

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 15: The True Meaning of God's Moral Law vs. Jewish Traditions

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After setting forth His own doctrine on the Old Testament Scriptures and the necessity of His disciples living a strict obedience to the whole moral law of God even in its smallest details, Jesus proceeds to give six examples which illustrate what He had just taught in verses 17 to 20. This section will demonstrate to His followers precisely how their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. As a brilliant teacher, our Lord first sets forth His general proposition and then clarifies by numerous examples. These antitheses form the heart of the Savior's sermon because they explain Christ's doctrine in such a clear and unmistakable manner that everyone should understand Jesus' exposition of the true meaning of the Torah. By way of introduction there are a number of noteworthy things about this section of Scripture.

Each paragraph contains an antithesis or contrast introduced by the same formula (with minor variations): "Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time" followed by, "But I say unto you." The false doctrine is stated and then refuted by the true interpretation of the law.

This raises the question: What exactly is the antithesis that our Lord has in mind? The question is crucial, for one's interpretation of the antithesis will affect the way one views the rest of the chapter and the rest of the whole sermon. A very common interpretation is that Jesus is setting Himself and the New Covenant ethic against the law of Moses. For example A. T. Robertson says, "Jesus... assumed a tone of superiority over the Mosaic regulations and proves it in each of the six examples."<sup>1</sup> Barclay concurs with even stronger language: "That is what Jesus thought of the Law; and now no fewer than five times (*Matthew* 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43) Jesus quotes the Law, only to contradict it, and to substitute a teaching of his own."<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein J. Jeremias writes, "Jesus establishes a new, divine law when he opposes his 'But I say to you' to the Word of Scripture."<sup>3</sup> In other words, our Lord came to repudiate the Mosaic law and set up a new law in its place, a deeper, more spiritual law. This interpretation appeals to people who think that the New Covenant brings in a new ethic. Such interpreters take the antithesis as, "You know what the Old Testament law said... but I teach you something new, different and superior."

Although this interpretation is popular in some circles, it is totally wrong and must be rejected for the following reasons. First, it completely violates the broad context of this teaching. It would be irrational and absurd for Christ to say that He did not come to destroy or abolish the law and then only a few moments later teach that the Old Testament moral law is defective and is being replaced. Further, our Lord had just told the disciples that only those who taught and obeyed the Old Testament moral law, including the least law, would be considered great. Those who did not teach and do even the least of the moral commandments would be least in Christ's kingdom. The Christian attitude toward the whole Old Testament moral laws, whether the ten commandments or the moral case laws that flesh out the Decalogue, is to be one of great respect, honor and obedience. Obviously then Jesus is not now abrogating and replacing these laws.

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<sup>1</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1:44.

<sup>2</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:134.

<sup>3</sup> J. Jeremias, "raca" in T. D.N.T., 4:973 as quoted in William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 295.

Moreover, laws that are moral in nature and are rooted in God's holy and righteous character cannot be abrogated. Jehovah cannot abrogate laws that mirror His being. Therefore, any idea that the moral statutes contained in the Old Testament are defective, or only for the Jews, is untenable.

Second, the Savior's introductory formula, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time" (21, 27, 33) or "It hath been said" (31), is never used by Jesus when referring to Scripture. When the Redeemer quoted from the Bible, He would say "it is written" (Gk. *gegraptai*, lit. "It stands written"; Mt. 4:4, 7; Lk. 2:23; 4:4) or if He was referring to only the law He would sometimes say "Moses commanded" (Mt. 8:4).

Third, the statement "it was said by them of old time" can be translated in two different ways, both of which point not to Scripture, but to the traditions of the scribes. The King James "said by them of old time" gives the sense of "taught by the ancients or the rabbis of antiquity." "In later Jewish writings such famous rabbans as Hillel and Shammai were called 'fathers of antiquity.' The designation 'the men of long ago' is accordingly an excellent designation for those who had orally interpreted the written Old Testament."<sup>4</sup> The Jews would go the synagogue each week and would receive these human traditions from the rabbis that had been passed down from generation to generation. They were catechized in the traditions of the scribes.

