



January 11: Heart of the Law

WEEKLY READING - MATTHEW 3-7 • TODAY'S PASSAGE - MATTHEW 5:21-37 •

MAIN POINT

Simply following rules isn't what pleases Jesus. Rather, He is honored when we consider and seek to follow the heart of the law.

BACKGROUND

Jesus repeatedly clashes with scribes and Pharisees over the law (Matt. 12:1-14; 15:1-20; 23:1-28). This is unavoidable, for their traditions misconstrue, even nullify, the law's intent (15:3-9). Jesus must violate their "laws" to obey God's law. But since they believe their "traditions"—their interpretations of the law—to have the same status as the law itself, they judge Jesus a sinner. Further, since Jesus acts knowingly, they consider him a willful sinner. And because Jesus acts like a rabbi, gathering and teaching disciples, and also displays healing powers, they consider him dangerous. As a charismatic teacher who sets aside the law, he might delude the people (cf. Deut. 13:1-5).

Jewish leaders judge that Jesus violates the Sabbath (Matt. 12:5-10; John 5:9-18) and sins by consorting with sinners (Luke 15:1-2) and with women. The latter points arise from fundamental rabbinic teachings. Jesus' foes regard women as empty-headed temptresses, so they say: "He that talks much with womankind brings evil upon himself and neglects the study of the Law" (Mishnah, Avot 1:5). Another rabbi once said, "Keep far from an evil neighbor and consort not with the wicked." Therefore, Jesus' habit of eating with sinners registers as lawlessness.

In this setting, Jesus affirms that he honors and obeys God's law (Matt. 5:17-20). Further, he explains that law correctly (5:21-48). Throughout, Jesus teaches followers to harmonize attitudes and actions so that they can do the right things for the right reasons, not out of duty, fear, or selfish calculation.

CHRIST CONNECTION

When Jesus closes this section of the Sermon on the Mount with the command, "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (v. 48), what is the perfection about which Jesus is talking? Is it some kind of absolute moral perfection, as the medieval monks were fond of teaching? They thought the Sermon on the Mount was only for the super-spiritual and that only a few (namely themselves) ever climbed these stairs to perfection. However, this is the absolute opposite of what Jesus is talking about. If that notion is in your head (monastic spirituality has become quite popular today), put it under your foot like a cigarette butt and crush it into the ground. For in context the meaning of the word "perfect" is perfectly clear. In verses 43-47 Jesus teaches how God the Father shows

indiscriminate love by making the sun rise and the rain fall on both the good and the bad. He doesn't hide the sun from immoral people. He doesn't fail to water the fields of the wicked. In the same way, Jesus says, we are to love all people—our brothers (those who love us) and even our enemies (those who don't love us). That is perfect love.

Think of it like a triangle. We are to love God. This is the greatest commandment and the tip of the triangle. But we are also to love our neighbors, the nice ones. They are, let's say, the right point of the triangle. But if we stop there, it is imperfect love. We must also love those at the left point of the triangle, who we'd naturally like to leave for the lions.

Everybody, the worst of people, love their own. You won't find an Italian mobster who doesn't love the family or a brutal inner-city gangbanger who won't take a bullet for his grandmother. But what kind of love is that? It is lopsided love. It's a one-pointed triangle! We are to love with perfect, complete, or whole love, as the Father daily demonstrates, and as the Father most fully demonstrated in the cross of Christ. ". . . while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10). That's perfect love. That's the love we are to emulate. It's the love of God the Father for us in Christ. This is the heart of the Law.

THE FLOW

- 15 minutes - Conversation and relationship-building
- 5 minutes - Create interest (icebreaker, activity, or quote)
- 10 minutes - Year of Prayer guided prayer time
- 40 minutes - Study and apply the Bible
- 5 minutes - Prayer requests

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use at least one of these questions to introduce the topic of discussion.

When have you become angry about something but later wondered why you reacted that way?

Why do you think we sometimes say or do things we end up regretting?

What promise has been made to you, or have you made, that you care the most about keeping?

Share information from BACKGROUND and CHRIST CONNECTION to help group members understand the context

Transition/Say - One of the phrases parents often hear their children say is, "But you said...!" And yet when we grow up, we find that people often do not hold true to their promises. Vows made are all too often set aside for convenience. Today, we will look at how Jesus cut to the heart of the Law, namely murder, adultery, and oaths, to show the depth of integrity to which He calls His followers.

YEAR OF PRAYER

PRAY THE FOLLOWING PRAYERS TOGETHER AS A GROUP. HAVE A TIME FOR PEOPLE TO OFFER THEIR PRAYERS OUT LOUD WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP OR PUT PEOPLE INTO GROUPS OF 3-4 TO PRAY TOGETHER.

