

## Matthew Exegesis 5:21-30

### Christ's Fence Building: The inescapable action of sin and the need for a savior

- Building the Fence
  - o Jesus spends the next ten verses building fences. This may not be a familiar term for most believers but it was a common practice among Jewish teachers of which Jesus was definitely considered one. Yoni Gerrish, a tour guide and historian in Israel mentions this in his lectures to his tour groups. He mentions that Jesus practiced the Jewish tradition of building fences around popular Jewish laws and thus providing moral guidelines for believers to abide by that are stricter than the previously held belief which prevents the believer from being in danger of sinning against God. Gerrish comments that the Sermon on the Mount is filled with this fence building concept that Jesus practiced.

### Do Not Murder

**:21**“You heard from the beginning that it was said that you will not murder and whoever might murder will be liable to the judgment.”

- You will not murder
  - o Jesus begins to qualify His previous statements about the importance of the Law by discussing the most recognized tenets which were laws that the religious leaders of the day would be sure that they had never broken. φονεύω (to murder) can be easily mistranslated to mean “to kill”. The Law did not forbid killing, as is evident when God led the Israelites into the promised land through the killing of the gentile nations but it did forbid murder. The verb “to murder” is the intentional, illegal act of depriving someone of his life. (Louw, 20.82) The context suggests that this type of killing is not an accident or the killing that takes place in war but a premeditated act out of anger or malice. This is the act that is forbidden by God and by Jesus here.
- Whoever murders is liable to judgment
  - o The one who commits murder will be held accountable under Jewish law to κρίσις or judgment by the court. The Greek word used for court is the same one that translates as “judgment.” Thus the one who murders another will be taken to court. What Jesus has said here would not have been shocking to any listener even in the gentile world.
    - Jamieson reports that the murderer is “Liable to the judgment; that is, of the sentence of those inferior courts of judicature which were established in all the principal towns, in compliance with De 16:16. Thus was this commandment reduced, from a holy law of the heart-searching God, to a mere criminal statute, taking cognizance only of outward actions, such as that which we read in Ex 21:12; Le 24:17.” (Jamieson, Matt. 5:21)
      - So it seems that Jesus is going to continue in His argument against the religiosity of the religious leaders of the day who seem to be perfect in their actions but are far from it in their own spirits.

**:22** “But I say (to) you that everyone who has been made angry (at) his brother will be liable to the judgment and whoever might say (to) his brother “fool” will be liable to the Sanhedrin and whoever might say “unwise” will be bound into the fire of Gehenna.”

- A Higher Judgment from a higher judge
  - o Everyone who has been made angry at his brother will be liable to judgment
    - It was just as important then as it is now for the person listening to Jesus or reading His words to realize why Christ came. John 3:16 reminds the reader of the truth that Christ came to give eternal life to all those who would believe in Him. One critical aspect of the faith in Christ is the realization that one cannot become righteous in God's eyes through his own actions. To illustrate this, Christ begins to uncover the true sinfulness of every person and thus uncover our need for Him for the forgiveness of that sinfulness.
    - Not only is the murderer liable to judgment but the one who ὀργιζόμενος “is made angry” at his brother. This type of anger is not a momentary frustration but a deep rooted furiousness that resides in the heart of a person like a deadly poison. Notice that Christ didn't mention the offending brother as the one who is liable to judgment but the offended brother. One can easily support the idea that the offender should be punished but how difficult is it for someone to accept

his own wrath against another as sin? The κρίσις or judgment for one's anger against another is shown by Jesus to be equally sinful to God here by the use of the same phrase "liable to judgment" and this idea is supported in the subsequent verse.

- whoever might say (to) his brother "fool" will be liable to the Sanhedrin and whoever might say "unwise" will be bound into the fire of Gehenna
  - The pressing question in this section of :22 is the difference in degrees of judgment for calling a brother a "fool" as opposed to "unwise." ῥακά "fool" would have been a contemptible word to call another person and would have definitely communicated one's anger towards another. This is the only time this word is used in the NT and Strong states: "a term of reproach used among the Jews in the time of Christ" (Strong, G4469) which supports the idea that it was a common word used to insult someone who one was angry with. So calling one a ῥακά would have been grounds for judgment by the Sanhedrin which was the court system under which Jews were responsible but calling one μωρός which means extremely unwise or foolish (Louw, 32.55) would be grounds for being sent to γέενναν τοῦ πυρός (Hell). The degree of insult seems to be similar between each of these words and other than the fact that one is a noun and the other an adjective they seem equal. So why would one have only temporary earthly consequences while the other has the eternal consequence of damnation to hell? It seems that the answer is that in reality both of these statements have the same consequence which is separation from God resulting from sinful actions. Both ῥακά and μωρός are equally offensive statements. They are words used in parallel and thus Jesus is showing that any outburst of anger against a brother would be a sin against that brother and against God. So the sinner would be held accountable to not only the Sanhedrin for his sin against the brother but also to God whom he sinned against as well. One judgment has earthly consequences while the other has eternal consequences.
    - Walvoord reminds the reader that "Gehenna" means valley of Hinnom, the valley south of Jerusalem where a continually burning fire consumed the city refuse. This became an apt name for the eternal punishment of the wicked." (Walvoord, Matt. 5:22)
    - Jamieson states: "Every age and every country has its modes of expressing such things; and no doubt our Lord seized on the then current phraseology of unholy disrespect and contempt, merely to express and condemn the different degrees of such feeling when brought out in words, as He had immediately before condemned the feeling itself." (Jamieson, Matt. 5:22) So it is not the word itself that is sinful but the feeling and attitude behind the word that contains the sin.

