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Matthew 5:21 - 5:30 (Part 1)



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg explains the textual meaning of Matthew 5:21-30 in part one of his sermon regarding The Sermon on The Mount. He emphasizes the importance of avoiding sin in order to enter the Kingdom of God, as Jesus warned that even minor infractions can lead to dire consequences. Gregg also stresses that proclaiming oneself Christian and attending church alone is not enough without complete obedience to Jesus Christ in all aspects of life, a point reiterated by Jesus in the Sermon on The Mount. Finally, Gregg reminds listeners that only genuine repentance for sins can lead to salvation through the cleansing power of Jesus.

Transcript

Today we're continuing with our study in The Sermon on The Mount in Matthew 5. In the portion that lies immediately behind us, which we've covered in the last few sessions, Jesus has given his teaching regarding murder and adultery. Now, it's not simply that he has given his teaching on these subjects, but he's rather illustrating from these teachings on these subjects his approach or his understanding of the law. Thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not commit adultery are simply two samples from the law.

They're from the Ten Commandments. And when Jesus expounds on them, he's trying to point out to his disciples that the current religious ideas of their time were quite shallow and inadequate because they seem to only focus on the outward observance of these extreme commands. Don't kill, don't commit adultery, but on lesser matters where the same principles were involved.

Like being angry at your brother without a cause, or in otherwise wronging your brother. Or maybe you would not commit adultery, but you would do so in your heart by looking at your neighbor's wife in order to lust after her. What Jesus is saying is that these things are as offensive to God as the others because they are violations of the same principle.

It may be that murder is an extreme example of an injustice, and adultery is an almost equally extreme example of an injustice. Yet, there are lesser examples that may not come immediately to mind where we do injustices to other people all the time. And in

doing so, we offend God for the same reason that he would be offended if we murdered or committed adultery.

Now, that doesn't mean that every injustice is of equal weight. We know this when we read the Old Testament law that different crimes had different penalties. And the different penalties, of course, reflect different magnitudes of the crime.

But even if we say that different crimes have different weights, that does not mean that any crimes are tolerable. In Jesus said to the disciples, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. That's in this same chapter, verse 20.

So, the disciples were told that they have to exceed the scribes and the Pharisees in their righteousness. And he's pointing out that you're going to have to think differently about the law than the scribes and Pharisees do if you're going to exceed them in righteousness. The scribes and Pharisees, for the most part, did not commit murder or adultery outwardly.

But if you're going to exceed their righteousness, you're going to have to be looking out not only for the avoidance of these major crimes, you're going to have to look behind these and say, why is it that God objects to this? What is wrong with murder and adultery? And once I discover what it is that is wrong with murder and adultery, I can see that that same principle would forbid other actions, not quite so blatant or quite so heinous as murder and adultery. And so, Jesus points out that the injustice of the thing is what offends God. And therefore, if you don't commit murder and you don't commit adultery, but you do things that are equally unjust, you are still in violation.

And your righteousness, therefore, does not exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, which it needs to do. Now, after having talked on this matter of adultery and saying, if your right eye, this is Matthew 5:29, if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. I should say, the verse before that, he says, I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in her heart.

Then he says, and if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you.

For it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Now, let me just say from the outset that much harm has been done by people to themselves by not understanding what Jesus is getting at here. I have personally known individuals who tried to cut off their hand or some other part of their body which they considered to be the offender.

These were people who did not want to go to hell and they found that they were continually falling into sin and they felt like, well, there's nothing for it but to cut that part of my body off that's causing the problem. And I've heard of many cases, besides the ones I know personally, I've talked to pastors on many occasions who had members of their congregations who sought to mutilate themselves in one way or another in order to fulfill this requirement of what Jesus is saying. Well, unfortunately for these people, they failed to see the hyperbole, they failed to see the figure of speech and the symbolic meaning of what Jesus said.

Now, there's a lot of people who say you've got to take the Bible literally all the time. I disagree with this. I believe you should take the Bible literally when it's intended to be taken literally and you should take it whatever other way it is intended to be taken in other passages.

So, you know, if you have a parable, you take it as a parable. You don't take it as a historical account. If you have a hyperbole like this, then you take it as a hyperbole.

