

Matthew 5:17-37

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.¹⁸ Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰ I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.²¹ “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.²³ Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you,²⁴ leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If 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 to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna.³⁰ And 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 to have your whole body go into Gehenna.³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’³² But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black.³⁷ Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.

Context

Here in the 6th Sunday of Ordinary Time, our gospel reading continues the “Sermon on the Mount” begun on the 4th Sunday. As mentioned elsewhere, the “Sermon” is the first of the Matthean discourses and perhaps the best known. Warren Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*) has these introductory comments about the entire sermon:

The focus of Jesus’ teaching concerns the “good news of God’s empire/reign” (4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 7:21). The sermon is not, though, a comprehensive manual or rule book not a step-by-step “how to” book. Rather it offers a series of illustrations, or “for examples,” or “case studies” of life in God’s empire, visions of the identity and way of life that result from encountering God’s present and future reign. (p.128)

For those who belong to the minority and marginal community of disciples of Jesus, the sermon continues the gospel’s formational and envisioning work. It shapes and strengthens the community’s identity and lifestyle as a small community in a dominant culture that does not share that culture’s fundamental convictions. The community is reminded that the interactions with God, with one another, and with the surrounding society are important aspects of their existence which embraces all of life, present and future. Mission to, love for, and tension with the surrounding society mark their participation in this society.

Integrity or wholeness defines their relationships with one another. Prayer, accountability, and the active doing of God's will are features of their relationship with God and experience of God's empire. (p.129)

Carter's insights about the "relationship" language and images present in the Sermon are so far present in the Beatitudes (5:1-12) and metaphors of salt and light (5:14-16) – in describing not the "terms and conditions" of the relationship with God and God's people, or a *halakah* (rule of life) – but rather is meant to stimulate the imagination and personal responsibility of freely entering into the covenant relationship with God. What does it mean to truly be God's people?

Introduction to Covenants

Too often the Sermon (and similar texts in Luke and Mark) are read as though it was a *halakah* without considering the idea of fulfillment in the *Gospel according to Matthew*. "Fulfillment" in Matthew's use means that he has looked back into the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and seen – not predictions – but patterns of the way in which God has related to his people. All of the patterns of history are completed in the person of Jesus – He possesses in himself the fullness of the promises of the covenants. Yes, plural – covenants!

Covenantal theologians identify four primary covenants: (a) Noahic, (b) Abrahamic, (c) Mosaic, and the (d) Davidic. Some scholars also argue for a fifth, earlier covenant, the Adamic – but that it not key for our purposes. How do the four covenant point to fulfillment in Jesus? R.E. Friedman put it ever so clearly when he wrote that with "the Noahic covenant promising the stability of the cosmic structure, the Abrahamic covenant promising people and land, the Davidic covenant promising sovereignty, and the Mosaic covenant promising life, security, and prosperity" we have a framework to understand all the stories in between. In other words, if you removed these four passages, you would have an anthology of stories, but no meta-narrative by which to understand them. As it is, we have the promise of God – much of which is unconditional – that our right relationship with Him, provides a wholeness for life by which we can freely enter into a full relationship with God.

It is God building for Himself a people. From family (Adam), clan (Noah), tribe (Abraham), federation of tribes (Moses), a nation (David), the covenants point in line and in pattern to the whole of the world as the people of God in and through the Covenant in Jesus. If one loses sight of this, then one forever asks "what do I have to do" instead of "what am I becoming."

Commentary

The opening passage of this Gospel is controversial. Is it a general statement of Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament, especially in its legal provisions, designed to introduce the detailed examples of Jesus' teaching in relation to the Old Testament law in vv. 21–48 and other points throughout the Gospel? Do Jesus' words affirm the permanent validity of the details of the Old Testament law as regulations, or do they express more generally the God-given authority of the Old Testament without specifying just how it is applicable in the new situation introduced by the coming of Jesus?

The Role of Jesus and the Law.... and the Prophets

Too often the question becomes framed only with respect to the "Law" where the verse reads: "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*" (5:17). The "*law or the prophets*" establishes a literary bracket with 7:12, setting off the sections in between as the instructional core of the Sermon. The phrase itself technically refers to the Pentateuch, the Former Prophets (Joshua-Kings) and Latter Prophets (Isaiah-Malachi), but forms the functional equivalent of the whole of Scripture.

Remember that this is not an apologetic to those who had accused 1st-century Christians of rejecting the Law (or rather the rabbinic interpretation of the Law), but rather is for “internal use” by Christians who belong to a community that has made some fundamental changes to Torah observance (which is different than rejecting the Law). Jesus does not abolish the law, yet he does not affirm the status quo of the manner of observance. How are we to understand this “in-between” posture? Eugene Borning (186-87) offers some clear insights as he writes:

“(1) The whole Scripture (‘law and prophets’) testifies to God’s will and work in history. Matthew does not retreat from this affirmation. He does not play off the (abiding) ‘moral law’ against the (temporary) ‘ceremonial law.’

