

Chapter 12: “You Shall Not Murder”

Matthew 5:21–26

In the previous section, Jesus gave a general overview of his authoritative teaching on the law featured in the Old Testament. There, Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). As a part of fulfilling that law, Jesus now begins to unfold the full requirements of the law—requirements that had been misunderstood, neglected, ignored, or even denied by the religious teachers of the day. In Matthew 5:21–26, Jesus offering what Bible commentators call his “antitheses,” where he teaches contrary to the prevailing understanding of the day. As Jesus teaches on the Sixth Commandment, he reminds us of the full requirement of the law, to *love your neighbor as yourself*.

The Requirement of the Law (Matt. 5:21–22)

In each of the six “antitheses” in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus begins by identifying what the people have *heard*. Jesus begins with the sixth commandment: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’” (v. 21). It is important to note at the outset, as Craig Blomberg reminds us, that “‘Murder’ is the correct rendering since the underlying Hebrew (*ratsach*, sometimes translated ‘kill’) did not include killing in self-defense, wars ordered by Yahweh, capital punishment following due process of law, or accidental manslaughter.”¹ As Jesus mentioned in the last section, he has not come to abolish this law, or even to relax it, but to fulfill it to the uttermost (Matt. 5:17–19). We must be very clear that what Jesus will oppose in each of these six sections (including this one) is not the law itself, but rather the traditional *interpretation* of the law. In each case, the law had been interpreted too narrowly, requiring only so much as the letter demanded, and nothing else. In the case of murder, then, the traditional teaching had insisted on nothing more than refraining from taking a life unjustly.²

This teaching did not, however, penetrate to the heart of the matter: “Not a word about God and what by this commandment he requires of the heart! Not a word about the lusts and the passions that lead to actual murder and, though they produce no murder, are just as wicked as murder!”³ Therefore, Jesus insists on the full significance of the law with his first antithesis: “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.” (v. 22). In

¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 106.

² “The amount of it is, that they had changed the doctrine of the law into a political order, and had made obedience to it to consist entirely in the performance of outward duties.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:284.)

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 217.

each of the six antitheses, Jesus counters the prevailing teaching on his own authority with an emphatically stated “I” (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).⁴ Thus, Jesus’ opposition is not to what “was said” to those of old (i.e., by Moses), but to what the people “have heard” from their teachers.⁵

Jesus counters the common teaching on the Sixth Commandment by identifying three ways to transgress the Sixth Commandment that would not have been recognized as such. First, he says that anyone who is merely *angry* with a brother “will be liable to judgment.” Now, in a passage where Jesus is teaching against unnecessary limitations on the scope of the law, we should not limit “brother” to someone’s male siblings.⁶ Toward one’s “brother,” then, Jesus says that even *anger* is enough to incur judgment. What is the judgment? R. T. France is correct to observe that, according to the Old Testament, there was only one judgment that one would incur for murder: the death penalty.⁷ Second, Jesus says that anyone who “insults his brother will be liable to the council”—that is, to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.⁸ Third, Jesus teaches that saying “You fool!”⁹ is liable to “the hell of fire.” Lenski explains the background to the word for “hell” γέεννα (*gehenna*):

South of the walls of Jerusalem lay the valley that was desecrated by Moloch worship, in which children were burned (Jer. 2:23; 7:31; II Chron. 28:3; 33:6), Josiah declared the place unclean (II Kings 23:10), and it was then used as a place for the disposal of offal (Jer. 7:32, etc.; 31:4). Thus *ge ben-Hinnom*, “the valley of the son of Hinnom,” became γέεννα or Gehenna, a designation for hell, the place of the damned. The addition “of the fire” refers to the fire of hell. The eleven passages in which Gehenna occurs cannot refer to the valley near Jerusalem. We have no evidence that the Jews ever burned criminals alive, or that the bodies of dead criminals were dragged out of this valley, or that constant fires were kept going there. Hell cannot be abolished by such interpretations of Gehenna.¹⁰

How does it make sense that mere anger should deserve the death penalty? Why call the full Supreme Court to judge insults? Why should a particular insult condemn someone to the fires of hell for all eternity?

Some commentators see here a progression of severity of sins (anger, general insult, cruel insult), each incurring a progression of severity (judgment, Sanhedrin, hell of fire). There are a number of problems with this view, however. First, to be liable to the death penalty might seem on the surface to be stricter than to be liable to the Sanhedrin. Jesus was, after all, condemned to death by the

⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 297. The Greek language does not require an explicit subject (“I”) with the verb, but Jesus’ “I” is both superfluously included and emphatically placed at the beginning of each sentence.

⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 217.

⁶ Carson, “Matthew,” 182.

⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 200.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 107.

⁹ Blomberg explains that the word “Raca” was a “quasi-swear word in Aramaic” that “probably meant something like *empty-headed*.” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 107.)

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 220.