Our Lord's statement can also be translated "it was said to those of old" (NKJV). The Jews in the days of Jesus, and even today, believe that Moses gave the whole oral law to the 70 elders chosen to judge Israel. Therefore, this translation would refer to the Jewish claim of divine authority for their human additions to the law. Since the Jewish teachers at that time could not prove that their doctrines came directly from the sacred Scriptures, "they veiled the origin of them in an indefinite expression, *It was said to them of old time.*"<sup>5</sup> The Jewish audience to whom the Savior was speaking would have immediately understood His statement to be a reference to the scribal traditions.

Fourth, that Jesus is refuting human tradition and not the law itself can be ascertained from the antitheses themselves. While a superficial reading of the "you have heard it said" examples makes it appear that they have elements that are very similar and sometimes identical to the Mosaic law (e.g., "You shall not murder" [21], "You shall not commit adultery" [27], "Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce" [31]), there are striking differences and additions that clearly have nothing to do with the Old Testament laws. The moral law did not allow men to verbally assault their neighbor. It also did not permit unlawful lusts and easy divorce. There is nothing in the whole Old Testament about hating our enemies. Therefore, Christ is not refuting actual laws in Scripture, but must be discussing additions to the law that came to be accepted by the rabbis and their followers. "It is these distortions of the law which Jesus rejected, not the law itself. After all, the first two antitheses do not read 'It was said "you shall not commit murder and adultery," but I say you may.' Rather, 'but I say you shall not even have angry or lustful thoughts.'"<sup>6</sup>

(2) Our Lord appeals primarily to abuses of the second table of the law: murder (21); adultery (27); divorce (31); the law of equitable retribution for a civil crime or in this case a personal offense (38); and the command to love one's neighbor (43). The only law that would fall under duties toward God, or the first table, is oaths to the Lord (33). The Savior's emphasis on the second table is for the simple reason that such abuses would be easier to identify (cf. Mt.

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<sup>4</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 296.

<sup>5</sup> James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, 77.

19:16; Lk. 10:25; 18:18). Note that, when Jesus instructs His disciples in the duty of personal righteousness, He does not limit Himself to the moral precepts of the Decalogue, but makes free use of the moral case laws found within the Torah.

(3) In each of the antitheses Christ introduces the correct doctrine with the statement, “But I say to you” (22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). “‘I [emphatic by initial position] say to you [plural],’ is the key statement of the pericope. The formula points to the unparalleled authority of Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> The Redeemer speaks with an authority unprecedented by the scribes and Pharisees and even the Old Testament prophets. “[T]he people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mt. 7:28-29). God incarnate, the very giver of the law Himself was now correcting the erroneous interpretations, conclusions and additions to His own law. Our Lord repeatedly appealed to His own authority to emphasize that what He said was exceedingly important and certainly true.

(4) There is a pattern to the scribes’ and Pharisees’ method of perverting the law. “In general, they were trying to reduce the challenge of the law, to ‘relax’ (19) the commandments of God, and so make his moral demands more manageable and less exacting. They found Torah both a yoke and a burden (indeed they called it such), and wanted to make the yoke easier and the burden lighter.”<sup>8</sup> Murder and adultery were externalized to exclude sins of the heart, eye and tongue. Divorce was permitted for any cause whatsoever. Lesser oaths were allowed to be broken. The law of retaliation was perverted to allow for personal revenge and the law relating to loving one’s neighbor was twisted so that love was only extended to friends, not enemies. Thus, we see that verses 21 through 48 explain why a disciple of Jesus must have a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees cleverly restricted the full extent of certain laws when it suited them and expanded the permissiveness of others. Therefore, Christ skillfully expounds the true meaning of the law to reverse both methods of debasing the law.

## The Law of God and Murder

Ye have heard that it was said of them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing (Mt. 5:21-26).

In the first antithesis our Lord focuses His attention on the scribes’ and Pharisees’ understanding of the sixth commandment. The statement, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment” (v. 21), by itself does not sound that bad. (This statement seems to be the sixth commandment combined with an allusion to Deuteronomy 35:30: “Whoever kills a person shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses...”).

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<sup>7</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 116.

<sup>8</sup> John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 79.

However, in Jesus' discussion of this scribal interpretation, we will see that the scribes and Pharisees were restricting the application of this commandment to the external deed of homicide alone. In other words, the only people who were guilty of murder were those who actually went out and killed someone. Thus, according to this view as long as we have not stabbed, shot or beaten our neighbor to death, then we have perfectly obeyed this commandment. In fact, if this is our view, then we could say that violations of the sixth commandment are indeed very rare. Christ deals with the scribal perversion of this law with three examples of how this commandment is commonly broken.