“(2) God’s work, testified to in the Scriptures, is not yet complete. The Law and Prophets point beyond themselves to the definitive act of God in the eschatological, messianic future.’

“(3) The advent of the messianic king’s proclaiming and representing the eschatological kingdom of God is the fulfillment of the Scriptures – the Law and Prophets. The Messiah has come. He embodies and teaches the definitive will of God. The Law and Prophets are to be obeyed not for what they are in themselves, but because they mediate the will of God. But in Matthew, Jesus declares that what he teaches is God’s will and the criterion of eschatological judgment (7:24, 26; cf. 7:21), so there can be no conflict between Jesus and the Torah, which he fulfills. This is a tremendous, albeit implicit, christological claim.

“(4) The messianic fulfillment does not nullify or make obsolete the Law and the Prophets, but confirms them. The incorporation of the Law in the more comprehensive history of salvation centered is the Christ-event which is an affirmation of the Law, not its rejection.

“(5) But his affirmation, by being fulfilled by Christ, does not always mean a mere repetition or continuation of the original Law. Fulfillment may mean transcendence as well (cf. 12:1-14). The Matthean Jesus elsewhere enunciates the critical principle that mercy, justice, love, and covenant loyalty are the weightier matters of the Law by which the rest of must be judged (see 9:13; 12:7, both of which quote that his own life and teaching are the definite revelation of the will of God; cf. 11:25-27; 28:12-20) does indeed mean that neither the written Torah nor its interpretation in the oral tradition...is the final authority.”

At this point one needs to be careful lest one is drawn into a purely “Law” question and begins to focus on the legal portion of the Mosaic covenant to the exclusion of the remainder of that covenant, as well as the other covenants that make up the whole of the relationship of the people with God. Remember that this passage follows upon an earlier passage wherein Jesus is teaching the disciples about discipleship in the kingdom of heaven (5:1-2) – something that is here and yet not fully here.

Until Heaven And Earth Pass Away

¹⁸ *Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.*” It is notable that “the prophets” are not mentioned again in Matthew 5; the focus seems to now be on the law alone. The statement is striking and perhaps somewhat puzzling. It is clearly a statement of the permanence of the law. The preservation of every least mark of the pen is a vivid way to convey that no part of it can be dispensed with. But the saying is complicated by two “until” clauses. It is not clear how these two clauses related to one another, or whether they are making the same or different points. “*Until heaven and earth pass away*” is the equivalent of our modern “until hell freezes over” – a none too subtle “never” (cf. Jer 31:35-36; 33:20-21, 25-26; Job 14:12; also positively in Ps 72:5, 7, 17). The repetition of the verb

“pass away” (*parerchomai*) links the law to the earth/heavens as equally permanent. Note that in Mt 24:35 Jesus’ own words are stated to be more permanent than heaven and earth.

The puzzling part comes with the use of the second “until.” Some see the repetition as just that, a repetition for emphasis. But the second “until” is contextualized by something happening, whereas the first is in the context of something that will not happen. The majority of scholars see the phrase “*until all things have taken place*” has typical Matthean use of eschatological fulfillment (cf. 24:34). If this is correct then fulfilling the law and the prophets is in terms of a future situation to which the law pointed. Then the text could be saying that the smallest detail of the law would be valid until the fulfillment arrived – and only valid until then.

This is the point at which some insist that Jesus is that fulfillment and since Jesus is there in their midst, then the law passes away. But in the light of Jesus claiming not to abolish the law (v.17), his insistence that even the least of the commandments remains important (v.18) and that the community is to “*obey and teach these commandments*” (v.19) – that understanding seems improbable.

The double “until” is perhaps awkward but is paraphrased by RT France (2007, p.186) as: “The law, down to its smallest details, is as permanent as heaven and earth, and will never lose its significance; on the contrary, all that it points forward to will in fact become a reality.” The new reality is present in Jesus, but not fully present as the kingdom of heaven. Still the law (smallest detail and all) have to be seen in a new light, but they still cannot be discarded. Matthew will make clear in 5:21-47 how the law will function in a new situation where they are not *halakah* but are pointers to a greater righteousness (relationship) in the family kinship (covenant).

