

The Law and Jesus: The Liability of the Heart

Matthew 5:21-26

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Please turn with me in your Bible to Matthew 5. This morning, we will be looking at verses 21-26. We are looking at a series in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5 through chapter 7, looking at what does it mean and what does it look like to live in the kingdom? Last week, Pastor John preached from chapter 7 about Jesus's teaching regarding making judgments particularly against another person. To the degree with pronounce judgments upon another person, we may experience that same judgment pronounced to us.

What Jesus is saying in each of these small snippets within the greater whole, they all fit together to discuss something about the law of God in relationship to Jesus. And Jesus is confronting us just as He was confronting the listeners on that day through His word about our tendency to subject the rigid letter of the law for others and advocate for a laxer law for ourselves. It's easy to conclude, I've never done that, so I'm good. And as He mentioned in verses 17-20, Jesus doesn't come to nullify the law, nor does He come to contradict the law. He comes to fulfill the law. And He calls His disciples to truly follow it.

So, follow along as I read from the passage this morning, Matthew 5:21-26.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you would bless us this morning as you already have as you have been singing over us with great delight as you look upon us by your Spirit and through your Son interceding for us. We ask that you would add to the reading and to the preaching of your word. We ask that you would grow us in our understanding, that you would nourish our souls, that it would be a well spring of living water, that our very hearts would be a posture towards you and towards our brothers and towards others in the watching world. We pray these things would be a reflection of who we are in Christ as a way to live in your kingdom. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

In our very connected world, you don't have to wait very long before you hear about another murder having taken place. But no matter how desensitized we are to its frequency, we are still shaken when it has close proximity. You see, it's probably easier to grapple our minds and put our hands around the reality that there have been 267 reported homicides in Baltimore so far this year. However, it's another thing that just this past July, a 22-year-old young man murdered another young man just down the street from where I live in Columbia. And each time we see this in the news or hear about it online or in the paper, we probably hear some version of this quote. "I never thought it could happen here."

You see, our legal statutes in our society here in the United States as well as many places in the world and certainly as it is played out in the Bible, there is differentiation between premeditated murder and manslaughter due to accident or negligence. And with due process of the law, those guilty of murder are subject to the appropriate punishments according to the law.

Here today as we look at this text, we see Jesus is affirming what the Old Testament has already declared, specifically in the sixth commandment. You shall not murder. But as we will see, He is saying something more profound about our very hearts. You see, when we fail to love others, we experience through various degrees, whether there is stress in the relationship or whether there is full rupture in the relationship, of brokenness. People do murder. People really want to murder, but then they don't. People don't really want to murder, but in their anger, they actually do. So, how do we relate to the law and Jesus with respect to those and the kingdom, who in our own sin, likewise, Christians can murder. How do we reconcile and put our minds around this?

In the passage as we see Jesus unpacking the character of the disciple who is to then have this embodiment of the righteousness of God and living out in the kingdom of God, we see that we are liable to God's judgment. And because of that, our hearts must conform to God's character. And that's what we'll look at this morning as we look at this passage. And I'll make reference here and there, but just for you to understand that this is just the first of six contrasting statements that Jesus makes where He says, "You have heard it said," "But I say to you," this contrast that He makes where He is not contradicting the law, but He is giving fuller and deeper meaning and reorienting our mind to the truth of the law.

And so, when we think about how our hearts must conform to God's character, we really have to ask the question of ourselves, where do we lack that conformity to God's character? And in today's text, we'll look at how our inner emotional world lacks conformity to God's character and we see our relationships lack the conformity to God's character.

Let's first look at verse 21. We see God's judgment that we are subject to involves our internal emotions. And those emotions must conform to God's character. He says in verse 21, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder.'" So, in this section, He is quoting the sixth commandment with, in a brief moment, something added, an oral tradition, an added interpretation of that law lived out by the scribes and Pharisees of adjudication, or how they think about the legal frameworks in that society. And when He does this, He says, "You have heard it was said." He is redirecting our ears and our minds and our hearts to that fuller and truer meaning.