You don't take it as a literal instruction. When Jesus said elsewhere you have to hate your father and your mother and your wife and your children to be a disciple, he was not speaking literally. When Jesus said you have to take up a cross and carry it to be his disciple, he was not speaking literally.

Certainly, he was saying something. When we say it's not literal, it doesn't mean it doesn't mean anything. This is where I don't understand the thinking of some Christians.

They insist that everything is to be taken literally. And if you suggest to them, well, not everything is necessarily literal, then they think by saying that the parts that aren't literal don't have any meaning. That's absurd.

We all use figures of speech. We all speak in ways that are not exactly literal. And we intend for our listeners to recognize the figure of speech.

It doesn't mean that we're not trying to communicate something, some real message. It just means we're choosing a method of communication other than literalism, and we do it all the time. So do the biblical writers.

So when Jesus says we have to take up our cross and follow him, although he doesn't literally mean that we have to wear a wooden beam on our shoulder, he does mean something, and what he means is very important. It's just that we have to recognize his use of a figure of speech and then identify what his meaning is and then obey it and apply it to our lives. Now, in this instance of his telling the disciples about plucking their eye out or cutting their hand off, we have an obvious example of how a wooden literalism consistently applied to Scripture can be very dangerous because the Bible doesn't intend for us to take everything literally, and this is not a literal instruction Jesus

is giving.

There are several reasons that we know this, not the least of which is that your hand and your eye do not cause you to sin. They may be instrumental in sin, but the cause of sin is your heart. Sin begins in the heart.

Jesus said that to his disciples and to the Pharisees when he spoke to them in Matthew chapter 15, and it's found also in Mark chapter 7, when he told them that it's not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out of his mouth, and the disciples said, what's that all about? You offended the Pharisees when you said that, and he said, well, here's the deal. What comes out of your mouth comes out of your heart, and all the wicked things that come out of your heart are the things that defile a man. You see, it's a wicked heart that is defiling.

It's not what you eat. Likewise, if you look at a woman to lust after her, your eye did not make you sin. Your heart did.

It was that part to lust after her that came from your heart. Your eye simply obeyed your heart, your wicked heart. If you go out and steal something with your hand, or do some other kind of criminal act with your hand, your hand didn't cause you to sin.

Your wicked heart did. Now, Jesus is the one who taught us that elsewhere from here. So, when he says, if your eye causes you to sin, or if your hand causes you to sin, pluck it out, we know he's, you know, to take it literally would be to go against what he taught elsewhere, and very plainly.

It's not your eye or your hand that causes you to sin. It's your heart, and you certainly can't pluck that out and cast it from you. He's not advocating suicide here any more than he's advocating self-mutilation.

He is advocating something, though. And once we say, okay, he doesn't mean that we should literally pluck out our eye, or literally cut off our hand, that doesn't mean we can say, okay, next passage. No, once we say, okay, it's not literal, the next question is, well, what does it mean? You see, some people like to just kind of blow off a hard passage of Scripture by saying, well, that's a figure of speech, next subject.

Well, that's not how we take the Scripture. When we find a figure of speech, we know that it means something, and it may well mean something very important. In this case, there's no doubt about it, because he says that it's better to do this than to go to hell.

Okay, so obviously Jesus is talking about something that's at the very core of avoiding hell. In other words, he's talking about a salvation issue, right? He said it's better to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell. It's better to enter into life with one hand than to have both hands and be thrown into hell.

Obviously, whatever he means by this passage, and I think we can discover that, but whatever it is he means by this passage, it is not of little consequence. It has to do with going to heaven or going to hell. It's just that weighty.

So, let's not take it lightly. Jesus, when he taught us about how to avoid hell, was not just blown smoke. He was sent by the Father to help us avoid going to that place.

And if you think you can ignore his warnings and his instructions and still not go to hell, then you're not listening, and you're not taking him seriously. Okay, now, some people would say to me, well, Steve, I'm not going to hell because I believe in Jesus, and I'm saved by faith. Well, I can believe that.

I can believe you're saved by faith. I believe in justification by faith alone. Fine.

But now that you're justified, or now that you claim that you're justified, how do you know that you really are? There's many people who think they know God, but they don't. Do you know that? Jesus himself said later in the Sermon on the Mount, there's many people on the Day of Judgment are going to be shocked to learn that they weren't Christians because they thought they were. In Matthew 7, verse 21, and following, Jesus said, Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and done many wonders in your name? And I will declare to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice lawlessness. Whoa.

