

The Sermon on the Mount (cont.)

The first principle I have listed in understanding Jesus' exclusive fidelity to the law is that Jesus is concerned not simply that we do the right thing, but that we do the right things for the right reasons. We must have coherence between our motives and our actions. I showed this using His teaching on murder, but we could do the same thing using His teaching on adultery. Jesus teaches us the requirement—Don't commit adultery—but then goes on to say that it's not enough to refrain from the actual deed. One must also refrain from the thought.

In Matthew 5:28 Jesus says, "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart" (NIV). In Greek this reads, "...anyone who looks at a woman in order to lust after her..." This distinguishes between saying a woman is beautiful (or saying a man is handsome) and lusting. Noticing someone is attractive may involve a temptation toward lust, but, if you reject it, you have not sinned. Jesus is saying that there is a look in order to lust. The intent and purpose is to indulge the eye and so to indulge the heart, to indulge the desire in the direction of lustfulness. That is a sin.

Lest we think that having lustful thoughts is a light matter because one is not acting on the thoughts, Jesus uses extremely strong language: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off, etc." This is not to be understood literally because a one-eyed man or woman can still commit a lot of sins with that one eye. A one-armed man can do a lot of damage. You're not supposed to take this in a literalistic manner. Jesus speaks this way to make it clear that God is very serious about this. Sinning in your heart or your mind is not a trivial thing. Thus, the first clear principle in the Sermon on the Mount is that we should do the right thing for the right reason.

Jesus' second principle is that we should move beyond the tolerable to the ideal. We see this in the next set of teachings. When the people of God lived in Egypt for a number of years, they fell away from covenant obedience into near paganism. Total paganism is being almost entirely given over to sin and being limited only by the question, "What will happen to me if I get caught, or if I harm somebody who is powerful?" God delivered His people out of Egypt and gave them a number of new standards of living. To some extent the law of Moses lifted the people of God an enormous distance out of their paganism. Jesus addresses some of these standards, which are an enormous improvement over the ways of unbelief we find in the world's paganism, and He says the standards are good. But He thinks we can do better yet. He speaks about divorce, oaths, retaliation, and loving your enemies.

Divorce is mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew 19:1-12. In ancient Egypt and ancient Rome in general, and in the Greco-Roman world for quite some time, divorce was rampant. It was not the same in every place and every time, but broadly speaking in Jesus' day, people rarely got married in the formal sense. They rarely registered with the state. They registered if they had enough property that they might need to divide it up among heirs or make some similar arrangement. More often, people simply lived together. That was their typical version of marriage. Then, if they got sick of each other, they just left. In the Jewish world men could divorce their wives for almost any reason. The debate was not over whether divorce was permissible, but whether a man could divorce his wife for absolutely any reason. In fact, some actually taught that if a woman merely got ugly, or if she got a little too mouthy, that was enough to justify a divorce. Some taught that if a wife burned a meal twice, that was enough.

Moses had said to the people of Israel that men could not get a divorce for any and every reason. He said that you could give your wife a certificate of divorce and send her away but you could not just give her a

certificate of divorce for no reason. Deuteronomy 24:1-4 says she has to have done something shameful (Jesus refers to this passage in Matthew 19). Some rabbis said that getting ugly is pretty shameful and mouthing off is shameful, but that's not what Moses meant. The language he used was very strong language for a deeply shameful act. So Moses prohibited divorcing any time you want. You must have a substantial cause. You have also got to give her a certificate of divorce so that it is public and she can remarry. Furthermore, if you divorce her and she marries another, you may never have her as a wife again. This warned the husband to think twice because women got remarried rapidly in the ancient world, if they possibly could, since they needed the protection of a man. Those are three qualifications designed to sharply limit divorce and to get people far from the slough of paganism.

But Jesus said, as good as the law of Moses is, and it certainly is good, we can do better. Instead of simply saying the only ground for divorce is something truly shameful, Jesus said the only ground is unfaithfulness. In this He identifies unfaithfulness as that which is truly shameful, as it breaks the marriage bond publicly and potently. This is not all we need to consider in order to arrive at a comprehensive view of divorce, but it is enough to show that Jesus is raising the standard.

