

## SERMON NOTES

Second Sunday of Great Lent  
Expulsion

Synaxis Gospel  
Matthew 5:17-48

### FULFILLING THE HIGHER LAW

#### INTRODUCTION

Today our reading is again from a portion of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew.<sup>1</sup> It is a commentary on six of the Mosaic Laws which can be broadly arranged here as a chiasm:<sup>2</sup>

#### ***I. THOU SHALT NOT MURDER,***

*II a. THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY,*

*II b. WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DISMISSAL*

#### **III. YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.**

*IV. AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH*

#### ***V. YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR.***

A chiasm, named from the shape of the Greek letter Chi, X, is an arrangement of statements so that each statement falls on the leading edge of an imaginary X. The central statement is placed where the two legs of the X cross and is different from the rest. The other statements reflect in some way the idea of the statement positioned in the same place on the other leg.<sup>3</sup> Positioning ideas chiastically made a special point and was a great memory aid for the hearers in days when oral teaching predominated.

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<sup>1</sup>For the background setting of the “Sermon on the Mount,” see Sermon INTRODUCTION from the Sermon notes for Poon Paregentan.

<sup>2</sup> Seeing a literary unit as a chiasm is always subjective to some extent.

<sup>3</sup> Here in the diagram above, Statements 1) and 5) are in opposite positions on the tips of the two legs, statements 2a and b) on the top leg are in the same position as is statement 4) on the bottom leg. Statement 3) is the central statement where the two legs cross. Statements 1) and 5) are opposites in concept—murder of humans and love of humans. Statements 2a and b) and statement 4) all deal with harm and reprisal between humans; while statement 5) is unique—an obligation to God. Statements 2a and b) are joined because Jesus has made them both deal with adultery. He has further balanced them chiastically with statement 4) by His illustrations using pairs (body parts that come in pairs and other pairs).

These laws Jesus discussed are all about human conduct *vis-à-vis* another human being. The central law deals with conduct involving God. The first and last statements of the chiasm are highlighted, and the central statement is especially emphasized.

Jesus introduced His discussion of the Mosaic Law with a statement of His own responsibility to it. He surrounded His commentary with an introductory statement of man's responsibility to the Mosaic Law, and concluded with our responsibility to His higher Law.

## SYNTAXIS READING

Matthew 5:17-48

*“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.*

*Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

*For I say to you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

*You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’, and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.*

*If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*

*Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.*

*You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.*

*And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

*And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell.*

*And it was said, 'WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DISMISSAL'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

*Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

*But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil.*

*You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your*

*shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.*

*You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

*For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

## NOTES

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished.

Jesus introduced his commentary on six Mosaic Laws with this statement of His own responsibility to the Law. He came to fulfill the requirements of the Law. The Law will not pass away until it is fulfilled. Jesus' life fulfilled the commandments and Jesus' death on the Cross fulfilled all the requirements of the Law for sin. He paid the penalty in full for all those who have broken the Law. However, there are prophesies that remain outstanding for the future.

“Until heaven and earth pass away” is an expression that indicated the end of time as we know it on this earth. According to prophecy and Jesus, this heaven and earth will be destroyed<sup>4</sup> and God will create a new heaven and earth.<sup>5</sup> The time of this destruction is the outermost limits of the time of fulfillment of the Law and the prophets.

“Jot” refers to the tiniest Hebrew character, the yod. The “tittle” is possibly the tiny ornamentation that distinguishes one Hebrew character from another similar character.

Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others [people] shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 24:25 and Luke 21:23

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22. See also 2 Peter 3:10-13 and Revelation 21:1.

whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

*Annul* could also be translated *repeal* or *abolish*.

*Least* here carries the idea of unimportant or insignificant. However, Jesus was speaking of the Laws of God, not those added by the scribes and Pharisees. But even among these Laws of God, some were more important than others. Not even the most insignificant of God's laws should be set aside. One does this at the peril of his own position in the kingdom of God. On the other hand, the way someone esteems the Laws of God will be reflected in the way that person will later be esteemed in the kingdom of God.

**For I say to you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.**

The scribes and the Pharisees were religious leaders who taught and interpreted the Laws of God. They often added to the commandments in order to 'put a fence around the Torah.' That is, they made rules to be kept so that the Laws of God would be carefully kept. For instance, if the Law taught that work should not be done on the Sabbath, they made extra laws that defined work—such as, on the Sabbath, you could not rub grain in your hands (an action construed by them as a kind of harvesting). Thus, they were seen as very protective of the Law. But Jesus is here saying that what these people were doing was not enough to even enter the kingdom of heaven. This statement must have come as quite a shock to His listeners.

