Love One Another

Matt 5:21-32
SS Lesson for 07/14/2019

Devotional Scripture: Eph 2:1-5

OUTLINE

LESSON BACKGROUND AND KEY VERSE

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Key Verse: Matt 5:23-24
Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

MAJOR THEME ANALYSIS

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- Anger, which could lead to murder, does not bring about the righteous life that God desires (James 1:20)
- Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:13-15)
- God's condemnation is for anger without cause (Barnes Notes on Matt 5:22)
- Three kinds of offences (Adam Clarke on Matt 5:22)

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- Reconciled unity though God composing the members of the body (1 Cor 12:24-28)
- Reconciled unity in Christ (Phil 2:1-4)
- Reconciled unity though baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:12-13)
- Reconciled unity into one faith (Eph 4:4-6)
- Reconciled unity that lets the world know that Jesus was sent by God (John 17:23)
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- Avoid immorality because it can cause death (1 Cor 10:8)
- Avoid immorality because the wrath of God comes because of it (Col 3:5-6)
- Avoid immorality because it results in punishment (Jude 1:7)

Faithful in maintaining a sanctified body (29-30)
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- A sanctified body because God Himself sanctified it (1 Thess 5:23-24)
- A sanctified body because of being chosen by God (1 Peter 1:2)
- A sanctified body through the blood of Jesus (Heb 9:13-14)
- A sanctified body through faith in the washing of God with pure water (Heb 10: 22)

Faithful in marriage (31-32)
- Marriage because a wife is worth more than any wealth (Prov 31:10)
- Marriage that prevents the improper actions toward future mate (1 Cor 7:36)
- Marriage without sexually immorality (Heb 13:4)
- Marriage without acting like someone who does not know God (1 Thess 4:3-6)
- Marriage with the basis of love (Eph 5:28)
- Marriage with the basis of respect and consideration (1 Peter 3:7)
- Marriage with the basis of pleasing the mate (1 Cor 7:33-34)
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CONCLUSION AND OTHER THOUGHTS

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh
Lesson Background and Key Verse

Background from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Is extreme anger a valid defense for murder? Called the “provocation defense,” this line of thinking has two associated components. First, there is a widely held assumption that when people are in a rage, such persons are less responsible for their actions. The anger blinds them from rational response and unleashes violent behavior. Second, the provocation defense maintains that the rage that resulted in murder was provoked by the one murdered. This places some (or all) of the blame on the victim, implying the person deserved to die. A classic situation for this might be the husband who catches his spouse in an adulterous situation and his rage results in the death of the wife and her lover. Sometimes called a “crime of passion,” such a person may elicit sympathy from the community despite the death of two people. Courts generally consider provoked rage only a partial defense for murder in terms of lack of premeditation. The charge in such a case may therefore be limited to voluntary manslaughter. Attempts have been made to equate blind rage with temporary insanity. But this line of defense rarely results in exoneration.

Matthew likely wrote his Gospel account after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. This outcome marked the end of Judaism being focused on the sacrificial system as practiced by the priesthood in the temple in Jerusalem. What survived the temple’s destruction was a Judaism focused on the law and its interpreters, a shift that began in the Babylonian exile. Any Jewish reader of Matthew’s Gospel would have been particularly interested in what Jesus had to say about the law. Jesus had no intention of demolishing the Law of Moses, which included prohibitions against murder and adultery. Jesus’ approach to the law was one of great respect; but it also held that simply following the law in a public manner was futile because of hypocritical hearts. Jesus’ teaching was not the simple righteousness of the Jewish teachers of the law and Pharisees of his day (Matthew 5:20), which would prohibit the physical acts of murder and adultery but say nothing to the heart of the matter. The teachers of the law and Pharisees were educated men, held in esteem by common folks for their knowledge and exemplary public lives (23:5–7). However, Jesus knew the hearts of the teachers of the law and Pharisees (see John 2:24) and repeatedly called them hypocrites (Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 29, etc.), ones who purposefully hid their sinfulness. He likened them to “whitewashed tombs,” looking clean on the outside but holding the uncleanness of dead bodies on the inside (23:27). There is a basic three-part pattern to the following sayings of Jesus. First, he gives a statement of a commandment from the Law of Moses, framed as something taught from ancient times. Second, he presents an expansion of this law as given by later teachers and interpreters. Third, Jesus announces a more rigorous version of this teaching, looking to root out the cause of the sin in the heart, not just the action itself.

