

The Ethics of God's World (Part 1)

Matthew 5:21-37

21 You have heard that our ancestors were told, “You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgement.” 22 But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

23 So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, 24 leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

25 When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

27 You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ 28 But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

31 You have heard the law that says, ‘A man can divorce his wife by merely giving her a written notice of divorce.’ 32 But I say that a man who divorces his wife, unless she has been unfaithful, causes her to commit adultery. And anyone who marries a divorced woman also commits adultery.

33 You have also heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not break your vows; you must carry out the vows you make to the Lord.’ 34 But I say, do not make any vows! Do not say, ‘By heaven!’ because heaven is God's throne. 35 And do not say, ‘By the earth!’ because the earth is His footstool. And do not say, ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the city of the great King. 36 Do not even say, ‘By my head!’ for you can't turn one hair white or black. 37 Just say a simple, ‘Yes I will,’ or ‘No, I won't.’ Anything beyond this is from the evil one.

In this series on the Sermon on the Mount, we've been looking at Jesus' character sketch of the kind of people whose lives reflect God's new world, also known as the kingdom of God. The Beatitudes give us a picture of the internal character of the people of God's world. Jesus' teaching about being salt and light

then describes the outward focus of God's people, who illuminate the darkness of the present world with the in-breaking light of God's new world.

But *how* will the people of God's world know they're doing it right? What does the life of God's world look like in practical terms? What are the ethical implications of living the life of God's new world in the present? In this next section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gets specific regarding some of the rules of conduct for those who would follow him.

We're all familiar with rules. When we were still in onesies or doing a furniture walk, we knew, even then, that there were some things that were "no-no's." In fact, "no" is one of the first words a toddler learns. It's usually said by a mother whose child is painting the wall with strawberry jam or on the floor eating the dog's food.

"No" is a word that establishes boundaries. When the child goes to elementary school and learns how to read, the rules get more extensive and are usually posted on the classroom wall. Of course, the child soon learns that there are also exceptions and loopholes in the rules, as well as various interpretations. A rule like "No chewing gum," for example, can be legally interpreted by a fifth grader to mean, "I can have gum in my mouth as long as I don't chew it." By the time children get to high school, they have the legal acuity of lawyers who know the rules and all the ways to get around them. Even after graduation, when the young adult goes to the workplace, there will be rules or codes of conduct that need to be followed. [NOTE 1]

That doesn't mean the rules aren't important; it's just that the rules *alone* aren't enough. An ethical person not only understands and obeys the rules, he or she also *knows -- and embraces -- the purpose and spirit behind the rules*. When Jesus wanted to lay out the ethical agenda for God's world, he didn't ditch the rules that were long ago written down by God on tablets of stone and handed to Moses. Instead, he "fulfilled" those rules by embodying them and teaching them with authority (5:17; 7:29). For Jesus, the rules were still important, but the *principles behind the rules were even more important*. It wasn't just about what was written in stone; it was about the character and law of God written on the hearts of God's people (Jeremiah 31:33).

The scribes and Pharisees knew the law backward and forward, and, as the self-appointed legal conscience of Israel, they were bound and determined to make sure everyone obeyed the law *to the letter*. The scribes acted as lawyers for the law of Moses, and the Pharisees believed that God's kingdom would come only when the people of Israel all obeyed that law perfectly.

The problem with that approach, however, is that focusing on the law alone imposes limits on obedience since I only have to comply with the law and nothing more. A Pharisee evaluated himself and others based on compliance to the rules, not on the basis of compassion toward others or the needs of the community.

This is why Jesus drops the bombshell of a statement in verse 20: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (emphasis added.) If the people thought the scribes and Pharisees had it all together because they obeyed the law to the letter, then they were missing the point. The law points to something bigger, Jesus says. It points to the way of living as the community of God's new world.

[NOTE 2] So, Jesus establishes a pattern in the Sermon on the Mount that points to the stated law of Moses ("You have heard that it was said ...") and the compassionate, community-building intention behind it ("... but I say to you ..."). The law of Moses was designed to show Israel *how to live together in a world of human authority; Jesus wants to discuss what it means to live in a world of divine authority, i.e. God's world, the kingdom of God.*

Jesus takes the old law and radicalizes it, shaking it down to the roots of the law's intent (that's what "radical" means -- the base word "radix" means "root"). Jesus is rooted in the law, but he calls his disciples to live a life with a much deeper rootedness than the legalism of scribes and Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned with what people did or did not do with their hands. Jesus was more concerned about what people had in their hearts and how that would translate into their relationships with people as a sign of God's new world. **[NOTE 3]**

Look at the *first* of these statements: "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'" (v. 21). "Do not murder" was one of the original Ten Commandments; a law set in stone. Murder destroys the humanness of another, thus the law of Moses minces no words. Murder is something to be avoided, which most of us are able to do. How many times have we heard people say something like, "Well, what I did was bad, but at least I didn't kill anyone!" **[NOTE 4]**

And yet while it's clear that we should avoid murdering the body of another, Jesus radicalizes the old commandment and goes down to its root. "But I say to you, that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment."

Anger itself is not a sin. Jesus was angry with the temple merchants turning the Temple into a flea market, but it was righteous anger. Anger can be positive when it is righteous.

Anger is a useful diagnostic tool. When anger erupts in us, it is a signal that something is wrong. Something isn't working right. There is evil or incompetence or stupidity lurking about. Anger is our sixth sense for sniffing out wrong in the neighborhood.

