

**Matthew 5:21-32**  
"A Legit Look At The Law"

It was a mind numbing, jaw dropping statement Jesus made to His disciples. "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes & Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven." -- Now to you & me, we sometimes make light of the ridiculous mindset of these men, but at that time & in that day, they were understood to be the spiritual elite of Israel.

From the robes they wore, the type of borders around their garments, the rituals they kept, it's all that they lived for. They studied the scripture, obeyed the scripture from all outward appearance to a "T". & They were constantly displaying how righteous they were by the way they carried themselves, the special actions that they would go through in their prayers. Making sure attention was drawn to not only their tithe, but also the large offerings they would make. All of which was carefully crafted to display the tremendous depth of righteousness that they had. How meticulously dedicated to God they were...

& Jesus is here saying that if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, *your* righteousness has got to go exceedingly/abundantly above & beyond *their* righteousness. You probably would've heard a myriad of gasps followed by stone cold silence... These guys spent their *lives* to uphold the most minute of details of the law.

But Jesus says, "You have to do better than that, if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven." & It wasn't that Jesus had something against the law, as a matter of fact He'd just declared His utmost *regard* for the law. He said that he didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. To ensure that every "i" was dotted & every "t" was crossed exactly as God had intended. & *That* is to what He draws our attention in our present passage.

Jesus wants us to take a *legitimate* look at the law as God *intended* as opposed to the superficial interpretation & the bad rabbinical explanations that had been given to the people over the years... What we're going to see is that even though God is certainly concerned w/the *external*, His priority lies upon the *internal*. Why? The Pharisees taught & modeled righteousness through performing certain *actions*, but Jesus said, "No, though it may surface in my action it's rooted in the *attitude* of my heart."

Same thing w/sin: It's not limited to the action, it stems from the attitude of my heart. Listen, Jesus takes our understanding of the law to a whole new level! & We do well to pay attention here because as human beings we can have a tendency to think we're right w/God based upon what we do (or don't do).

We think that if we keep the law we're good, even if our heart is bad (meaning we may do what's right outwardly, even honor God verbally, but our heart is far from Him.) But the bible is clear that even though man may look to the outward appearance, God searches the...? Heart. For instance...

### Vs 21-22

So we note how Jesus shares the traditional *interpretation* of the law & then the intended *application* of the law. He says, "You have *heard that it was said to those of old...*" 2 Things there. #1 He says that they'd heard it *said*, why didn't He say, "You know you've *read*"? It's not because the law didn't say that, "You shall not commit murder" is very much apart of the law, 1 of the 10 commandments. But it was something they'd heard said, not anything they'd ever read because very few people read Hebrew in Jesus' day. *It was practically a lost language, it was something reserved for scholars & the people were dependent upon the scholars (the scribes/Pharisees) to share w/them the scripture. The common language of Jesus' day (post Israeli captivity) was primarily Aramaic (& Greek).* But the scriptures that they had (we call the O.T.) was written in Hebrew... So they'd heard it said, but most of them had never read the scriptures personally. It's simply what they'd been taught by those who were "scholarly".

The 2<sup>nd</sup> thing we see is that He mentions that it's been the standard teaching for decades, maybe centuries. He says, "To those of old" in other words, "even from ancient times." But now He's going to blow buckshot through the classic interpretation & demonstrate how it doesn't hold water. What's my point? Just because something has been taught for centuries, that doesn't mean it's true. It's antiquity is of no value if it's integrity doesn't hold up. Antiquity does not equal authority. This idea of, "It's what we've always been taught" or "It's how we've always done it" doesn't hold water if what we're taught or what we're doing isn't right... *That can be hard for people, especially if they have the greater portion of their lives invested in a particular position. But we're always to remain open & teachable to the truth.*

So the traditional interpretation, "don't commit murder" was limited to, "Don't physically murder another person, don't blow their brains out, or choke them to death" or whatever. But Jesus says, "No, murder isn't defined exclusively by wrongfully extinguishing a person's life. *But in reality God intended this to reach down into those root attitudes of the heart from which the action springs.*" So that when I hear, "You shall not commit murder" I can say, "Check, I've never done that, I'm righteous before God!"

