

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

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SECOND BLOCK (5:17-48)

The Ethics of Jesus

Code Vs Character, Part 1 (5:17-30)

This block of material exemplifies all that we have discussed in the previous lesson. Jesus sets out, in a series of five contrasts, the value of moral character over moral codes in influencing moral behavior. This contrast is developed through the use of five moral issues of his day: murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, and retaliation. But before that, he assures his audience that he is not speaking against the Scriptures; in fact, he had come to demonstrate in his own life what fulfilling the Scriptures was all about.

He Came to Fulfill the Law (5:17-20)

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill (pleroo – to make full, to accomplish). 18 For truly, I am saying to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, one jot (iota – Greek substitution for the Hebrew letter yod, smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet) or one tittle (keraia – a stroke of the stylus in writing some Hebrew letters) will pass from the law until everything has become [come to pass]. 19 Whoever therefore loose one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, he will be called least in the kingdom

(basileia – rule or reign) of the heavens; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I am saying to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds (perisseuse – over and above, to go beyond) that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter into the kingdom of the heavens (Matt 5:17-20, author's translation).

The key terms in these verses are "fulfill" and "accomplish." These terms are actually synonyms; one is always used in the interpretation of the other. The term "fulfill" is translated from the Greek word *pleroo* (play-RA--o) and is defined as, "to make full, to fill up, to fulfill, to accomplish or complete, to make come true." This term is found throughout Matthew for the fulfillment of the promises of Scripture (i.e., what God promised has come true); e.g. Matt 1:22; 2:15, 17, 2J; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; etc. This term is used in the NT in almost ninety occurrences in this sense. The second term, "accomplished," is translated from the Greek word *ginomai* (GIN-o-my);, which simply means, "to become." This term is used of something becoming or coming to pass; or what is taught in Scripture being realized or happening, as is the case in over eighty occurrences in the NT.

Jesus' point here in 5:17 is that in him (i.e., in his presence) the Scripture would find their full realization. His life was a manifestation of what this collection of revelation from God was intended to accomplish. One of the purposes of the giving of the Scriptures the development of moral character in God's creation, not becoming a collection of moral codes designed to forever control man but to inform him in the control of himself. It is important here that we understand the role of codes or rules.

Codes serve us well at certain stages of our existence; especially, for those whose moral behavior can only be controlled by moral codes (i.e., stages one through four). Codes are necessary for the child (or even for the morally underdeveloped adult) who can only determine what is right or wrong by having codes defining right and wrong behavior. As one develops as a moral being, he learns, for himself, what is right or wrong, unless his moral development is, in some way, inhibited or retarded.

It appears that Jesus is working out of the assumption that there will come a time in ones moral development when he is capable of determining

right from wrong and develops a desire to do that which is right rather than that which is wrong. When one reaches this point his behavior is more controlled by his moral character rather than moral codes.

The law was given to Israel with the twofold purpose of controlling human behavior and developing the man of God in moral character. Jesus was the quintessential Israelite in this sense. What he says in Matt 5:17-20 is that what the law (the codes of the *Torah*) was intended to accomplish was being fulfilled in his existence. He, then, as a very revelation of God's moral character, became for man the norm by which to measure moral behavior, a very model of the moral character we are to possess if we are behaving as beings created in the image of God.

Code Ethics Vs Character Ethics

A Series of Contrasts
(5:21-47)

Concerning Murder (5:21-26)

You have heard that it was said to those of old (archaios – the rulers or old ones), “You shall not murder [Exodus 20:13; Deut 5:17], whoever murders will be subject to the judgment,” 22 but I am saying to you that everyone being angry with his brother will be subject to the judgment, and whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” [worthless] shall be subject to the council (sunedrion), and whoever says, “fool!” shall be subject to the Gehenna of fire. 23 If you should bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go [your way]. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Be amenable toward your adversary (antidiko – one who seeks judgment against) quickly, while you are with in him the way, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you are thrown into prison. 26 Truly, I am saying to you, you may never get out of there till you have paid the last brass coin (Matt 5:21-26)

The expression, "you have heard it said," indicates that an oral tradition is under consideration. In the book of the *Traditions of the Fathers (Pirqa Aboth)* in the *Mishnah*, (which tells of the legend of the giving of the oral traditions to the elders on Sinai), most of the traditions are introduced by the expression "Rabbi Hillel (or the name of an ancient Hebrew teacher) said." "You have heard," says one NT scholar, "means 'you have received a tradition,' and 'it was said' means 'it was taught as a tradition.'" (David Hill, *Matthew*, p 125). These expressions are found throughout the rabbinic writings as a preface to a tradition or interpretation of Scripture. The Greek expression for "men of old" is "*tois archaiois*" (the first or ancient ones). These expressions occur throughout this block of material. The traditions with which Jesus is dealing here are, apparently, very old.

Moral Codes and Murder

This first tradition concerns the intentional taking of innocent human life, which is "murder." The tradition Jesus speaks of here has to do with different levels of accountability for such an act as murder. The expression "*subject to the judgment (krisis)*," implies legal proceedings, the tribunal dealing with criminal affairs. The codes that governed Jewish behavior condemned such overt actions as assault or murder as a result of assault. Jesus here is addressing the thought or motives (i.e. moral reasoning) lying behind such behavior.