Key Verse: Matt 5:23-24

23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Commentary from the Bible Knowledge Commentary

Jesus rejected the traditions of the Pharisees (vv. 21-48) and their practices (6:1-7:6). Six times Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said.... But I tell you” (5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). These words make it clear that Jesus was presenting (a) what the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were saying to the people and, by contrast, (b) what God’s true intent of the Law was. This spelled out His statement (v. 20) that Pharisaic righteousness is not enough to gain entrance into the coming kingdom.

5:21-26. Jesus’ first illustration pertained to an important commandment, Do not murder (Ex. 20:13). The Pharisees taught that murder consists of taking someone’s life. But the Lord said the commandment extended not only to the act itself but also to the internal attitude behind the act. Of course, murder is
wrong, but the anger prompting the act is also as wrong as plunging in a knife. Furthermore, becoming angry and assuming a position of superiority over another by calling him a derogatory name (such as the Aram. Raca or You fool!) demonstrates sinfulness of the heart. A person with such a sinful heart obviously is a sinner and therefore is headed for the fire of hell ("hell" is lit., "Gehenna"; cf. Matt. 5:29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; 7 of the 11 references to Gehenna are in Matt.). “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. 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. Without such reconciliation, gifts presented at the altar mean nothing: Even on the way to a court trial a defendant should seek to clear up any such problem. Otherwise the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court of 70 members, would send him to prison and he would be penniless.

5:27-30. A second practical illustration dealt with the problem of adultery (Ex. 20:14). Once again the Pharisees’ teaching was concerned only with the outward act. They said the only way one could commit adultery was through an act of sexual union. They correctly quoted the commandment, but they missed its point. Adultery begins within one’s heart (looking lustfully) and follows in the act. The lustful desire, in the heart, as wrong as the act, indicates that one is not rightly related to God. Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew 5:29-30 have often been misunderstood. Obviously Jesus was not teaching physical mutilation, for a blind man could have as much of a problem with lust as a sighted person, and a man with only one hand might use it also to sin. Jesus was advocating the removal of the inward cause of offense. Since a lustful heart would ultimately lead to adultery, one’s heart must be changed. Only by such a change of heart can one escape hell (“Gehenna”; cf. v. 22).

5:31-32 (Matt. 19:3-9; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18). Among the Jewish leaders were two schools of thought regarding the matter of divorce (Deut. 24:1). Those who followed Hillel said it was permissible for a husband to divorce his wife for any reason at all, but the other group (those following Shammai) said divorce was permissible only for a major offense. In His response, the Lord strongly taught that marriage is viewed by God as an indissoluble unit and that marriages should not be terminated by divorce. The “exception clause,” except for marital unfaithfulness (porneias), is understood in several ways by Bible scholars. Four of these ways are: (a) a single act of adultery, (b) unfaithfulness during the period of betrothal (Matt. 1:19), (c) marriage between near relatives (Lev. 18:6-18), or (d) continued promiscuity. (See Matt. 19:3-9.)

**Major Theme Analysis**

*(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)*

**Love Reconciles (Matt 5:21-26)**

21 'You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.'

22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

26 Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

**Reconciliation from anger (21-22)**

*Anger, which could lead to murder, gives Satan a foothold (Eph 4:26-27)*

26 "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold.
Anger, which could lead to murder, does not bring about the righteous life that God desires (James 1:20)

20 for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3:13-15)

14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.

