

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 5:21-37

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“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’;
and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to
judgment.’

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment;
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.

This section of the Sermon on the Mount addresses a series of specific issues in the interpretation of the Mosaic Law, specifically rulings about murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. Jesus is addressing the reinterpretation of the spirit of these laws and making specific judgments about liability under the law in relation to each of these specific matters of the law.

The four rulings have a similar formulaic introduction: “You have heard that it was said. . . But I say to you.” At the end of the statements about murder and adultery, Jesus names the consequences of disobedience to the law eschatologically. The first is the prediction that you will be thrown into prison and will never get out and the second is that your body will be thrown into hell.

The general principle that underlies these four rulings is that true obedience to the law requires observing the spirit of the law rather than simply the letter of the law. One way of understanding this principle in a rabbinic context is what was called the fence around the Torah. In order to avoid a transgression of the law, one would not only observe the letter of the law but also the things that might lead to a transgression of the law. Thus, in the contemporary context of the possibility of sexual intercourse before marriage, a frequent teaching of parents in the ‘40’s and ‘50’s was not only no intercourse but also no petting and no kissing. Holding hands was sometimes OK. In relation to the observance of Sabbath law, in order to avoid a violation of the prohibition of work, one would not rub grain in your hands or perform an act of healing. One way of understanding Jesus’ rulings is that he is advocating attention to the spiritual attitude or expression that leads to the violation of the law.

Un relation to the prohibition of murder, Jesus’ ruling is that anger, insult and derision make one liable to judgment as a violation of the law prohibiting murder. In his exposition of this ruling, he advocates seeking reconciliation with anyone who is offended at you before bringing a gift to the altar of sacrifice. In effect he advocates aggressive actions of seeking reconciliation immediately when there has been a perceived offense. The effect of this practice would be to prevent the offense growing in intensity and leading to more extreme actions. Likewise the statements about coming to terms quickly with an accuser on the way to court are an admonition to seek a mediation of the dispute before you get to court. The statement of the consequences of going to court—judgment, incarceration, and a life sentence in prison—exceed what would happen in any actual 1st century court and have an eschatological ring. That is, this is what will happen in relation to God. Jesus’ recommendation is then to seek reconciliation aggressively with those whom you have in some way offended. All of this is in your own self-interest to prevent someone becoming murderously offended at you.

In regard to adultery, Jesus advocates extreme actions to intercept the feelings and perceptions that are the early warning signs of imminent adultery. The first is looking at a woman with the desire for sex and the second is the initial touch. This injunction is focused on looking at the body of a woman or a man as an object of desire rather than as

a full person. Jesus advocates extreme actions—plucking out your eye or cutting off your hand—as a way of preventing either “the look” or “the touch.” This is typical Jesus hyperbole and is clearly not to be taken literally. But he is advocating that we take this very seriously. In American culture, the marketing of lust has become a major industry in which the bodies of women and increasingly of men are portrayed in a manner that actively invites fantasies of sex and the sexual benefits of specific products. While there has always been infinite imagination in relation to sexual fantasies, Jesus’ teaching here is particularly demanding in the context of our highly sexualized culture.

The ruling in relation to divorce is a radical and highly conservative extension of the sanctions against divorce. The Mosaic Law requiring a certificate of divorce was in the interest of women who had no rights and were sometimes divorced for no reason. The certificate of divorce required the man to state the reason for the divorce and gave her legal status that might enable her to be remarried. Jesus’ sanction against marrying a divorced woman appears to be directed against the possibility that a man would be attracted to a divorced woman and divorce his wife and marry the divorced woman. Jesus’ ruling seeks to nip this possibility in the bud as he does also in relation to sexual fantasies.

The prohibition against oaths is likewise an extension of the prohibition of swearing falsely, that is of taking oaths that are not kept. Apparently the taking of oaths by swearing by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or by one’s head had become a common practice: e.g., “I swear by Jerusalem that I will . . .” Thus, Peter’s oath swearing that he did not know Jesus might have been accompanied by some such swearing by something. The practice became a formula for hypocrisy by excessive protestations and vows that were then broken. This is a reaction against a kind of male bravado that often leads to a kind of craziness in oaths and vows. Jesus’ recommendation is a simple statement of either affirmation or negation. Say what you really intend to do and if so, then say yes, if not, say no. More than that has its sources in evil because it grows out of an excessive effort to demonstrate commitment to some course of action by an excessive protestation rather than just saying what it is you will do.

In all of these rulings Jesus identifies the source of transgressions of the law in spiritual attitudes and practices that precede and often cause sinful actions. The practice of the examination of conscience is an extension of this overall recognition by Jesus of the dynamics of law observance in the spiritual interior of each person. The invitation of these sections of the Sermon on the Mount is to reflect about one’s own self and what’s going on in your mind and in your spirit. Jesus is steadily pushing us to think back into the interior regions of our minds and spirits and to examine our internal motivations with total honesty.