Discipleship and the Law

¹⁹ *Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven.* ²⁰ *I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven*

Like the previous two verses, v.19 warns the disciples against altering or setting aside any part of the law, however small. Although our translation uses “break,” the underlying Greek word is *lyō* which means “loose, untie or relax” (and is from the same root as *abolish* in v. 17) The word typically means to ‘set aside’ or ‘teach against’ a commandment, rather than to disobey it; ‘loose’ in 16:19; 18:18 is the same verb). To do such a thing would show disrespect for the Old Testament and Jesus implies that makes a poor Christian. “*Least*” is used chiefly for its rhetorical effect echoing the *least* commandment, though clearly within the kingdom of heaven there are those who are more or less consistent and effective in their discipleship; the thought is of quality of discipleship, not of ultimate rewards. The good disciple will *obey* and *teach* the commandments: he will go beyond lip-service, to be guided by them in his life and teaching. Does this mean literal observance of every regulation? Not if we may judge by vv. 21–48 and e.g. Jesus’ attitude to the laws of uncleanness. The question of interpretation and application remains open: it is the attitude of respect and obedience which is demanded, and to this no single commandment can be an exception.

Verse 20 dispels any suspicion of legalism which v. 19 might have raised. The *scribes* (professional students and teachers of the law) and *Pharisees* (members of a largely lay movement devoted to scrupulous observance both of the Old Testament law and of the still developing legal traditions), whose obedience to ‘the least of these commandments’ could not be faulted, do not thereby qualify for *the kingdom of heaven* (whereas the disciple who relaxes the commandments does belong to it, though as the ‘least’). What is required is a greater *righteousness* (see on 3:15; 5:6, 10), a relationship of love and obedience to God which is more than a literal observance of regulations. It is such a ‘righteousness’ which fulfils the law and the prophets (v. 17), and which will be illustrated in vv. 21–

48 (in contrast with the legalism of the scribes) and in 6:1–18 (in contrast with the superficial ‘piety’ of the Pharisees).

An Interim Summary

R.T. France (1989, p.116) offers a paraphrase to make the point clear: “¹⁷I have not come to set aside the Old Testament, but to bring the fulfilment to which it pointed. ¹⁸For no part of it can ever be set aside, but all must be fulfilled (as it is now being fulfilled in my ministry and teaching). ¹⁹So a Christian who repudiates any part of the Old Testament is an inferior Christian; the consistent Christian will be guided by the Old Testament, and will teach others accordingly. ²⁰But a truly Christian attitude is not the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees, but a deeper commitment to do the will of God, as vv. 21ff. will illustrate.”

Matthew 5:17-20 does not say that every Old Testament regulation is eternally valid. This view is not found anywhere in the New Testament, which consistently sees Jesus as introducing a new situation, for which the law prepared (Gal. 3:24), but which now fulfills it. The focus will be on Jesus and his teaching, and in this light the validity of any particular Old Testament rule must now be examined. Some will be found to have fulfilled their role and be no longer applicable (see especially Hebrews on the ritual laws, and Jesus’ teaching on uncleanness, Mark 7:19), others will be reinterpreted. Matthew 5:21ff. will be dealing with this reinterpretation, and vv. 17–20 can only truly be understood as an introduction to vv. 21ff. To assert, as these verses do, that every detail of the Old Testament is God-given and unalterable, is not to preempt the question of its proper application. If the law pointed forward to a new situation which has now arrived, that question of application arises with new urgency, and vv. 21ff. will go on to indicate some answers to it. Their answers will be the opposite of legalism (the literal and unchanging application of the law as regulations) but will reveal the deeper meaning of covenant.

A Framework of Understanding

Matthew 5:21-47 is clearly designed to be read as a whole, consisting of six units of teaching each introduced by ‘You have heard that it was said ... But I say to you ...’, and rounded off with a summary of Jesus’ ethical demand in v. 48. It is neither a complete ethic, nor a theological statement of general ethical principles, but a series of varied examples of how Jesus’ principles, enunciated in vv. 17–20, work out in practice. And this practical outworking is set in explicit contrast with the ethical rules previously accepted: it is in each case more demanding, more far-reaching in its application, more at variance with the ethics of man without God; it concerns a man’s motives and attitudes more than his literal conformity to the rules. In this sense, it is quite radical.

The Introductory Phrasing

The formula with which Jesus’ demand is made is unvarying: “*But I say to you.*” The other side of the contrast varies from the full formula “*You have heard that it was said to your ancestors*” (vv. 21, 33) to the more abbreviated forms “*You have heard that it was said*” (vv. 27, 38, 43) and even simply “*It was also said*” (v. 31). But there is no discernible difference in intention: the full formula, once introduced in v. 21, does not need to be repeated in order to make the same point.

Two aspects of the wording of this formula are important. First, “*it was said*” represents a relatively rare passive form of the verb *erethe*, which is used in the NT specifically for quotations of Scripture or divine pronouncements. This means it is not likely that we can simply assume Jesus’ reference is the teaching of a group such as the Pharisees. The rare *erethe* points to a divine declaration. Secondly, this declaration was made to the *ancestors*; the reference cannot then be to any contemporary or recent tradition. These features suggest strongly that in the first half of each contrast we should expect to find a quotation of the Mosaic law, as it would be heard read in the synagogues.