God’s condemnation is for anger without cause (Barnes Notes on Matt 5:22)

What he condemns here is anger without a cause; that is, unjustly, rashly, hastily, where no offence has been given or intended. In that case it is evil; and it is a violation of the sixth commandment, because “he that hateth his brother, is a murderer,” 1 John 3:15. He has a feeling which would lead him to commit murder, if it were fully acted out. The word "brother" here refers not merely to one to whom we are nearly related, having the same parent or parents, as the word is commonly used, but includes also a neighbor, or perhaps anyone with whom we may be associated. As all people are descended from one Father and are all the creatures of the same God, so they are all brethren: and so every man should be regarded and treated as a brother, Heb 11:16.

Three kinds of offences (Adam Clarke on Matt 5:22)

There are three kinds of offences here, which exceed each other in their degrees of guilt. First, Anger against a man, accompanied with some injurious act. Secondly, contempt, expressed by the opprobrious epithet raka, or shallow brains. Third, hatred and mortal enmity, expressed by the term moreh, or apostate, where such apostasy could not be proved. Now, proportioned to these three offences were three different degrees of punishment, each exceeding the other in its severity, as the offences exceeded each other in their different degrees of guilt. First, the judgment, the council of twenty-three, which could inflict the punishment of strangling. Second, the Sanhedrin, or great council, which could inflict the punishment of stoning. And third, the being burnt alive in the valley of the son of Hinnom. This appears to be the meaning of our Lord. Now, if the above offences were to be so severely punished, which did not immediately affect the life of another, how much sorer must the punishment of murder be!

Reconciliation through reconciled unity (23-26)

Reconciled unity though God composing the members of the body (1 Cor 12:24-28)

24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Reconciled unity in Christ (Phil 2:1-4)

2 If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Reconciled unity though baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:12-13)

12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Reconciled unity into one faith (Eph 4:4-6)

4 There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.
Reconciled unity that lets the world know that Jesus was sent by God (John 17:23)
23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me
and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Reconciled unity though the Church (Eph 4:10-13)
10 He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole
universe.) 11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and
some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ
may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become
mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Reconciled unity though love (Col 3:14)
14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Reconciled unity because Jesus became our peace (Eph 2:14-16)
14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall
of hostility, 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was
to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile
both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

Reconciled unity through Jesus' blood (Col 1:19-22)
19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all
things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
21 Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. 22
But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight,
without blemish and free from accusation—

Reconciled unity that requires humility, seeking God's face and a repentant heart (2 Chron 7:14)
14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn
from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

Love Remains Faithful (Matt 5:27-32)
27 ’You have heard that it was said to those of old, ’You shall not commit adultery.’
28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his
heart.
29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of
your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.
30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one
of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.
31 ’Furthermore it has been said, ’Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’
32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit
adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery.

Faithful in avoiding immorality (27-28)

Avoid immorality because it is not God's will (1 Thess 4:3)
3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

Avoid immorality because it makes one unclean (Matt 15:19-20)
19 For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony,
slander. 20 These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him
'unclean.'
Avoid immorality because it is improper for God's people (Eph 5:3)

3 But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

Avoid immorality because it is a sin against own body (1 Cor 6:18)

18 Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body.

Avoid immorality because the body is not meant for immorality (1 Cor 6:13)

13 "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food"—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

Avoid immorality because it can cause death (1 Cor 10:8)

8 We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died.

Avoid immorality because the wrath of God comes because of it (Col 3:5-6)

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.

Avoid immorality because it results in punishment (Jude 1:7)

7 In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

**Faithful in maintaining a sanctified body (29-30)**

A sanctified body that been sanctified by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:9-11)

9 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

A sanctified body that has been sanctified by God’s Will (1 Thess 4:3)

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

A sanctified body because of being a vessel for noble purposes (2 Tim 2:20-21)

20 In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. 21 If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

A sanctified body because God Himself sanctified it (1 Thess 5:23-24)

23 May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

A sanctified body because of being chosen by God (1 Peter 1:2)

2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.
A sanctified body through the blood of Jesus (Heb 9:13-14)

13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. 14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

A sanctified body through faith in the washing of God with pure water (Heb 10: 22)

22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Faithful in marriage (31-32)

Marriage because a wife is worth more than any wealth (Prov 31:10)

10 A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.

Marriage that prevents the improper actions toward future mate (1 Cor 7:36)

36 If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

Marriage without sexually immorality (Heb 13:4)

4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

Marriage without acting like someone who does not know God (1 Thess 4:3-6)

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you.