Moral Character and Murder

Men behave as they do because they think as they do. If one's life is characterized by such moral principles as: the value of human life, human rights, human dignity, and responsible human behavior, codes against such actions as murder will not be necessary. Moral character is at the heart of Jesus' teaching here.

The expressions "*raka*," an Aramaic word meaning "worthless" or "of no value" and "*moros*" (the Greek word for "a fool") carried different connotations in first century Palestine than they do today. In our culture they are terms of jest, in the first century Jewish culture they were designations of contempt. Man is a created masterpiece of God. Human

life is held in highest regard (Gen 9:6), especially so innocent human life (Exod 23:7).

Only human "behavior" is deserving of contempt, not our fellow human beings. It is the human being who was created in the image of God that is given sanctity by God (Gen 9:6), not the behavior of man; especially, if that behavior proceeds out of evil (Gen 4:7). It is the case, however, that human behavior can destroy the being in possession of that behavior as well as others; and oftentimes, if that being's behavior cannot be changed, he must be removed from the society of men, as has been the case throughout biblical history. Individual man, however, has never been given permission to take the life of another, only in the case of the defense of his life or the life of others.

Jesus' teaching here emphasizes the importance of valuing human life the life, so much so that one's relationship with God is destroyed when he wills to destroy the life of his fellowman (Matt 5:23-26). The one having ill will for his fellowman is capable of taking his life. The one whose moral character is such that he values the life of his fellowman is not capable of maliciously taking an innocent life.

The man who hates his fellowman will kill him if he wishes to do so strongly enough, no matter what the laws or codes of his society may say. The one with hate in his heart does not think about anything but that which causes his hate. The one, however, whose moral character is such that hatred for which fellowman is inconsistent with who he is will not be a threat to his fellowman.

Concerning Adultery (5:27-30)

You have heard that it was said [to those of old], "You shall not commit adultery," [Exodus 20:14; Deut 5:18]. 28 but I am saying to you that everyone looking upon a woman to desire (epithumia – to desire, want, or lust) her has committed adultery already with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of your members be destroyed, than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna, 30 and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of your members

be destroyed, than for your whole body to be cast into Gehenna (Matt 5:27-30).

Moral Codes and Adultery: There was a code prohibiting adultery (Exod 20:14); in fact, the punishment for adultery was death (Lev 20:10; John 8:3-5). The term "adultery," as used in the OT Scripture (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17), should have been simple enough to understand. In first century Judaism, however, the meaning of this term appears to have been anything but simple; and this appears to have been by design. Even though the *Torah* condemned adultery (Exod 20:14), adultery was defined in such a way that Jewish males were allowed certain sexual privileges outside of marriage while the women were not. The term adultery, in Hebrew and Greek, simply means to defile or make impure. In the culture of first century Judaism the idea of defilement was associated with that a man's wife being impregnated by another and rendering her husband's bloodline (heirs) impure. Adultery applied more to the married woman than to the married man. This was true with patriarchal figures as well as first century Jewish males (Gen 16:1-4; Gen 38:6-30).

In first century Judaism a Jew only committed adultery if he had extra-marital sexual relations with the wife of another Jew. If his sexual partner were an unmarried woman or the wife of a Gentile, no adultery was committed. This piece of theological chicanery was not acceptable to Jesus. Adultery rendered more than a man's bloodline impure; it rendered him impure, to his very heart (Matt 5:28).

Moral Character and Adultery: The critical term for Jesus in this matter was "lust," more specifically, "the lustful look." To look at a woman is not forbidden; to look at a woman lustfully is forbidden. The word lust is from the Greek *epithumia* (epee-thoo-MEE-a), which here means "desire or what out of control." To look at a woman and think her attractive is normal for anyone. To look at a woman and see her not as a person, but as a sexual object to be used for one's sexual pleasure, that's forbidden, and this is what Jesus is addressing here.

To develop the kind of character that sees the opposite sex as a being created in the image of God, rather than an object of sexual desire, is not something that comes from moral codes. A variety of universal moral

principles are present in this issue, but the essential moral principles with which we are concerned here are human dignity and human responsibility, these are the results of moral character rather than codes.

The way we look at other people says something not only about the dignity with which we esteem others but our own dignity as well. There is dignity and moral responsibility intrinsic within a person of high moral character and that dignity is reflected in the way he behaves toward others. To lust after another man's wife and to adulterate and destroy his (and her) marriage is to totally divest oneself of any trace of human dignity or responsible moral behavior.

The language of verses 29-30 may appear excessive; however, Jesus often speaks hyperbolically (i.e., extreme exaggeration) for the sake of emphasis. Here the adultery begins with the lustful look, which usually leads to touching or handling that which is forbidden to us; Jesus says that it would be better for the sake of our moral being to pluck out our eyes and cut off our hands than to give in to lustful looking and touching that leads to adultery.

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