This construction seems to imply that Jesus is setting his teaching in opposition to the divine law – as noted before Jesus claims not to abolish the law (v.17), insists that even the least of the commandments remains important (v.18) and that the community is to “*obey and teach these commandments*” (v.19). The intent of the construction may become clearer when we consider the peculiar nature of the “quotations” of the Law.

The Old Testament passages cited

The first two are straightforward quotations of two of the commandments – although the first (*You shall not kill*) is augmented by an additional principle (*whoever kills will be liable to judgment*, v.21) taken from the Pentateuch. The third (*Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce*, v.31) is significantly different from the text of Deut 24:1 and seems to take a different trajectory than the OT text. The fourth quote (*Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow*, v.33) is not a quote but rather a summary of various OT guidelines on oaths and vows. The fifth (*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*, v.38) is quoted accurately, however what develops from it seems to have a different intent and context than the original use. The sixth (*You shall love your neighbor [Lv 19:18] and hate your enemy [addition]*, v.43) adds something new. There is no OT command to hate one’s neighbor, even if the “neighbor” of the love commandment was understood as one’s fellow countryman.

We will return to each of these passages, but one can intuit a general impression that perhaps Jesus is not addressing the Law *per se*. The use of *errethe* is appropriate as Jesus is citing a series of “legal” principles based in the Law. But in several cases there is an addition that distorts their intention. In other words, the “opponent” here are those who began with the OT law (hence *errethe*) but then began to add and interpret it in a way that by Jesus’ time the OT law was understood and applied in a manner that misled the people from the Divine intent.

Jesus’ reading of the OT Law

The way in which Jesus’ reading of the OT laws differs from an and goes beyond current understanding varies from one example to another. In the first two examples (murder and adultery), while there is no suggestion that the literal ethical ruling is set aside, Jesus goes far beyond its outward observance (which can be seen and judged) to the thoughts and attitude which underlie the action, whether they are carried into effect or not. In the third and fourth examples (divorce and swearing) Jesus declares that the actions which the OT law presupposes and for which it provides regulation should never have occurred in the first place; where the law recognized and attempted to mitigate human failure to maintain the standard of life God requires (marital fidelity and truthfulness), Jesus goes to the root of the issue and challenges the initial actions themselves. In the fifth example (retributive punishment) an OT judicial ruling is stated to be inapplicable to personal ethics, to which it was presumably being applied by Jesus’ contemporaries as a justification for retaliatory action; in its place Jesus declares a principle of nonresistance which leaves no room for the calculation of proportionate retribution. In the sixth example Jesus extends the principle of love far beyond the explicit purview of the OT law and in direct contradiction of what was presumably a contemporary “corollary” from the love of neighbors, the hatred of non-neighbors.

Common pattern

R.T. France (2007, p.197) writes: “If there is a common pattern to these varied examples of ‘going beyond’ both the OT law and the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, it might be characterized in a number of ways. (1) It promotes an ‘inward’ concern with motive and attitude above the ‘outward’ focus on the visible and quantifiable observance of regulations. (2) It goes behind specific rules to look for the more far-reaching principles which should govern the conduct of the people of God. (3) It is concerned not so much with the negative goal of the avoidance of specific sin but with the far more

demanding positive goal of discovering and following what is really the will of God for his people. (4) It substitutes for what is in principle a 100 percent achievable righteousness (the avoidance of breaking a definable set of regulations) [for] a totally open-ended ideal (being ‘*perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*’) which will always remain beyond the grasp of the most committed disciple. Such a radically searching reading of the will of God in the light of the OT law establishes a righteousness of the kingdom of heaven which is in a different league altogether from the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees —and of any other religious traditions which understand the will of God in terms of the punctilious observance of rules.”

An alternative view

In v.20 Jesus calls for a greater righteousness. Eugene Boring sees vv.21-47 as offering six concrete instances from which the disciples can discern a way forward to that greater righteousness. In Jesus’ teaching a three-fold structure appears (what follows is quote from Boring, 189):

Reaffirmation. Matthew reassures those who fear that Christians advocate the abolition of the Torah that this is a misunderstanding. Jesus’ commands do not transgress the Law, but radicalize it—they go to the radix, the root of the command. The one who puts into practice what Jesus teaches in Matthew 5 will not violate any command of the Torah, which is not abolished but reaffirmed.

Radicalization. The fulfillment of the Law brought by the advent of the messianic king does not merely repeat the Law, but radicalizes it. The ultimate will of God was and is mediated by the Law, but sometimes in a manner conditioned by the “hardness of heart” of its recipients (cf. 19:3-9). The legal form fostered a casuistic approach, which Matthew opposes, since it does not go to the root of the matter (i.e., is not radical), but touches the surface, not the heart, of the ethical problem. (For Matthew’s opposition to casuistry, see 23:16-21, the longest “woe” against the Pharisees, entirely “M” material.) Jesus’ teaching deals with the inner springs of human conduct, which Law as such cannot regulate. Like the prophets of Israel, Matthew declares the unqualified will of God, which sometimes deepens or broadens the Law, expressing its ultimate intent, and sometimes qualifies or even negates its limitations, while affirming the ultimate will of God to which it pointed.

