12-18 February 2023 No buts

Matthew 5:21-37

Read the passage from Matthew. It is written below.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.” But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and

if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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 for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 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 for your whole body to go into hell.

‘It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

‘Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.” But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from

the evil one.’

Bible notes

This passage is sometimes taken to be an intensification of the law and a sign of sect-like requirements in the strict community for whom Matthew is writing. The context gives the lie to this ‘ultra-strict membership’ interpretation, however.

The earlier beatitudes contain wide-open categories: it is the merciful who will receive mercy, not those who conform to some strict requirement. It is true, however, that this passage does place all of us in the uncomfortable position of needing to change and improve. It takes us from rule-based, exterior ethics based on obvious actions to interior attitudes and choices. Suddenly the interior world where we fume against someone else, calling them an idiot, is as real as the exterior world in which we might commit an act of violence. The point is not that the act of violence is equivalent to the vocal outburst; it is that, if we ‘live by the rules’, we can excuse ourselves of some pretty horrendous things because external rules give me the leeway to do this. We might never hit anybody, but if we exterminate them again and again in our mind, judging, condemning and despising them, dismissing them as not fit to live – what has happened to our soul? Do we not have the soul of a murderer? If we would never swear falsely when under oath in court and if we take our commitment to God seriously, but feel free to lie to our friends and family and to renege on our promises to them, do we not remain an untrustworthy liar?

It is possible to keep outward rules and yet not allow them to impact our inner selves very much. In fact, it is possible to use the rules to keep a small pocket within ourselves where we are free to follow our sinful desires because ‘I have never done that.’ The goal of the passage is not a more intense set of rules, but entering into a process of getting real with ourselves, working to bring our thoughts and feelings into line with our beliefs, a willingness to look into an inner mirror and work seriously with the faults that we see.

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

There is a ‘spiritual’ (i.e. song) that begins, ‘Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standin’ in the need of prayer’. This seems like a good way to approach Matthew 5.21-37. All of us are shown up by this inner spotlight in some way. We have certain pockets of behaviour where we excuse ourselves, either because we consider what we do is ‘not that bad’ or because we keep the letter of the law but refute its spirit. There is no huge guilt trip in this teaching, however, or an existential despair over our inherent sinfulness – rather encouragement to act and change things. Let’s do better and be better!

**Questions for reflection**

*You may wish to use these questions and the picture to help you think about or discuss issues arising from this week’s Bible passage.*

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**Questions**

* If you have given or received a ‘random act of kindness’, how did it feel?
* If no one knows or sees or even benefits when you do the right things, are they still worth doing?
* What ‘buts’ or excuses might we make when it comes to integrity?

## Prayer

Adapt to your local context.

### A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Jesus, we thank and praise you,
that you have taught us another way,
that you have given us life in all its fullness.
Thank you that when we seek you with all our heart,
we are choosing that life.
Thank you that you have offered us a different path:
a path of truth, a path of humility,
a path of wisdom, a path of integrity,
a path of honesty.
Through your example here on earth you showed us
how to live peaceful lives,
how to reconcile with others,
how to follow you and seek wholeness.
Thank you that we have all of that in you.
You reconciled us on the cross and we are truly grateful.
**Amen.**

## **A prayer to end the Bible study**

Loving Lord, we want to use
our strong feelings to bring change;
our words to encourage;
our gifts to heal;
our eyes to see as you see;
our hands to give help.
Lord, we choose life, we choose you.
**Amen.**

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