Perhaps we can see this even more clearly when we consider what Jesus said about oaths. In the slough of paganism people tell lies whenever they can get away with it. The law of Moses, as well as the law of various other lands, tries to lift people up and get them to tell the truth by the custom or the social institution of the oath. The classical form of an oath is, "If I am not telling the truth, may God judge me," or "May God strike me down if my word is false." In essence it is saying, "You can count on me telling the truth." Oaths are used in the law of Moses. First of all, God Himself takes oaths, swearing to Abraham that he will have a son and heirs and so forth. There are other places where God swears an oath, such as Genesis 22:16-18, Psalm 132:11, and Psalm 119:106. When God makes promises to Abraham or to Israel or to His people, He takes oaths. He says, "May I be destroyed if I don't do this."

Not only does God take oaths, but He also regulates oaths in the Old Testament. He says we should not take oaths rashly. He also says, "If you do take an oath, be sure you pay what you vow. I am the judge and I will hold you to account." See Deuteronomy 23:21-23.

Today, most of us take oaths only a couple of times in our lives, such as when we testify in court, get married, or get ordained as an elder or deacon in the church. But we make promises all the time; a promise is a contemporary equivalent to an oath. Why do you make promises? You make promises to get somebody to believe you. When I'm telling jokes to my kids and they say, "Daddy, that's not a true story," I'll say, "Oh, yes, absolutely, it's true." Then they ask, "Do you promise it is true?" That's the magic word. If I don't promise that tells them I am joking. Unfortunately, at home children sometimes learn to get their parents to promise other things. When Dad says, "If you help me rake the leaves, I'll take you out for ice cream," the wise child sometimes learns to ask, "Do you promise?" This is not because Dad is a liar so much as because he is busy, distracted, and forgetful. Still, the phenomenon of "Do you promise?" is a testimony against us. If we have to promise it means our children have learned they cannot quite trust us. Out in the world we sometimes have to promise in order to make people believe us, perhaps because they have dealt with dishonest people in the past, or because we are not quite believable by ourselves.

Jesus' point is that it is good to keep our oaths and promises, but it is even better if our "yes" is "yes" and our "no" is "no." If, when we said "yes," it meant "yes" there would be no need for a follow-up statement like "I promise." Instead, we would be totally honest all the time. Jesus is saying that we should press beyond just getting by in the world and instead strive for consistency between our words and actions.

How do various groups interpret this passage in the Sermon on the Mount? The Roman Catholic view of the “two-tiered ethic”—the sermon presents one ethic for truly noble people and one for “normal Christians”—would mean that Jesus’ teachings about oaths apply only to “super-Christians.” An Anabaptist (that is, a literalist who wants to obey the law of God as it is literally spelled out) might see the prohibition on oaths and conclude that he cannot serve in the military or testify in a court. If God’s law says it, he will obey it, even if it means withdrawing from society. An early Lutheran might reply, “This business about ‘no oaths’ applies to your private life, not your public life. The public life is one in which you live in and by the standards of the world; when the world requires us to give oaths, we should give oaths. But privately we should try to live in the way of the Sermon on the Mount.” Later Lutherans would say, “This command about ‘no oaths’ shows you exactly how sinful you are. If you try to live without oaths, without promises, it will bring you face to face with your failure and drive you to Christ.”

There is some truth in the later Lutheran view, but we will be most helped by something called “the analogy of Scripture.” “The analogy of Scripture” means allowing all Scriptures around the passage in question to bear on the question. When asking, “Should we never, ever take an oath?” we should look at what the Bible as a whole says. The best answer is, “We should absolutely aspire to never take an oath. We should seek to live our lives so that if we say we will do something, we do it.

Nevertheless, we may meet people who don’t know us and who have met a lot of liars over the years. There may be a situation where there is pressure to say something we don’t quite mean—for example, in a court room situation. In that case, since there are other Scriptures that say it is permissible to swear oaths on occasion in the Old Testament, and since God Himself swears oaths to people who may not fully believe Him, then maybe in this specific circumstance we can take an oath. When people don’t know us they may need to hear the oath since they don’t know we are reliable.

There is a difference between a marriage vow and an oath because an oath has the form of, “May God punish me if I don’t do what I say I will do.” It is true that we take a vow in the presence of God and the witnesses in a marriage ceremony, and that God is the one who seals a marriage—certainly at least a Christian marriage. But the real purpose of the marriage vows made by a bride and groom is toward each other. They are an expression of love and faithfulness. The threat that is technically implicit in an oath is not there. In the marriage vows we do not say, “I will love and cherish you and, if I don’t, may God kill me.” Marriage vows are close to being oaths, but are not quite identical.