Sanhedrin, but they couldn’t carry out the punishment without the permission of Pilate (Matt. 26:57–66; 27:11–26). Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus is using these three to warn of “the danger of eternal judgment.”¹¹ Second, an emphasis on varying degrees of punishments would miss the central lesson that Jesus is teaching: “namely, that the root of evil lies in the heart, where love must be substituted for hatred and indifference, and sincerity for hypocrisy and selfishness.”¹² Third, if these are three sins of increasing severity, accompanied by three punishments of increasing severity, what is left for those whose anger breaks beyond the passions of the heart and into actual, murderous action?¹³

Here, as in each of the other five antitheses, Jesus is pressing beyond the letter of the law to get to the heart of the law. R. T. France’s discussion on how Jesus’ righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) is worth quoting in full:

(1) It promotes an “inward” concern with motive and attitude above the “outward” focus on the visible and quantifiable observance of regulations. (2) It goes behind specific rules to look for the more far-reaching principles which should govern the conduct of the people of God. (3) It is concerned not so much with the negative goal of the avoidance of specific sin but with the far more demanding positive goal of discovering and following what is really the will of God for his people. (4) It substitutes for what is in principle a 100 percent achievable righteousness (the avoidance of breaking a definable set of regulations) a totally open-ended ideal (being “perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”) which will always remain beyond the grasp of the most committed disciple. 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 the Pharisees—and of any other religious traditions which understand the will of God in terms of the punctilious observance of rules.¹⁴

This is not the same thing as saying that “anger is equal to murder in God’s sight.”¹⁵ That idea would draw murder *down* to the level of anger, rather than drawing anger *up* toward the level of murder. No one (least of all Jesus) truly believes that murder is equally heinous as anger;¹⁶ however, Jesus is

¹¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 107.

¹² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 298.

¹³ “What greater penalty could be inflicted beyond hell-fire?” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 218.)

¹⁴ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 197.

¹⁵ Pace Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 219.

¹⁶ The Westminster Larger Catechism helpfully clarifies this point: “All transgressions of the law are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others” (WLC 150). Among such aggravations, a sin is more heinous “if not only conceived in the heart, but breaks forth in words and actions” (WLC 151.3).

ferently arguing that those who are angry without murdering are thereby acquitted.¹⁷

Martyn Lloyd-Jones draws an interesting correlation to Paul’s discussion of sin in Romans 7:7: “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Lloyd-Jones writes, “Paul...once he thought he was keeping the law perfectly. Then he suddenly understood that the law said ‘Thou shalt not covet’, and at once he was convicted. ‘When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.’ He had not realized that it was the spirit of the law that mattered, and that coveting is as reprehensible under the law as the actual doing of the deed itself.”¹⁸ The Tenth Commandment against covetousness presses beyond external acts to internal attitudes. The Heidelberg Catechism’s exposition of the Tenth Commandment is so helpful: “Q 113. What does the tenth commandment require of us? A. That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God’s commandments should ever arise in our heart. Rather, we should always hate all sin with all our heart, and delight in all righteousness.” This is precisely the sense of the law that Jesus is giving in the Sermon on the Mount.

Reconciliation with a Brother (Matt. 5:23–24)

After Jesus extends the Sixth Commandment to condemn even anger arising within our hearts, he applies this law to our daily lives with “two illustrations (some call them parables), one involving a ‘brother’ to whom you need to be reconciled, and a second involving an ‘adversary’ to whom you must be reconciled.”¹⁹ Still, we should not think that Jesus is just telling some stories to fill out his sermon. In the context of the looming judgment that he has just described, nothing could be more important than learning to apply this teaching!²⁰ Further, we should not pass too quickly by the little word “so” in the ESV, which might be translated “therefore.” William Hendriksen writes, “The very word ‘Therefore’ shows that what the Lord is about to say follows directly from what he has just stated. It is a positive application of the rule that the heart must at all times be filled with love, not with anger and hatred.”²¹

In the first illustration, Jesus says, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (v. 23–24). Grant Osborne summarizes the simple principle from this illustration: “Reconciliation in the kingdom community is so important that it has priority over worship. The imperative for ‘go’ is present tense (‘leave’ and ‘be reconciled’ are aorist), stressing the ongoing movement of the one who goes and seeks

¹⁷ While sins have varying degrees of heinousness in the sight of God, the Westminster Larger Catechism continues with this very important counterpoint: “Every sin, even the least, being against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his righteous law, deserveth his wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come; and cannot be expiated but by the blood of Christ” (WLC 152).

¹⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:221.

¹⁹ Osborne, *Matthew*, 188–89.

²⁰ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 107.

²¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 299.

reconciliation.”²² To clarify, we should note that Jesus is teaching about the *sequential* priority of reconciliation over worship, not about any *ultimate* priority. As John Calvin observes, the Sixth Commandment against murder is in the second table of the law, while the whole first table of the law gives ultimate priority to the worship of God. Calvin further explains: “it is a false and empty profession of worshipping God, which is made by those who, after acting unjustly towards their brethren, treat them with haughty disdain.”²³ We cannot worship God as we ought to until we are reconciled with our brothers.