How must they surpass the uprightness—in the sense of fulfilling the Divine statutes—of these men who prided themselves on protecting the Law? Jesus illustrated his demand by discussing six of the commandments, two of which He combined.

In His discussion of the Laws, Jesus followed a certain formula or pattern that can be seen to support the chiasmic structure mentioned in our Introduction:

1) He introduced each of the *first* group of Laws having to do with conduct between humans with the statement "You have heard that the ancients were told" (Murder), or "You have heard that it was said" (Adultery) or "and it was said." This last is a departure from the two major types of introductions and suggests that Jesus tied the Law following (Divorce) with the Law preceding it (Adultery).

2) He introduced the Law having to do with the conduct of men involving God with "Again you have heard that the ancients were told" (Oaths).

3) Jesus introduced each of the *second* group of laws having to do with conduct between humans with "You have heard that it was said" (Revenge/Recompense and Love).

4) Following the statement of each Law in all three groups, He added, "But **I** say to you. . ." He then described the kind of obedience to each Law that surpassed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>6</sup> Jesus used the emphatic pronoun *I*, *εγω*, with the conjunction of contrast, *but*, to underscore His higher authority with regard to the Law.

**I. You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER', and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'**

The first law of Moses Jesus chose to discuss is number six in the Ten Commandments.

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<sup>6</sup> These teachers were occupied with merely the outward expression of the Law and not with its spirit.

The “ancients” were the Israelites who received the Ten Commandments from Moses at Mt. Sinai during their journey from Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land.

“Liable to the court” is a summation of further legislation found in the Torah.<sup>7</sup> The punishment for murder was death, unless it could be shown to be accidental, in which case, the offender could flee to a city of refuge.

**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.**

“But *I* say to you,” introduces the higher Law of Jesus.

The sin of murder arises from anger. Jesus equates this anger with murder. “Raca” is Aramaic for “empty-headed,” an abusive term. “You fool” was another hateful epithet. The Supreme Court was called the Sanhedrin, a group of religious rulers presided over by the High Priest.

Gehenna, the “fiery Hell,” was the place of torment of the wicked after death. In a parable, Jesus once spoke of a rich man who was conscious in this place after death.<sup>8</sup>

**If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.**

Jesus applied this teaching on anger with two examples. The first is in a religious context. One should not attempt to offer God a gift when one is not reconciled to his ‘brother.’ The term ‘brother’ is probably used loosely as someone in the community. Do not attempt to come before God until human relationships are in order.

The term “altar” supposes that the worshipper is making an animal or grain offering to God at the Temple in Jerusalem, the only acceptable place to make such an offering in Jesus’ day.

**Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.**

The second application is in a legal context. The example has to do with money, a debt owed, probably to a tax-gatherer, one of a group of officials who were notorious for over charging. The tax-collectors had the upper hand in the power structure, and hatred for them was general among the Jews. Here, again, the anger between the two parties must be removed.<sup>9</sup> An agreement of reconciliation of differences must be reached before the case is brought before the judge.

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<sup>7</sup> As Davies has observed, this legislation is found in Exodus 21:12; Leviticus 24:17; Numbers 35:12 and Deuteronomy 17:8-13. W. D. Davies, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1988) p.511.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 16:23.

<sup>9</sup> The words, “Make friends” are a translation of ἰσθι εὐνοῶν which means ‘be in agreement.’

Otherwise, the outcome will prove to be very costly for the one charged by his opponent: debtor's prison.

Anger kills not only others, but one's self. One could not hope to receive favor from God, Who is just, or from a magistrate, who may not be just, when your relationships with others are not in order from the point of view of the higher power.

The complementary higher law that one should follow that would completely avoid breaking the law of murder/anger is explained under the discussion of the law "Love thy Neighbor."<sup>10</sup>

## II a. You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY'; **but I say to you**, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

The second Law of Moses Jesus discussed is number seven in the Ten Commandments.

While the Law of Moses prohibits the external act of adultery, the higher law of Jesus recognizes that adultery first begins in the heart. *Επιθυμήσαι* is the strong desire for something and it is here translated as 'lust'. Desire is not always immoral; one can strongly desire appropriate things.<sup>11</sup> Here, however, the object of the strong desire is inappropriate *and* immoral—the desire for the woman observed. This passionate desire is not the flash of looking; but is the result of dwelling on what is seen.<sup>12</sup> This is looking with a purpose—to lust.

Like inner anger which is tantamount to the external act of murder, inner lust is the same as the external act of adultery. It carries the same penalty in God's eyes. Under the Mosaic Law, the penalty for adultery was death.

