

Session 6

You Have Heard It Said

Matthew 5:17–6:4

Memory Verse

*“Don’t think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets.
I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.”*

– Matthew 5:17, CSB

You Have Heard It Said

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Genuine heart change, only possible through the work of the Holy Spirit, is more important than any good works we think we do or any rules we believe we must follow. God has always been most concerned with our hearts.

CALL TO ACTION: Do you live as though you can earn your salvation by doing everything right? Or do you believe you don't have to worry about right and wrong because you are covered by grace? This week, let Jesus speak to you about the condition of your heart.

In the days of the kings, the faithfulness of the Israelite people was a mixed bag, with many more unfaithful kings who did evil in the eyes of the Lord than faithful kings who obeyed the Lord's guidance and commands. Generations of unfaithful kings led the Israelite people down a slippery slope of disobedience, into the consequences He promised back in Deuteronomy. The people's collective sin led to the destruction of Solomon's temple and the exile of the people.

Following the people's return from exile, religious legalism emerged among the Jews. Initially, religious leaders acted like watchmen on the wall, protecting the people from future disobedience. By the time Jesus arrived, many of these leaders had moved toward legalism, creating a culture that, in many ways, missed the mark of God's intention through His law. The Pharisees had created a robust additional "fence" around the law with the hope of guarding against even approaching breaking the law. This "fence" consisted of extra laws not handed down by God but recorded in a book called the Mishnah (which was about 800 pages long in English). Since this was so lengthy, commentaries known as 'Talmuds were introduced to share interpretation of the extra laws.¹ (You can see how this would get restrictive and excessive.)

Some of this same extreme legalism still exists today. In the 1990s, three apartments in Tel Aviv burned while the tenants asked a rabbi if calling the fire department would violate Shabbat (using the phone on the Sabbath was considered a form of work). The rabbi considered this a permissible action, but by the time this word reached them, the damage was done.² Less extreme, all of us are prone to seeking ways to earn God's favor over living obediently in His grace.

In His ministry, Jesus offered a better explanation of the law and guidelines on righteousness. As we continue our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we will see how Jesus corrected this legalistic mentality. Following God faithfully has never been about completing a checklist of to-dos before God. **God has always been more concerned about our hearts.**



Do you think legalism is still something the modern church struggles with? Why or why not?



What are some ways you are prone to this way of thinking in daily life?

Session Summary

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus corrected the flawed thinking of religious legalism and instead taught a higher standard: heart change. When a person has a transformed heart, they don't just avoid murder, they avoid anger and hate in their heart. They don't just abstain from the actual act of adultery; they also fight against lust in their heart. They love their spouses, and don't divorce them for senseless offenses. They tell the truth. They don't seek vengeance. They love everyone, even when it's hard to do so. They are generous, not because they think they will get something in return, but from a loving and grateful heart.

1. Christ Fulfills the Law (Matthew 5:17-20)



What does it mean that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it?



How has Jesus fulfilled God's law perfectly?

In His earthly ministry, Jesus's teaching against legalism stirred up anger and animosity from the religious leaders of the day. An example of this is when He healed on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11; Luke 13:10-17; John 5:1-18). The religious leaders accused Jesus of violating the law, but in our passage, Jesus refuted this by saying that He didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (v.17).

The reference to the law and the prophets here means the Old Testament as we know it today. Jesus upheld the value of the Old Testament. It is reliable and accurate, down to the "smallest letter" (v. 18). It is divinely inspired (the Word of God), but the extra traditional laws (the Mishnah) were not.

The self-righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees was, in many cases, a façade that hid a heart in the wrong place. Jesus taught that true righteousness didn't come from legalistically following every tiny rule they had put into place, it came from a heart transformed by the Lord. Jesus displayed this right heart posture for His entire life and never sinned at all. He perfectly fulfilled the law that no other person ever could.



Application: When do you struggle feeling like you must complete a checklist of good works to remain in God's good graces? How can we seek to avoid this way of living?

2. You Have Heard It Said (Matthew 5:21-48)



What is surprising about Jesus's teaching in this section?



How does this teaching conflict with modern worldly thinking?

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus pointed firmly to the need for heart change (which can come only with the help of the Lord) to overrule following. In every case, He presented a model that is different than what the people had been taught. Jesus was turning their upside-down world right-side up and teaching them how to live the way God desires.

Notice the authority by which Jesus taught (“But I tell you . . .” v. 22). A rabbi, cognizant that he was not speaking words that were divinely inspired, would normally not teach with such authority but rather use a phrase like “there is a teaching that . . .” But Jesus asserted His own authority. This is another reminder that Jesus, as God’s Son, has divine authority.

Let’s break down His teaching by section:

Murder Begins in the Heart. The first heart issue Jesus addressed was anger and enmity. “Do not murder” (v. 21) is God’s commandment, and “whoever murders will be subject to judgement” (v. 21) referenced the religious teachings of the day (don’t murder, because you will be subject to judgement).³ Jesus taught a higher standard. The sin of murder grows from sin in the heart. The hate hidden in our hearts is sinful too. Murder will bring you judgment in this life, and the hidden sin of the heart is subject to divine judgement.