**:23-24** "Therefore if you bring your offering upon the altar and then you remember that your brother has something against you, Leave your gift in front of the altar and go firstly (to) become reconciled with your brother and then having gone bring your offering."

- Bringing your offering and your brother has something against you
  - The placement of these two verses seems to be error at first glance. In the preceding verses, Christ talks about the sin of murder and in the next verses the sin of adultery. The reader might ask himself, what are these two verses doing here? Stott comments that this entire passage is formed around Christ's emphasis on the importance of interrelationships among believers. While this seems to be an important theme throughout the NT, it seems as though Stott may have the interpersonal relationship idea in an illogical order. First, it is essential to understand οὖν προσφέρει τὸ δῶρόν σου "you bring your offering" about which phrase Louw writes that Christ is referring to a sacrificial offering used by the Jewish people. (Louw, 57.84) Thus, Christ is speaking about the requirements outlined in Leviticus for sacrificial offerings required by the Law and so His statements would have been shaping the practical exercise of religious duties by the people. Christ's next statement would have been scrutinized by the religious leaders of the day and spoke about by the common people at the city's gates. When a Jew approaches the altar to provide his dutiful sacrifice to God, in that special moment in which he is truly worshipping his God, Christ says: ἄφες ἐκεῖ τὸ δῶρόν σου ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου "leave your offering at the altar." One can only imagine what kind of logistical problems this would have created for the religious leaders who moved the people through like robots performing their duties without a hint of desire for spiritual reformation. Next, He states: διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου "become reconciled

with your brother.” In this statement, Christ could be interpreted as placing the relationship that one has with his brother over his relationship with God. The context here does not support this idea, however, but the order διαλλάσσομαι “become reconciled” commands the believer to make peace in his relationships with his fellow men because only then will he be prepared to find peace with God during worship.

- Walvoord makes an important statement: “Such wrongful attitudes should be dealt with and made right. Reconciliation between brothers must be accomplished whether the “innocent” (5:23-24) or the “offending” (vv. 25-26) brother takes the first step.” (Walvoord, Matt. 5:23) So the responsibility for reconciliation lies not only with the one who has wronged but also in the one wronged. These statements by Christ have immeasurable practical significance in the relationships between believers.

**:25-26** “Be in agreement with your accuser quickly until whenever you are with him on the road lest the accuser might hand you over to the judge and the serving judge also will cast you into jail. Truly I say (to) you no you might not come out from there until you might pay the final farthing.”

- The one who is wronged must work to rectify the severed relationship and the one who has wronged must work to rectify the severed relationship. What is the product of a body of believers who all work to repair problematic relationships? The product is a unified body of believers. While the person who has approached God to sacrifice is unable to do so because he has been wronged and possibly carries resentment in his heart, the person who has wronged carries with himself the possibility of jail or even eternity in Hell (not because he has wronged another person but because his sinful behavior may indicate that he is no believer at all). First, Christ states: ἴσθι εὐνοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου ταχύ “Be in agreement with your accuser quickly.” Here Christ is telling the offender that he must consider the position of the offended person and make a plan for a resolution. This verb εὐνοέω “to be favorable” can also be translated “to settle the case out of court.” So Christ warns the believer against leaving his fate in the hands of the court as opposed to the grace of the offended party. The responsibility of resolution is definitely on the offender in this verse. If the offender refuses to find a resolution then he will be at the mercy of the court who could εἰς φυλακὴν βληθήσῃ “cast you into jail.” Carson reminds the reader that it would have been virtually impossible for a person to earn the money needed for reparation while in jail and thus his only hope would have been for friends and family to donate the money for his release. Thus, the truth in Christ’s statement about settling out of court becomes apparent in his final sentence: οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδώσῃ τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην. “no you might not come out from there until you might pay the final farthing.”

- The farthing was about 1/64 of a days wages (Louw, 6.78)
- An obvious spiritual application of this passage is the destiny that every person has to justify his own offence against God. What is the cost of sin? When one sins against God, when and how can one repay God for that sin? Like the person who is in jail, unable to render the funds necessary for his release, so is the sinful man cast into Hell where he will be unable to render the funds necessary for his release. Thus it is only through Christ and His atonement that one is able to justify his sin.