But when I learn that God intended a much deeper meaning, dealing w/the attitude of my heart (becoming angry & bitter & demeaning toward a person) from which those actions are birthed I have to hang my head in shame, I'm guilty before God.

Now there *is* righteous anger (& Jesus acknowledges that here) but the vast majority of what we express in anger is anything *but* righteous & in *that* we fail... Perhaps you haven't murdered anyone physically, but you've been guilty of character assassination by the way you've spoken of that person. You see, the Pharisee would justify a vindictive attitude based upon the fact that you didn't physically take the person's life. (Now that's not to say that taking their life isn't worse & Jesus isn't saying they're the same. What He's saying is that they're both sin & as such show us as guilty before God).

When He speaks of "Raca" or "fool" he's not speaking (again) of those words specifically but the ugly attitude & brooding malice that spitefully spawns them. It demonstrates a sinfulness of heart, & He says, "Listen, if your heart is full of sin, watch-out." Because a sinful heart will cause us to find ourselves in hell every bit as much as a sinful act, the sinful act is born out of a sinful heart...

& Again we note that Jesus never had to say, "Thus says the Lord!" To assure us of the finality (the concrete reality) of what He was saying. He just said, "I say to you..." It's a signature of His Deity; He spoke on His own authority. When He spoke, God *was* speaking; His word *is* God's word.

Arrogant contempt for someone else is sin *before* God & such sinful anger needs to be faced honestly & confessed *to* God as such. Anger will make you *say* foolish things & *do* foolish things. The bible says, "*In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, But he who restrains his lips is wise.*"<sup>1</sup> & Again, "*He who guards his mouth preserves his life, But he who opens wide his lips shall have destruction.*"<sup>2</sup>

Vs 23-26

You're feelin the flow of this right? Jesus is saying, "Don't be one bitterly *breaks* peace, but one who eagerly *makes* peace!" Don't nurse anger & hostility leading to isolation & separation; seek peace through forgiveness leading to restoration/reconciliation.

One has said that the person who refuses to forgive his brother destroys the very bridge over which he himself must walk... So again we note the external emphasis of the scribes, "Doesn't matter what's going on in your heart as long as you bring your gift to the altar."

<sup>1</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Pr 10:19]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>2</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Pr 13:3]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

But Jesus says, “Your gift at the altar is irrelevant if there’s sin that’s not been dealt with in your heart.”

Now don’t be confused here. Jesus isn’t saying that you need to track down everyone who has something against you; you might never make it to the altar! ☺ Not to mention that some people have something against you that isn’t true, they’re seeking your harm in some way. But He says here that if you bring your gift to the altar & *there* remember that your brother has something against you. The idea being that there you are, at the altar, you’re worshiping God, you’re praying & seeking to commune w/God & in that time the Spirit reminds you of a situation... Something that took place & it’s legit. That person isn’t making something up, they’re not being malicious, you’ve genuinely wronged them in some way. They *have* something against you.

Now you have a choice don’t you? You can pretend God isn’t dealing w/you, continue to pray & worship & hope it goes away, you’re trying to stuff it down & maybe massage your conscience through the sacrifice, the gift, that which you bring to God... (Which is really our pride isn’t it?)

Or you can humble yourself, go to that person & say, “Hey, God has really been dealing w/me about this. I just want you to know that I’ve asked *Him* to forgive me & now I’m asking *you* to forgive me...” Listen, Jesus considers reconciliation to your bro/sis *in* the Lord much more important than a “religious duty” *before* the Lord.

Sometimes we can think that we may not be right here, or there, but we serve here or give there so it sort of evens out. Jesus says, “No”. Now, you may go to them & they still may have nothing to do w/it, they don’t want it. You’re clear at that point, you’ve obeyed the word of God, that’s between them and God. It’s just important that as Paul said, “*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*”<sup>3</sup>

Don’t think that some big sacrifice on your part sorta makes up for your sin... The essence here is that which Samuel taught Saul when *he* tried to make a sacrifice *to* the Lord even though he was in sin *before* the Lord; remember that? What did Samuel tell Saul? “*Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams.*”<sup>4</sup> In other words, there’s no sacrifice that you can render to God that will mean more to Him than your simple obedience to His word. Unchecked sin can render the sacrifice null & void...