He says, "But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment" (v. 22). There are a number of noteworthy things about this statement.

First, it is an acknowledgment that all sin begins in the heart. As James writes, "Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war" (4:1-2). Murder is not simply the act, but the anger and hatred in the heart that leads to the act. People who commit homicide do so because they are very angry inside or because they are lusting after something that is not theirs; they plan the evil act and carry it out. Christ is teaching us a very important principle about the moral law. When God forbids murder, He at the same time forbids all the inward emotions, thoughts and lusts that are related to murder and that lead to murder. The Westminster Larger Catechism succinctly makes the same point: "The duties required in the sixth commandment are, all careful studies, and lawful endeavours, to preserve the life of ourselves and others by resisting all thoughts and purposes, subduing all passions, and avoiding all occasions, temptations and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any...." (A. 135)

This point is very important for two reasons. a) If Israel had not viewed the law in this external way and had seen that internal violations also merited punishment by God, then their whole system of salvation by works would have fallen to the ground. This truth calls to mind the rich young ruler who told Jesus that he had faithfully kept the whole moral law since his youth (Mk. 10:20). This man really believed that he had kept the law perfectly because of the teaching of the scribes. But from our Lord's response to him, we learn that he loved his riches more than God (cf. Mk. 10:21). He was guilty of idolatry in his heart. The fact that sin occurs in our thoughts even if we do not go out and actually kill someone or commit adultery leaves all concepts of self-righteousness and human merit in the dust. No one this side of heaven has perfect control over all his thoughts.

b) Christ teaches us that if we are to avoid the act we must stop the hatred and unjust anger that leads to the act. Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Christians are to resist the starting point of sin in the spirit or soul. The Pharisees' attitude toward sin was only to worry about gross external acts of iniquity; while Jesus teaches that sin must be dealt with at the source, the beginning. We must learn to nip sin in the bud before it has the opportunity to become outward and scandalous. The attitude of the scribes and Pharisees toward the law did not lead to a godly culture. The idea of only an external obedience does not lead to holiness because when sin is coddled in the heart, it breaks out in all sorts of wicked behavior. Jesus says, "Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Mt. 15:18-19). We must, therefore, diligently and constantly, watch our hearts to detect unjust hatred and rage and subdue it by repenting of it immediately. Further, we must be on guard against the

sinful tendency to modify the strictness of God's laws in order to create loopholes for our favorite sins. When people do not want to repent, they often become experts at lowering the standard of God's Word. They persuade themselves that their inner lusts and secret sins are somehow excusable. This is a very deadly error. Paul the Pharisee, before his conversion, believed he had kept the law perfectly (Rom. 7:7-11). But when the Holy Spirit applied "Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17) to his heart and thus internalized the law, Paul immediately understood that, apart from Christ, he was a guilty sinner and was not even close to the kingdom. All his supposed righteousness was filthy rags before God (cf. Phil. 3:8). We must remember that the teaching of the scribes destroyed the doctrine of both justification and sanctification.

Second, it is important to note that Jesus only condemns "unjust anger." The "received text" which is clearly superior to the defective minority of Greek texts (i.e. the critical text) says "whoever is angry with his brother without a cause." Obviously, not all anger can be labeled as sinful because God Himself has anger, indignation and wrath toward the devil, his angels and all unrepentant sinners. Our Lord became so angry he drove the money changers and all those who bought and sold animals out of the temple complex by overturning their tables and swinging a "whip of cords" (Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15; Jn. 2:15). God and the Savior are perfectly holy and pure and cannot sin. Even Christians, at times, can experience righteous indignation at injustice, sin and persecution. Thus Paul could say, "Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil" (Eph. 4:26). "Anger as such need not be sinful. It is ascribed even to God (1 Ki. 11:9; 2 Ki. 17:18; Ps. 7:11; 79:5; 80:4, 5; Heb. 12:29), and to Christ (Ps. 2:12; Mk. 3:5; Jn. 2:15-17). In fact, the age in which we are living could use a little more 'righteous indignation' against sin of every type. Also, the angrier every believer is with his own sins, the better it will be."<sup>9</sup>

However, we must be on guard to make sure righteous indignation does not lead to thoughts of personal revenge or retaliation. Moreover, we must carefully distinguish between things said or done against us that may hurt our pride and vanity and things done against God. We must concern ourselves with the latter. Righteous anger should lead to biblical action such as prayer and godly admonition. It must never lead to malice and revenge. Righteous anger should be turned over to God who judges with a perfect justice and metes out a due recompense of reward. We must concern ourselves with the latter. As Paul says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). People who do not pray and leave things in God's hand will hurt their own health and will enter into the temptation to get even. Such thoughts must never be entertained by believers.