What anger fails to do, though, is tell us whether the wrong is outside us or inside us. We usually begin by assuming that the wrong is outside us -- our spouse or our child or our God has done something wrong, and we are angry. That is what Jonah did, and he quarreled with God. But when we track the anger carefully, we often find it leads to a

wrong within us -- wrong information, inadequate understanding, underdeveloped heart. "Be angry but do not sin," says Ephesians 4:26. --Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*(Eerdmans, 1992), 157.

Jesus understood that the dehumanizing act of murder has its roots in the dehumanizing of another person through our anger. And not only does anger dehumanize the other, it dehumanizes us, too. Every time we decide to allow anger to smolder inside of us, we become less than fully human, less than the people God created us to be. Instead of merely avoiding murder, we should embrace reconciliation, which leads to community (v. 24). It's the difference between following the rule and engaging a relationship -- the difference between avoiding doing something with the hands and doing something with the heart.

[NOTE 5] The *second* statement: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (vv. 27-28). Lust dehumanizes people into objects that we use for our own pleasure. We might be able to avoid the physical act of adultery and thus obey the law, but we forget that the emotional or psychological attachment of lust is just as destructive. Jesus here calls us not to merely avoid breaking the law but to avoid breaking the fidelity of marriage that supports community, trust and love -- the kind of fidelity that Christ himself has with his bride, the church. God's new world is characterized by faithfulness, and when we embrace fidelity in our hearts and in our relationships, we will learn how to embrace it forever.

The *third* statement: Coupled with that is Jesus' teaching about divorce. The law said that a man could simply give his wife a certificate of divorce and that was that. Sounds easy, but it's not unlike the "no-fault divorce" our culture so easily embraces. With the exception of infidelity, however, Jesus says that divorce should be off the table since the root of marriage is faithfulness, community and love (vv. 31-32). If our hearts are focused on maintaining the relationship, then our hands will be less apt to sign the dismissal papers. **[NOTE 6]**

The *fourth* statement: And then there's the law about making vows. Under Jewish law (as in the law courts today), swearing something under oath by sealing it with something like the phrase "so help me, God" is common. If you swear an oath in court, then what you say has to be true or you are violating the law. The implication, then, is that when one is not under oath, one may not have to be as truthful in what one says. Jesus takes the law and goes to its root. We shouldn't just be truthful under oath, we should be truthful all the time. Telling the truth is the basis of community. Lies and falsehoods tear a community apart (vv. 33-37).

[NOTE 7] In these verses, the ethical pattern for the people of God's world emerges. It is a pattern that goes beyond the letter of the law, to the spirit of the law. It goes beyond what we do with our hands, to who we are in our hearts. It

recognizes that external behavior often emerges from an internal temperament. The ethics of God's world are in some respects the same as the ethical structure of the old Israelite society. Murder is still forbidden, adultery is still forbidden, and so on.

But Jesus establishes here that his followers are more than people who refrain from whore-mongering, murdering and being truthful only when it's convenient or required. **[NOTE 8]**

The people of God's world follow an ethical program that requires a purity of intention beyond anything people had heretofore been taught. One's ethical deeds must come from clean hands and a pure heart.

The sermon for this Sunday, then, calls us to look inward, not outward. It is there that we will come to the root of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus in the kingdom of God. Then we can live out the kind of relationships that God calls us too. So, what are you going to do about it? Please write down one thing that you will do, an "I will ... statement" that will help you apply this message. Write down one thing that you can do to start thinking and acting from clean hands and a pure heart. Let's pray ... AMEN

Rules of the House

If you sleep on it -- make it up.

If you wear it -- hang it up.

If you drop it -- pick it up.

If you eat out of it -- wash it.

If you spill it -- wipe it up.

If you turn it on -- turn it off.

If you open it -- close it.

If you move it -- put it back.

If you like it -- share it.

If you receive it -- give thanks for it.

If you lost it -- find it or replace it.

If you broke it -- repair it.

If you empty it -- fill it up.

If it rings -- answer it.

If it howls -- feed it.

If it cries -- love it. --Original source unknown.

Sermon Notes for “The Ethics of God’s World (Part 1)”
based on Matthew 5:21-37 given in Doster on November 12, 2023

- I. Nowhere does Jesus imply that the rules aren’t important. But He does imply that they are not enough. An ethical person not only understand and obeys the rules, he or she also knows and embraces the purpose and spirit behind the rules.
- II. The Law of Moses was designed to show Israel how to live together in a world of human authority; Jesus is discussing what it means to live in a world of divine authority, as in God’s World/the kingdom of God.
- III. Jesus takes the old law and radicalizes it, shaking it down to the roots of the law’s intent. Jesus is talking about how the Law looks in the arena of human relationships.
- IV. “Do not murder; Thou shalt not commit adultery”. Make sure you give a woman a certificate if you divorce her; make sure you don’t lie when you take a vow.” These are rules. Jesus talks about how they are lived out when you take into account the spirit of the laws/rules.
- V. Anger dehumanizes the other and it dehumanizes us. Instead of avoiding murder we should embrace doing something with the heart. Lust dehumanizes people into objects that we use for our own pleasure. We should understand that God’s new world is characterized by faithfulness.
- VI. Divorce should be off the table since the root of marriage is faithfulness, community and love.
- VII. Telling the truth is the basis of community. Lies and falsehoods tear a community and/or a relationship apart.
- VIII. The people of God’s World follow an ethical program that requires a purity of intention. One’s actions come from clean hands and a pure heart. Now what are you going to do about it? What is one thing that you can do today to start thinking and acting from clean hands and a pure heart? Please write something down. Apply it or it will be lost.