

Radical Law-keeping

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[0 : 0 0] Now, we come to the final of our little studies in Matthew chapter 5 on Jesus' radical kingdom, and today we are going to be looking at radical law-keeping. The passage today is quite a long one, Matthew 5, verses 21 to, it says on the sheet, 21 to 28, it's actually 21 to 48, but in other words, the rest of the chapter. Obviously, we won't be able to look at every detail in this passage, but we'll do what we can. Now, Jesus has been talking about the radical nature of his kingdom, and he says now in chapter 5, verse 21, on page 810, you heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say this 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 fire. So if you're offering your gift at the altar, and then 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'll never get out till you have paid the last penny. You heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery.

But I say to you, that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right hand causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.

But it is better that you lose one of your members than let your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. But it is better that you lose one of your members than let your whole body go into hell. It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you, that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you have heard it said, it was said to those of old, you shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. And I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil. You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone will sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you. And do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his son rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what rewards do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. This is the word of the Lord.

[4 : 19] Lord. Now let's have a moment of prayer. Lord God, as we listen to these challenging words, whose punch, whose bite has lost nothing over the long centuries since they were spoken, give to us honest and open hearts, so that we may not evade what he said. Give us integrity, so that we don't pretend to be what we are not. Give to us openness of vision, give to us clarity of thinking. And as we look at these passages today and ask what they mean to us, that you will indeed continue to change us until one day we are like the Lord Jesus Christ, when we see him as he is. And we ask this in his name. Amen.

Amen. One of the least helpful descriptions of the Bible, I've often heard this used, is that it is a rule book or a guide book. And one of the reasons that's inadequate is because, you know, often what happens is the rule books and guide books. You may know the highway code backwards and forwards as well, but be a rotten driver. You may have a whole shelf full of cookery books, but incapable of reducing anything anyone wants to eat. Simply knowing the rules simply does not make any difference to inner behavior. And what Jesus is doing here is saying it's not enough to keep the rules, because that doesn't go to the root of it. Remember, this is Jesus' radical kingdom, going to the root, going to the heart of what's happening. And this part of the Sermon on the Mount is sometimes called the six antitheses, the six contrasts, where Jesus affirms and deepens the Old Testament law.

One of the sillier things I've heard at various places is that Jesus rewrote the Old Testament. The argument goes something like this. The Old Testament full of law, full of judgment, full of rules and legalism, and Jesus came and did away with all these. Then the argument goes a bit further. Since the Holy Spirit has come, we can go further than Jesus and keep on changing as well.

Now, what Jesus is doing, very far from rewriting the Old Testament, is telling us what it means. Like the Pharisees, Jesus believed in the Old Testament. But unlike them, he wasn't simply concerned with keeping rules. He is concerned with the attitude of heart. God looks on the heart.

And it's from the heart that all our attitudes and behavior comes. Jesus is saying, we need to change radically, not simply obey rules. So it's a long passage. I want to look at it, make four main points, because we can take some of these together. What is Jesus asking us to do? Jesus is asking us to engage in some radical surgery, after all. Some total transformation of our inner landscape, if you like. And first of all, he says, we've got to root out anger. Verses 21 to 26.

[7 : 58] Now, of course, the Pharisees believed that it was wrong to murder, as did Jesus. But you know, Jesus is making it much more deep. Jesus is tracing it to the root. Why do people murder? Because they hate the victim. That's what Jesus is saying. Now, some manuscripts said, without a cause, you shall not murder without a cause. But that's not really helpful. The point is, not all anger is evil in itself.

Jesus is referring to ungodly anger, pride, vanity, hatred, and revenge. The desire to do people down, malicious gossip, character assassination. Very interesting that two of the places in the Bible where the image of God is mentioned, one in the book of Genesis, Genesis chapter 9, God says to Noah, no murder because humanity is made in the image of God. In the letter of James, in chapter 3, James says, no gossip because humanity is made in the image of God. What James is talking about, character assassination. And what Jesus is talking about as well. We need to restrain our anger.

You see, it's easy enough to go through your life without murdering somebody. It's very, very difficult to go through your life without feeling bitterness and anger. And his emphasis, this will ultimately bring judgment. He talks about the hell of fire, a word that Jesus uses here as often as Gehenna, which was the valley of Hinnom, which where the rubbish was dumped and burned. This is one of his very terrible metaphors. Words matter. That's what he's saying. We'll come back to that.

Jesus gets right to the heart of the matter. You may never have committed murder. You may never have injured somebody physically. But if you hate that person, you've already unleashed the kind, the unsavory trail that can lead to murder. You see what Jesus is saying? None of us are really all that good. None of us. You see, often, it would be very easy, wouldn't it, if we said there's a certain type of person. Type of person who commits murder, who commits adultery, who takes drugs and so on.

We're not like that. Truth of the matter, Jesus is saying, we all have the seeds of these things in our hearts. They're already there. In fact, we don't do the things outwardly doesn't mean we're incapable of doing it. So Jesus says, root out anger. Then next he says, in verses 27 to 32, root out lust. This is not just about adultery and desire. It really is about the sanctity of marriage.

