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Matthew 5:21 - 5:26



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses Jesus' interpretation of the law of Moses in Matthew 5:21-26. Jesus provides six examples to illustrate God's concern for giving the law to learn about loving, just, merciful, and faithful dealings. Jesus also emphasizes the importance of settling disputes with our brothers and sisters rather than going to court, as God is concerned with justice and acting justly towards our neighbors. Gregg encourages us to focus on these lessons and their relevance in our daily lives.

Transcript

In this session, we're going to start looking at those six examples that Jesus gave of his interpretation of the law of Moses. He said that he did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it, and in order to illustrate what he meant by that, he gives six examples. We will only be able to take one of them today, and we will have to work slowly through these because they are so pregnant with meaning and so relevant to so many areas of our lives.

And so we will not rush through them, but he basically says in verse 20 of Matthew chapter 5, that if your righteousness does not exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Elsewhere, he clarifies what's wrong with the scribes and Pharisees and their so-called righteousness. It is that they kept the external and ceremonial laws of God, but neglected the weightier matters or the more important matters of the law.

Jesus said that in Matthew 23, 23 when he rebuked them for that thing. And when he said they neglect the weightier matters of the law, he told us what those matters are, justice and mercy and faithfulness. These really are the components of love for your neighbor.

If you love your neighbor, you will be just toward him, you will be merciful, and you will be faithful toward him. And so Jesus illustrates that the concern that God had in giving the law was that we would learn to be loving, that we would be just and merciful and faithful in all our dealings. And Jesus here gives two examples of each of these.

And the first one he gives is in verse 21 through 26. I will read it in its entirety and then we'll go through and talk about it in its parts. In Matthew 5, 21, Jesus said, And there remember that your brother has something against you.

Leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there until you have paid your last penny. And then he goes on to the next illustration, which has to do with the command, you shall not commit adultery. Now one thing may puzzle some here, and that is that he starts out by talking about the command, you shall not commit murder.

And then in his discussion of it, he seems to go very far afield from the subject of murder. He talks about being angry, then he talks about if your brother has something against you, and you bring your gift to the altar, and then he talks about agreeing with your adversary quickly before he takes you to court. What does all that have to do with murder? Well, it has to do with it as follows.

The command to murder, I should say to not murder, is an easy command for most people to keep. I mean, maybe, maybe most people at some point in their life would kind of like to see somebody's lights put out. I mean, there are some people who are simply an annoyance or a real inconvenience or maybe even a true threat to our lives, who we would be very relieved if they were not around.

Maybe even if we heard they died, it would be a relief. Most of us, however, do not have any serious intention of murdering them. The temptation to actually murder probably does not occur to most people very strongly.

And therefore, the Pharisees congratulated themselves that they never murdered, but that's not too hard to avoid doing. What Jesus is trying to point out is the command not to murder is simply one of the commands that illustrates God's concern about a larger principle. What is that principle? Why, it's the principle of justice.

Now, why do I say that? Well, think about it. We can demonstrate that a few ways. One is that the other illustrations Jesus gives have to do with justice.

And he's saying, essentially, you may not murder, but you might violate justice in other ways that are less, you know, drastic. And we'll talk about those in a moment. But let's think about murder for a moment.

What is it that's objectionable about murder? Now, many people would give the wrong answer, I think. I think many people would say, well, murder is taking a human life. And human life is sacred because it's made in the image of God.

Well, that's not entirely true. I mean, it is true that human life is made in the image of God. It is even true that human life is at some level sacred.

But it can't be said that God objects to taking human life in every case, because we read in the same law that said you shall not murder, many times God commanded that certain people actually be put to death. The law of Moses, which said thou shalt not murder, also said you shall not permit a witch to live. And if somebody strikes or curses his father or mother, he should be put to death.

And a murderer should be put to death. And an adulterer should be put to death. And many other people, about 30 different crimes are listed in the Old Testament law as being punishable by death.

And in those cases, God actually commands that people be put to death. Therefore, the objection to murder cannot simply be that it ends a human life by human hands, since the ending of human life by human hands is commanded in some situations. Not all killing of humans is murder.

