

## A New Approach

**Scripture Text:** Matthew 5:17, 18, 21, 22, 27, 28, 38, 39, 43, 44

**Devotional Reading:** Matthew 5:1-12. **Background Scripture:** Matthew 5.

**Time:** A.D. 28 **Place:** mountain near Capernaum

Matthew 5:17, 18, 21, 22, 27, 28, 38, 39, 43, 44

<sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

<sup>21</sup> “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup> But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

<sup>28</sup> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

<sup>38</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup> But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

## TODAY'S AIM

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Give examples from the text of how Jesus corrected misunderstandings of the Old Testament law.
2. Explain why the law of love should be our guide in interactions with others.
3. Commit to Jesus one specific area in which he or she will choose to be more loving.

## INTRODUCTION

Since each evangelist (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) presented the life and work of Jesus Christ from a unique perspective, each writer emphasized certain aspects of the Lord's teaching and ministry. The Gospel of Matthew was directed toward a Jewish audience.

Some have suggested that Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. Just as there are five books of Moses (the law), so there are five major discourses in Matthew. Just as Moses received God's law on a mountain, so Christ delivered His new law from a mountain. Matthew 5 through 7 is called the Sermon on the Mount, a small portion of which we study this week.

It is also noteworthy that there are numerous contrasts in this sermon between what the rabbis said the law taught and what Christ declared to be true. The master Teacher was interpreting the Mosaic law in light of truths that He revealed as the Son of God.

## LESSON BACKGROUND

Since Jesus did not follow the traditions of the Pharisees, we can easily see how He might be accused of being a law-breaker. The scribes and Pharisees were the guardians of the law. Anyone refusing to accept their traditional interpretations was subject to being chastised severely as a sinner (Matt. 12:2; John 9:16).

In the verses that follow this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Christ made several contrasts between His teaching and the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. He addressed such topics as murder (Matt. 5:21-22), adultery (vs. 27-30), divorce (vs. 31-32), and the taking of oaths (vs. 33-37).

Among Jews, what Christians call the Old Testament is divided into three sections: Law, Prophets, and Writings (cf. Luke 24:44). Sometimes the Scriptures were simply referred to as the Law and the Prophets, as they are in Matthew 5:17.

### **The Law Fulfilled (Matthew 5:17, 18)**

As our printed text opens, Jesus is about to say some things that sound, on first impression, to be quite different from the bits He will quote from the Old Testament. But He does not want anyone in that Jewish audience to think He means to deny or contradict God's Word, so He begins by declaring His respect for the Scriptures and His relationship to them.

While some may have thought that Christ came to destroy the Law and the Prophets, this was not the case at all; rather, He came to fulfill them. "By fulfillment is meant not just the carrying out of predictions but the accomplishment of the intention of the Law and the Prophets. In contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus brought out the true and deeper meaning of the Law, and he actually lived up to its intention" (Allen, ed., Broadman Bible Commentary, Broadman).

Since Matthew was concerned to show that Jesus of Nazareth is the long-awaited Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures, he often reminded his readers that certain events occurred because they were prophesied (cf. Matt. 1:22; 2:5-6, 15, 17-18; 4:14-16; 8:17).

#### ***1. In what ways did Christ fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17)?***

To further impress upon His hearers that He did not come to destroy the law, Christ declared that the minutest details of the law would be fulfilled in Him.

A "jot" or yod, was the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The smallest Greek letter, iota, is still used today to express something very small. The "tittle" is smaller still. It is only a part of a letter. Compare the English letters C and G. The tiny stroke of the pen that distinguishes one from the other is a tittle. It was as if Christ were saying that every i in the law would be dotted and every t crossed by Him.

The thrust of Christ's statement was that every part of the Law and the Prophets would be fulfilled in Him before the end of time. Unlike every human before or since, Jesus of Nazareth perfectly obeyed God's law (Hebrews 4:15); therefore He alone could be accepted by the Father as a sacrifice for sinners.

#### ***2. What was a "jot" and a "tittle" (Matt. 5:18)?***

### **The Law Interpreted (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28)**

From the beginning of time, man has understood that there was a prohibition against the taking of human life (Genesis 4:10; 9:6). This was reinforced by the teaching of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13), which required capital punishment for this and certain other crimes (21:12-17; 22:18-20). The taking of any life is a serious matter and should never be viewed lightly. Sadly, we live in a time when human life has been cheapened in many ways.

