

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, give us a truly generous heart towards those who find themselves in difficulty. Because we live in a world full of distress and trouble, may we always be prepared to help those who are needy for whatever reason; and may we be generous to them in every possible way; for You have been generous to us, Lord Jesus Christ. We give You our thanks and praise; AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

On-going prayers

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Meditation

Live as if you know that Christ will come:

Reject the words He would not wish to hear you say;
Accept the power He gives to change you for the better.

Reject the things you do of which you are ashamed;
Accept the saving work of Christ by which you are set free!

Reject the friends you know will lead you far from God;
Accept the fellowship of those who live within the Kingdom.

Reject the thought that God does not have more for you;
Accept the path of holiness which leads you on to higher things.

Reject the world's discredited agenda for the future;
Accept the Gospel truth; the world will soon be 'born again'!

And live as if you know that Christ will come.

Bible passage - Matthew 5:21-30

²¹ 'You have heard that it was said to people of old, "Do not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." ²² But I say to you that anyone who is angry with someone will be liable to judgment; and if you insult them, you will be liable to the High Court; and if you curse, you will be liable to the fires of hell.

²³ So when you present a gift at the altar, and you remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there at the altar and go; first be reconciled to that person, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Settle quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and then you will face jail. ²⁶ I assure you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷ 'You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." ²⁸ But I say to you that anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

²⁹ 'If your right eye makes you to sin, get rid of it and throw it away; it is better for you to lose a part of yourself than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand makes you sin, get rid of that and throw it away; it is better for you to lose a part of yourself than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

Bible Study

Review

Jesus had just said that He had come to do away with the traditional Jewish understanding of scripture and instead fulfil the 'law and the prophets' Himself (5:17-20). Our passage today begins a series of six teachings which remind us of the Old Testament Law, and yet each of them gives us new insight into God's Word. The six teachings are about murder (5:21-26), adultery (5:27-30), divorce (5:31,32), the swearing of vows (5:33-37), retaliation (5:38-42) and the love of one's neighbour (5:43-48), and we study the first two of these today.

The way in which Jesus dealt with each issue was straightforward, and its consequences are extraordinary. He quoted from the relevant commandment from the Old Testament by saying 'you have heard it said ...' (5:21,27 etc.) and then went on 'but I say to you ...' (5:22,28 etc.) giving His own assessment of the Law and indicating that a deeper understanding of God's ways required an even higher standard than that set out in the Ten Commandments! For centuries, Rabbis had added their own interpretations to the Jewish Talmud, or 'body of learning', of the Law; but Jesus did not wish to enter into this debate and merely comment on the law and how it might be kept. By using the words 'but I say to you ...' Jesus spoke with authority as the Messiah, telling his listeners that behind the Law lay a deeper understanding of both God and human nature. The two subjects of 'murder' and 'adultery' in our passage today follow this pattern exactly.

When we read verses 21 to 26 which give Jesus' comments about murder, it is relatively easy to see that He went behind murder to find its root causes in anger. This puts each of us on the back foot, because we all experience what it means to be angry! Unfortunately, the judgement for anger is a triple sentence from the local courts ('liable to judgement'), the High Court, or Sanhedrin ('liable to the High Court') and the eternal judgement of God ('liable to the fires of hell!'). It is not easy to imagine who might escape such justice because of its all-embracing severity; however, Jesus goes on to give two examples of how we may deal appropriately with anger in the midst of normal life. The first is an example of unresolved issues between friends, and Jesus tells His followers that such anger should be resolved before worship and be offered to God (5:23,24); and the second concerns resolving issues with someone who has made an accusation, and not being a personal friend, takes you to court (5:25,26). With these examples, Jesus urges His followers to deal with their anger now before it gets out of hand. The more you think about it, the more you realise how effective this advice could be. By following Jesus' advice you can deal with your own anger, even if you cannot deal with the anger of someone else!

In verses 27 to 30, we read Jesus' comments on adultery. He was not the first person to perceive that behind adultery lay lust (5:28) for there are rabbinical teachings which do the same. However, the way Jesus developed the theme is extraordinary, instructing us to remove those parts of our bodies which cause us to sin! It is hard to imagine that Jesus meant this literally, despite the obviously pernicious power of lust, and even the most literal of conservative interpreters of scripture do not, generally, suggest mutilation as being the command of Christ for the punishment of lust (though in early history there are some examples of people making themselves eunuchs for this reason, including the eminent 2nd century scholar Origen). All this is enough to make anyone wince, but the problem remains, how can we interpret this passage?

With hindsight, we know that Jesus Himself gets rid of sin through His death on the Cross, and this is the heart of the doctrine of Salvation that has upheld the Church for two thousand years. Bearing this in mind, verses 29 and 30 may be illustrative of the manner in which Jesus Himself was 'cut off' from 'the Body' (God's people on earth) to save us from sin! You may think this approach rather strange, but we should not shy away from it. Jesus indicates progressively through the Gospel of Matthew that He fulfils the prophecies of Isaiah about the Messiah, and amongst these prophecies are the words 'He was taken away ... for he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgressions of my people ...' (Is 53:8)!

