

Matthew 5:21-48

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But 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. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly 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.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰And 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. ³¹It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But 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.’

³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone

forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Reflection

Jesus here continues his challenging teaching, reminding his followers—and us—that it is not enough to fulfill the letter of the law. Rather, what is in our heart matters as much as what we do.

I am certainly well acquainted with anger, and Jesus' teaching that my anger makes me "liable to judgment" is hard to hear. Of course, there is great wisdom here. Anger consumes the heart, and when rage is kindled within me, I am not able to be my best self, to love others, or even to love God fully. This is why reconciliation is so very important.

Then we come to the tough bits about retaliation and loving our enemies. How different would our world be if we sincerely and devoutly prayed for our enemies, if we loved them, rather than wishing our enemies harm or dispatching armies to kill them? I'm not sure how this plays out in foreign policy, but I do know that every time I have prayed for the well-being of someone who has harmed me, my heart has been transformed. It is not easy to hear, but the call of the gospel is not "they should be punished as they deserve" but rather that we should love our enemies. We are called to be perfect, something that we will never achieve, though the quest will bring us ever closer to Jesus.

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Questions

Taking one example, Jesus says to “Give to everyone who begs from you.” This command must have presented some of the same challenges to Jesus’ listeners as it does to us today. Why do you think Jesus asks this of his followers?

For several days, try praying for an enemy, perhaps a coworker or a relative or a terrorist. Does this change you? Do you think it changes your enemy?

Prayer

What you ask of us is impossible, Lord Jesus, and so we beg you to help us repent and try again whenever we fail to follow you. Amen.