Marriage with the basis of love (Eph 5:28)

28 In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Marriage with the basis of respect and consideration (1 Peter 3:7)

7 Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

Marriage with the basis of pleasing the mate (1 Cor 7:33-34)

33 But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world — how he can please his wife— 34 and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world — how she can please her husband.

Marriage with no desire for divorce (1 Cor 7:27)

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

The Errors of Jewish Interpretation Exposed (Six Specific Examples) (5:21-48)

What our Lord charged in the preceding verses, He now proceeds to demonstrate in the remaining verses of chapter five. Here He gave six specific instances in which the scribal interpretations departed from the Old Testament Scriptures.

Before we begin to expound these verses we must be careful to avoid an error common in Christianity today. It is the error of thinking that Jesus was giving to men a ‘new law,’ opposed to that of the Old Testament. This is especially tempting to dispensationalists, who emphasize the distinctions between the dispensation of law and that of grace. This error stems, in part, from the formula: “You have heard that the ancients were told … But I say” (verses 21-22; 27-28; 31-32; 33-34; 38-39; 43-44). Some believe that ‘You have heard’ refers to the Old Testament teaching, and that ‘But I say’ introduces the ‘new’ teaching of our Lord which supercedes the old. Such is not the case. ‘You have heard’ introduces the erroneous or incomplete teaching of scribalism, while ‘But I say’ is followed by the true teaching of the Old Testament, which is also that of our Lord.

First Example: The Old Testament Law and Murder (21-26)

While the scribes went to senseless extremes on the matter of the Sabbath, they did not go nearly far enough with the prohibition of murder.

“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 every one 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 hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Within Jewish orthodoxy, one would keep the sixth commandment so long as he did not commit murder. Jesus went beyond the prohibition of the act of murder to the attitude of anger which prompts it. To hold a bitter resentment toward another is to be guilty of violating God’s prohibition of murder. We sometimes say, “If looks could kill, I’d be dead.” We mean that the anger (which can result in murder) is written on one’s face. That slow-burning, long-harbored anger is sin, and so is that explosive anger which has a hair-trigger.

The expression ‘Raca,’ (verse 22) is probably of Aramaic origin and one which reflects on the intelligence of the one so called. It could mean something like ‘blockhead’ or ‘empty-head.’ In our idiom, it might come out ‘idiot,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘lame brain,’ or some similar expression. These are the kind of outbursts which you or I (I don’t know about you, but I am certain of myself) could come up with as we are driving along and someone makes a foolish decision that affects (and angers) us. ‘You fool’ does not belittle a man’s intelligence so much as it challenges his moral character. Such a fool was described in Psalm 14:1: He is the kind of man who says, “There is no God.”

Having established the principle that anger is as much a sin as murder, the one being the source and the other the symptom, Jesus gave two very practical applications relevant to nearly everyone.

“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” (Matthew 5:23-24).

If anger is sin, and if sin affects one’s relationship with God, then one cannot truly worship God while harboring anger in his heart. The one who remembers a grievance between himself and another should deal with it immediately, even before his acts of worship and devotion. What is interesting in this passage is that the assumption is that someone else has a grievance with us. Even though we may harbor no ill feelings toward this brother, he has hard feelings against me. If I am to take the initiative in healing this situation, surely I must act to bring reconciliation and restoration in situations where I am the one who feels wronged.

A second application is made in the area of civil law. If there is a legal dispute pending against us, we should make every effort to, as we say, settle out of court. Again the emphasis falls upon dealing with anger quickly and decisively. The longer anger is allowed to go untended, it will grow. Legalism looks to the law to settle disputes; our Lord says that love should arbitrate our differences. When we choose to reconcile in love, we remain friends, and the matter is settled much more simply. When we rely on the Law to arbitrate, we are
subject to the severest penalties. I have never seen a dispute between two parties settled in the law courts where they left as friends and they felt as though they had come out ahead.