Now here we've got some people who think they're Christians. In fact, they've got some pretty good reasons for thinking. So they've cast out demons in Jesus' name.

They've prophesied and done wonders in his name. That'd be pretty good evidence they're really Christians, but he says they weren't. Well, then how do you know that you are? Well, quite simply, he says it this way, Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.

It's what you do that will demonstrate that you really are a believer. You may think you're a believer, but the devil's a believer of one kind. Maybe you're the same kind he is.

It doesn't change him any, and therefore it doesn't change his state. He's going to hell, and those who have the same kind of faith he does will be there with him, apparently, from what Jesus taught. Now, some might say, well, you know, Jesus, he was talking to the Jews.

You know, he's talking about a different system. We're under a different dispensation. Paul, you know, Paul is our apostle.

He's the one who teaches us what's right and wrong, and salvation by faith, that comes from Paul. No, it doesn't. That comes from Jesus.

Jesus taught salvation by faith, and so did Paul. But if you like Paul better than Jesus, God forbid that you would, but if you do, you can look to Paul if you'd like. In Titus chapter 1, Paul describes certain people, he says, in Titus 1.16, he says, they profess to know God.

Do you? Do you profess to know God? Do you profess to be a Christian? Do you profess to be a believer? Fine. Next, they profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work. Now, notice, these people profess with their mouth that they know God, but their works prove that they don't.

They deny him. Do you remember Jesus ever saying something like this? If you deny me before men, I will deny you before my Father, which is in heaven. Paul said there's more than one way to deny Jesus.

You deny Jesus, and he'll deny you. That's a given. He said it.

Now, you might say, well, I don't deny Jesus. I profess to be a Christian. Fine, with your mouth, but do you deny him with your works? If so, you're denying him, according to Paul, and he'll have to deny you.

He made it very clear. I will say I never knew you. Why? Because you did not do the will of my Father.

Well, what's that? What is the will of the Father? Well, Jesus put it this way in the parallel passage in Luke 6. He said, Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and you do not do the things that I command, the things that I say? You see, doing the will of the Father is doing the things that Jesus says. Now, with that in mind, we have to realize that though we are saved by faith, the only way we can know that we are saved by faith is if our lives have changed, and the particular way in which they've changed is that we now obey Jesus. Okay? Well, what did Jesus say? You don't look at a woman to lust after her.

That's one thing he said. Well, how important has that got to be? Well, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It's better to lose that and go into life than to keep it and go to hell.

Okay? We're talking salvation here. Same thing with the hand. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you.

Better to go to heaven with one hand than go to hell with two. That's what Jesus said. Now, Jesus is making it very clear here that we have to take him seriously when he says this.

Too many Christians take him lightly because they have some kind of totally unbiblical concept of what it means to be saved by faith. They think that faith is simply a mental thing. They don't realize that the only faith that the Bible recognizes as a saving person is a faith that changes the whole way you live.

And that change is measured on the scale of whether you are following what Jesus said, whether he is your Lord, whether you are following him or not. If you are saying you're a Christian, going to church every Sunday, but your life both on Sunday and the rest of the days of the week does not reflect obedience to Jesus Christ in the nitty-gritty details of your life, forget it. Forget it, man.

You may profess to know God, but in your deeds you deny him, and he will deny you before the Father. You want to change that? Then you better get right with God. You better put your faith in Jesus Christ in a way that changes your life.

You don't make the change. God does. But that faith has got to be accompanied by repentance from sin.

You need to experience the conviction of sin that God's Holy Spirit will bring. If he hasn't convicted you, pray to him that he will. Because if he doesn't, you won't repent.

And if you don't repent, you will not be saved. You will not believe savingly if you do not turn from your sin and follow Jesus Christ. That is the consistent teaching of every writer in the Bible, in the New Testament.

Okay, now, how serious is this? If it's your eye that caused you to sin, pluck it out. If it's your hand, cut it off. Now, Jesus is not telling anyone literally to pluck out their eye or to cut off their hand.

But he is saying something, and he's saying it with great emphasis. What is it? Well, the eye, of course, represents, I believe, the thoughts. The hand represents the works, the deeds.