There is a difference between murder and capital punishment. Do you know what the difference is? Quite simply this. Murder is unjust killing.

Capital punishment is justice being done. You see, when a state takes a person who has killed people and puts that person to death, they are simply giving that person what he deserves. He has earned it.

He has it coming. It's his just due. It is an act of justice to punish criminals proportionately to their crime.

Now, by the way, it is not justice to punish a criminal disproportionately to his crime. In a land where if you steal a loaf of bread, they'll cut your hand off, that is a disproportionate punishment. That is not just punishment.

But likewise, because that's too severe, but at the same time, if a person rapes a woman and the judge just slaps his hand and finds him five cents, that's not just either. It's not just to punish a criminal too harsh, and it's not just to punish a criminal too leniently. There is a standard of exact justice, and God is the one who tells us what that is.

Exact justice means that the criminal is given the reward that his actions really deserve, not one that's more and not one that's less severe. Now, God is the one who's told us that certain crimes are so severe in his sight that they deserve death. And if a government does not put such people to death, then that government is not punishing justly.

They are punishing unjustly. Now, God is concerned about justice, and that is why, although he condemns murder, he approves of capital punishment, because it is just.

Certain actions actually deserve that the perpetrator be put to death, says God.

It's very clear. Even Paul says that. In the last verse of Romans chapter 1, Paul said, after he listed a long list of crimes, he said, who knowing that those who do these things are worthy of death, there are people who not only do them, but take pleasure in others who do them.

Now, Paul is the one who says that these things are worthy of death. On another occasion, when Paul himself was on trial for his life, Paul said, if I am an offender or have done anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying. By that he meant, I don't object to being executed, because he was on trial for his life.

He said, if I'm guilty of crimes worthy of death, I do not object to execution. That is, Paul did not object to capital punishment. Why? Because it is just.

If he deserved it, then he should get it. That's what he said. Now, that is the teaching of the Old Testament and the New.

But murder, on the other hand, is an unjust act of killing. Capital punishment is an act of justice. Murder is an act of injustice.

Murder takes place when a person who has done nothing that is a capital crime is put to death. If a person has stolen a fish and he's put to death for that, that is murder. He has not done anything worthy of death.

On the other hand, if a person is just walking down the street, and a man jumps out of the alley and knifes him to death, that's murder too, because the man had done nothing worthy of death. It was an act of injustice. It is depriving a man of his right to his life.

And that's what injustice is, depriving a man of his rights. So, God is opposed to murder, but he's not opposed to all killing of human beings. What is the difference? The issue is justice.

God is against injustice. You know, many times people who are pro-life are criticized by those who are pro-choice because they say we're inconsistent. They say, well, you say you're pro-life because you don't want to see the fetus destroyed, but you're in favor of capital punishment, which means you're in favor of killing people.

So you're not consistently pro-life. Well, there's a sense in which maybe pro-life is the wrong label. Maybe the right label is pro-justice.

You see, to be in favor of capital punishment, but to be against abortion, is consistent if the guiding principle is justice. There is no justice in killing an innocent baby in the womb, but there is justice in killing a murderer. And for that reason, it is a question of justice, not so much of the sanctity of life.

And for that reason, the command not to murder underscores God's concern about justice. It does not underscore God's concern about the sanctity of life, since God is favorable toward executing certain people who do certain crimes. That person's life ceases to be sanctified in the way that would entitle him to live, according to both the Old and the New Testament.

And Jesus, by the way, never changed that. But what he says is this. You've heard that you will be in danger of judgment if you murder.

Let me tell you something else, he says. I say that if you're angry at your brother without a cause, you'll be in danger of the judgment. In other words, murder is not the only form of injustice that will put you at odds with God and put you in danger of being judged by God.

Actually, being angry at your brother without a cause is actually another injustice. Now, some manuscripts do not have this phrase, without a cause. If you're not reading the King James or the New King James, then you won't find this phrase, without a cause, there.