Situational “Between the Times” Application. The call to live by the absolute will of God is not a counsel of despair. Prophets announce the absolute will of God and leave it to others to work out how this can be lived out in an imperfect world. Jesus spoke in this prophetic mode, and it had been continued by Christian prophets, including those in Matthew’s tradition and church. But Matthew is a scribal teacher who is concerned not only to declare the absolute will of God as expressed in Jesus’ radicalization of the Torah, but also to provide counsel for day-by-day living for imperfect people who fall short of this call to live by the perfect will of God. Thus, without negating the call to perfection, Matthew selects other sayings of Jesus from his tradition that provide situational applications for disciples who both believe that the kingdom of God has come with the advent of Jesus and pray for its final coming (6:10). The new age has come in Jesus, but the old age continues and Christians live in the tension between the two. Disciples can take the antitheses seriously as models for their life in this world in the same way that they take the advent of the kingdom of God seriously as both present and yet to come. Most important, for Matthew, commitment to the messianic king means more than proper confession; it results in a changed life (repentance). But the messianic king, who makes these demands and who will use them as the criteria of the final judgment, which he will conduct, both lives them out himself during his earthly ministry and continues with the community in its struggle to discern and do God’s will in ever-new

situations (28:18-20). In the first set of three antitheses (5:21-32), the reality of Christian existence “between the times” of the Messiah’s appearance and the eschatological coming of the kingdom is addressed by giving examples for the creative application of Jesus’ teaching by his disciples. These examples are not casuistic new laws, but models for the disciples to adapt to their varied post-Easter situations. In the second set of antitheses (5:33-48), the concrete models are omitted, and the disciples are left to their own responsibility to be “Jesus theologians.”

Keeping the big picture

Both of the France and Boring point to the movement towards righteousness as expressed in a deepening of relationship with God – not by external observance alone – but by a conscious movement of conversion to the deeper observance to the root (*radix*) of things: seeking out the Divine will in its fullness in order to live that out in the world. In other words, to more fully be the people of God – that is, to be the covenant people that God has always intended them to be.

And perhaps most radical of all, let us not lose sight, this portion of the Sermon on the Mount also marks Jesus’ assertion of authority. But it is not simply claiming a new contribution to the exegetical debate among rabbis, Jesus is making a definitive declaration of the will of God. Such a claim demands (and receives, 7:28–29) the response, “Who is this?”

A Truly Christian Attitude: Four Examples

As we consider the first four examples we should note that all six examples deal with relations between human beings, not with religious rituals that express humanity’s relation to God (that begins in Mt 6:1-18). As will be evident, the following comments use Boring’s model as a way to think about the text at hand.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to fiery Gehenna.²³ Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you,²⁴ leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

The Law Reaffirmed. Jesus begins with a direct quotation of the command in the Decalogue against murder (Exod 20:13; Dt 5:18). The supplementary “whoever kills will be liable to judgment” is not found exactly in the Old Testament, but presents a paraphrasing summary of several texts in the Torah (Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:12; Deut 17:8-13). It is likely Matthew composed it in order to introduce the word *judgment*, which plays a decisive role in Jesus’ pronouncement.

The Law Radicalized. Some rabbinic text nuanced OT texts to distinguish between “justified” and “unjustified” anger (others declared such anger the same as shedding blood). Jesus declares that anger makes one subject to judgment, without distinguishing between “justified” and “unjustified” anger. One school of scholarly thought holds that the three-part escalation in severity ultimately leading to *fiery Gehenna* is a parody of a legalistic casuistry among overly zealous/pious Pharisees which Jesus mocks and rejects.

Evidence of such a rejection is seen because (a) there is no clear escalation in the offenses cited, (b) and because Jesus’ demand is difficult or impossible to carry out—becoming angry is not usually a

matter under one's control—and from the absurdly disproportionate punishment, not to mention the fact that taken literally the Jesus violates his own injunction (“fool” in 23:17, 19). Verse 22 is not literally an escalating scale from local courts to the judgment bar of God, but a declaration of the absolute will of God, who wills not only that persons not kill each other, but also that there be no hostility between human beings. “This is not an injunction merely to avoid certain abusive expressions (that would be another form of legalism) but to submit our thoughts about other people, as well as the words they give rise to, to God’s penetrating judgment.

Situational Application. Despite their commitment to live by Jesus’ command, the disciples find themselves involved in hostility. What then? Jesus offers selects two illustrations that guide the disciples in applying Jesus’ radical demand to their situation of imperfect people living in an imperfect world. They are to consider reconciliation, overcoming alienation and hostility to be even more important than worship at the altar (vv. 23-24); thus they are to work for reconciliation in the light of the eschatological judgment toward which they are journeying (vv.25-26). Simply put: “do not allow bad relationships to remain unresolved” (France, 2000, p.203) – there is an urgency here.