In this, we should not overlook the inconvenience this would cause. Osborne writes this: “We must remember that Jesus’ disciples were from Galilee and rarely got to Jerusalem, so this only happened once or twice a year and was an important event (the “altar” is the sacrificial altar in the inner court of the temple). Also, there were probably long lines waiting, so the picture is of one who had been there some time and was finally able to perform his solemn duty.”²⁴ Even so, right worship requires us to reconcile with those who have something against us.

Reconciliation with an Accuser (Matt. 5:25–26)

In the last section, Jesus offers a second illustration: “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” (v. 25–26). At first, it may seem unclear why Jesus adds this illustration to his exposition of the Sixth Commandment. What does settling a financial debt have to do with the commandment against murder? John Calvin probably has the best answer to this question:

But I interpret the words as having been spoken with another view, to take away occasion for hatred and resentment, and to point out the method of cherishing good-will. For whence come all injuries, but from this, that each person is too tenacious of his own rights, that is, each is too much disposed to consult his own convenience to the disadvantage of others? Almost all are so blinded by a wicked love of themselves, that, even in the worst causes, they flatter themselves that they are in the right. To meet all hatred, enmity, debates, and acts of injustice, Christ reproves that obstinacy, which is the source of these evils, and enjoins his own people to cultivate moderation and justice, and to make some abatement from the highest rigor, that, by such an act of justice, they may purchase for themselves peace and friendship. It were to be wished, indeed, that no controversy of any kind should ever arise among us; and undoubtedly men would never break out into abuse or quarrelling, if they possessed a due share of meekness. But, as it is scarcely possible but that differences will sometimes happen, Christ points out the remedy, by which they may be immediately settled;

²² Osborne, *Matthew*, 191. The aorist describes a single, complete action. Thus, Jesus is saying to continue “going” as you (abruptly) leave, accomplish (completely) reconciliation, and then return to offer your gift in worship.

²³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:286–87.

²⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 190.

and that is, to put a restraint on our desires, and rather to act to our own disadvantage, than follow up our rights with unflinching rigor.²⁵

The contrast between these two sections, then, gets at two different situations. In the first illustration, Jesus described the ideal—a conscience so tender as to leave worship to reconcile first with a brother. In this second illustration, though, Jesus now describes a last-ditch effort to reconcile before it is too late. John Nolland writes, “The approval of God which stands implicitly behind the resumption of sacrifice is likely being contrasted with the judgment of God which stands implicitly behind the punitive action of the legal officials.”²⁶ Jesus is warning us not to be so stubborn that we obstinately refuse to reconcile, even when the judgment is coming.

While Jesus uses a civil case to illustrate the issue, it is clear that what he says has implications for our eternal judgment. If we refuse to reconcile with our accusers, they may hand us over to the Lord to be judged by him! The idea of being put in prison until we have paid every last “penny” describes the absolute smallest amount of money that would have to be repaid. Osborne writes, “Think of it as the amount earned for one-sixty-fourth of a workday or = seven and a half minutes of work in an eight-hour day. The message is that you will receive the maximum penalty, so reconciliation is all the more urgent.”²⁷ Once the judgment comes, there will be no negotiations or settlements. God’s wrath must be paid in full, so reconcile before it is too late!

Discussion Questions

1. What does “murder” refer to in the Sixth Commandment (v. 21)? How had the Sixth Commandment been traditionally understood and taught by the religious leaders? Why does Jesus find that interpretation so unsatisfactory? What does Jesus mean when he says that anyone who is angry is liable to the judgment of the death penalty (v. 22)? How does this teaching underscore our utter guilt before God? How does this teaching call us to live instead?
2. In Jesus’ first illustration, how does the Old Testament background of the scene at the major festivals fill out the great inconvenience it would have been to leave an offering at the altar (v. 23–24)? What does this illustration teach us about our relationships with others? What does this illustration teach us about our relationship with God? What is one relationship where reconciliation would require you to inconvenience yourself?
3. In Jesus’ second illustration, what does the threat of debtors’ prison symbolize? What might harden someone from seeking to come to terms with an accuser, as Jesus here suggests? Why does the Sixth Commandment condemn pride that would keep us from reconciling with a neighbor? What is one relationship where pride has gotten in the way of settling with an accuser in your own life? What step might you take to lay down your pride this week toward reconciliation?

²⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:287–88.

²⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 234.

²⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 192.

4. How does Jesus exemplify what he teaches here? How does he love his neighbor as himself? In the illustration of the worshiper leaving the offering to go reconcile with his brother, what role does Jesus play? In the illustration of the debtor coming to terms with his accuser, what role does Jesus play? How does the love of Jesus fulfill the Sixth Commandment? How does the love of Jesus affect your love for him? How does the love of Jesus affect your love for others?