 4) Jesus presents an *open-ended ideal of being perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect* - which will always remain beyond the grasp of the even most committed disciple.

France then concludes,

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 Pharisees – and of any other religious traditions which understand the will of God in terms of the punctilious observance of rules.

What then happens to the jots and tittles of the OT law? They are taken up into a far more demanding "fulfillment" which leaves some of them on one side as having no role in the true life of the kingdom of heaven . . . They remain, no doubt, as part of the God-given revelation of the law which points forward to a better way, and in that sense they are not abolished. But the disciple should now have moved beyond them under the guidance of the Messiah in whom that fulfillment has come" (France, 197-198).

In the first two examples of how Jesus' teaching fulfills the law (Matt. 5:20-26 and 27-30) we see that Jesus takes the law up in His own teaching and reapplies it to His followers.

Matthew 5:21-22

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER ' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court (literally "the judgment" τῆ κρίσει); and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court (literally, "the Sanhedrin" τῷ συνεδρίῳ) ; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (literally, the Gehenna of fire τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός).

The prohibition "Thou shall not murder" is found in Exodus 20:13. The Bible does not forbid the taking of life in all instances. Capital punishment and wars designed to eliminate pagan tribes that inhabited the Promised Land were permitted (Stott, 82-83). But the intentional and unlawful taking of a life was forbidden by Mosaic legislation and anyone who committed murder had to appear before the court.

Jesus is *not* saying that anger, insults, and contempt are the same as murder. Rather, He is stating that “murder is only an outward manifestation of the inner attitude which itself is culpable, whether or not it actually issues in an act of murder” (France, 199). As John said, “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 Jn. 3:15).

The command “you shall not murder” *reflects* God’s moral will, but it is *not identical* to God’s moral will. God’s will goes beyond the outward act of murder to the intent and attitude behind it. According to Jesus, the commandment pointed to a prohibition of anger, insults, and contempt. In other words, a follower of Jesus obeys this commandment in a new form as part of a larger “package”– a package defined by Jesus which includes inward attitudes. It is not enough to not murder; we must submit to the authority of Christ and not have thoughts or speech that are bedmates with murder either.

“Stupid” (“good-for-nothing” - NAS; Raca [Ρακά] in Greek and some translations) or “fool” (moros [μωρός] the root of the English terms, "moron, moronic") are ordinary, every-day words that are not considered to be exceptional forms of abuse, or crimes that society takes as a basis of litigation. However, since Jesus places anger in the same category as murder, the angry person is liable to the same penalties as the murderer. Both are deserving of hell.

Here the word for hell is “Gehenna”, a word that comes from the Hebrew word ge-hinnom (Valley of Hinnom), which is a ravine south of Jerusalem. The valley was once associated with the pagan god Moloch and the disgusting rituals that took place in Moloch worship (child sacrifice – 2 Ki. 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; sorcery - 33:6; Jer. 7:31). When King Josiah abolished these practices, he defiled the valley by making it a dumping ground for garbage and the corpses of criminals (2 Ki. 23:10). In Jesus’ day it was a trash heap, smoldering with fires used to burn the trash. The place then became a picture of the eternal torment that awaits the unbelieving (Carson, 149; cf. Matt. 3:12; 25:41; Heb. 10:26; Rev. 14:10; 20:12-15). Hades, by contrast, is not understood as a place of punishment but the place of the shadowy existence of the dead (France, 202). (see additional notes on hell below)

In verses 23-26 Jesus gives two illustrations of the principle just stated. The first illustration deals with our attitude toward others during worship, the second is in a judicial setting. The first concerns a brother, the second an adversary. Remarkably, neither deal with people we are angry with but rather with our response toward people who are angry with us. This makes Jesus' point even stronger. If we are truly concerned about anger and hatred, we should also be concerned when we cause others to be angry as well (cf. Eph. 6:4).

Matthew 5:23-26

23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

The first picture is drawn from Jewish life as an individual is about to offer a sacrifice in the Temple. It is at this moment, when about to cast himself upon divine mercy and seek God's forgiveness that he recalls that a brother has a complaint against him. What is he to do? Is he to say, "As soon as I have offered this gift I will go straight to my brother, and make things right?" No. He is to leave his offering and first reconcile with his brother. If he did not do so he would be making worship of God a mockery.

Of course, the converse of this is also true. We are to both forgive and seek forgiveness when we have offended others. Mark 11:25, 26 says, "Whenever you stand praying, *forgive, if you have anything against anyone*, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." Likewise, Jesus taught us to ask God to "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

If we keep the Sermon on the Mount in the historical context, we can imagine how shocked those who heard Jesus must have been. The only place that had an altar where offerings could be made was the Temple in Jerusalem. Jesus was giving the Sermon in Galilee, about a week's travel from Jerusalem. In other words, Jesus envisages a worshipper who had traveled 80 miles to get to Jerusalem with a sacrificial animal to worship at the Temple. He then remembers that he offended someone. In order to be reconciled, he most likely has to travel back to Galilee. After that, he can go back to Jerusalem to finish his offering. Travel to and from Jerusalem twice would entail about one month of travel time. This emphasizes even further Jesus' point of the importance of reconciliation.