People often wonder if some aspects of the Old Testament law have become passé, or have been annulled and/or superseded. Are they obsolete because something higher has come? That is a complex question. There are many Old Testament laws that take us a huge step towards God’s ideal and away from paganism, but they do not fully reach His ideal. This is demonstrated by the fact that there were looser divorce laws in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. Another example would be oaths. We could also consider the Old Testament laws about the cities of refuge for those who cause accidental death. These laws were given because of the prevalence of blood feuds and families taking revenge. Wouldn’t it be better if people investigated and then forgave so they could live and not have to move to the city of refuge?

So there are a number of Old Testament laws that are a great improvement on paganism, but they are not perfect justice. There are other Old Testament laws that somehow point us to Christ, like those regarding the tabernacle and temple ritual. There are others that have to do with the particularity of life in that country, such as how you go to war and don’t destroy fruit trees.

Every law from the Old Testament has a vital truth or principle, and embodies some part of God's truth. But cultures do change and the embodiment of the truth may change as we live in a different situation or as we have more light. We never say something in the Old Testament is false or wrong, but we sometimes go farther as we get a new command or a new law.

This raises the question, "How do we know how to treat a specific Old Testament law?" We must, on a case-by-case basis, do painstaking exegesis, always trying to find out what issue is being addressed. Some laws look *very* strange to us—laws about bowls, roofs on houses, and other odd things. Never say, "Oh, that's some old law; we don't do that." Rather, you must ask, "What's the underlying principle?" and then consider how it applies today, how it speaks to a similar situation. We do not simply throw out the Old Testament, but try to understand how Jesus is taking the principles deeper.

As the Sermon on the Mount continues it keeps getting harder, especially in verses 31-48. Notice that Jesus explains the ideal relationship with one's wife (Matt. 5:31, 32), the closest relationship a man has. Then He deals more generally with one's society in teaching about oaths (Matt. 5:33-37). These people are closer than others, but not quite as close as one's wife or husband. Then we come to Matthew 5:38-42 Jesus teaches about the "eye for an eye" principle and articulates the ideal toward those who harm us. So we move from wife to neighbor to the person who has hurt us.

Jesus says to turn the other cheek and not resist the person who harms us. It used to be that people would expect "eye for eye or tooth for tooth" treatment, and this was actually an improvement over paganism. When someone was hit and got his tooth knocked out, the pagan way of retaliation was to knock out all of the offender's teeth. Moses restrained vengeance to an equal amount of damage—nothing more than a tooth for a tooth or an eye for an eye. Jesus said there's actually something even better: to turn the other cheek.

But Jesus challenges us further. He moves from those who harm us or take from us to those who *need* to harm us, who plan to harm us—our enemies. This demand is truly daunting. His challenge is not just to be faithful to your wife and to your word and to be forgiving. You must also love your enemy. It just keeps getting harder and harder.

Finally we come to the hardest challenge of them all, "You shall be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." Some people say that this word "perfect" does not really mean *perfect*, but the Greek word meaning "mature." But does this make things any easier? Is it really good news to learn that you don't have to be as perfect as God but only as mature as God? That is hardly easier to accomplish! Jesus' words are meant to drive us to the realization that indeed *everything* is required, bringing us back to Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are the poor." By the time you have heard Jesus' list of demands you ought to know your spiritual poverty and your utter inability to your obligations before Him.

However, there is a twist to this command. Most of the translations say, "Be perfect, therefore, as your Father in heaven is perfect." But you might have noticed above when I quoted the verse that I did not say, "Be perfect..." Rather, I wrote, "You *shall be* perfect..." Jesus' little statement is a demand, but it is also a promise. It is somewhat like a teacher saying to a student, "Bring that note up to me." If the student stubbornly refuses, the teacher might insist by saying, "You will bring that note to me." The teacher is commanding the student but there is also a promise about the future involved: "You will do it." "You shall be perfect," is the highest command. You will be perfect. God is demanding everything of us—complete perfection. And He is also saying that it will come to pass.

Notice the way Jesus makes His point: “You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.” There is a beautiful balance in His statement between the two sides of our relationship with God. He is our Father. The highest demand that God gives us is that we be like our Father. In one sense, that is the easiest thing in the world to do. If you ever see a father and his son walk together, you will notice how similarly they walk. If you hear them talk you will notice they have the same accent. They may not look the same, but they will say the same words and have similar gestures. It is natural for a father to be like the son, or a son like the father. Jesus is affirming to the disciples that God is their Father. So this is an awesome privilege: to be like your dad.