This passage has much to teach us both about ourselves and about God, and we have only just scratched the surface!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

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Going Deeper

Our scripture today contains essential teaching from Jesus. It deals with how His preaching of the Kingdom of Heaven relates to the historic work of God through the 'Law and the Prophets' (vv17,18) and goes on to make two observations as a consequence. The first is about the responsibilities of living and teaching the Kingdom (v19), and the second concerns the righteousness which lies at the heart of Christian discipleship. It is a tall order to study all this in one session, but they do closely relate, and as the only variation of these verses in scripture is a brief passage in Luke (16:16,17), I believe these four verses are original to Jesus' teaching in this form, and belong together.

The abolition of the Law and the Prophets?

Most Christians know that the Pharisees embodied a tradition of legalism, and they readily accept that Jesus came to replace that tradition with the 'law' of love. This is a reasonable summary of the teaching of Paul based upon the life of Christ, from Romans (ch.7) and Galatians (5:14 in particular); but it does ignore some important points which will help us understand what Matthew (and Jesus) said about the Kingdom of God. As I go through the next paragraph, do not worry if you cannot remember the technical words. I ask you to follow this through with me as you read, and you will see that what comes out at the end is important; more valuable, I suggest, because it is not clearly explained in most commentaries.

In order to understand Matthew 5:17,18, it is wise to recall the way that the scribes and Pharisees handled their scriptures and developed their religious practices. The Jewish traditions of learning (Talmud) were based on the written law (the 'Torah', or first five books of the Bible) and the oral 'law' (Halakah) that was believed to have been handed down even from the time of Moses. Scribes and Rabbis interpreted the law and applied it to their own times by a process of investigation, called 'Midrash', which led to a considerable range of additional written material about the law, called 'Mishna'. By Jesus' day, the Law had been translated into Aramaic 'Targums', and the process of translation together with the tradition of Midrash had produced a large body of Mishna, some held by the Pharisees, and others held by other groups such as the Sadducees (who did not believe in the resurrection).

What we should note from all this is that God's 'Law', the first five books of the Bible, which is best understood as God's 'ground rules for life' found within everything from descriptions of creation (Gen 1,2,3) to legal codes (Ex 20) and stories (Most of Genesis 12-50), was the most important scripture for the Jews. It was more important than the 'Prophets' (including, what we think of as the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, which were called the 'former prophets') and the other 'Writings' in our Old Testament. This grading of God's Word is not something we are used to, but was well understood in Jesus' day.

Secondly, the Rabbis and Pharisees based their understanding of scripture as 'the Law' on their own developed oral and written material, added over the centuries. For them, the Prophets and the Writings were of secondary interest, valuable for reading and discussion, but not as what we would call 'God's Word' on a par with 'Law'. They did not use the Prophets to interpret the Law as Christians do today.

On reading many commentaries on this text for these studies, most of them discuss, without considering all I have written above, whether verse 17 and 18 mean one of two things. Firstly that Jesus came to do away with the Old Testament Law completely and replace it with his law of 'love'; in which case, some say, we can virtually abandon the Old Testament. Secondly that Jesus came to 'fulfil' the law, in order to bring out its meaning by being obedient to it and completing it; in this way the Old Testament remains in force, but we, then, fulfil it only 'through' Christ. Strictly speaking, though again not mentioned in most commentaries, the first option is mightily close to the beliefs of the 2nd century church leader Marcion, who, as the mainstream Early Church regulated its belief that the New and Old Testaments spoke with 'one voice', was excommunicated for his beliefs and declared a heretic in 144 AD! We are therefore left with some form of the second option.

A new interpretation

What is not made clear, and is the purpose of my writing, is that Matthew is making a new case in his Gospel for how to interpret the Old Testament. I believe he realised this directly from the teaching of Jesus, and it is evident in our passage today. Jesus said 'do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets ... but to fulfil them'. He placed equal emphasis on the 'Law' and the 'Prophets' here and in other teaching (Matt 7:12, 11:13, 22:40) and declared that he had come to fulfil them both, which means that he would, in his person, meet the legal demands of the Law and also fulfil the interpretation of the Prophets in the Old Testament; the Old Testament is to be interpreted by Jesus himself and the Prophets.

I firmly believe that this transition of Biblical interpretation is rooted in Jesus' teaching, and that Matthew spotted it. This is why in so many of the stories of Jesus, and in particular the early ones we have just studied, Matthew describes the way Jesus 'fulfils' prophecy (1:23, 2:6, 2:18, 3:3, 4:15,16). Further, when Jesus comes to John in the wilderness, he asks to be baptised to 'fulfil all righteousness'. The very phrase

itself held together the Law, which described 'righteousness' through both the faith of Abraham and the law of Moses; with the prophets whose words were spoken in order to be 'fulfilled'.