Adultery Begins in the Heart. The next issue Jesus addressed was adultery. The sin of adultery begins as the sin of lust in the heart. The problem isn’t just the act of adultery itself, but also the hidden sin of lust. Things like pornography, promiscuity in TV and films, and sexuality in books all feed this hidden sin of lust. Jesus made clear that even lustful thoughts are sin.

Jesus made the point that sin is serious, and we should be willing to go to extreme measures to remove it from our lives. Sin separates us from God. Secret sin in our hearts can lead us to actions of sin. Sin is a deadly slippery slope. When we sin, we miss the mark on fully loving God and others.

Divorce Practices Censured. God's intention for marriage is that it exists between one man and one woman for life. In Jesus's day, divorce was a hot topic. One rabbinic school of thought taught that small slights like burning bread were grounds for divorce.⁵ Such teaching often led to women being put in unjust positions. Such cavalier treatment goes against God's design and Jesus taught a higher standard.


Though God's ideal for marriage is not divorce, the reality is that we live in a fallen world. We all sin, and sometimes that sin leads to divorce. This can be a messy, difficult subject to approach. We must always keep in mind that we are to be known by our love. We offer help, resources, support, and prayers of reconciliation for those walking through divorce, even as we recognize it is not God's design. Kicking someone out of a congregation, ostracizing, or shaming someone for divorce is not Christlike and goes against the very heart posture Jesus is calling us to here.

It should also be noted that just as Jesus wouldn't teach that we shouldn't call the fire department to uphold Sabbath law, He wouldn't advocate for staying in an abusive relationship simply to remain married.

Tell The Truth. The Old Testament taught that you should keep your word, but tradition created all sorts of workarounds to get out of an agreement. Jesus taught we shouldn't even need to take an oath because we should be men and women of our word.


Go The Second Mile. Jesus wasn't teaching that we shouldn't defend ourselves or seek justice as the occasion requires, but rather that we shouldn't seek vengeance.⁵ As followers of the Prince of Peace, we, too, should be peacemakers at heart.

Love Your Enemies. This whole section points to the importance of love. Loving others like Jesus loves addresses the issue Jesus named here. "Love your neighbor" (v. 43) was an Old Testament command, but "and hate your enemy" was an addition by the scribes.⁶ Jesus calls us to a higher standard. We should love everyone, not just the people who are easy to love. This includes even our enemies.

 Application: What of Jesus's teachings here is a struggle for you? How can you seek obedience in this area?

3. A Generous Heart (Matthew 6:1-4)

 Why do our hearts matter when it comes to giving?

 What are some ways we might give rightly but still be in the wrong?

Jesus went on to address another aspect of right living: generosity. Remember, a main point of Jesus's message here: strictly following a checklist of requirements isn't what God wants from us. He cares more about our heart posture. Scripture consistently teaches that we should have a generous spirit. As God is abundantly generous with us, we should also be generous with others.

He wants us to be generous with our time, talents, and gifts, but not out of motivation to be honored or to merely look reverent, as some religious leaders in that day were in the habit of doing.

Consider the example of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. After Barnabas sold a field and gave the proceeds to benefit the body of believers, they also desired the glory and honor he received. They, too, sold a property, but only gave a portion of the proceeds, attempting to lie and say it was the full amount they received. Their sin literally cost them their life. Jesus addressed this type of sin in these verses.

Giving generously isn't about what we get in return or receiving honor for our actions. Our motivation should simply be right living—to serve the Lord faithfully and steward well the gifts He has given us. As we do so, our heart posture will be one of love and gratitude and we will prioritize eternal rewards over earthly ones.



Application: What makes it challenging to align our hearts with godly generosity? What are some reasons a person might struggle to do so?

Conclusion

Contrary to the opinion of the religious leaders of Jesus's day, Jesus upheld and fulfilled the Old Testament law completely. The religious leaders who opposed Jesus were assumed to be righteous because of their prestige and the positions they held in society, but they had missed the point. Many were not truly righteous. True righteousness, Jesus taught, doesn't come from legalism, but from a heart transformed by the Lord.

Jesus went on to give examples of a transformed heart. When a person has a transformed heart, they don't just avoid murder, they fight against anger and hate in their heart. They don't just abstain from the actual act of adultery, they don't permit lust to live in their hearts. They love their spouses, and don't divorce them for senseless offenses. They tell the truth. They don't seek vengeance. They love everyone, even when it's most difficult to do so.

In His sermon, Jesus called His followers to a higher standard than the religious leaders of the day. Still today, Jesus calls us to a higher standard than our society expects. We should stand out as different, in the best way.

We all sin and fall short of God's standards, but the Holy Spirit is slowly working on our hearts, molding them to be more Jesus-shaped, and as He leads us through this life-long process of progressive sanctification, this type of posture will become more natural.



Assess your heart posture today. What further transforming work do you need God to do in your heart and life?



How can our group support one another in living in the counter-cultural ways Jesus described in these verses?



How might living in this way give us further opportunity to share the gospel with others?

Memorize

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References

- ¹ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 93.
- L. A. Times, “World In Brief: Israel: Apartments Burn in Sabbath Delay,” <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-26-mn-1545-story.html>.
- Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 94.
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