<sup>3</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Ro 12:18]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>4</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [1 Sa 15:22]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It's not about the outward show. I look so spiritual, I'm fasting all the time, giving, serving, sacrificing for the Lord... It's about obedience from the heart.

There's a phrase that's used in various contact sports that are overseen & scored by judges & that is, "Don't leave it to the judges". The idea being that the matter needs to be settled before the end of the last round because even though you may think *you've* won, they might think your *opponent* won... That's kind of what Jesus is saying here. He's saying, "Don't leave it to the judge, if there's an issue that God is dealing w/you about, seek to settle the matter now. You may think you're right, the judge might not."

Generally when 2 people go to court it's because each one thinks they're right. They're not both right but one's pride won't relent. Don't let your pride get the best of you, make things right if it's up to you.

### Vs 27-28

Again Jesus shares the traditional explanation & the intended application. The Pharisees would tell you that as long as you didn't engage in sexual activity w/anyone outside of your spouse you were good on that before God. Jesus says, "Sin isn't limited to a physical act, it's rooted in the orientation of the heart."

When I hear, "Don't commit adultery" & I limit that to the actual act, I present myself as righteous before God. But when I hear that I'm guilty if I look on a woman w/lustful intent, than who among us can say we're w/out sin? Again, He isn't saying that if you've thought about it you're guilty so you may as well go ahead & do it, God forbid. He's not saying that both the thought & the act are the same, He's saying they're both sin. & That appetite leads to action. In other words, if my heart were pure, I wouldn't enter into the act. But because I've polluted my heart through looking & lusting, now it can lead to acting.

Notice Jesus says that it begins through the eye; it enters my mind & settles in my heart. Charles Spurgeon said, "If sin were not allowed in the mind, it would never be made manifest in the body." To guard your mind is to guard your heart...

I should also point out that this word, "looks" doesn't speak of a glance. He's talking about "eyes on target". Staring purposefully so as to feed the lust... It's that which Job was speaking about when he said, "*I have made a covenant with my eyes; Why then should I look upon a young woman?*"<sup>5</sup> Listen, lust (like the flesh) is never satisfied. The more you feed it, the more it hungers. & It's not that temptation is sin, but if I yield to the temptation...

<sup>5</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Job 31:1]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

It becomes sin. To see a beautiful person isn't sin, but if I then begin to entertain inappropriate thoughts & settle into that mindset... now I've entered *into* sin.

The question becomes, how are we to achieve the victory over this kind of thing? Jesus says you have to cut it off. You can't slowly back off, like throttling back on your diet, keep it in check through moderation... You have to deal w/it immediately/decisively & w/finality.

### Vs 29-30

Let me get this out of the way, Jesus is using hyperbole here, He's *not* speaking literally of self-mutilation. He didn't spend all this time speaking of sin being a matter of the heart to then say it can be remedied in the flesh... You might take out your right eye, but you still have a left one. & If you're a thief & you pickpocket w/your right hand but you haven't deal w/the heart you'll perfect the art w/your left...

The idea here is that of dealing directly & w/finality w/whatever it is that's causing you to stumble into sin! Don't let it destroy *you*, you destroy *it!* In other words, do what you need to do to stop sinning. How serious is it to you to gain victory over that which is destroying your life? If you can't stop drinking, than go to rehab, who cares about your pride? If you can't quit entertaining internet porn, than get rid of your internet, have someone install software that doesn't allow it & have them place in the password & never tell you what it is. Do what you need to, to "cut it off", make sense? Someone said, "Holiness is where the heart is..." Is your heart caught up w/the things of Christ? Or bogged down w/the things of this world? We don't pamper sin, we put it to death... Jesus is saying that we've got to be willing to make some radical sacrifices if necessary to be obedient. If part of your life is given over to sin, it's better that part of your life "die" rather than the whole of our lives be condemned. Paul shared this principle in the book of Romans like this, *"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."*<sup>6</sup> To the Colossians he said, *"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."*<sup>7</sup>

Now listen, don't wait till later to make your decision on these things. Don't sit there thinking, "Man, I really need to consider this." No! Don't wait till later, take care of it now! There are a lot of people who quite frankly aren't willing to do that, so they remain trapped in their sin, or they won't come to Christ.