Of course, the sixth commandment comes from Exodus 20:13, and likewise, you can read it in Deuteronomy 5:17. And the word "murder" specifically deprives a person of life by illegal intentional killing. It does not prohibit all forms of killing, which there's plenty of discussion that we could have on that today. But for the time that we have, we won't. But if there's discussion on how we take this passage and think about an ethic of other forms of killing, we certainly can have a discussion about that. But we do realize that the Old Testament made distinctions between that intentional killing and accidental deaths.

And different types of killing carry different types of punishments. For example, premeditated murder was a crime punishable by death whereas hitting an intruding thief in your home in the middle of the night that then resulted in that person's death was not ruled a crime. You were not held responsible if your ox killed a person by running out of your control it gored someone. But you were held responsible if you were negligent knowing that that particular ox was dangerous, and you didn't go out of your way to pursue the protection and preservation of life in the community.

So, what specifically is Jesus correcting here? He's quoting the law as I've said. But it's in this second part where He says, "Whoever murders will be liable to judgment." This word "liable" is key to the passage. The word means being subject to. It's dealing with the idea of being answerable to an authority, particularly a court where a person could be held accountable for being guilty. But liable to what? The text here says judgment which could both refer to the judicial process of determining the judgment or the punishment due to the nature of the guilt. Some scholars lean on the process itself while others focus upon the verdict's punishment which that's what I actually lean towards. I take it to be more about the punishment which it could certainly involve the process for determining the appropriate punishment. But it makes better sense with the parallels that follow in the following verses.

Taken on its face, Jesus isn't contradicting the truth of the statement, for indeed, whoever does murder will be subject to the punishment for murder. However, Jesus is challenging how the scribes and Pharisees narrowly define murder being liable to judgment which creates a sense that if it's not worthy of that punishment – remember, premeditated murder is punishable by death – then that person was adequately following the commandment. You hear what He is addressing there? If I don't murder, then I'm good.

However, Jesus is challenging that. At a basic level of external performance of the law, the Pharisees and the scribes were undermining also what was part of the law which was the ideal pursuit of the inward embrace of the law from the heart. This isn't just Jesus saying this. He is bringing to mind, also, what is found in the Old Testament regarding the character of God and the law of God, those things being a reflection of one another.

We see in verse 22 when Jesus makes His contrasting comments. He says, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Jesus drives His point home using hyperbole.

Just for a minute, use your imaginations to think about the listeners hearing Jesus's sermon. They might have been thinking, yes, Jesus, murder is bad; and if guilty, one rightly does deserve the full punishment according to the law. We know this. And then perhaps they were amused when Jesus pivots and goes straight to an emotion such as anger. That is not as easily determined in a court of law how one could be held accountable to that. But maybe they're hearing Jesus, they're tracking what He's saying, but they're saying okay, Jesus, I get your point. Even the Old Testament law taught this that it's not just the external performance of the commandments, but it's the reflection of the internal condition of the heart.

But then Jesus goes further. He goes deeper. He moves from mere emotion that burns within us, and some of that imagery of the word "anger" is fire, of redness, hot-headedness, your temper getting the best of you. When this emotion burns against someone, He also then moves to your speech that tears down someone. Jesus uses a word that everyone in the audience likely had said with their own members of their family or their own friends from their community. Here in the ESV, they use "insult your brother." Other English Bibles may leave the actual word in there that's just a transliteration of a put-down. It's specifically relating to intelligence. It's like saying telling someone that they're empty headed or that they're a numbskull.

So, it would likely start to get uncomfortable because Jesus says, if you have said this then you will be subject to the council. Now, what's the council? The word here is actually "Sanhedrin" which can generically mean a governing board or a council where decisions are made at a local context. However, it's also the word that refers to a particular council that's in Jerusalem. It's the Supreme Court. It's the high court of the land insofar it doesn't encroach on the authority of Rome in the region. But it was comprised of high priests, elders, scribes. And it was both the religious and legal government court in the region of Judea.