To learn what it means to be angry without a cause, it will be helpful to note some examples of this common sin. One instance is when parents become angry with their children without a good cause. The child may have *accidentally* spilled his milk or broken a window. Sometimes we become angry over a genuine mistake of simple forgetfulness. At other times, our anger is all out of due proportion to the offense committed. Also, it is very common for people to become angry and lay blame before knowing the facts. Such anger is unjustified. There is anger that flows from words of gossip and slander which never should have been heard. There is even the unjust anger directed at ourselves for things that have happened beyond our control. Anger without a cause is often directed at ministers of the gospel who preach against declension, corruptions and sins that are popular. There is unjustified anger of children against their parents for proper discipline and the duty of household chores. There is unjustified anger over

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<sup>9</sup> William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967, 68), 218.

differences of opinion that are trivial and unimportant. Anger is unlawful when it is not directed to a good end and the glory of God, but instead is selfish, self-centered, egotistical and narcissistic. When anger is directed at simply hurting others, seeking revenge and not helping others repent and look to Christ, then it is vain, useless and sinful. Unlawful and uncontrolled anger is a very destructive thing. It does not help anyone. “Cain’s killing his brother began in anger; he is a murderer in the account of God, who knows his heart, whence murders proceed, ch. vx.19.”<sup>10</sup> We need to search our hearts and continuously be on guard against anger without a cause.

Third, what does Jesus mean when He says that those who are angry with a brother without cause shall be liable to the judgment? There are two different views regarding the meaning of this judgment. One view is that the three expressions for penalties in verse 22 (*krisei-judgment, sunnedrio-sanhedrin* or council: *ten geennan tou puros*—the Gehenna of fire) are simply different expressions for God’s judgment that leads to the penalty of hell. Jesus sets forth these judgments in a rhetorical manner as a kind of crescendo. In other words, the penalties all speak of God’s judgment and not a civil punishment, and God’s judgment is essentially the same. A much more common view is that, as each offense is more serious (unjust anger, *raca* [i.e. empty-headed one], you fool), each punishment is more serious (e.g., the judgment of a local council, the rendering of the supreme council, and the judgment of hell itself). Those who object to the second view argue that: a) Christ would not make a hair-splitting distinction between calling someone an idiot and a fool; b) local and regional courts do not have jurisdiction over sins unless they are defined in Scripture as crimes and it is very unlikely that anyone would take a brother to court who lost his temper and called him a “block head;” c) being angry with a brother in one’s heart is not detectable by witnesses; d) the word *krisis* which can be translated local court, in every other occurrence of the New Testament means decision, judgment or verdict.<sup>11</sup> Given these considerations, it is likely that Jesus is emphasizing that all sins relating to anger are worthy of God’s judgment and will be recompensed according to the seriousness of the sin in hell. Lenski suggests that our Lord is using satire “to demolish the entire Jewish treatment of this commandment as a mere civil law.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever position one holds, the central thrust of Christ’s teaching is that each example is a sin and will be treated as such by God. Our Lord says that if you are angry with a brother without a cause, you have exposed yourself ultimately to the same eternal condemnation as the murderer.

Fourth, let us examine the meaning of the other expressions of unjustified anger. These are examples of inner unlawful anger that moves from the heart to the tongue. Jesus tells His disciples that they must not be guilty of making insulting comments to others. “Whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council” (v. 22). “Raca” is an Aramaic word which was transliterated directly into Greek. “The word means something like ‘blockhead’ or ‘idiot,’ but in that culture conveying a much more objectionable insult than in modern Western society. Name calling was a much more serious affair in biblical times because of the importance attached to names (cf. Elisha, 2 Kgs. 2:23-24...), than in our day when names, like labels, can be readily exchanged...”<sup>13</sup> An insult that proceeds from anger and malice in the heart is tongue-murder. The whole purpose is to verbally assault the other person to cause emotional pain. “[I]t is the language of that which Solomon calls *proud wrath* (Prov. xxi.24), which tramples upon our

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:58.