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your time of prayer.

Father God, we come this morning to worship You. We acknowledge that You alone are Holy, Holy, Holy. You are Yahweh Nissi—the Lord our Banner—You go before us, able to overcome any foe. You are the Good Shepherd as we read in John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.”

Lift your words of adoration at this time. (pause)

Psalm 139:23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Now take a moment and let God search our heart. May we be quick to repent of any sin He brings to our minds. Thank you, Lord, that as we confess and repent, You are faithful to forgive and remember our sin no more.

We are desperate, God, for You to move in the hearts and lives of the people who will gather in our worship service today who've yet to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior. We pray in agreement that God would fill our Pastor with the Holy Spirit and bless him in the preaching of the sermon so that the Word of God would come “not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5). We pray for an anointing on the worship pastor and all others who will lead.

In a moment, I'm going to ask you to speak the name of at least one person for whom you are praying because they've yet to receive Christ as their Lord and Savior. Say their names aloud now. (pause)

Now offer a silent prayer for the barriers keeping them from coming to Christ to be removed.

Lord, we know you've heard their names and the prayers lifted in faith, believing for their salvation. Forgive us when we doubt that You hear our prayers. We pray for every member of (name/designation) to have a heart for serving within the Body of (church name). Raise up committed men and women to serve in our children's, youth, . . . all areas of our church—individuals with a passion for discipling others.

We will now take a few moments to allow you to offer up words of thanksgiving to the Father, remembering that God's mercies are new every morning.

Lift up your words of thanksgiving to God at this time (pause)

Group leader close time of prayer

We pray in agreement and faith, in the name of Jesus and for His glory. Amen

STUDY AND DISCUSS

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says and means.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 5:21-26.

In what ways are anger and murder connected?

What new standard of right and wrong did Jesus create in this passage?

With the formula, "You have heard..." followed by, "But I tell you...", Jesus forced His audience to consider the real meaning of the Law. While verses 17-20 emphasized Jesus' continuity with the Law, this formula emphasized His discontinuity with its interpretation. In this particular section, Jesus addressed the meaning of the commandment not to murder. While the scribes had only focused on the actual act, Jesus revealed that its intent was to expose the murderous desires that are found in instances of anger, insult, ridicule, and conflict. To emphasize its meaning, He offered three examples of murderous relationships (5:22), followed by two illustrations meant to encourage the active pursuit of reconciliation.

What might Jesus say about our quick-to-sue society?

Jesus used the word "brother" four times in verses 21-24. Why was He so concerned about how His followers related to one another, and how they reconciled conflict?

Four times the word "brother" is used (vv. 22-24). These principles are not so much aimed at relationships in the world, but at those within the community of the church itself. It is by practicing these principles that the church shows itself to be a community radically different from the communities found in the world.

What is the difference between "righteous wrath" and the kind of anger or hatred that is akin to murder?

What are some ways Christians can legitimately and biblically express their anger?

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ MATTHEW 5:27-37.

How did Jesus set a new standard for sexual purity in these verses?

Just as anger is the root of murder (5:21-22), so lust is the root of adultery. Jesus was not trying to prevent natural sexual attraction. God has designed the sexes to be attracted to each other as His way to populate the earth and maintain the circle of life through the covenant of marriage. God also designed sex as a pleasurable experience between one man and one woman in marriage. However, we should not dwell on and encourage sexual desire that would violate the principle of purity that God calls us to live by.

How does Jesus' statement in verse 32 compare with the general attitude about divorce and remarriage in our society and even in the church today? How do you need to adjust your own thinking about the problem of divorce?

What is the heart of the matter regarding oaths?

Why is keeping promises so important?

All of these teachings relate in one way or another to commitment and faithfulness to promises. We must not let our lusts pull us away from our commitments, or drag others down in the same sin (vv. 27-30). We should not think that the commitment of marriage that we make before God can be dismissed by legal paperwork. Rather, such commitments are sacred (vv. 31-32). We should adhere to whatever commitments we make, whether relating to marriage or not. But Jesus cut deeper than just keeping formal promises or sworn oaths. He demanded the kind of integrity and careful speech that allows a simple statement to be trusted as a binding promise because we should not carelessly say what we do not mean to do (vv. 33-37).

How does a life of integrity, as taught in this passage, stand in contrast to how most of the world operates?

Simply following rules isn't what pleases Jesus. Rather, He is honored when we consider and seek to follow the heart of the law, for the purpose of growing closer to Jesus, as the greatest good we could ever experience in our life.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How seriously do you view the sin in your life? Do one of these demands challenge you the most: controlling anger, resisting lust, or keeping your word?

Do you believe that the heart of the Law given by Jesus is the path to the greatest good in your life? Why or why not?