If you're tracking with Jesus, you're starting to maybe say, I got the first principle, but do you mean if I call my brother names that I'll be subjected to the rules and the sentence and the punishment of the Sanhedrin? Perhaps as they were thinking about how often they say such things or to whom they say them, it starts getting a little hot under the collar for different reasons.

Jesus sharpens His point with the third example. He says that "whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." The sense here is that a person calls another person foolishly stupid. It could also imply a declaration of that person being an obstinate, rebellious, godless person. There is a moral component in a lot of these words in the Old Testament, particularly in the Proverbs speaking about the wicked and the foolish. But it's more likely here that there's actually very little difference between such derisive insults and saying, you fool. It's kind of a way of using two words to say kind of the same meaning.

But you may have noticed Jesus seems to be ramping up. He says this, for the person who says, “You fool,” that they will be liable to the hell of fire. Some translations use danger of the fire of hell or the danger of hell fire. Here, Jesus is emphasizing the punishment rather than the general place of the dead. In our day and age, maybe people don’t want to hear it or want to think about it. Some people might not want to offend people, and so we maybe downplay it. But the reality is that Jesus talked about hell quite often, and He doesn’t shy away from it here.

The word is a Greek term derived from the Hebrew phrase, “valley of Hinnom,” which is a real place. It’s a ravine running along the southside of Jerusalem. It’s a place that would’ve jumped out in their imagination because, you see, King Ahaz in Manasseh sacrificed their sons to Moloch there. It later took on a place of defilement because they would burn trash there or even the refuse of the sacrifices in the temple. So, the idea of this place being outside, being a place of punishment, would have been very much on their minds when He mentioned it. Theologically, they are very attentive to this point. Is Jesus saying that if murder subjects a person to the judgment of men, then insulting words subjects them to the punishment of God?

Another question that we can ask of this text is what Jesus is saying, is it to be taken as three distinct offenses and three distinct punishments? Or is Jesus using them together for their cumulative effect upon the listener? It’s an important question. It’s one that, if you are so inclined, I could give you hours and hours of reading. We don’t have hours and hours. If you do later, we can hang out, I guess.

Some scholars think that Jesus is making a distinction and highlighting such intensification. Although, it appears that He’s doing that as some sort of threefold progression of a local community to a broader governing council and then ultimately to the judgment of God. And we can deduce that from other places in scripture, especially Matthew 18. However, I think that Jesus is thickening His point that our motivation that compels murder is morally equal to the act of murder in the sight of God. Murder is bad. But in the sight of God according to His law, what Jesus is saying is, you are not off the hook if you just avoid murdering. You are also held accountable for the condition of your heart.

This then moves into the second section of the passage. Out of that reality of liability of our heart before the Lord, we see that we’re also guilty and, therefore, liable to His judgment. And we see how this plays out also in our relationships. And they, too, just as our emotions must be conformed to the character of God, our relationships must be informed by the character of God. Jesus appears to be highlighting the importance of reconciliation. Failure to pursue reconciliation represents both the rupture of the human relationship and its natural various consequences. But Jesus is inserting a spiritual component with our heavenly judge. He’s saying, as we are reconciled with God through Christ, go and be reconciled to one another. The justification that you have with God in Christ is the reconciliation, the restoration that we have with your brother.

This pursuit is the antidote to this liability of our heart. Through repentance, through faith, we move toward one another. We work to mend what has been broken, repair what has been torn. And here, Jesus gives us two examples where reconciliation may be required. And the first is in the context of the community of faith. He uses the word “brother.” And it’s connected to the context of worship. He uses kind of the temple language of offering an altar.

In verse 23, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Notice a few things. Jesus provides no comment on whether the complaint is valid. It’s not, I know my brother says that I’ve done this to him, but that’s just nonsense. He’s emptyheaded. He’s a fool. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. No. That is not in view here. The thought of having your brother or sister having something against you is to go, and the first part of reconciliation is to go negotiate and to listen, to be open to what they have to say. Go to your brother and seek out restoration. Jesus is emphasizing the urgency. Paul alludes to this dynamic in Romans 12

especially in verse 16, “Live in harmony with one another.” And then in verse 18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all.”