It'll simply say, whoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment. But even though some manuscripts read that way, that cannot be Christ's meaning. It cannot be that Jesus is saying that anyone who's angry is in danger of the judgment, since Jesus himself was angry on occasion.

And not all anger is sin. The Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4, be angry and do not sin. Well, if you can be angry and not sin, then there must be some anger that isn't sin.

Right? Okay. Well, also, in the third chapter of Mark, it says of Jesus, in verse 5, So when he had looked around at them with anger, being grieved by the hardness of their hearts, notice Mark 3, 5, Jesus looked on them with anger. Obviously, if Jesus never sinned, then not all anger is sin.

There is some anger that is not. So Jesus could not be meaning to say anyone who's angry is guilty of a crime before God, because that would make Jesus himself an offender, and it would disagree with what the Bible teaches elsewhere. So, I believe the phrase, without a cause, belongs there.

It's there in some manuscripts, it's not there in others. But certainly the teaching of Jesus is not against all anger, but against unjust anger. If you're angry at your brother without just cause, then you have stopped loving your brother without justification.

You are unjustly angry at him. That's what without a cause would suggest. And therefore, just like it is unjust to take his life, if he's done nothing worthy of death, it is also unjust to do something as minor as being angry at him without a cause.

That is a much lesser form of injustice. But what Jesus is pointing out is that injustice is what God objects to, whether it's big or small. Whether it's a big deal like taking someone's life unjustly, or a seemingly relatively small deal like just being angry at someone when it's not justified without a cause.

It's the injustice in the act. Likewise, he said, if you call your brother raka, or if you call him fool, you'll be in danger not only of the council, but also of hellfire. Now, the idea here is that if you despise your brother and view him as less than what he really is, you are esteeming him unjustly.

The word raka is an old Aramaic word that means empty-headed, worthless fellow. So what Jesus is saying is, if you view your brother with less respect than he really deserves, because there's no one who's really a worthless fellow and an empty head, and the person you call a fool probably isn't really a fool. That's probably just a term of contempt that you're using.

He probably really isn't a fool, at least not worthy of the title, more than you are. What he's saying is, you are unjustly critical. You are unjustly depriving your brother of the basic respect that another human being ought to have.

Now, this is all, of course, if he doesn't deserve it, but the point is, it's injustice. The injustice of murder finds a lesser manifestation in the injustice of hatred or anger toward another person unjustly. Both are instances of injustice.

Now, Jesus carries this theme of justice further when he says, in verse 23, Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, Now, what does that mean, your brother has something against you? What that means is that you have, in some sense, violated your brother. He knows it. You have maybe made a promise you didn't keep.

Maybe you've damaged something of his and have not replaced it. Maybe there's some other way in which he has suffered damage by you. You have treated him unjustly.

You have done something wrong to him. Well, if you come to worship God with your gift at the altar, and you remember that you have wronged your brother and he's holding that against you, then don't offer your gift, he said, until you make it right with your brother. Leave your gift there before the altar and go your way.

First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Now, what he's saying is this. The Pharisees and other Jews thought that what God was fascinated by was religious ritual.

Offering sacrifices is a good example of a religious ritual. You go to the temple and you jump through all the religious hoops and you do the ritual thing that God required. But what Jesus is saying is there's something more important than that to God, and that is

your relationship with your brother.

Have you done something unjust to your brother and you've never gone and made it right? Have you cheated him? Have you lied to him? Have you in some way injured your brother and he knows it and he's holding it against you? Don't you pretend like you don't know that. Don't you go worship God. God knows more than you think he knows, and he will not accept your worship as long as you have an outstanding, unsettled problem where you have injured your brother, he holds it against you, and you're just shining it on.

You're paying no attention to it. He says you don't even bother to worship God in that case because God cares more about the relationship between you and your brother than he does about your religious ritualism. Now, what he's saying, of course, is if you have treated your brother without justice, you go and make it right to him.

And then he says this in verse 25, and this is continuing on the same theme, really. Agree with your adversary quickly while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there until you have paid the last penny.