<sup>6</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Ro 8:13]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

<sup>7</sup> The New King James Version. (1982). [Col 3:5]. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

They never get passed a jaded or disillusioned desire to be better. But what does it profit to gain the whole world, if you lose your own soul? Let's not feed our flesh, let's crucify our flesh...

### Vs 31-32

Jesus will deal in greater detail on the matter of marriage & divorce in Ch 19 so we will as well. We'll just touch on this for now & then we'll wrap up & wind down.

I realize that when we get to a topic like this it can get a little uneasy because the divorce rate is at epidemic proportions in our culture. Having said that God is the One who ordained & instituted marriage so we do well to humble ourselves, hear Him out & respond appropriately to His word.

That may mean moving toward reconciliation, it may mean seeking God's forgiveness on handling something inappropriately... But I also want you to realize that even if you've sinned in this area, & God *hates* divorce (the bible is clear), but He doesn't hate the *divorced*, He loves you & there is forgiveness for you no different than any other of us sinners in here.

But in Jesus' day there were a couple schools of thought on divorce as propagated by a couple different Rabbis. One very conservative, & one very liberal & much like in our day the popular consensus tended to rally around the liberal.

Now the law revolved around a single word "uncleanness". Deut 24:1 stated that if a man married a woman & discovered some "uncleanness" in her, he could write her a certificate of divorce. (There was no provision for a woman to divorce her husband, it seems primarily because in that day a woman primarily depended on her husband for provision.) But the question was, "What constitutes uncleanness?"

Well, the conservative Rabbi (Shammai) would say, "He marries her, discovers she's not a virgin, he can divorce her." The liberal rabbi (Hillel) would say that "uncleanness constitutes just about anything that the husband finds displeasing about her." She burns your breakfast, it stumbles you (makes you mad) that's uncleanness she's gone. You find another woman more attractive, that means she's unclean to you, she's gone. It was just radically abused to justify basically anything you wanted.

But Jesus comes along here & says, "Hey, sexual immorality (unfaithfulness to the marriage union) is grounds for divorce before God, outside of that there's to be a permanency." Now Paul would speak also of what we call an "abandonment clause".

He said that if you're married to an unbeliever & they abandon you, than you're free to remarry. Beyond that Jesus says that if you remarry after an illegitimate divorce you've committed adultery. It doesn't indicate necessarily that there's a permanent state of adultery. Jesus didn't say that all manner of sin is forgiven man w/the exception of divorce & remarriage.

The whole point is that God hates divorce & the destruction it brings upon the individuals, the families, the children... it can put family members in the awkward position of choosing sides; it's simply not good. Be glad that God hates divorce or He may've divorced you & me along time ago!

But like any other sin (drunkenness, lewdness, fill in the blank) it ruins lives. But listen God is in the business of restoring lives in Christ ☺!

When we read the Sermon on the Mt, it's not meant to make us feel good about ourselves. It's meant to heighten our awareness of the true intent of the law. It drives us to the place of saying, "Who can do this? There's no way, I'm a sinner, I need a Savior! I'm guilty before God!" The law properly understood drives us to J.C. & Christ is the end of the law for all who believe. He did for us what we could never do for ourselves. He lived life sinlessly, fulfilled the law perfectly even paying its penalty for you & me. & Now if you will come to Him, turn from your sin & believe upon Him, He'll forgive you entirely & give you a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes & Pharisees... He'll give to you His righteousness personally. Isn't God good? Who among us deserves the love of God? Yet He pours it out liberally, receive it to His glory today...

### Prayer Points:

Father Your love overwhelms us... Jesus You are worthy of all honor, all blessing, all power & all praise. As we think through Your words in Matthews gospel here our need for You becomes so evident & Your love for us, Your sacrifice for us is magnified & You are glorified! Be glorified in us, helps us to abandon our sin & cling desperately to You.

Question: Is today your day. You're sitting there thinking about how blatant your sin is before God & you know you need His forgiveness, you know you need Jesus in your life. But the question is, will you move from the disillusioned desire to be better to being a new creation in Christ? Are you willing to deal decisively w/your sin through the cross of J.C. who shed His blood for you so that you might receive everlasting life in Him?