And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole body to go into hell.

"Makes you stumble," a translation of *σκανδαλίζει*, here, has the nuance of causing one to fall into this deadly sin. Reprisal for this harm should be taken. It is the same idea as the law "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."<sup>13</sup> That is, if the offender (the eye or the hand) causes death, the offender must die.

The seriousness of this sin is illustrated by hyperbole. Jesus' listeners would know that this command is not to be taken literally. It is the inner immoral thoughts that need to be amputated and thrown away for the health of the soul, not the physical eye or hand.

## II b. And it was said, 'WHOEVER DIVORCES HIS WIFE, LET HIM GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DISMISSAL'; **but I say to you** that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes

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<sup>10</sup>This can be inferred by the chiasmic structure of Jesus' teachings on these laws. Murder and Love fall on the exact opposite points on the 'X'.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, in Luke 22:15, Jesus used this verb when He said, "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

<sup>12</sup> The infinitive *Επιθυμήσαι* after *προς* indicates result.

<sup>13</sup> This law is found on the exact opposite point of the 'X'.

her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

This legislation is from another part of the Law, not from the Ten Commandments. For an extended discussion on Jesus' teaching on divorce, please refer to the chapter, "The Second Sunday of the Exaltation (Eve of the Fast of the Holy Cross of Varak)."

A point to notice, here, is that Jesus ties the two laws together in His discussion with the words, "and it was said." His discussion of the law of divorce is a continuation of His discussion of adultery. **Unjustified** divorce *causes* adultery. Simply giving a certificate of dismissal (a divorce decree) is not the end of the matter. There are repercussions for both the man and the woman, and possibly for others, that violate the laws of God. Moreover, the ensuing snarl of relationships is difficult, if not impossible, on a human level, to make right.

The higher law for determining how one should positively deal with an unfaithful spouse, rather than the reprisal of divorce, falls under the law of "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."<sup>14</sup>

### III. Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, **YOU SHALL NOT MAKE FALSE VOWS, BUT SHALL FULFILL YOUR VOWS TO THE LORD.**'

This law that Jesus placed in the central position of his discussion for special emphasis refers to the making of oaths. In the Old Testament (and in Jesus' day presumably), oaths "were made by men or women to attest to their innocence before judges; to vow to perform some future action; to solemnize peace treaties; to renew their devotion to the LORD; and to pledge loyalty to an important personage."<sup>15</sup> Sometimes they were conditional.<sup>16</sup> Once an oath is made it must be fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

Oaths are not commanded in the Law with the exception of Exodus 22:11. But how oaths are made is legislated. Lying, with an oath, is especially punished because one has not only told an untruth, a sin in itself, but has done so using the NAME of the LORD.<sup>18</sup> Swearing was by the Name of the LORD only.<sup>19</sup>

Oaths were made invoking God as a witness to truth and to enforce accountability. This made the oath extremely serious and was taken seriously. Thus lying under oath and breaking oaths was a profanation of God's NAME.<sup>20</sup>

By Jesus' day, it was not permitted by the scribes and Pharisees to pronounce the sacred Name of the LORD. Therefore some sort of circumlocution was sought for the Name in oaths. Various possibilities were in vogue: the Temple, the gold of the Temple, the altar, the offering on the altar, heaven, and the throne of God.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This may be inferred from the apparent chiasmic form Jesus used in His discussions of these teachings on the Law. The laws on Adultery and Divorce (on the top leg of the X) are connected in several ways to the law "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (on the bottom leg of the X) reflected in their exact opposite positions on the chiasm.

<sup>15</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr. and Bruce K. Walke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1980) p. 900-01.

<sup>16</sup> See Numbers 30:3-15.

<sup>17</sup> Deuteronomy 23:21.

<sup>18</sup> Leviticus 6:2-7; 19:12.

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 6:13; 10:20

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 19:12

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 23:16-22.



However, the scribes and Pharisees were providing legal loopholes by allowing some vows to be non-binding if they had been made using a phrase for the Name that was not *important* enough. Thus, the NAME was indirectly being profaned by broken vows—a violation of law number three in the Ten Commandments.

We did not mention above that this Law, Oaths, was introduced in the same way—with only the addition of “Again”—as the first Law Jesus discussed, Murder. Though these two laws have a different emphasis position on the ‘X’, they have a similar connection with the honor of God. Every person is created in the image of God—in some way reflecting God’s characteristics; murder profanes that image. God’s NAME also reflects His character, and so must not be profaned.