You do your works with your hands. Now, you don't think with your eye, I will admit this. But many times, the eye in Scripture corresponds with knowledge or with your mental processes.

And that is because the lamp of the body is the eye. And if your eye is single, your body will be filled with light. If it's evil, then your body will be filled with darkness.

Your eye is really the tool of the mind. When you look at a woman to lust after her, it's because your heart or your mind decides to do so, and your eye simply obeys. You know, Jesus, in the book of Revelation, is described as a lamb with seven eyes and seven horns.

Now, I don't have time to go into Revelation much right now, but I'll say this. Seven eyes

is a Jewish symbol to speak of all knowledge. It means he sees all and knows all.

And so the eye often represents the mental process, the knowledge, the thoughts. And the idea that Jesus is saying is you need to guard your thoughts and your actions carefully to the point that you will avoid totally whatever keeps you from sinning. Or whatever keeps you from entering the kingdom, whatever makes you sin.

Excuse me for getting that backward. If there are certain places you go, if there are certain people that you associate with, if there's a certain way you make your living, if there's certain hobbies that you have, and these things intrude into your commitment to Jesus Christ, in that they present to you temptations that are greater than you can really resist, then you'd better get rid of those things. They are not as valuable to you as your eye or your hand is.

But even if your eye or your hand was the culprit, you should be willing to rid yourself of it. How much more if it's simply something like an association, a relationship, a goal, an ambition, a possession, something you idolize, something that's more important to you than obeying Jesus. That thing, get rid of it by all means.

Cast it from you as a contemptible thing because it's better to go into life without it than to take it with you to hell. Now you know what you're talking about. You know what's in your mind.

You know what's in your heart. You know what your sin is. Get rid of it.

You know what tempts you to do that. Get rid of that temptation. Don't go to those stores.

Don't go to the beach. Now I know a lot of surfers are listening to me down there in Santa Cruz. If you go to the beach and you see all those naked bodies down there, or nearly naked bodies, and then you have mental problems with lust afterwards, get a clue, man.

You're exposing your eyes to things that will give you pictures that tempt you. If that is getting to be something you can't avoid, that is the temptation, and you are beginning to succumb to lust, tell you what, however much you may like to surf, get off the beach, man. Get out of there.

Cast it from you. It's better to go to heaven without your surfboard than to go to hell with it because you're not going to be surfing down there. This is what Jesus is saying.

Get serious about holiness. When Jesus talks to you here in the Sermon on the Mount and says this is the righteousness that God requires, it's got to be a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, or you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. He's not just blowing smoke here.

He's trying to get us to go to heaven. He's trying to keep you from going to hell. It's amazing.

Jesus wants you to avoid hell more than some of you want to avoid it yourself. Now, I don't know. I get a little preachy here once in a while, but it sounds to me like Jesus is getting a little preachy here.

How can we talk about the Sermon on the Mount and do it justice without getting a little bit preachy? When we talk about eternal life and eternal damnation, it's really not something to talk calmly about. There are people listening to me right now who are living in just the way that Jesus said will send you right to hell. If that's what you want to keep doing, don't complain when you end up there.

But this is your warning. Jesus is giving this warning, and by the way, he's not giving it to the pagans. He's giving it to his disciples.

I'm concerned about the Christians listening to this broadcast who are playing games with God. They say they know God, but in their lives they do not obey him, and they think they're going to get away with it. Surprise, you're not.

Jesus is going to say to many who said, Lord, Lord, Lord, we did these things in your name. He's going to say, I never knew you, and I can hardly think of any circumstance more terrifying than to stand before God on the day of judgment. That one day where all your hopes and fears and pleasures of life are all behind you now.

There's nothing to look forward to except forever. And he says, I don't know you. You can't come here with me.

You don't belong to me. I think you belong in that place I warned you about, but you didn't seem to want to avoid very badly. How much do you want to avoid going to hell? Well, I guess you have to make that decision right now.

If you are a sinner living in conflict with God's laws, you can turn to God. You can repent of your sin, and you can turn and follow Jesus Christ and put your faith in him. He will forgive you.

The blood of Jesus cleanses from all sin, but not if you're not serious enough to turn from your sin. That's what the Bible teaches. We'll have more on this tomorrow.

Hope you'll join us. You may not want to, but this is what the Bible teaches. Thanks for joining us.

Talk to you tomorrow.