The Bible continually reminds us that God is more concerned with our hearts than our outward religious activity (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps.51:16, 17; Isa. 1:11-17; Jer. 7:8-11). It is more important to restore relationships with others than to perform religious duties. Jesus had already told us "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Ro.12:18). We are commanded to love God with all our heart (Deut. 6:5). In order to do this, we need to put our human relationships in order.

The second example (5:25, 26) is about a person whose case is being taken to court.

In Jesus' day, an offender was thrown into jail until his offense was paid. Because he was in jail, he had no means to pay it and be released unless friends or family paid it for him. Thus, people were wise to settle matters before going to a judge.

In this scenario the offender sees the plaintiff making his way to court. Jesus advises him to settle things before they get there. Luke 12:57-59 helps make this passage easier to understand (although the application in that context is warning Israel to be reconciled to God): "For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, so that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I say to you, you will not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent." In Luke, Jesus warns men to be reconciled to God before it's too late. Both Luke and Matthew are stressing the same urgency of being reconciled as soon as possible – one to God, the other to men – before they face the judge and it is too late to avoid punishment.

In conclusion, Jesus is not making a radical departure from the law, nor is He simply affirming the true intent of the law; rather, He is claiming by His own authority that “His teaching on these matters is the direction in which the laws actually point” (Carson, 148). Or, as Moo says, “Jesus ‘fulfills’ the law by proclaiming the standards of the kingdom righteousness that the law anticipated” (Moo, *Ibid*, 352).

Many think that they can enter the Kingdom simply because they are good people. “At least I haven’t murdered anyone”, they say. Yet here Jesus strips all illusions of self-righteousness away. Have you ever wished someone was dead? Have you ever been angry? Who has not shown contempt for a fellow human being? Jesus says that these things are deserving of hell. Therefore, we must do all that is in our power to get rid of these attitudes as quickly as possible (Eph. 4:26-27; Matt 18:30-34).

ADDITIONAL NOTE: OUR PROBLEM WITH HELL

Probably the greatest difficulty people have in believing in hell is in reconciling the love of God with eternal punishment. If we, whose love cannot compare to the love of God, could not send someone to hell, how could God do such a thing? Furthermore, the punishment doesn’t seem to fit the crime. No matter how bad someone is, no one deserves an eternity of torment.

In order to discuss this difficult subject, we must understand a little about the attributes of God. An attribute is an inherent quality of God that helps define who He is. For example, we say God is love, holy, eternal, and unchangeable. All of these describe qualities about Him; therefore, they are called attributes.

God's wrath, unlike His love, is not considered one of His attributes. Wrath is the response of His holiness to sin. Where there is no sin, there is no wrath. By contrast, the love of God will always be there. When a holy God confronts sinful man, wrath is the natural outcome. If we dilute the wrath of God, we dilute His holiness.

One problem we face in understanding how a God of love could send someone to hell is that we don’t understand perfect holiness, love, nor do we understand the hideous nature of sin. If we were honest with ourselves a lot of the things the Bible calls sin don’t seem all that bad. Consequently, we cannot understand why God would have such a severe reaction to them. If we truly understood the nature of sin, we would free ourselves of it completely for it would be utterly offensive to us. The fact that we can live among sinners rather easily and take pleasure in sin ourselves demonstrates how far short we fall of perfect holiness.

Therefore, we must first come to grips with the fact that we cannot understand God's holiness and His violent response to sin based on our own understanding of it. God has revealed the proper response to sin based on His own perfect character. The response to sin is wrath and judgment. If we do not share the same response, it is because we are flawed, not Him.

Secondly, we are confused about how love and wrath could co-exist since in our experience anger and love usually exist in two separate compartments. Love drives out wrath and wrath drives out love. We come closest in bringing the two together when we must deal with a wayward child, but normally we do not think of a wrathful person as loving.

But this is not the way it is with God. God's wrath is not a blind, emotional outburst. It is a reasonable response to the sinner who affronts His holiness. If sin did not offend Him, He would not be holy. Men deserve the wrath of God. They do not deserve His love. If God loves, it is because He chooses to do so for there is nothing in us that compels Him to love us. The real mystery isn't in God's wrath; it is in His love.

Thirdly, many of us are mistaken in believing that forgiveness entails overlooking another's faults, turning a blind eye, or that it is a necessary requirement of love. That is, if someone sins against us or God, we believe that we are required to forgive them unconditionally or we are not acting in love. The assumption is that to love is to forgive and to forgive is to love. Of course, love does often lead to forgiveness, and forgiveness is a loving thing to do, but the question is must God forgive us if He loves us? The answer is, No! In spite of the fact that God loves us, forgiveness is not obligatory. This is obvious or all would be saved and the cross would be unnecessary. Forgiveness of sin is conditioned upon repentance and faith in Christ. God demonstrates His love for us through the cross, but at the same time forgiveness cannot take place apart from it.

Finally, even if we were to convince ourselves that there was no hell, denial does not change reality. Failure to believe that God is a God of wrath actually lessens our ability to appreciate the cross. The cross is where the love and holiness of God meet. God is so holy that He cannot endure the slightest sin, but so great is His love that He poured out His wrath upon His Son to our benefit.