The second thing to look at is where is this person? Likely, in the context of worship, he would be in the temple in Jerusalem. And so, we see that as Jesus is connecting the urgency of reconciliation with the diligence of reconciliation, what do I mean? Well, Jesus’s audience is likely in Galilee some 70 miles away from Jerusalem. Go the distance. See how awkward and inconvenient that is? It’s easy to downplay that. There’s nothing really against me. I’m already in Jerusalem. It’s going to cost me too much to travel back. It’s going to take too much time. No. Jesus is addressing urgency. He’s addressing diligence. And with those two, additionally, He is stressing the inconvenience.

Regarding the offering, Jesus is not saying that someone being unreconciled with your brother makes that gift to God invalid. Worship is not a mechanized algorithm that if you do it in the right sequence, it’s valid and pleasing to the Lord. No. Jesus is highlighting how the relationship between our reconciled status with God informs the posture of our heart toward our brothers or sisters in Christ. You see, if we are unwilling or if we are uninterested to be reconciled with our brothers and sisters, then it’s actually something to reflect that it might be shining light on the condition of our heart revealing that our worship is displeasing to the Lord, not because we’ve done it in the wrong way, but we’re coming to the Lord with the wrong heart.

If we are so moved by the grace of God, then we will worship God for He has indeed redeemed us. He has reconciled us back from enemies, from death to life, from distances to closeness with our Lord. If we are so moved by that and we are worshipping Him for it, we are to seek to live it out, to give it away, to reflect that in our relationships.

The second example is in the context of a legal dispute. Verse 25, “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.” Here, notice a few things. This situation could certainly involve your brother in the community of faith or your sister. But Jesus is more likely pivoting His example to a different sphere, to a different context. Rather, it being in relationships outside the community of faith. You see, the Jewish law had no stipulation for debtor’s prison. So, likely in this context, it would be in a situation that would involve the surrounding Gentile society.

And this verb of go and settle with your accused, “Come to terms quickly,” this picture isn’t just the pragmatics of the economics or the debt. It certainly involves that. But it is something more relational. It’s saying, go and make friends with the one who is antagonistic towards you. Go and make peace. Win them so that they are not against you.

So, for both examples, whether it’s in the community of faith, whether it’s outside the community of faith, what Jesus is getting at is something that He’s addressed in the beatitudes. The believers in the kingdom who are living that out with Jesus in His kingdom are to be peacemakers, to be reconcilers. We see this certainly played out in places like Romans 13 which gives more context for these types of dynamics in our relationships as well as Matthew 18 where Jesus gives a fuller account of how we might engage a process of making peace, pursuing reconciliation.

I want to leave you with a few questions as you consider this passage in your own life. Now, these dynamics can play out with you and another person. It can play out with you and a group of people. It can play out from groups of people to groups of people. It just scales, and how we navigate these relationships are informed by the character of God. So, on a personal level or on a more group level, here are some things to consider when you are lacking reconciliation. I’m going to put these on the website underneath the text for this sermon for you to read because I was reading it to the guys this week, and they were like, this is really rich. A PowerPoint slide would be helpful. And I’m sorry that I forgot. So, bear with me.

As you think about your relationships that need repair, to heed the Lord's call to go and be reconciled, consider some of these things and begin connecting these two paragraphs together. Remember, the principle of anger, insults, how we are treating our brother, and then by extension, how we are treating others, consider these things. Are you maximizing what they have done to you? Is it worthy of murdering them literally and figuratively with your insults? The idea of our anger welling up to the point that we're seeking justice and we are wanting to exact our recompense, and we're wanting them to experience punishment worthy of the crime. Are we maximizing what they have done and thereby minimizing what we are doing with our anger, our words, our speech? Are we saying, at least I'm not physically engaging in violence or murdering someone as long as I'm venting and I'm provoking with my words either to their face or passive aggressively with others? How are we minimizing what we are doing?