The warning about being "*subject to judgment*" (Matt. 5:21) had to do with the system of courts and judges found in ancient Israel (Deut. 16:18; 19:11-20). As in modern times, those who take the lives of

others are subject to the criminal justice system under which they live.

Of course, there will be a final judgment before which individuals will have to answer for their actions. Even if they escape the justice of men, they will one day stand before God (2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 21:8; 22:15).

As bad as murder is, it is not unforgivable. Moses (Exod. 2:12), David (2 Sam. 12:9), and Paul (Acts 26:10) were guilty of murder. Thankfully, *"the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin"* (1 John 1:7).

### ***3. What does God's Word have to say about murder (v. 21)?***

As the Son of God, Christ spoke with divine authority: "But I say unto you." This, in fact, was what impressed the crowds who listened to Him on this occasion, for <sup>28</sup>*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching,* <sup>29</sup>*because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*" (7:28-29).

Though the human propensity to get angry is quite strong, many do so "without a cause" (5:22). Of course, we can usually justify why we get angry, but most of the time it is rooted in our own pride and selfishness. Even the Lord became angry-but not without real justification (Mark 3:5; 11:15). Again, the word "judgment" (Matt. 5:22) likely refers to the local judges, not necessarily the final judgment. The point of our Lord, however, was to show that both overt acts (such as murder) and the inner motivation that leads to such acts (anger) are serious matters.

The meaning of the Aramaic word "Raca" is somewhat uncertain, but it could be translated "empty-head" or "good-for-nothing." It was a term of contempt reserved for those considered utterly worthless.

The Greek word for "council" is the word used for the Great Sanhedrin, which met in Jerusalem and was the highest court in the land (Deut. 17:8-13). Each village and town also had a sanhedrin, or council, to adjudicate local matters (16:18).

Again, the point of Christ was that treating others with contempt puts one in grave danger. To declare another a fool, though, was to place one's soul in danger of eternal punishment (Matt. 5:22). Since *"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'"* (Psalm 14:1), to label another person a fool was to relegate him to the level of an atheist. Certainly, nothing worse could be said of an individual.

### ***4. What is the meaning of the word "Raca" (v. 22)?***

Christians are not immune to anger. To a certain degree anger is healthy (Psalm 4:4; Ephesians 4:26). Taking that into account, we understand Jesus was talking about uncontrolled anger, but that is small comfort.

We Christians do not always control our anger properly, otherwise there would never be a church split! The church needs to work harder on building healthy relationships within the body. We need to learn to value people over things and personal preferences. The unity of the church is important (see 1 Corinthians 3:17). We need to be more forgiving when others are insensitive. Uncontrolled anger is not consistent with the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-26).

***5. Anger is altogether too common in our culture. Road rage, gang violence, political protests, spouse abuse-they all speak of anger in our society. How much of a problem is anger within the church? What can we do about it?***

That the Ten Commandments clearly sanctify the marriage bond is seen in the declaration "*You shall not commit adultery*" (Exod. 20:14). In its broadest sense, this referred to all sexual activity outside the marriage relationship. It is obvious that many give little regard to obeying this commandment in today's world (cf. Heb. 13:4).

### ***6. How did Christ strengthen the prohibition against adultery (v. 27)?***

As murder has its roots in anger, so adultery has its roots in lustful thoughts. People who lived as far back as Job realized the nature of the lustful thought process (see Job 31:1), and Jesus brings this ancient knowledge back to life. People today who think they can drool over pornography and still be right with God just as long as they don't "actually" commit adultery are sadly mistaken!

Christ went to the very heart of the matter, the lustful mind. The desire and the deed are not identical, but, spiritually speaking, they are equivalent. The 'look' that Jesus mentioned was not a casual glance, but a constant stare with the purpose of lusting. It is possible for a man to glance at a beautiful woman and know that she is beautiful, but not lust after her. The man Jesus described looked at the woman for the purpose of feeding his inner sensual appetites as a substitute for the act. (Wiersbe, Bible Exposition Commentary, Victor).

### ***7. Why is it wrong to have lustful thoughts and desires (v. 28)?***

There are many reasons for the prevalence of divorce today, and different people attach greater or lesser significance to the meaning of love and marriage. One problem is the pace of modern society. Ten- and twelve-hour workdays, high stress and pressure on the job, juggling the schedules of two working parents, and arranging child care are wearing people out. They don't have the energy to build relationships. They are exhausted, and exhaustion tries the patience.

As students, you may suggest other problems. Be sure to spend time also on solutions. How can your church foster healthy relationships for couples? What about premarital counseling-is enough being done? Do couples in crisis know where to turn-other than to the divorce lawyers?

