

Raising the Bar

Matthew 5:21-37 (February 16, 2020)

Matthew 5:21-37

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Historical Context

This portion of the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew’s gospel contains the first four of what are called “the six antitheses.” In each antithesis Jesus will posit what has been said (from the law), and then answer with a response that begins, “but I say to you”

Theme: Raising the Bar

Jesus is quick to tell us that he has not come to contradict the law. Rather he is here to give us a fresh perspective on God’s law. Instead of governing our lives by constant reference to an encyclopedic canon of regulations, he would have us look for God’s love in all things.

Jesus would have us live more active and more complete lives of virtue... as defined by love of God and love of neighbor. He is raising the bar... calling us to elevate our game. He is telling us that the state of our souls is just as important as the actions of our bodies. To be consumed by revenge and seething with anger is as wrong as acting out that anger. In calling us to follow him, Jesus would have us live in the love of God... leaving no room for sin. We know that in this life

we will never be completely removed from temptation. To the contrary, the virtuous are subject to constant onslaught by the world. But Christ has changed the whole dynamic of good and evil. In his love we run towards holiness, not away from sin. We are not alone, under siege, fearfully hanging on by our fingernails. Rather, he protects us and claims us for his own.