Number two, how are you minimizing what they have done to you? Specifically, you minimize often by spiritualizing your anger and just inviting God into your part. You're just kind of cutting them out of the equation. It's so painful, so you're torn. You're conflicted. You want to kill them. You want to destroy them. You want to tear them down. You want to make them pay. But you're following Christ and you're wanting to just find your happy place. We cut them off out of the equation and we come to God, and it's just about us and our heart. That's part of the equation, it's not the whole equation.

Number three, are you maximizing what they have done and closing the door of God's involvement in the equation both to them and to you? Reconciliation involves forgiveness. Reconciliation involves making amends. If we're cutting God out of the equation, we're not open to what He is doing in that person's life to move them towards repentance, and we're not open to what the Lord will do in our lives and our heart for us to be moved to compassion and mercy.

Number four, self-reflection of how might you be sabotaging, neglecting, or avoiding reconciliation in your life?

And number five, what do you need to do next to pursue reconciliation?

These are very meaty questions. And in this urgency that Jesus is painting, in this diligence that He is describing, and in this sense of the possible inconvenience, what we can't extrapolate from this passage is in the urgency of go and be reconciled, we can't shortcut the process and just presume that it's going to happen like that. We can't force it. We can't pretend that it's happening by just saying forgive and forget. The work of reconciliation is hard and sometimes long. But sometimes it's short and brief. And all of those steps conflate together and it's happening simultaneously, and you are reconciled with your brother or your sister. Sometimes there is long suffering when that does not take place quickly, even for years.

There are applications to what Jesus is talking about, also, in how we treat one another in our relationships of regular discourse, how we interact with each other in projects at work. How are you elevating yourself at the expense of tearing down someone else? How are we engaging in the political climate of our nation both online and at the water cooler or in the neighborhood or at the HOA meeting? How are we engaging with our speech? Is it reflecting God's character? And likewise, Christian charity that reflects God's character and demonstrates our love for each other also becomes our public witness. To use Ken Sande's word from his book *Peacemaker*, peacemaking is not peace-breaking and it's not peace-faking.

Peacemaking is hard. It's painful. And you need help. Oftentimes, you need to involve people on both sides to navigate this together because you're pursuing what the Lord has for you in making that peace. May that be done in our community even here.

So, murder, it's been fun, hasn't it? We intuitively think of murder as a tragedy. And society rightly condemns it. Murder is a violence. It takes life, and we rightly lament it. But our hearts are really no different than long ago with the first murder in Genesis 4.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"
[ESV]

Just as the young man who I mentioned at the beginning, in his anger, in his words, and with his hand, he murdered. Did he do well to be angry? Do you do well to be angry? In seeking his own path toward judgment, he sinned towards God, the man he had killed, as well as the ripple effects in those families and the ripple effects into the generations and the ripple effects into our communities.

As we look at today's passage and as Jesus has talked about His disciples living in His kingdom, He's correcting the faulty assumption of, I am not considered guilty unless I do something drastic. If I don't murder, then I am doing what I am supposed to be doing and therefore and righteous. Rather, the righteousness that Jesus proclaims to His followers is far deeper than just the external obedience of God's law. This righteousness that is to be yours, this righteousness that is imputed to you by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is proclaimed to us to be the internal conformity to God's character. The law of Jesus is the rule of love, this rule of love that we don't just avoid the destruction of another person's life, but we pursue the construction of another person's wellbeing. Let us pray.

Our Father, we ask that you would help us in these ways. We do repent of our anger. We repent of how we destroy. We repent of how we have brought violence to the world even by our own hands and certainly by the hands of other followers. Likewise, we lament of any who takes upon themselves such destruction. And we cry out to you. Help us to repent where Cain should have repented. He walked away, and in his own anger found his own path of peace and did not find any. But Lord Jesus, we find our peace and we find our rest in you. Melt our hearts by your love. In Jesus's name. Amen.