[10:53] That's what Jesus is talking about here. The root of it all is in the eye and in the heart. Verse 28, I say to you, everyone who looks to a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Jesus is not condemning sex and attraction. Read the Song of Songs, where appropriate devotion to human beauty and appropriate relationship between a man and a woman is celebrated. What he is talking about is not even, I don't think, looking at somebody and thinking they're attractive. And this applies to both sexes. What Jesus is saying, don't dally around temptation. Now the internet, of course, has not invented this sin. But like so many other sins, it's given abundant opportunities to indulge in it, surely. Don't dally around temptation. That's what he's saying. Now, of course, we are inclined to dally around temptation, aren't we? That's what temptation means. If you're not tempted to something, it's no danger to you. Don't be afraid to run away. That's what Joseph did, wasn't it, with Potiphar's wife. It would have been good if the great King David had instead done that as well, when he looked from his palace roof and saw Bathsheba having a bath. Now, we all know our hearts are so weak, our wills are so weak. That's what Jesus is saying. Don't imagine you're incapable of this. Don't imagine you're better than others. Don't imagine this is something that you can get rid of simply by keeping rules. Interesting phrase that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 5. He says, the body is not meant for immorality. Now, we would expect the sentence to continue something like, the body is meant for holiness. The body is meant for purity. But that's not how Paul finishes the sentence. He says, the body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord. In other words, it's all about relationships. And it's all about, above all, our relationship with the Lord.

When that relationship goes bad, others do as well. Then, interesting, the first thing on earth was committed, not when Adam and Eve fell out with each other, but when they conspired together against God. And then they fell out with each other. And probably Paul has that in mind in the Corinthians passage. And he calls for fidelity in marriage. There are a few more devastating things on earth than an unhappy marriage. And he's probably thinking about the passage in Deuteronomy 24, where later on the Pharisees say to him, Moses permitted divorce. What do you think?

You see, the Pharisees were preoccupied with rules about divorce. Jesus was preoccupied with relationship about marriage. That's the point. Now, Jesus knows how weak we are. Jesus knows that the Spirit is willing and the flesh is weak. We can't go back to innocence. The Bible never calls us to be innocent.

It calls us to be holy, to be like Christ. And this is what this, you have heard them say, you have heard them say, you shall not commit adultery. And looking around, you probably thought, most of these people have not committed adultery. But don't imagine, just like murder, don't imagine that you are incapable of it. Never think that you are so holy and so God-like that you cannot do this.

I mean, these words are terrifically challenging and they're a lifelong challenge. I mean, this is something that Jesus is saying is characteristic of relationships. Root out anger. Root out lust.

[15 : 04] Then in verses 33 to 37, root out dishonesty. Fundamentally, it's important that we have integrity, integrity. Now, Jesus has talked already about the lack of honesty, the simmering hatred that leads to murder, the dishonesty. I mean, adultery after all. It doesn't just involve two people. Everybody is hurt.

Everybody in the circle is hurt when that kind of thing happens. And it does involve lying and cheating. So, just as murder involves lying and cheating and trying to cover up. So, Jesus is saying, be careful what you say. Because, as the book of Proverbs says, what we say reveals our heart.

Now, first of all, the place of oaths. Verse 33, do not swear false. I say, do not take an oath at all. Now, I want to take this pedantic literalism, as some have done, and say that means we can't even make an oath in court. What it means is, once again, Jesus is saying, don't imagine simply saying words. Repeating formula and ignoring integrity will really be important. Why do we have oaths? Why do we have contracts and so on? Because people are often dishonest. We are often dishonest.

It's interesting. Look at a contract. When you look at a contract, you always get the impression your employer doesn't like you very much. And all these little phrases about, you know, if you do this and if you do that, and the procedures and so on. Now, the reason for contracts, of course, is because people are often dishonest. That's why marriage isn't a contract. Marriage is a covenant.

That's a very different thing between two people who have committed themselves to each other. The reason we have contracts with all these clauses and all these things, as I say, that sound so pedantic and finicky, is because it's very easy to be dishonest about gentleman's agreement. Well, that's fine if you're a gentleman or a lady. That isn't always the case. So, the place of oaths. And the book of Ecclesiastes says, better not to make an oath than to make an oath and not carry it out. Oaths are a particular form of speaking.

[17 : 39] Easy enough to make an oath. Easy enough to sign a contract. But the important thing is how we carry them out. And then he moves on, really, to the importance of words.

In the, do not let what you say be simply yes or no. Jesus is saying, mean what you say and say what you mean.

Once again, he's not saying that we should never compliment and never criticize. What Jesus is getting at is don't make extravagant compliments if you don't mean them.

That's a great temptation, isn't it? To try and make everyone think you're nice by making extravagant compliments. Somebody wants you to do something you really don't want to do at all.

You say, oh, that'd be great, wouldn't it? We don't mean that at all, do we? Ever tried silence? Sometimes in these circumstances, silence is a better thing.

[18 : 41] And do we really imagine that simply adding words such as God and the Lord make our words more or less truthful? We mustn't devalue language. We devalue language by extravagant praise.