Neither picture is to be taken legalistically as a literal case. The worshiper before the altar can not literally leave the sacrificial liturgy half completed, find the offended or offending brother or (which may require a round trip of several days to Galilee and back), then return to the Temple and complete the liturgy. Corresponding to the antithesis of 5:22, this is not a realistic “case” but a pointer to the kind of greater righteousness appropriate to those who belong to the kingdom of God. Disciples are responsible for using this example creatively to apply Jesus’ teaching in their own situations. As such it is a frontal attack on legalistic system as an approach to the righteousness God demands. As well it is a pointer to the divine judgment on those whose earthly relationships do not conform to the values of the kingdom of heaven

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’²⁸ But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If 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 to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna.³⁰ And 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 to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

Reaffirmation. The Decalogue’s absolute prohibition of “adultery” (*moicheia*; see Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18) refers specifically to a married woman’s having sexual relations with a man other than her husband, and it is to be distinguished from “fornication” (*porneia*; illicit sex general). Adultery was considered a violation of the husband’s exclusive right to his wife and the assurance that children born to her were his own. Both the woman and the man involved were considered guilty of adultery, whether or not the man was married. Jesus’ teaching does not abolish the Decalogue’s command against adultery, but reaffirms it.

Radicalization. Jesus then goes to the root of the thing: the intent of the Law. He proclaims that every man who looks on the wife of another for the purpose of sexual desire is already an adulterer in his inmost being. Although both men and women can be guilty of adultery, Jesus presupposes the patriarchal setting of both the original Decalogue and his own time by explicating his own command in terms of the man. This is remarkable, since the woman was often considered the offending party (cf. John 7:53-8:1). Strictly interpreted, this text does not deal with natural sexual desire and its associated fantasy, but with the intentional lustful look at the wife of another. This observation, however, should not be used to domesticate Jesus’ radical demand. As in 5:21-27, not only the physical deed, but the intention of the heart as well makes one guilty before the Law of God.

Situational Application. Jesus exaggerates to make his point with the shocking metaphor of self-mutilation (cf. Mk 9:43, 47; Mt 18:8-9). Matthew likely mentions the eye first since that is the gateway to the sexual objectification that is present in this sin. Beyond that people speculate about associating body parts with specific sins, but the point of the text is likely the comparison of a body part to the whole of the body. Again, it is a pointer to the divine judgment on those whose earthly relationships do not conform to the values of the kingdom of heaven.

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.’³² But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The teaching of the Jesus (here in Matthew) in relation to the Law may be clarified by considering the following history of the tradition of Scripture regarding divorce.

- (1) There is no Torah command against divorce. There is no specific verse that makes clear divorce is within the intention of God. On the other hand, God’s intention is clear in other places: *For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel* (Mal 2:16). In the NT Jesus gave the authentic interpretation of this text: “*Moses, by reason of the hardness of your heart, permitted you to put away your wives; but it was not so from the beginning*” (Matthew 19:8,9). The intent seems clear in Matthew: Moses allowed divorce – but it was never intended by God
- (2) Rather than being a law that allows divorce, Dt 24:1-4 assumes the existence of divorce. This text is directly concerned only with forbidding divorced couples to remarry each other, and indirectly with checking hasty divorces, by demanding sufficient cause and certain legal formalities. Divorce itself is tolerated as an existing custom whose evils this law seeks to lessen (Dt 22:19,29; Malachi 2:14–16).
- (3) The evils arose surrounding the issue of remarriage. Divorce had to be official and regulated by the community, thus offering some protection to the divorced woman by granting her legal status and permitting her to marry someone else. Yet, the decision to divorce was strictly the prerogative of the husband, who did not have to go to court, but could simply make the decision himself in the presence of certified witnesses.
- (4) Deuteronomy 24:1-4 was the locus of the scribal discussion in Jesus’ day. The issue between the rabbinic schools being how strictly the grounds for divorce (“something objectionable”) should be defined. The strict school of Sharrimai interpreted this to mean sexual sins or perhaps gross impropriety, while the liberal school of Hillel argued that it could be anything that displeased the husband (burning his dinner, *m. Git.* 9:10, is often cited as the illustration). In either tradition, divorce was relatively easy to obtain and frequent in occurrence, encouraging a lax attitude toward marriage.
- (5) Against both Dt 24 and later tradition, Jesus proclaimed the absolute prohibition of divorce as the will of God. Mark 10:2-9 and 1 Cor 7:10-11 still reflect this oldest tradition, in which Jesus functions as a prophet who proclaims the unqualified will of God, without making any adjustments for the demands of practical necessities; such an absolute prohibition of divorce is unprecedented in Judaism.