**But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet,<sup>22</sup> or by Jerusalem, for it is THE CITY OF THE GREAT KING.<sup>23</sup> Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.**

Jesus’ solution to the problem was to refrain from swearing oaths at all. In Deuteronomy 23:21-23, the LORD requires a man to pay the vows that he makes; otherwise, it would be counted as sin. However, it is clear that making a vow is voluntary. The LORD states, “However if you refrain from vowing it would not be sin in you.”

Jesus, with one sweep, pronounced that all circumlocutions for the Name of God in fact invoke God (and would thus be binding). To avoid the possibility of sin, do not make oaths.

**But let your statement be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’; and anything beyond these is of evil.**

Jesus commands that a person’s word should stand on its own. Reputation as a person of integrity should be sufficient. If more is required, something is wrong.

**IV. You have heard that it was said, AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.’ But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil;**

This legislation is not from the Ten Commandments but from another part of the Law.<sup>24</sup> It has to do with harm and reprisal in human relations. If someone destroyed the tooth or the eye of another man, the reprisal was that his own eye or tooth would be destroyed. What ever harm one does to his fellowman, the same would be meted out to the offender.

While this is *permitted* (like divorce is *permitted* because of the emotional and social harm done to the spouse whose partner has been unfaithful), Jesus commands that a higher law be followed with respect to other humans who harm us personally. We are not to fight back.<sup>25</sup>

**but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if**

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<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 66:1

<sup>23</sup> Psalm 48:2

<sup>24</sup> Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20.

<sup>25</sup> But this dictum should not be seen as a negation of the Christian citizen’s obligation to protect society. Paul, in Romans 13:4, teaches that rulers have the authority to maintain justice with the death penalty. A citizen in this country has the right extended from our constitution to make citizen’s *arrest* acting for the government. For a discussion of this issue see <http://www.constitution.org/grossack/arrest.htm>.

anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.<sup>26</sup>  
And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two.<sup>27</sup>

Again, this use of hyperbole, extreme exaggeration to make a point, is not meant to be taken literally. However, the spirit of the commandment is non-retaliation and to do even more good for our oppressor than he demands. In a one on one situation, we are not to defend our personal and legal rights but to return good for evil. We are taught in another place that vengeance is to be left to God at the final judgment.<sup>28</sup>

**Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.**

Kindness is not only to be extended in situations in which we have been overpowered as in the other three illustrations, but also in situations in which we have the upper hand.

In this last example, the disciple is pictured as the loaner, while in the court case above—where the shirt is taken away— the disciple is pictured as the borrower, whose shirt is being taken as pledge or collateral to ensure the repayment.

Jesus is not asking that we give indiscriminately, in an irresponsible way; but that we open our hand to those in need. In Luke 6:35 Jesus adds that we are to lend without expecting a return.

**V. You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you**

The final law which Jesus discussed is not one of the Ten Commandments, but is found in Leviticus 19:18.

“And hate your enemy” is not found in the Old Testament Scriptures as they have been transmitted to us. However, in Psalm 139, David confesses that he hates the enemies of God, which are David’s enemies as well, with a perfect hatred. Here, Jesus may have been correcting David, as well as those who see the prayer as an endorsement for hating their enemies.

Love is the opposite concept of murderous anger with which Jesus opened His discussion of the higher law. The Psalmist David did not understand that God loves even His enemies so much that He was willing to become a man in order to die for their sins and make reconciliation possible.

Our enemies do persecute us. The higher law requires that we love them and pray for them (not against them as David did so often in the Psalms). We should pray that even our brutal enemies might be rescued from the power and control of Satan and be transformed into children of God. This is difficult, but it is what HE wants from us.

**in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven;**

A “son of . . .” is a way of describing someone’s character. The disciples James and John were called “sons of thunder.” Wicked people were called “sons of Belial”.

”A son of hell”, “a son of peace”, “sons of the prophets,” “sons of pride,” and “sons of the resurrection” are other epithets that were used to describe the character of those so named. Here,

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<sup>26</sup> Jews wore two garments, an inner shirt and an outer coat. It was illegal to take the coat away.

<sup>27</sup> These examples have in view a disciple who is personally insulted, taken to court, or requisitioned to carry burdens for a soldier.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 12:19.

“a son of the Father” would be a person with a character like the Father’s. The Father in heaven is characterized by grace and love. As His sons and daughters, our character should reflect His.

for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

The righteous are the ones who love God. It is right that He should show His love to them. But why should He show love and kindness to the unrighteous, to those who hate God? But He does.