On the other hand, He’s your dad *in heaven*. There is great separation between Him and us. It is hard, but Jesus has given us a prediction: “You will be perfect as your Father is perfect.” So God commands, but He also promises.

## Matthew 6

Chapter 6 is closely related to the themes in chapter 5. The beatitudes are the beginning of an introduction that describes Christian character. It is easy to understand Matthew 5:20 as a programmatic introductory statement that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. At that point, the rest of chapter 5 is devoted to showing how our righteousness should exceed that of the scribes who knew the letter of the law. They knew what you were supposed to do, and Jesus said you must go beyond that—you’ve got to do it from the heart.

So now Jesus’ listeners face the questions, “How are you going to beat the Pharisees? How are you going to have a greater righteousness than they do?” A description of this is found in Matthew 6:1-18. It does not explicitly mention the Pharisees, but it returns to the question of motives. When you look at the question of motives, it is not hard to see that the Pharisees had some difficulties with motives, difficulties that fit well with the description in these verses.

First, the Pharisees were hypocrites and what Jesus says here seems to address hypocrisy. Second, the topics Jesus addresses fit the focal point of the Pharisees’ quest for righteousness. One can see this by looking in the Book of Tobit. Tobit is part of the Jewish writings known as the Apocrypha, written in the period between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament. Tobit 12:8, was very popular with the Pharisees. It said that prayer is good when fasting, and almsgiving and righteousness accompany it. The Pharisees understood this to mean that one could and should be righteous by doing these three things: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. In Matthew 6:1-18 Jesus talks about almsgiving, prayer and fasting, so it is a very close fit for the Pharisees.

We must be careful because it is so easy for us to judge and denigrate the Pharisees. Any disciple can easily slip into hypocrisy. D. A. Carson, one of the great Christian writers of our day, says the following about hypocrisy:

“We humans are a strange lot. We hear high moral injunctions and glimpse just a little of the genuine beauty of perfect holiness and then prostitute that vision by dreaming about the way others would hold us in high esteem if we were like that. The demand for genuine perfection loses itself in the external goal, the lesser goal, of external piety. The goal of pleasing the Father is traded for its pigmy cousin of pleasing men.”

That is well stated. How many times have you and I set out to do something good and then thought, “It would be nice if somebody would notice.” Or, “It would sure be nice if somebody realized how much I

am sacrificing here.” It is not that big of a step from hoping somebody will notice you to doing something or saying something to draw attention to yourself—just dropping a small hint in some conversation, so somebody knows what you did.

Against this, Jesus says over and over that if you are bent on having others observe your righteousness, you can succeed at it and you will be rewarded. But every good deed is rewarded exactly once. If you want to be rewarded in the court of mankind, if you want to be praised and get your reward on this earth, then you will get it, but that’s your one reward, and you will then not be rewarded for it in heaven. If you bypass that opportunity and do not seek reward on this earth, then you will get your reward another time and that is in heaven.

Three times in chapter 6 Jesus say to be careful not to practice righteousness so as to be seen by men. When you do a good deed, whether it involves fasting or almsgiving or praying, do not do it to be noticed by men, because then you have your reward in full. Rather when you do a good deed, whether almsgiving or fasting or prayer, do it in secret, conceal it in an inner room so no one notices. Then God will see and reward. If you do your work for men’s praise, you will receive it but nothing else.

To put it another way, Jesus says the meek will be righteous. He says to hunger and thirst for righteousness and it will manifest itself to the world (Matthew 5:16). We should be holy with regard to the world, but we should not have a “holier than thou” attitude. Be holy, but private; don’t wear your holiness on your sleeve.

Notice that Jesus assumes that we give alms to the needy (6:2). He also assumes that we pray (6:5) and that we fast (6:16). The question is not *whether* we will do these things but *in what manner* we will do them.

Consider what Jesus says about prayer. The Lord’s Prayer is a test of true righteousness. First, notice that when you pray, you should pray in secret (Matthew 6:5). In verse 6 some translations say that we should pray in a closet. That does not mean you have to get in with your coats. It means a room that doesn’t have windows, an inner room. That way not only are you not praying on the street corners, but you aren’t even praying near a window so that people can admire you by looking in from outside. Your prayers should be a secret event.

It is not that public prayers are a sin, because there are many public prayers in the Bible (for example, in the book of Acts). Rather the idea is that the essence of prayer is private. The essence of prayer is conversing with God. While you can converse with God in public, it is harder to do so. Another test of your prayer life would be whether you do most of your prayer, or your most thoughtful prayer, in public. If you do, then something is amiss. Private prayer is the essence, so Jesus said.