Reaffirmation. What is reaffirmed? In reality, it is the previous command regarding adultery – and since divorce is the precursor to adultery insofar as a 1st century woman in Palestine would have sought to remarry because of the protections it afforded her – then divorce must be considered aligned with adultery.

Radicalization. As noted above Jesus’ absolute prohibition of divorce is unprecedented.

Situational Application. Matthew preserves Jesus’ saying about divorce, but reintroduces the issue of remarriage, a practical necessity in the case of the divorced woman. In the *Gospel according to Mark*,

the sacred author adjusts the saying to his Gentile context by adding the provision for a woman to divorce her husband (Mark 10:12). This provision was unknown in Jewish society except in exceptional cases, such as for royalty.

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, ‘Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.’³⁴ But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God’s throne;³⁵ nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.³⁶ Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black.³⁷ Let your ‘Yes’ mean ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’ mean ‘No.’ Anything more is from the evil one.

One commentator labeled this section “Love Is Unconditionally Truthful;” perhaps that is what Jesus demands of his disciples: a truthfulness that makes oaths unnecessary.

That being said, there is no explicit precedent in Judaism for the absolute prohibition of oaths. What Jesus cites is not an exact quotation of any Old Testament text (but see Exodus 20:7; Dt 5:11; Lev 19:12). In general, the purpose of an oath was to guarantee truthfulness by one’s calling on God as witness

Jesus formulates an antithesis that summarizes and paraphrases the Old Testament’s teaching about oaths (Lev 19:12; Ps 50:14), then rules it out by his command that his followers take no oaths at all. Matthew 5:34b-36 is explicitly anti-casuistic (cf. 23:16-21), rejecting oaths that use substitutes for the name of God and those that avoid it altogether. Jesus abolished the distinction between words that must be true and those that must not, between words one is compelled to stand behind and those one must not, and calls for all speech to be truthful. As with divorce, Jesus’ original prohibition was absolute, rejecting not only false or unnecessary oaths, but any effort to bolster our statement’s claim to truth beyond the bare statement of it. It is a demand for the truthfulness of all our words.

Instructed by the models in the preceding antitheses, Jesus’ disciples are called to make their own situational applications as they attempt to be guided by his call to speak the truth. There may, indeed, be situations when utter candor violates the greatest command of love to God and neighbor. Someone once said the all our words need to be true, necessary and helpful. Sometimes it is best not to speak at all. Jesus disciples have to take on the theological responsibility to determine if a lie can ever be told in the service of love and truth. What is clear is that Jesus refuses to give legalistic sanction or casuistic examples, casting the disciples on their own theological responsibility.

Notes

Matthew 5:17 *abolish*: It is perhaps that more legalistically inclined Jews, scandalized by Jesus’ radical attitude to, e.g., the sabbath or the laws of uncleanness, accused him of setting out to *abolish the law and the prophets*. The charge, and its rebuttal, would be the more worth recording if Matthew’s church included Christians who, like the heretic Marcion in the second century (and like some today), disparaged or completely repudiated the Old Testament. But the emphasis of the saying lies not on the negative but on the positive (cf. 10:34 for a similar rhetorical construction): Jesus has come to fulfill ***the law and the prophets***: This expression is a regular Jewish name for the entire Old Testament (cf. 7:12; 22:40; Acts 24:14; 28:23; Rom. 3:21) and occurs again in 11:13, with the verb ‘prophesied’. So the whole Old Testament, the law as well as the prophets, pointed forward to what Jesus has now brought into being. His ministry brings them to full measure (cf. *plēroō* in 23:32), by supplying the final revelation of the will of God. In the background may be the Jewish expectation (based on e.g. Isa. 2:3; Jer. 31:31ff.) that the Messiah’s role would include the definitive exposition of the law. This complex of ideas then lies behind *plērōsai*: Jesus is bringing that to which the Old Testament looked forward; his teaching will transcend the Old Testament revelation, but, far from abolishing it, is itself its intended culmination.

Matthew 5:18 Amen: Here and in following verses, “Truly I tell you” is “*Amēn gar legō hymin.*” The word “*amēn*” is not a Greek word but is transliterated from the Hebrew and is used as a responsive affirmation to something previously said. **until:** The Greek word *heōs* can be translated “as long as, while, until, up to.” **heaven and earth pass away:** this need not be understood as a physical passing away, but can be used as a metaphor for permanence or for something inconceivable (e.g. hell freezing over). Most scholars take it to mean until the fullness of the kingdom is present. **the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter:** The *iota* (the letter *yōd*) is the smallest Hebrew letter, and is often optional in spelling; the *dot* (*keraiā*, ‘horn’) may be either the similar letter *wāw* (which is equally optional), or the ‘serif’ which distinguishes some similar Hebrew letters. The Rabbis discussed at length the destructive effects of such minute alterations to a single letter of the law (*Leviticus Rabbah* 19:2).