Second Example: The Old Testament Law and Adultery (27-30)

The Jewish interpretation of the seventh commandment was that one was guilty of adultery only if he or she had committed the physical act. This was a very narrow and external interpretation of the Law and ignored the clear teaching of the tenth commandment: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or female servant or his ox or his donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20:17).

Adultery is an act conceived in the heart, before it is culminated in the bedroom. It is sin to look at a woman with the intention of contemplating her potential as a sexual partner.

In a day when sex is exploited to sell toothpaste and toilet paper, candy bars and cars, it is hard not to fall into this particular sin. Movies and television deliberately appeal to the lusts of the eye. Outright pornography is not in a dark corner anymore; it is at the checkout stand at the grocery store. We virtually cannot avoid it.

The Lord Jesus spoke very strongly on this particular sin, for He instructed us that “… if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out …” (Matthew 5:29a). These are very stern words. Are we to take them literally? Very few would say “Yes.” Although we should take them seriously, we need not take them literally we are told. Several observations must be noted here.

(1) It is not just our right eye, or our right hand which causes us to fall into this sin. If we were to remove one eye, the other would carry on very well. This might inform us that it is not just one eye, one member, that is the problem.

(2) Ultimately, the sin begins in the heart, and it cannot be plucked out.

The point of this teaching is that we must deal quickly, decisively, and severely with this temptation. It is no small matter. It has been the cause of countless divorces; the lives of many have been wrecked because of it. Legalism condemned the outward symptom, but failed to deal with the source. Our Lord’s position was clear and decisive.

In this confrontation between legalism and our Lord, I find an interesting insight into the difference between legalism and responsible Christian liberty. Legalism draws a line and then tries to get as close to the line as possible. Because of this, it doesn’t work. John Warwick Montgomery has written, “The fundamentalist church in the town in which I grew up, by effectively keeping its young people from all forms of mixed entertainment, succeeded in having the highest illegitimate birth rate of any church in the community.” Christian liberty discerns what is offensive to God and stays as far away as possible.

I am not certain that Christians have taken the words of verses 29 and 30 seriously enough. Is there never an occasion where a sincere Christian man might undergo surgery to become a eunuch for the sake of the Gospel? When, then, did our Lord tell His disciples, “… there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven …” (Matthew 19:12). It may not be often that a Christian would need to consider surgery, but I would not dare to say that such a time could never come.

Getting to the heart of the matter, I believe what our Lord is saying here is that unless we view the sin of adultery (including immoral thoughts) so offensive to God that we would be willing to undergo sexual surgery to solve the problem (if it would), we do not see this sin from our Lord’s perspective. I personally feel that much of the immorality within the Christian community can be directly related to a casual attitude toward sexual sin.

Third Example: The Old Testament Law and Divorce (31-32)

Closely related to the prohibition of adultery is the biblical position on divorce. The scribes and Pharisees assumed that divorce was a biblical option. They only quibbled over the grounds for divorce. Some felt a man could divorce his wife for virtually any reason; others only for marital impurity. Their interest was entirely procedural. But Jesus refused to speak on this issue. Instead, He went back to the divine intention for marriage. Granted, God had permitted divorce (not commanded it, as the scribes maintained, Matthew 19:7-8), but He did so only due to the hardness of men’s hearts (Matthew 19:8). The divine purpose, as described in Genesis was that one man and one woman should be permanently united until separated by death. In the light of this purpose, our Lord made a statement which was designed to discourage any divorce: “But I say to you that every one who
divorces his wife, except for the cause of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Matthew 5:32).