This is easy for us to say now, because we are used to it as traditional Christian doctrine, but consider this against the background of traditional Jewish teaching in his day. It is extraordinary! It is quite new! Those who look for some new item of Jesus' teaching not taught before miss the point. What is new is that he places the Prophets on a par with the Law, and declares that he fulfils them! He has taught across the face, as it were, of the Jewish traditions of his day, but not the Old Testament. God's Messiah could not be extracted from mire of traditional teaching, and a new approach was required.

We are now used to interpreting the 'Law' as well as the historical stories of the Old Testament according to the Prophets. We abide by what they say and not the Jewish Mishna; for example, we do not consider legalistic offerings to be 'what God wants' (Isaiah 1:11), and even have services to renew our 'Covenant' with God using the words of the Old Testament Prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-33). The Prophets, generally, spoke unrepentantly about the failings of Israel, but they pointed to a solution of her problems in the Messiah; and it makes sense, therefore, for us to say that Jesus, our Messiah, fulfils the 'Law and the Prophets'. For this reason Christians believe the Prophets (and also the Writings, but that is another story!) to be an equal part of scripture to the 'Law' – contrary to Jewish belief.

So, when Jesus said 'until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter or stroke of the pen will pass from the law ...' (v18) he was able to say this because he had reinterpreted the whole Jewish system; not the scriptures themselves. He replaced the Jewish Talmud, the old interpretation of Halakah, Midrash and Mishna, and threw it away. By so doing he opened up the scriptures of the Old Testament to all, and invites us to discover how He himself, the Messiah, fulfilled of the 'Prophets'.

Living and teaching the Kingdom of Heaven, and 'righteousness'

For this reason, Jesus taught next about the importance of the 'Law'. If someone were to break the law, whoever they are, they set an example to others; no-one, in any part of the world, lives so isolated an existence that what they do does not affect those around them. Also, if a teacher were to break the 'Law' that they are supposed to teach, then that would be equally dire. Both were dismissed by Jesus; they would be 'called least in the Kingdom of Heaven'; however, those who lived God's Law and taught the same would be 'called great ...' (v19).

This verse could only come after the previous affirmation of the Law by Jesus, and it sets the scene for the teaching that is to come in the rest of the 'Sermon on the Mount'. Over and over again during the next couple of chapters, comparisons are made with the Old Testament Law; but if we thought Jesus was giving us an easy option by re-interpreting the 'Law' and the 'Word of God', then we have misunderstood Him.

The great objective of the 'Law' was to secure 'righteousness' as a bridge between God and His sinful people. The fact that the Law failed to do this by itself is the reason why the Messiah had to come, not because Paul says so in his letters (see above), but because the Old Testament Prophets declared it to be God's way and God's will. Jesus, in fulfilling the Prophets, called therefore for a higher standard of righteousness than that on offer by the 'Scribes and Pharisees', with their Talmud, Mishna and Midrash. His work, as Messiah, was to succeed where the Law, albeit good of itself, had failed. Verse 20 makes all this quite clear, and again, sets the scene for what is to come in Matthew's Gospel; though it will be some time before we discover how we are to attain that higher standard.

I hope you can see the importance of this passage of scripture. It is a crucial text about the work of the Messiah in Matthew. Our understanding that Jesus replaced not the Old Testament itself, but the interpretative system of the Scribes and the Pharisees and their religious practices, is one that the Church has wholly taken on board today; though most Christians largely develop their understanding of this through the letters of Paul, rather than the Gospels.

The interpretation I have given of this passage is confirmed by the famous story of the transfiguration in Matthew 17. Here, Jesus meets Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the Prophets) on a mountain top. When Jesus appears together with these two great figures before the disciples, a voice from heaven speaks for a second time in the life of Christ 'This is my Son, the Beloved ...'

Matthew, for one, firmly believed he had got it right about Jesus, the Law, and the Prophets!

Application

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How do people deal with anger in the secular world? How can the saving work of Christ help someone deal with anger?
2. Do you have any experience of the legal system, and does your experience bear out Jesus' advice in verses 25 and 26?
3. How can we best deal with lust? Discuss in your group whether the cutting off of body parts is a part of scripture which should be studied or forgotten!

Personal comments by author

I find the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to be very important and it affects me quite deeply. Unless I had come across the interpretation of verses 28 and 29 as given above, I would have struggled merely to say that these words were some kind of exaggeration for effect, or unknown literary device. As it is, by reminding me of Christ, they help me understand the full effect of what Jesus has done for me, and for this I am grateful.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *If this passage has touched you because of personal problems to do with anger or lust, then do not delay to spend time in prayer, and fast if possible. Ask the Lord to help you understand why you have a problem, and guide you to His answer.*
- *Talk with your spouse or a close family member, preferably someone with whom you live about any problems of lust or anger you have. This is not easy, but if you are able to do this, you will be greatly blessed.*

Final Prayer

Dear Jesus; some things are hard, some things are easy. Sometimes I find my way through problems, and sometimes only with difficulty. I need Your help. Give me a vision of Your love which has saved me for ever from the consequences of my sin, and lead me to trust in this great love of Yours: AMEN