Matthew 5:21 you have heard it said: This represents a relatively rare passive form of the verb *errethē* which is used in the NT specifically for citing Scripture or divine pronouncements. Thus it is clear that Jesus is not referring to another teacher but to the Scriptures themselves.

Matthew 5:21 [general comment]: The King James bible adds the phrase “*without cause*” which was printed in the *Textus Receptus*, which was developed based on somewhat late manuscripts. Earlier manuscripts do not include “without cause” thus making it likely that the phrase was a scribal addition.

Matthew 5:22 but: The Greek word used here (*de*) is a rather weak word; it can also be translated as “and.” The word *alla* is the strong form of “but” meaning a point of strong contrast – and is notably not used here. In other words, it is not a contrast to the law, but a strengthening of the law.

Matthew 5:22 raqa: an Aramaic word *reqa*’ or *reqa* probably meaning “imbecile,” “blockhead,” a term of abuse.

Matthew 5:23 brother: *adelphos* – literally meaning blood brother or sister, here more likely referring to the relationship within the community.

Matthew 5:27 commit adultery: moicheuseis The verse accurately quotes Exodus 20:14 and Deut 5:18 which concerns a man who has sexual relations with a married woman (another man’s wife)

Matthew 5:27 adultery: moicheia is understood to involve married persons

Matthew 5:31-32 [general comment]: See Deut 24:1-5. The Old Testament commandment that a bill of divorce be given to the woman assumes the legitimacy of divorce itself. It is this that Jesus denies. (*Unless the marriage is unlawful*): this “exceptive clause,” as it is often called, occurs also in Matthew 19:9, where the Greek is slightly different. There are other sayings of Jesus about divorce that prohibit it absolutely (see Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; cf 1 Cor 7:10, 11b), and most scholars agree that they represent the stand of Jesus. Matthew’s “exceptive clauses” are understood by some as a modification of the absolute prohibition. It seems, however, that the unlawfulness that Matthew gives as a reason why a marriage must be broken refers to a situation peculiar to his community: the violation of Mosaic law forbidding marriage between persons of certain blood and/or legal relationship (Lev 18:6-18). Marriages of that sort were regarded as incest (*porneia* – a general term for illicit sexual relations), but some rabbis allowed Gentile converts to Judaism who had contracted such marriages to remain in them. Matthew’s “exceptive clause” is against such permissiveness for Gentile converts to Christianity; cf the similar prohibition of *porneia* in Acts 15:20, 29. In this interpretation, the clause constitutes no exception to the absolute prohibition of divorce when the marriage is lawful.

Matthew 5:33 oaths: The purpose of an oath was to guarantee truthfulness by one’s calling on God as witness. Judaism seems to have created and elaborated the system of oaths and vows developed in the Old Testament to guarantee (some) words as especially true. The Mishnah has an entire tractate on oaths (*Shebuoth*) and another on vows (*Nedarim*). In both the Gentile and the Jewish worlds, an oath invoked the deity to guarantee the truth of what was said, or to punish the one taking the oath if what

was affirmed was not true. Oaths involve communication between two parties, with the name of God (or a valid substitute) invoked as guarantor. Vows were made directly to God. What was confirmed by an oath had to be true; what was vowed had to be done. This is somewhat analogous to the legal distinction made in United States courts between statements made under oath and other statements that are not. To testify falsely under oath is a crime. Other false statements may be considered morally wrong, but the oath system is considered necessary in order to guarantee the truth of at least some statements, and to tell when guilt has been incurred by falsehood and when not.

Matthew 5:34-36 by heaven...by earth ... by Jerusalem ... by your head: The use of these surrogate oath formularies (*kinnuyim*) avoid the divine name is in fact equivalent to swearing by it, for all the things sworn by are related to God.

Matthew 5:37 Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No': literally, “let your speech be ‘Yes, yes,’ ‘No, no.’ “ Some have understood this as a milder form of oath, permitted by Jesus. In view of Matthew 5:34, “Do not swear at all,” that is unlikely. **from the evil one:** i.e., from the devil. Oath-taking presupposes a sinful weakness of the human race, namely, the tendency to lie. Jesus demands of his disciples a truthfulness that makes oaths unnecessary.

Sources

- G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007) 21-26
- Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) 183-98
- Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2000) 140-50
- R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007) 177-217
- R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 1*, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 118-30
- Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship By Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven, CN: Yale Anchor Library Press, 2009) 25
- Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 77-90
- Daniel J. Harrington, “Matthew” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) 870-71
- Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009) 175-95
- John P. Meier, *Matthew*, *New Testament Message 3* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) 45-55
- D. Turner and D.L. Bock, *Matthew and Mark* in the *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) 84-98

Scripture

The New American Bible available on-line at <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/index.shtml>