What is God saying to you, personally, about your heart to obey Him?

What is the response/adjustment you need to make this week to adhere to the heart of the Law as Jesus taught?

OPTIONAL GROUP ACTIVITY

ACTIVITY: "GOING DEEPER: WHAT JESUS REALLY MEANS"

Step 1: Framed Reading (2 minutes)

Ask the group: "As we read, listen for what Jesus says you have heard versus but I tell you."

Have two volunteers read the passage aloud:

- Reader 1: "You have heard..." statements
- Reader 2: "But I tell you..." statements

This highlights the pattern and sets up discussion.

Step 2: Pair Work – Identify the Tension (3 minutes)

Ask participants to pair up and answer:

- Which teaching feels most challenging or uncomfortable today?
- Which one do you think people are most tempted to explain away?

Encourage them to reference specific verses.

Step 3: Whole-Group Conversation (4 minutes)

Guide discussion using a few of these questions:

- Why do you think Jesus moves from outward actions (murder, adultery) to inward realities (anger, lust)?

- Which feels harder to control—actions or attitudes? Why?
- What do these teachings suggest about Jesus' view of spiritual maturity?
- How do these passages challenge both legalism and minimal obedience?

If conversation slows, ask: "What would change in our relationships if we took even one of these teachings seriously?"

Closing Thought (30 seconds)

Say: "Jesus doesn't lower the bar—He moves it to the heart." Then **Transition** to Year of Prayer.

COMMENTARY

MATTHEW 5:21-37

5:21-22 Matthew 5:21 begins a section of the Sermon on the Mount generally known as the "Six Antitheses." The title may seem to imply that Jesus opposed the OT in some way, but in reality He always upheld its authority. Rather than contradicting or overturning OT teachings, Jesus opposed the misguided interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees. These men were concerned only with superficial matters, but Jesus went deeper. He argued that the law prohibits not just actual murder but murderous attitudes as well. Similarly, violent temperaments are condemned just as surely as violent deeds.

5:23-24 Disciples must attempt at their earliest opportunity to reconcile with a brother or sister who has something against them, even if doing so interrupts important business. Speaking to the context of His day, Jesus said disciples should seek reconciliation even if it meant halting in the middle of offering sacrifices at the Jerusalem temple. This interruption was significant since Jesus' original audience (located away from Jerusalem) would have to abandon their gift at the altar, travel for days to reach Galilee and seek reconciliation, and then return to Judea to complete the sacrifice. Such is the priority of reconciliation.

5:25-26 A person can typically pay a smaller penalty for their offense by seeking an out-of-court settlement rather than waiting for the issue to be settled in court. This illustrates that reconciliation is urgent because the longer it is postponed, the more severe the consequences.

5:27-28 Jesus said that gazing on a member of the opposite sex for the purpose of arousing illicit sexual desire is adultery of the heart. True righteousness therefore seeks to avoid not only adulterous acts but also adulterous thoughts.

5:29-30 Self-mutilation and amputation are not effective ways to overcome sin. After all, sin arises from a corrupt heart rather than flesh and bone (15:19). Jesus here uses hyperbole (intentional exaggeration for the sake of making a point) and allegory (in which the eye represents a lustful perspective and the hand represents an immoral deed) in order to convey a vital requirement of discipleship. Disciples should put a stop to thoughts and behaviors that contribute to immorality.

5:31-32 Jesus challenged a loose rabbinic paraphrase of Dt 24:1 that distorted the original meaning of the text. In the hands of the rabbis, Dt 24:1 greatly multiplied the number of offenses that could justify divorce. For instance, rabbinic commentaries on Dt 24 cited minor complaints such as a wife's fading beauty or her tendency to burn food as legitimate grounds for divorce. However, Jesus kept true to Dt 24:1 and insisted that sexual immorality is the legitimate grounds for divorce. People who divorce for frivolous reasons and remarry are guilty of adultery since their original marriage covenant has not been genuinely dissolved.

5:33-37 Oaths to the Lord (i.e., “I swear to God”) were considered binding, but since Jews avoided use of God’s personal name and instead used reverent substitutions, clever liars could take an oath that seemed to appeal to God without technically doing so (23:16-22). Jesus taught that swearing oaths is wrong since oaths call for the destruction of an object or person if the oath is broken. Thus, swearing by heaven... earth... Jerusalem, or even one’s own head is inappropriate because it implies that we have the authority to destroy things over which God alone has authority. Swearing against God or His belongings aligns us with the evil one who attempted to assume God’s position as Ruler of the universe.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayer Requests of Group Members (be sure to share these with the group and check in on relevant requests)

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- .
- .
- .
- .
- .

Those we are Asking God to Save

Friends -

Family -

Co-workers -

Others -