<sup>11</sup> See William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 298.

<sup>12</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 219.

<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 116.

brother—disdains *to set him even with the dogs of our flock.*”<sup>14</sup> Anyone familiar with how actual murders take place can see the importance of what our Lord says. There is virtually always a progression from uncontrolled inner anger, to verbal insults, then to blows and physical violence. There is a thread that runs from the heart, to the tongue to the bloody hand. Christ insists that each step in this process is a violation of the sixth commandment and will receive God’s judgment.

If we harbor unjust anger in our hearts, then we will commit murder with our tongues. There is the tongue murder of the personal insult and there is the tongue murder of gossip and slander. Many a man’s personal reputation has been permanently destroyed by the murdering tongue. Before the Jewish leaders were able to arrange the death of Christ, they made every effort to harm Him with slander. They accused Him of being born of fornication (Jn. 8:41), of being demon-possessed (Jn. 8:48), of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub (Mk. 3:22) and being a drunkard and glutton (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34). The scribes and Pharisees were committing murder with their tongues. “Killing does not only mean destroying life physically, it means still more trying the spirit and the soul, destroying the person in any shape or form.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we must diligently work to control the hardest thing to control in our whole body—our tongues. “If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless” (Jas. 1:26).

Our Lord’s next example is similar. “But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (v. 22). Commentators are somewhat divided over whether the word “fool” is being used in a Greek or Hebraistic sense. The Greek word for fool (*moros*, “foolishness”) is like our English word and as an insult is not very different than “*raka*” which refers to an empty-headed one, a moron or idiot. If “fool” is a transliteration of the Aramaic (*mora*) or Hebrew (*moreh*), it would be a more serious insult. To a Jew it refers to someone who is not only stupid, but also is in serious rebellion against God. It was even used of apostates, “so that the one using the term arrogated to himself the passing of judicial sentence, consigning his fellow to hell.”<sup>16</sup> This is the same term (in the plural form) that Moses used when he lost his temper, yelled at the people of God and struck the rock twice with his rod (Num. 20:10). The word is translated “rebels.” If it is used in the Jewish sense, we do have an escalation of offense from unlawful anger in the heart, to a common everyday insult, to a very strong insult.

The phrase translated “hell fire” (KJV) means literally “the Gehenna of fire” (*ton geenan tou puros*). The word Gehenna comes from the Aramaic “valley of Hinnom” (cf. Josh. 15:18; 18:16). It was a place in Israel’s history where infants were sacrificed to Molech (cf. 2 Kgs. 23:20; Jer. 7:31). In Jesus’ day it was Jerusalem’s garbage dump. Fires were burned there continually to consume the refuse. By the first century it became associated with hell and its eternal torment. Therefore, what Christ is saying is that insulting a person is an offense against God that merits the punishment of hell.

This was a radical statement then and still is today. In our day, coarse jesting, name calling and hurling insults are accepted as no big deal. Movies, television and comedians use insults as a form of entertainment. Yet, our Lord categorizes all such activity as a species of murder, as highly offensive to God. We need to examine ourselves and make sure that the Savior’s attitude is our attitude. We must also control our children and not permit them to call each other names. We must not lower our standard to that of our surrounding culture; but, rather,

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:56.

<sup>15</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:225.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 72.

raise it up to Jesus' interpretation of the law. Unlawful anger and insults that flow from that anger are incompatible with a Christian profession. John taught this same doctrine when he said, "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 Jn. 3:15). "The law of the Messiah's kingdom is much more strict in its requisitions, and terrible in its sanctions, than the Mosaic law as expounded by the Scribes and Pharisees."<sup>17</sup>

Some people who are familiar with our Lord's strong use of terms will often ask if some of His denunciations were contrary to His teaching in our passage. In Matthew 23 did He not say that the scribes and Pharisees were: "fools and blind" (vs. 17, 19), "blind guides" (v. 24), "serpents, brood of vipers" (v. 33) and were like "white washed tombs" (v. 27)? Indeed, He did. However, as the Son of God who is omniscient and the Messiah who is anointed beyond measure, He has the knowledge and authority to make such pronouncements. Further, His statements were not based on a personal offense or unjust anger, but were inspired warnings to His followers and judicial pronouncements against wicked apostates. In a similar manner, ministers of the gospel have a duty to identify false teachers and warn people of their character and doctrine. The person's public doctrine and life can be discussed with very strong terminology, yet without hurling personal insults.

