
Jesus said to His disciples, ²¹ ‘You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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. ²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. ²⁷ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ ‘It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” ³² 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. ³³ ‘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.” ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Matthew 5:21-37 (NRSV)

In 1971 English rockgroup ‘Led Zeppelin’ released a song that has often been described as one of the greatest rock songs of all time, and certainly comes at the top of the list for many people’s ‘greatest rock song of all time’: ‘Stairway to Heaven’. Just over ten years after its release, many Christian evangelicals protested against the song, claiming that if the music was played backwards it had a message of worship to Satan. However, when played backwards, no such words are found. In response to the allegations, the records company issued the statement: "Our turntables only play in one direction—forwards." And one of the band members called the allegations "totally and utterly ridiculous. Why would they want to spend so much studio time doing something so dumb?" The lyrics of the song, however, are greatly debated and discussed – not least because even the authors of the song (Robert Plant and Jimmy Page) do not even agree on their meaning. But at its heart the song is about someone who pursues material wealth at the expense of the search for the ‘spiritual’ and things of greater meaning.

However, there is a line in the song (which was intended as a question) that we may wish to reflect upon, and that is "Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run, there's still time to change the road you're on." There is an implied idea (refuted in the song, by the way) that somehow in the journey of life one can delay making important decisions in relation to 'the spiritual'. But we note (as also reflected in passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:2: "Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation") that we shouldn't be 'putting off' important 'decisions' or 'responses' in relation to a life of faith.

In our Scripture readings for today we have an overarching theme of listening to God's word, and the call to live according to God's Word. In Deuteronomy 30 we hear (30:19-20): "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying Him, and holding fast to Him." And Jesus gives some very specific words that are challenging for many today.

As we come to this passage today (Matthew 5:21-37) it is important to understand its context. Jesus was gathering with his disciples near the Sea of Galilee. While near the Sea of Galilee, the disciples and Jesus climbed up the high brown hills, and from there He began to teach them. The first thing that Jesus taught his disciples was about true joy verses temporary happiness. Then, after teaching his disciples about joy, he said, "You salt of the earth." And part of this call was to be like a 'preservative' for society. Jesus then began his teachings about personal morality.

As Jesus spoke these words He made a comparison. He began each section by stating "You have heard it said to the people of old..." Here Jesus is referring to God's Word as it is written. And here Jesus reaffirms the value of God's Word (as He had said, as recorded in Matthew 5:17: "'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.'")

When Jesus spoke as He did, He was saying that there is a definite continuation between the past and the present. We must never look on life as a kind of battle between the past and the present. The present grows out of the past. After Dunkirk, in the Second World War, there was a tendency to look for someone to blame for the disaster which had befallen the British forces. At that time Churchill, as he then was, said a very wise thing: "If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future."

But as Jesus reaffirms 'the past' He also points to a different 'future'. And so he says, "But now I say to you..." And here Jesus speaks with an authority which no other person had ever dreamed of assuming. . Right at the beginning of His ministry, after He had been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, it is said of His hearers: "They were astonished at his teaching; for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the Scribes" (Mark 1:22). Matthew concludes his account of the Sermon on the Mount with: "And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching for He taught them as one who had authority and not as their Scribes" (Matthew 7:28-29).

And at first Jesus' words seem to be very radical and difficult (especially the words concerning 'divorce'). But there is an incredible compassion in Jesus' words.

Those are very strong words. There are some on one hand who see the words of Jesus as being totally radical in that Jesus urges us to take the law far more seriously than perhaps we sometimes do, and this is true. We know deep down that we are meant to take God's commandments seriously. So often look for 'except' or 'but' clauses, but Jesus says, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No' mean 'No'. Don't fight. Settle disputes. Honour people. Work at marriage. Don't create wriggle room. Take God's word seriously. And, at this point I am sure we would all agree that God's intent is for people to get along, to honour and love one another, and to tell the truth. Is Jesus wrong? After all, what else would we want to teach children... "Do whatever you like"?

There are others who reflect on Jesus' words regarding divorce. In reflecting on the Old Testament there were people in Jesus' time who said that a man could simply say, "I divorce you" three times, and he had no further obligation to his wife. Could you imagine that? And so Jesus' words "Whoever divorces a person except for grounds of unfaithfulness" is designed to protect people. And isn't that what we want...?

But there are others who say that when Jesus preached this sermon He knew of our sin, our struggles, and the hurts others cause us. Therefore, Jesus is over-emphasising the law to show us that we are utterly helpless to follow the law. This approach views the law essentially as a word from God that is not about guiding the Christian life, but only really about showing our failures and driving us to Christ for mercy.

Certainly, if we take Jesus' word in the wrong way we may end up with more questions than answers. And it's easy to 'weaponise' Jesus' words to 'control people'. But we also need to acknowledge that we are called to take God's word seriously.

We are called to acknowledge that we are to 'strive daily to lead a holy life'. And here, of course, we also need to know Jesus as our Saviour.

It must always be remembered that this passages are spoken to *disciples* of Jesus, and not to people in general (Matt.5:1-2). Furthermore, to the disciples Jesus said, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off."

Now, if even if only a small portion of Jesus' followers today followed through with the plain-sense meaning of this teaching, we'd run into mangled faces and hacked off limbs every time we went to the grocery store, the movies, or work. Of course, even the most stringent of biblical literalists don't advocate for taking this teaching word-for-word. And so, what does Jesus mean? He wants us to consider the state of our heart. At another time Jesus said (Matthew 15:19): "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Jesus is concerned with the state of your 'heart'. What is your 'intent' as you share life with other people?

If we seek to use Jesus' words about anger, adultery, marriage, and divorce like a sledge-hammer, and try to control people, we need to ask again 'What is our intent? Where is our 'heart'?' And if we don't see God's word as being 'fulfilled' in Jesus (Matt.5:17) all we will end up is with a bunch of rules that make life itself miserable.

When some men brought to Jesus a paralysed man, lying on a mat. Jesus said to the man, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Matthew 9:2). Jesus also says, "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). And on that special night, Jesus took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to His disciples, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28)

When Jesus began The Sermon on the Mount He said, "Blessed are you." Then the commands follow. But because we do not keep the commandments, Jesus climbed up a cross to bring us forgiveness and life. Yes, we are still under obligation to keep the commandments. But because we don't Jesus says, "I forgive you." We are never off the hook, yet we are continually loved. As Jesus' disciples, we have a new way of life; It is a life that demands much, and promises so much more. That's what it means to belong to God. As God's children we rejoice in God's holy power, and saving and forgiving love for us and all people in Jesus. What a wonderful gift this is. Amen.