Now, what's this business of agreeing with your adversary while you are on the way with him? Who is this adversary, and where are you on the way to? Well, in the context, it's clear you're on the way to court. You have wronged your brother, and he's taking you to court. And if you don't settle with him out of court, then you may well go to jail for what you've done.

This is what it says in Luke, in the parallel, in Luke chapter 12, and verse 58. Jesus said, when you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you shall not depart from there until you have paid the last mite.

Obviously, this is the parallel in Luke, but it's clearer there. In Luke 12, verse 58, it says, when you're going with your adversary to the magistrate, that means to the judge, your brother is taking you to court. Why? Why do you do that? Well, obviously, you've done some wrong.

How do I know that Jesus is assuming you've done wrong? Well, he's assuming you're going to jail if you don't fix it. Obviously, he's talking about a situation where you have neglected justice. You have violated your brother's rights.

And he is angry at you, and he's taking you to court for it. Now, some people feel that they can just ignore their duty in business, or their duty to their family, or their duty to

their neighbor, and then go to church and sing the songs and raise their hands and say the prayers, and be a good Christian. Well, that can't happen.

It can't happen. If you are living in injustice, if you are making promises you're not keeping, you're violating the rights of other people, and then you go to church and worship God, it's all the same as if you brought your gift to the altar, and you remember that your brother has something against you. God will not accept your worship.

God will not accept your gift. You can pay your tithes. You can pay double tithes.

God won't accept it. Because you are living without concern for justice, and that is God's chief concern. And he says, don't think that you can get away with that.

And, you know, if your brother takes you to court about what you've done to him, don't think that God's going to bail you out. Why should he? You have neglected to make it right. Now, if your brother's taking you to court, the presupposition is you've done something to him that's punishable by the law.

And he says you make it right with him. What's that mean? Pay him what you owe? Settle the matter in a just fashion that's acceptable to him? If you don't do that, he says he'll turn you over to the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer, and they'll throw you in jail. Now, what Jesus is saying is simply this.

You should not think that your religiosity will deliver you from the consequences of your wrong behavior toward your brother. Don't think that because you offer sacrifices to God, that God will send angels to open the prison doors for you. No, he says you'll rot there until you pay the last penny.

What Jesus is saying is you will suffer the consequences, and God will not bail you out if you neglect this matter of justice toward your brother. If you are unjust to your brother, you better go make it right with him. Don't worship God before you've done that, because God won't listen to you.

God won't accept it. Furthermore, he says, don't expect God to get you out of jail. Don't expect God to spring you out of the consequences of your misdeeds if you're not making every effort to get right with your brother.

Now, there are times, of course, that you might not be able to get right with your brother, but in the passage I read a moment ago, in Luke 12, 58, Jesus said, when you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him. In other words, settle out of court. If it comes to court and you are guilty, God is not going to spare you from the penalties you deserve, because God is even more concerned about your breach of justice than the courts themselves are.

And the courts are there in order to enforce justice. And so don't think that by praying to

God or by doing something religious that you can escape the righteous consequences of your injustice. God is concerned about justice, and he is so concerned about it, he is more concerned that you act justly toward your neighbor than even that you worship God.

Of course, he wants you to do both, but he wants you to get right with your neighbor first. That's what Jesus said. So it's not just murder that God objects to.

He objects to murder because murder is an act of injustice. But God is opposed to all acts of injustice toward your neighbor, and God will see to it that you face consequences if you even are unjust in much lesser areas than that of murder. So Jesus is saying, you may think you're righteous because you don't commit murder, but you're missing the point.

God commanded against murder because he's against injustice. Murder is a classic example of injustice. But there are other examples, and you need to observe them all.

You need to make sure that you are just in all your dealings. Otherwise, you are not acceptable to God. You may bring your gift to God.

You may worship God, but it will stink in his sight. It says in Proverbs, even the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to God. Your worship to God stinks in his sight if you are not concerned about your relationship with your brother and acting justly toward him.

Those are the big issues, the weightier matters. More on this next time. We've just run out of time.