

Bible Studies for Life Series for October 21: The heart of the matter

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The heart of the matter

- Matthew 5:21-48

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In Matthew 5:21-48, Jesus gives us six specific examples of his radical new ethic. For Jesus, it is not enough to think rightly; we also must act rightly. The kingdom of God is about more than following a set of rules or agreeing with a certain set of principles; it is about living as a citizen of God's kingdom in this world.

The implication of Jesus' teaching in this section is that his followers will live differently than the rest of the world. The six examples in this section give concrete form to being salt and light and having a greater righteousness than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.

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Jesus' model in his teaching is to call attention to the Old Testament teaching. All of his followers there would have had at least a passing understanding with each of these teachings. Jesus then calls his disciples to an even higher standard than the law did.

This is the place where we usually get hung up. It is apparent to anyone who reads the Old Testament that Israel, and the rest of the world which they represented, was by no means capable of maintaining even the original standards of the law.

How in the world are we supposed to live up to this higher standard? This is precisely the problem that has caused us to skip over the Sermon on the Mount, or to view it as an ethic for a different time. I hope that by looking at each section, we can see Jesus did not give us an unrealistic standard to live up to but taught us how to begin to live to that standard.

We might best title Matthew 5:21-26, "Dealing with Anger." Jesus starts by saying, "You have heard it said, ... 'Do not murder,'" but Jesus goes further by getting to the root cause of murder, "But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to judgment."

First, Jesus in no way says a Christian should never be angry. In order for us to never be angry, we must be apathetic; it means that we don't care. When something that we value is hurt or in some way diminished, it causes us to be angry. When someone, or something, causes our family to hurt, we are angry. Anger comes because we care deeply about someone or something. That is the reason church fights are the worst. We care about

the church, we love the church and that is true of both sides. What Jesus does here is tell us how to be delivered from that anger and live together as brothers and sisters in Christ. In short, Jesus tells us how to keep our anger from causing us to sin.

In *Kingdom Ethics*, Glen Stassen and David Gushee call Jesus' teaching "transforming initiatives." Jesus does not give us a command without telling us how to fulfill it. Jesus gives us a specific way to deal with our anger, to keep it from getting out of hand and leading us to sin. Jesus says if there is a brother who has something against us, we are to go and be reconciled. We are to take the initiative in making the relationship right. Jesus moves us from allowing anger to take over our lives to living in grace and restoration.

It should not surprise us that this is the method Jesus prescribes for us. It is exactly what God has done for us. Romans 5:8 says: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God does not allow his anger to go unchecked but gives us every opportunity for reconciliation. He calls for us to do the same. Jesus does not ask us to do what he has not already done, and in doing so, sets the example for us.

Matthew 5:27-30 deals specifically with sexual lust. It follows the same pattern as the previous section. Jesus reminds them of the standard, sets it higher and then tells us how to live it out. Once again, Jesus deals with the issue in the germinal stage. Adultery hasn't yet happened, but the seeds are there. Lust is best defined as looking with a desire to conquer or possess. It does not mean appreciating beauty. It is normal for us to admire people of the opposite sex who are beautiful. Sin comes in when that admiration is twisted into something other than what God desires.

Jesus prescribes radical action for dealing with lust. Gouging out an eye and cutting off a hand could not be described as anything less than radical.

Jesus tells us we need to take radical action to remove the cause of temptation. With the Internet, cable and satellite TV, we have access to temptation at our fingertips. For some, action as radical as doing away with Internet or cable at the house might be necessary. For others, software for which only our spouses have the password might be necessary. The point Jesus makes here is this: do what is necessary to remove the temptation.

Jesus is fully aware of the power of this temptation. He places the responsibility squarely on the man's shoulders. In that culture, women usually were blamed for lustful relationships. Not much has changed in our day. The women still tend to take the brunt of the blame. Jesus placed responsibility for their actions, habits and practices squarely on the shoulders of the men. Men in particular need to step up and take the responsibility to change those actions which lead to lust.

If we have not experienced personally the difficulty of divorce, then we certainly have seen it in the lives of our friends and family members. It is no different now than it was then, we still are looking for ways to justify divorce. Jesus' emphasis was different; it focused on how we can reconcile broken relationships rather than looking for ways out. This does not mean there are not reasons to legitimately divorce; it does mean we first seek reconciliation and restoration. Jesus deals with this in greater detail in Matthew 19:3-9. It is a good idea to consult this text in conjunction with Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.