### ***8. Why is divorce such a problem in the church today? What can the church do to address this problem?***

#### **The Law of Love (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44)**

The concept of an eye for an eye comes from the Mosaic law and is sometimes called the law of retaliation. If you want to know the Latin term for this kind of justice, it is *lex talionis*. This means, roughly, "law of equal and direct retribution." For physical injury the legal punishment is the same kind of injury in return, according to Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19, 20; and Deuteronomy 19:21. That kind of justice, strictly speaking, is "fair." The prospect of such punishment might keep an angry person from injuring an opponent.

### ***9. What was the idea behind the "eye for an eye" (v. 38) concept from the Old Testament?***

In Jesus' day a strike on the cheek is more of an insult than an outright attack. Jesus advises a nonviolent response, a response that goes against the natural wish to strike back. This is the quickest way to stop the confrontation from escalating.

The only way evil can be conquered is to overcome it with good (Rom. 12:16-21). When treated badly, most find it difficult to turn the other cheek. Doing so takes great strength and courage. When hurt, we think that it will make us feel better to get back at the one who caused us pain, but it does

not. It only lowers us to the level of the one who has mistreated us (Prov. 20:22).

This attitude speaks to what our hearts should look like in the kingdom of God. The ancient prophets had predicted a new heart for God's people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:39; Ezekiel 36:26). This is all part of the fulfillment that Jesus brings.

### ***10. Why is it so difficult to turn the other cheek (v. 39)?***

While the law did say, "*You shall love your neighbor*" (Lev. 19:18), it did not state that one's enemies were to be hated. Even so, this was a common teaching among the Jewish rabbis, who drew a sharp distinction between one's neighbor and one's enemy. In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus clearly responded to this misreading of God's law (Luke 10:25-37).

"It is astonishing, that the scribes fell into so great an absurdity, as to limit the word neighbor to benevolent persons: for nothing is more obvious or certain than that God, in speaking of our neighbors, includes the whole human race" (Calvin, *The Gospels*, AP&A).

Jesus taught us to live by standards higher than those of the scribes (Matt. 5:20). Jesus requires that we look for opportunities to help an enemy. We even set about to create such opportunities. When we do, we fulfill Old Testament requirements found in Exodus 23:4,5 and Proverbs 25:21. Jesus said (in verse 44 of our lesson text) that instead of hating our enemies, we should love them. Instead of cursing those who curse us, we should bless them. Instead of hating those who hate us, we should do good to them. Instead of persecuting those who persecute us, we should pray for them.

Of course, these concepts are as radical today as they were when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Putting them into practice is difficult, to say the least. Our Lord never said that following Him would be easy, though. Nevertheless, "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another*" (1 John 4:11).

Keep in mind that Christ was speaking to individuals and was not attempting to regulate human governments. Even if a nation adopted in principle that it would love its enemies, there would always be those who would refuse to do so. If, however, enough individuals within a nation practiced Christ's teachings, it would revolutionize the character of that nation and how it related to other countries. For the time being, though, we can only anticipate such universal peace, which will be realized only when Christ returns (Isaiah 2:1-5; Hosea. 2:18; Zech. 9:10; Revelation 11:15).

### ***11. Is it acceptable to hate one's enemies? What did the Jewish teachers say about this?***

## **CONCLUSION Excuses or Reasons?**

Our lesson title directs our attention to "A New Approach," and the Sermon on the Mount leads our thoughts along that line. Readily we agree that we cannot be as great and good as God is; but just as readily we agree that we can be better than we are. Then why aren't we? With so many years of Christian living behind us, why aren't we closer to perfection? Some reasons (excuses, really!) are clearly seen.

First, when we notice some imperfection in our character or life, we shrug it off with the cliché, "Nobody's perfect." Often, we just don't try very hard to be better than we are.

Second, we often find that our time is fully occupied with things we like to do. It takes time and effort to do good to our enemies, for example. So, we just don't get around to it.

Third, we never have done those good things that we are not doing now. A sense of inertia keeps us from improving. Maybe we should listen to the more mature Christians who say, "Try it-God commands it." If we can be a hundred-watt lamp, why be content with sixty watts?

### **PRAYER**

Father in Heaven, thank You for being perfect, and thank You for sending Your Son, Your perfect sacrifice for sin. Forgive our easy self-satisfaction, we pray, and help us to be better than we are in all the ways that glorify Jesus. In His name we pray, amen.

### **THOUGHT TO REMEMBER**

May our obedience to Christ honor Him.