For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

The people that Jesus’ listeners would consider the most unrighteous were the wicked tax-collectors and the Godless Gentiles. If you only show love to those who love you, you are no different than the most Godless.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

David said in Psalm 139 that he hated with a perfect hatred. The “perfect” that Jesus demands is the perfect love. This is the love which our heavenly Father demonstrates.

This final saying in Jesus’ teaching on the Laws of Moses sums up all of His teachings on the higher law He demands that we follow. One who strives to reflect the perfection of our heavenly Father will not break the Laws of Moses as further defined by Jesus. One who strives to reflect the perfection of our heavenly Father will react as He does, without the legal retaliation permitted but instead with kindness and love to those who harm us—even our worst enemies

## APPLICATION

People who grew up in Lebanon may remember that children loved to bind their parents to a promise by getting them to promise in the name of “jushmarid Asdvadz.” They would do the same with their playmates. But sometimes another child might be tricky and say very quickly “jushmarid ch’asdvadz.”— The equivalent of an American child crossing fingers behind his or her back to make a promise unenforceable. These childhood acts assumed correctly that we are accountable to the True God.

In our reading for today, Jesus instructed his disciples that we are far more accountable to God than their religious leaders—with their endless list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts,’— had taught. In fact, the disciples would have to be a lot better than their religious teachers if they hoped to be acceptable to God. To illustrate what He meant, Jesus discussed six of God’s many laws and applied them to their lives.

Two of these laws, “Thou shalt not murder,” and “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” which people normally view as outward acts, Jesus taught were also inner acts that God judges, even if the outward act is *never* committed. Anger is the same as murder; and lust

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<sup>29</sup> The chiasmatic form is supported by the use here of the examples of “brother” and “opponent (tax-collector),” the same examples used for the law of murder.

is the same as adultery. There can be no ‘crossed fingers’ with God, He sees inside our minds and hearts. What happens there is as punishable as what happens physically.

Moreover, the common practice of divorce, while permitted in the Law, is not God’s will for a couple. Because of the way the economy worked in Jesus’ day, in order to survive, a woman had to have a husband. Therefore, if her original husband divorced her, she had to find another. This made her, and her new husband, adulterers in God’s eyes. The original husband’s decision to divorce caused adultery. He is guilty. This is a tough teaching, but Jesus wants us to know that God’s standards are higher than we think.

God’s standards demand that we conduct ourselves in a manner that goes far beyond what lawyers teach us is permitted. Jesus discussed two other laws, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ and the law ‘Love thy Neighbor’ to give us a deeper awareness of God’s positive expectations for our conduct with each other. The Law defined what we *can* do; Jesus’ higher Law shows us what we *should* do.

Jesus’ higher law teaches that our actions should be determined based on what would be good and helpful to our neighbor, not what the law permits us to do in retaliation for some harm done to our own interests. Divorce is permitted. However, forgiveness and reconciliation are God’s desire in that instance, and in all other situations in which we have been harmed.

This past week, we began our observance of Lent. It is a time for us to think about our lives before the eyes of God. Disobedience to the Law of God caused our first parents to be expelled from the Garden of Eden—hence because we are concentrating on God’s Laws, this Sunday is called Expulsion Sunday. Adam and Eve were expelled from and lost Eden because of inner sin that resulted in outward disobedience. They did not believe God and questioned His character; actual disobedience was quick to follow, and they ate of the forbidden tree.

In our lesson, Jesus commands that we guard against inner sin ourselves but also show kindness to others who have harmed us or need our help. In this way we will reflect our heavenly Father’s character. For those of us who believe we harbor no anger in our hearts, remember, God does not allow ‘crossed fingers.’ He sees if we hate our historical enemies or if instead, we pray for their salvation as He commanded.

Central to Jesus’ teaching on the Law is that God holds mankind accountable for what we do. Failure to live up to His standards to fulfill the Law, failure to be perfect, will keep us from His kingdom. The good news from this lesson is that Jesus prefaced the whole teaching with His statement that He came to fulfill the Law. He perfectly lived as a human being, and He perfectly fulfilled the requirement, the penalty for us law breakers—death. So, even though in our struggle to obey our Lord’s commands, in our struggle to live up to God’s higher Law, we personally fail; He Who cannot lie has promised that if we trust in Him, He will give us *His* righteousness. This is the righteousness that perfectly fulfilled the Higher Law. This is the righteousness that is demanded for entrance into His kingdom.

In the days ahead, as we thoughtfully remember the awful cost to our Lord to provide us with perfect righteousness, let us *believe* Him. May our hearts be thankful to Him Who loved us, when we were His enemies, and gave Himself for us. May we determine to honor Him by striving, with His help, to reflect His magnificent character of love and forgiveness.