After Jesus gives His teaching on how the sixth commandment applies to the heart and tongue and focuses on things that we are not to do, He then turns His attention to some positive implications of this commandment. The disciple is not only required to avoid everything that leads to murder, but he also is to be an active peacemaker. Christ sets forth two examples of positive application of the sixth commandment:

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing (Mt. 5:23-26).

Let us examine each application in turn.

First, the Savior describes a man who comes to the temple to make a gift offering and realizes that he has done something to offend his brother. Jesus says that under such circumstances this man must not make the offering until he first reconciles with his brother. If we apply this to our situation we could paraphrase it as: "If you are at public worship and realize that your brother has a legitimate grievance against you, do not partake of the holy supper until you first make amends with your brother." In other words, love and reconciliation must be sought and, if possible, achieved before you approach God in worship. One must seek to fulfill even the positive application of the sixth commandment before seeking the Lord's blessing in the ordinances. Since we praise God for His kindness, love and mercy toward us, we must also treat our brothers with love and kindness. God does not want us to approach Him in worship until the unresolved sinful conflicts in the local body that we have caused are resolved.

This teaching was a strong rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees, for they regarded such matters as unimportant; instead, they focused their attention on the external things of religion. They thought that as long as they did not commit physical murder that everything was fine. Therefore, personal conflicts, hatred, strife and insults were left to fester in their communities.

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<sup>17</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:187.

These things were not considered violations of the law. Thus, they would go to worship with a clear conscience even though personal relationships were in turmoil. Christ says that once you understand the full meaning and application of the sixth commandment, you will do everything in your power to stop this situation. In order to keep the negative aspect of the commandment, you must also be very careful to carry out the positive aspect. Love and peace must be attended to and continually nurtured.

This teaching, which is simple and beautiful, is constantly being violated in Christian churches today. People often do not seek reconciliation, but rather make matters worse by excuses, gossip, slander and the like. Jesus expects believers to live in a way that is the opposite of unjustified anger and insults. They are to be aggressive with their love; they are to be active peacemakers. They are to remove the causes of conflict, even before they have an opportunity to grow worse and lead to further sin. This aspect of the sixth commandment is rarely practiced today, but it is required by Christ. To emphasize how important this teaching is, in verses 23 and 24 the Redeemer has shifted from the second person plural (“you”) to the second person singular (“thou,” KJV). He says to each particular Christian, “This teaching applies to you. Do not neglect it. Examine your own heart on this issue.”<sup>18</sup>

The point that our Lord makes is so true and logical. If I treat any brother like dirt and refuse to do everything I can to make the situation right, then why should God hear me? How can I worship God actively for saving me and bringing me into His family when I abuse His family members? If you are mistreating your brother in Christ and refuse to speak with Him and perhaps are even making matters worse by gossiping about him, then the Son of God assures you that your attempted act of worship is vain or useless. “It will avail you nothing, the Lord will not hear you.”<sup>19</sup> Think of how serious this teaching is. Think about the great importance that Jesus places on reconciliation and peace in the body of Christ.

In the second example, the Savior moves from a church situation to that of a court of law. Here the Lord instructs Christians to settle issues with enemies before they get to civil court. Believers are to agree with their adversary and make matters right, out of court. They are to do this quickly, even on the way to court if necessary. If the debt is not settled immediately, then the person in debt will go to prison and will pay every penny owed. In other words, putting the matter off will only cause the problem to grow worse. The problem will not go away if it is ignored. Both of these illustrations teach that grievances against us must be dealt with immediately. Both require urgent action on our part. Worship must even be postponed to make matters right as soon as possible. We must not delay making peace. Thus, the sixth commandment requires positive action. It requires active love and peacemaking.

Our Lord’s teaching on anger, insults and positive peacemaking is an excellent exposition on the meaning of the sixth commandment. We need to adopt Jesus’ attitude regarding these things and be much more diligent about watching our hearts, controlling our tongues and working for reconciliation with others before matters become worse. We must never permit anger to grow or personal conflicts to fester. These things must be nipped in the bud and dealt with aggressively. May God enable us to put this great wisdom into practice in our daily lives.

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<sup>18</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:228.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.