## Do Not Commit Adultery

**:27** “You all heard that it is said “You will not commit adultery.”

- You will not commit adultery
  - In Genesis, it becomes apparent that God considered the relationship between a husband and wife to be one of great importance. God reinforces importance that He places on marriage by forbidding adultery in the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment. This is probably what Christ is referring to in this statement. Christ will qualify this statement in the following verse basically saying that any type of action that would threaten that intimate relationship would be wrong in God’s eyes. Here, Christ uses μοιχεύω “to commit adultery” which Louw points out as sexual intercourse of a man with a married woman which is different from πορνεία ‘fornication’ which is defined as sexual intercourse of a married man with an unmarried

woman. (Louw, 88.276) There does not seem to be any difference in the magnitude of the sinful relationship but just two different words describing different types of circumstances.

- The Jewish leaders and the people would have wholly agreed with Christ's reverence to the Law here but may not have been ready for what He would say next.

**:28** "But I say to you that whosoever looks at a woman with lust after her he (has) already committed adultery with her in his heart."

- Many times in the Gospel accounts Christ reprimands the Jewish leaders for their lack of true worship of God. They spent so much time fulfilling the Law right down to the slightest tradition that they had missed the real reason that the Law existed. They had begun to worship the Law instead of worshipping God. So what Christ has to say here would be difficult for many of the religious leaders to hear.  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma \delta\acute{\omicron} \beta\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\pi\omega\nu \gamma\upsilon\nu\alpha\acute{\iota}\kappa\alpha \pi\rho\acute{\omicron}\varsigma \tau\acute{\omicron} \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\theta\upsilon\mu\eta\sigma\alpha\iota \alpha\upsilon\tau\eta\nu$  "whosoever looks at a woman with lust after her" is important because of one key word which is  $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\theta\upsilon\mu\eta\sigma\alpha\iota$  "to lust." This verb can mean to desire after or long after but in this context it means to desire that which is not yours or is morally wrong. In this case, it would be a sin to desire after a woman in a morally wrong way. So, Christ again shows how God's Law is not a legalistic set of regulations but a way to live one's life to worship Him. Adultery is any sexual act whether by eye or body committed by a married person. Lusting after one other than your spouse is entertaining passions that are morally reserved for one's spouse and thus the one lusting is committing adultery. Jesus wasn't further restricting the Law just to make the people more tentative to their actions but to help them to become true worshippers of God and to find faith in Christ. What the religious leaders had stripped from the Law Christ wanted to reinvigorate in His people. So this is not about the act of adultery only but about any other Law handed down from God that had been stripped of its spirituality and based on human merit alone. What Christ was saying in these verses was nearly impossible to complete in one's lifetime. Thus, the sinner would be drawn to repentance and find faith in Christ who was the only one that could fulfill the requirements of the Law.

**:29-30** "And if your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and hurl it from you, it is better for you so that one of your body parts might be lost lest your whole body might be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin cut it off and hurl it from you, it is better for you so that one of your body parts might be lost lest your whole body might be cast into hell."

- The single most important question that must be answered in response to these verses is regarding whether Christ's statements should be taken literally or metaphorically. The context of the previous verses could suggest both interpretations. These verses could be interpreted in both ways and have in the past. Stott reminds the reader that the church father Origen actually made himself a eunuch in response to these verses. It is apparent, however that this would have been a misinterpretation of these verses. While there is no clear delineations as to when to take Christ's words literally or metaphorically, in the majority of passages one interpretation becomes clear. It can be confusing, however since at times Christ speaks about leaving one's offering on the altar to seek out a brother whom has offended him and gathering on the road to court to sort out problems. While at other times He speaks in parables to explain Biblical truths. One Biblical truth will help the reader to explain the literalness of Christ's words here. The Bible states that the body is a temple for the Holy Spirit and also that there is no test placed before a believer that he or she could not pass. Therefore, believing this to be true, if these words by Christ were taken literally then they would contradict the Scripture. Since contradiction in Scripture is impossible there must be another answer. The other answer is a metaphorical interpretation of these passages. So if Christ is not to be taken literally but metaphorically in these two verses then what metaphoric truth is being uncovered? It seems evident that Christ is stating that the believer is to remove the temptation to sin. "If your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and hurl it from you," is strikingly similar to another verse warning the believer to "run from sin." So the metaphoric translation would be that if there is something in one's life that causes him to sin then he should eliminate that thing from his life. The particular Greek words chosen in these verses help to show Christ's passion for holiness. The believer is to tear the sin causing part away and hurl it away from his body. It is better for a believer to live without not a limb but anything no matter what it's earthly value then to cling to it and fall into a life of sin. The temporal penalty of losing a part of one's life here on earth fails in comparison to enjoying that vice with the penalty of spending an eternity in hell.

- The reader should notice that it is not one sin that leads to hell but as before the lack of repentance the person shows for his sin and thus the indication that he is not a believer in Christ. Christ reminds the reader that the believer should be prepared to give up anything that stands in the way of his relationship and true worship of Jesus Christ. There is no temporal penalty that could measure up to an eternity in the valley of Gehenna.

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, A. R. Fausset et al., *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*, On Spine: Critical and Explanatory Commentary. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Mt 5:21.

James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible : Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order.*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship., 1996), G4469.

John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:30.