We also devalue by malicious criticism. It's important that, as Christian people, what we see is what we get. Now, once again, of course, as you know, there are things you can say to close friends and family that would be unbearably rude if they were said to other people.

But, once again, that's a special use of language because of a relationship. Jesus is saying our words so often betray us. And we know this, don't we?

Like, well, I didn't mean that. Most often what we mean is, actually, I did mean it, but I didn't want you to know. Now, that's another example of the devaluing of language.

See, this is really penetrating, isn't it? It gets under the skin. So, Jesus is saying, root out dishonesty. Root out false talk.

[19 : 51] And be a lecture. Actually, let your yes be yes and your no be no. And finally now, rooting out malice and revenge in verses 38 to 48.

This is about our attitude to evil and our natural human desire for revenge. Oh, they all get what's coming to them. Who has never said that?

Or who has never thought that? Even if we don't say it. And so, first of all, in 38 to 42, the law of retribution. You have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Interesting, that's often taken as an example of the savagery of Old Testament law. If you take Old Testament law and compare it to the laws of surrounding nations, the point of this law was to make the punishment fit the crime.

It was a tooth for a tooth. Not cutting the person's throat or something. An eye for an eye. You see what I'm getting at?

[20 : 54] This is make the punishment fit the crime. To avoid excessive punishment. The other thing, of course, is this belongs to the law courts. It's not about personal revenge.

And Jesus speaks here of non-resistance, doesn't he? If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Once again, we mustn't fall into pedantic literalism.

Jesus is not talking about letting bullies and evildoers get away with it. What he is saying is, this must never be a matter of personal revenge.

We mustn't take the law into our own hands. It's a matter for the courts. It's not forbidding justice being done. It's forbidding us to take justice into our own hands.

Revenge is sweet, it's often said, isn't it? And our natural instinct, if somebody insults us, is to insult them back. Our natural instinct, our fallen humanity, always wants to do that.

[22 : 02] But Jesus says, this is not a sign of the kingdom. This is a sign of the old, unforgiven, and regenerate, sinful person.

And then, that's the negative side of it. And then, in the last antithesis, 43 to 48, the positive side, active love. You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor.

Now, the book of Leviticus says that. But the other interesting thing is, nowhere in the Old Testament are the words, hate your enemy. You see, this is where the Pharisees had added.

A special example of revenge, isn't it? The Pharisees said, in between the Old Testament and New Testament periods, a vast amount of laws and legislation and rules are added to the Scriptures, covering every conceivable situation, or trying to cover every conceivable situation.

Jesus is saying, the whole thrust of the law is love. Love your enemies. And pray for those who persecute you.

[23 : 10] Now, you see, once again, it's back in the whole realm of relationship. Any of us can love when it's convenient. There are some people we find more lovable than others.

We know that. That's a fact of life. But what Jesus is saying is, if you are going to be children, sons of your Father, you have to love in the way he does.

Your Father is what's called common grace. The sun rise on the evil and on the good, rain on the just and on the unjust. Be like that. Love indiscriminately.

Try and become like our Father. That's what he's saying. Our Father treats us in this way. Indeed, he treats humanity in that way. This is not saving grace.

This is what's sometimes called common grace. Common grace, which has to do, as I say, with things obviously like rain and sun. If we thought that sun was a sign of favor and rain a sign of judgment, then we would want to emigrate, wouldn't we?

[24 : 13] But that's not the point. The point is that sun and rain shine and fall indiscriminately upon everybody. Whether they are good or bad, deserving or non-deserving.

Then comes this utterly terrifying statement. If you think the other state has been terrifying, you therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Just like that.

Now, two things need to be said. And I'm trying to avoid the temptation of saying what Jesus really meant.

But there are two things. First of all, like everything else in this chapter, this will never fully be realized in this world. We will never love like our Father until we are in the new creation.

Until we are changed to be like Christ. That is the first thing. But the second thing is, since that is our destiny, we need to, day by day, become more like.

[25 : 17] Let me put it this way. So that when we do eventually reach the new creation, the contrast won't be too horrific between what we are like now and what we will be. The contrast will be pretty drastic.

But see what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying, ultimately, God's desire for us is to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.

We're never going to achieve it in this world, but we are going to make progress towards it. Often slipping back, often getting it wrong. But one day, this will happen.

So you see, this gospel is radical, not cosmetic. It's not doctoring up the old nature. It's transforming to a radical new nature.

And Jesus is saying, we'll never do that by keeping rules. We'll only do that by loving relationship with the Father, which will spill out to other people.

[26 : 18] Here, as John was to say later on, here is love. Not that we love God, but he loved us. And this is something that is going to be a lifelong experience and something that will culminate in when the kingdom finally comes.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord God, how far from perfect we are. How sinful we are. So much murder, so much adultery, so much dishonesty, so much equivocation in our hearts.

Father, forgive us. Cleanse us from our sins day by day. And make us more like Christ Jesus, who died that we might be forgiven and died to make us good.

We ask this in his name. Amen.