One must recognize by the brevity of our Lord’s teaching on the subject of divorce here, that this is not the full revelation on divorce. Because the scribes had focused on the exception (some ‘indecency,’ Deuteronomy 24:1, which varied in Jewish interpretation from adultery to burning the breakfast eggs) and made it the rule, Jesus here refused to expound on the exception, only to mention it. He stressed the principle, God’s attitude toward all (unbiblical) divorce. Unbiblical divorce leads to the sin of adultery on the part of the initiator of it (usually the husband in Jesus’ day, Matthew 19:9), it puts the ‘innocent,’ or at least passive party in a position where she will seek marriage to another, thereby committing adultery (Matthew 5:32).

Here is yet another insight into the matter of legalism. Legalism looks only at the rules, Christian liberty at the reason behind the rules. While the Law permitted divorce, God hates it, and we should avoid it at all costs (cf. Malachi 2:16).

I may say to one of my children who asks to go to the store with their friend, Sally, “No, I don’t want you to go to the store with Sally.” Being the legalist and literalist that all children are, they would probably call up another friend and go with her. When called on the carpet, my child would probably respond, “But you said not to go with Sally, and I went with Jane.”

If they knew my intention was that they should not go to the store with any child, then this disobedience could have been avoided. Such is the danger of legalism—it lends itself to stark literalism.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/fatal-failures-religion-2-legalism-matthew-517-48)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary
Anger and murder, lust and adultery: these are not feel-good issues. But they resonate in many lives. Our hearts can harbor unrighteous thoughts, attitudes, and motivations. Jesus calls for genuine righteousness, a life-changing orientation that does not excuse anger or lust, even if they don’t result in murder or adultery. To Jesus, such matters of the heart cannot be ignored. Responding to Jesus’ call to righteousness is not possible with simple rule-keeping; it requires the love of God and love for one another (Matthew 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28; 1 John 4:7–12). Jesus’ approach cuts through all veneers of right behavior that mask ungodly attitudes and motivations. Jesus’ approach also makes us aware of how unrighteous we actually are, how much we need God’s grace. The church today must maintain this insight as taught by Jesus. Keeping rules can never be seen as a pathway to being saved, for salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8). Yet despising or ignoring God’s commands is not the way of the Christian either. The New Testament speaks with one voice that says we should strive to live godly lives, to walk in God’s light rather than the darkness of sin. This call demonstrates God’s concern that his people live lives of righteousness. Our good deeds, however, have a hollow ring if they come from dark hearts. Only when our hearts are fully devoted to our Lord will our acts of mercy and justice be pleasing to God, the acceptable service of a transformed life (Romans 12:1, 2).

Concluding Thoughts from the Echoes Commentary
Watch Your Tone, Inside and Out - The Jews who listened to Jesus understood the commandment prohibiting murder. Jesus took this a step further and said whoever is harboring a murderous intent or spirit in his or her heart will face judgment as well as the one who's taken a life. This also applies to one's silent or spoken attitude degrading a person.

Be at Peace - How God's children relate to one another is important to the Father. He desires for them to be at peace with one another, more than regularly performing religious duties. Slander brought about through anger should be settled quickly to avoid prosecution of the slanderer.

Refrain from Lusting - While Jesus spoke against the physical act of adultery, He also addressed the kind of adultery that occurs in the mind. Both actions defile the heart of an individual. Jesus goes on to say if a hand or eye causes a person to sin—cut off the offending body. Was Jesus encouraging physical mutilation? Absolutely not. He was instead underlining the seriousness of these sins and the need to depart from them.
Be Committed to Your Spouse - The final teaching Jesus addressed in this section of the sermon was divorce. The Jewish tradition allowed a man to do away with his wife for any minor offence, so some of them changed wives like socks. Jesus let the husbands know God failed to recognize their divorce for insignificant reasons. Unfaithfulness, He said, would be the only grounds for breaking up a marriage in the sight of God. If either party married another, it was also considered adultery.

Seek to Make Peace with God and Others - When was Jesus asked what are the most important commandments, He answered: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. The reason there is so much conflict and hatred among people is because these godly instructions are ignored. Loving God and receiving His love makes it possible to show compassion to others.