Furthermore, when you pray, your method must not be manipulative. Jesus says, when you pray, don’t keep babbling like the pagans when they think they’ll be heard because of their many words (Matthew 6:7). In pagan prayer, every single god that could be thought of might be listed, maybe anywhere from forty to seventy gods of all kinds of religions. The request might be simple, like, “Give me help,” “Give me a safe journey,” or “Give me profit on my trading venture.” Then something might be promised to the gods. By calling on every god, the hope was that the prayer might reach some god who was interested and would pay attention to answer the prayer. Or sometimes the thought was that if you just said your prayer over and over again, that if the gods were sleepy or looking the other way, they might finally wake up and notice that the request was being made. That is manipulative and it flows from a

defective concept of who God is. Jesus says, “God will hear, even before you ask. You don’t need to shout to get His attention or say it over and over.”

Not only should you have a high view of God, but also your petition should be theocentric. The first three petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are theocentric. The first one is, “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.” The second is, “Your kingdom come,” and then, explaining that, “May Your will be done.”

No matter how long you study, there is always more to learn about the Lord’s Prayer. Consider the first petition: “Hallowed be Your name.” This means, “May Your name be revered,” or “May Your name be honored.” There are many ways of doing this. One way is to always sanctify every use of God’s name so that we don’t take the name of the Lord in vain (the third commandment). We also hallow God’s name by praying sincerely to God as our Father. We hallow and revere His name by lifting it up sincerely every time we take it up.

Typically Christians know that when they pray they should mean it. When you sing, you should mean it. When you pray the Apostles’ Creed, you should mean it, etc. But Christians also carry God’s name with them in another way. You bear the name of God on you because you are baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We share Jesus name as *Christians*. So when somebody sees a Christian driving around town with a “Praise the Lord” bumper sticker and he goes roaring through a red light, he will think that’s the way *Christians* drive. You are lifting up the name of Christ in your driving or when you work. The name of Christ rests upon you. We should pray that we would live our lives in such a way that the name of Christ, which we bear, is hallowed, is revered by all who know us because of what we do and the way we live.

That’s just a sample. There are lots of other things you could ponder in the Lord’s Prayer. It is a theocentric prayer but it is also a frank and candid realistic prayer. We are free to pray for the things that we need—our bread, forgiveness, and release from temptation. Consistent with His statement about how our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20), Jesus has now covered both sorts of temptations. He has told us to go beyond simply imitating the letter of the law as the scribes do, and to be concerned about our motives and avoid human praise, addressing the problem of the Pharisees.

What about the standard of a disciple? A disciple is one who is loyal to God. In a sense we have already been talking about that in Matthew 6:1-18 because one of the false gods, one of the ways in which we can betray or pollute our commitment to Christ, is by being committed to Christ for the sake of reputation. One of the false gods that could wean us away or draw us away from Christ, if we’ve committed ourselves to Him, is the god of reputation, the god of position and prestige.

The second god that can lead Christians astray is the god of money and what it can buy. That is what is at issue in Matthew 6:19-24:

“Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth where moths and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy, where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.” (NIV)

Notice that my translation (the New International Version) uses the word, “money.” Other more literal translations say, “You cannot serve both God and mammon.” There are many words for money in the ancient world. The most common is the word for silver because most coins were silver. There are a couple of other words too. Jesus does not use the common word for money, but rather, “mammon.”

In Hebrew and Aramaic you can turn a verb into a noun by putting the m-consonant in front of it. It is similar to the way the -tion suffix works in English so that the thing communicated can be called “a communication,” or something presented can be called “a presentation.” Mammon is the noun form of the verb for “trust.” It is the Aramaic verb we use to close our prayers: “Amen.” It indicates that we sincerely mean what we have said.

“Mammon” means something you trust—the trusted thing or a thing that is a result of trust. Isn’t that true about money? It is a thing in which people put their trust. It is a false god. In fact, we use some of the words for deity with regard to money. We refer both to “almighty God” and to “the almighty dollar.” We trust in money. We refer to the promised money we are owed by our government as, “Social Security.” It promises security for things that you can buy. We also have “trust funds” and things like that. “Security and trust” is the language we use.

This leaves us with the question: What exactly is Jesus saying in Matthew 6:24 about money becoming a false god?