

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL INSIGHT

(Matthew 5:21-48)

1.24.21

INTRODUCTION

During the time that I was attending school in North Carolina, I had the opportunity to work with a second-grade class at a private school. The school was set up in a modular fashion, where several of the grades actually met in their own individual building. That was great - you could be making all the noise you wanted and you wouldn't be disturbing anybody. Well anyway, one afternoon when I was at the front of the classroom, I noticed all the school buses arriving. Now that was weird: We had just come in from lunch and recess so there was still a whole lot of school day left. In fact, it was weird enough that I sent one of my kids to the office to find out what was going on. The student came back a couple of minutes later to tell me why all the buses were there: School was being cancelled on account of snow. Snow? Are you kidding me? So we all went to the windows and, sure enough, we saw snow - falling one flake at a time, as in "Oh, there's a flake," and "Hey, I see another one." And sure enough the class soon got the message that they would be ending the school day early - on account of snow. Now the kids were, obviously, very excited, but I remember telling them, remembering all the snowfalls and drifts we have all experienced in Minnesota, "Y'all don't know what snow is." Today is kind of going to be the same thing.

In our series entitled "The Radical Rabbi," we are currently looking at the Sermon on the Mount - a study of how citizenship in the Kingdom of God differs from citizenship in any other kingdom. Jesus would one day tell a Roman official named Pilate: ***"My kingdom is not of this world" - Jesus Christ, John 18:36a.*** That statement was the declaration of the make-up of Christ's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount gives the details. So, here's where we've been so far:

1. Two weeks ago, we looked at the details of those Kingdom characteristics - the Beatitudes.
2. Last week we looked at two things: (a) the reason for living with those characteristics, that Kingdom citizens would ***"let [their] light shine before others, that they may see [their] good deeds and glorify [their] Father in heaven" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:16,*** and (b) the "sure foundation" of those Kingdom characteristics - the word of God that will never disappear or diminish.

Now today, we are going to be hearing about a fundamental shift in how sin is viewed - and it's very much like what happened with my second graders. They had an idea of what snow was, but I was there to explain a somewhat deeper meaning than the individual flakes they were watching fall. In many ways, the culture of Christ's time had lost their sense of what sin looked like, so Jesus was about to give them a much deeper meaning than what they had grown to understand.

Now this is a rather long section of Scripture, but we are going to do enough to come to an understanding of God's "insight" into sin - a view radically different from what we will find in the world. But as we listen to the words of Christ as He teaches us, **let's begin with a moment of prayer.**

TEXT AND ANALYSIS (Matthew 5:21-48)

Keeping in mind that He is addressing His followers, Jesus is now going to bring specific examples of what citizenship in the Kingdom of heaven actually looks like, and He's going to do this by bringing some very common matters into the conversation - things with which everyone listening that day could relate or understand.

Murder/Anger: *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca, '*

is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:21-22.

Christ begins by citing the sixth commandment from the tablet God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai: ***"You shall not murder"- God speaking, Exodus 20:13***, meaning literally that "you shall not be a murderer." Now in the guidance provided by the scribes and Pharisees, not committing this outward act would be enough to be seen as righteousness before God. Jesus established a view that went much deeper. He taught that outward acts were direct "harvests" that grew from inner attitudes and, while naturally actions would result in much more destructive outcomes than did thoughts, both actions and attitudes were both equally sinful in God's eyes. In fact, He uses the same word in the Greek for "judgment" for committing "anger" as He does for committing "murder," and the word for "judgment" itself is used with the implication of "divine law," meaning that this is a God's-eye view of anger.

This also includes violent temperaments, as Jesus alludes to: calling somebody "Raca," an Aramaic insult of disgusted contempt (somewhat equivalent to today's "f-bombs" and similar terms) meaning "empty-headed, completely worthless," or calling somebody a "fool," meaning "dull or stupid." For Jesus, words had meaning, profoundly so when you consider Christ's conclusion for such behavior: a local synagogue council pronouncing judgment (possibly extending all the way up to the national court of the Sanhedrin) or even the "fire" of an everlasting "hell."

And then Jesus speaks of reconciliation, the need to repair and restore broken relationship. The point He makes is that, in God's eyes, there are few things more important in the Kingdom than proactively moving at the first opportunity to make a relationship right again. And the context in which He is saying this truly pictures its importance in divine eyes. Christ makes the comment: ***"[I]f you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:23-24.*** OK; He is referring to the offering of sacrifices at the altar in Jerusalem - 80 miles away from the followers with whom He is speaking in Galilee! So He is saying that, in God's eyes, reconciliation is so valued in the Kingdom that even leaving your gift at the altar in Jerusalem and taking the time to return to Galilee to heal an injured relationship and, having done that, returning to complete your offering at the altar back at the Jerusalem temple would be worth it in Kingdom terms. Wow! And that's why as followers of Jesus we initiate healing; we don't wait for the "other side" to take the first step. We should be so internally upset with an injury done to a relationship because God is so upset with an injury done to a relationship that the only thing that matters is, "What must I do to make this right? As a citizen of the Kingdom, what must I do to make this right?" That last part is the most important because it is the characteristics of the Kingdom that are meant to mold and make and drive believers, creating the finished product of a believer whose first response is filtered by Kingdom terms (how does this reflect the Kingdom, how does this impact the Kingdom) - along with the example that Christ Himself proactively initiated God's plan to make our relationship right with Him. And God's plan of salvation, to rescue people from sin and restore a right relationship with Him, is all about reconciliation - making whole what has been broken.

And then He illustrates the benefit of a quick reconciliation with the picture of a legal proceeding with an adversary: ***Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:25-26.*** Quickly trying to resolve the dispute will often be less costly than waiting for the problem to be settled in court. Similarly, this points out the sad truth that, the longer reconciliation is put off, the harder it becomes, and the more severe the consequences. And now Jesus moves on with another example of inner attitudes being as

critically important as outward actions.

Adultery/Lust: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:27-30.*

The prohibition against adultery was given by God through Moses in the seventh commandment - and, again, this commandment had been taught in its external dynamics only. Christ again goes beyond what is outside to what is inside - to an attitude begun in the heart. Now we are not talking about seeing a beautiful woman and thinking, "Wow, she's really pretty" and quickly moving on, but rather a deep, abiding, continuing look, returning to her in the heart time and time again, to covet her for himself, making her the object of his lustful desire in strictly physical, self-satisfying terms. That, according to Christ, sets that person up for moving from fantasy to reality. Again, internal or external adultery is defined by the same word; either adultery is seen as the same violation.

And then Christ practices a bit of hyperbole - that is, intentional exaggeration to make a point. Here His point is to, for the sake of the Kingdom, remove whatever is necessary to eliminate the possibilities of temptation. Self-mutilation, cutting away an eye or a hand? First of all, Ouch! And secondly, No! Lust is still possible regardless of the loss of any physical abilities. But if, for instance, your computer becomes a snare of inappropriate images, get rid of the computer. If books or magazines cause a problem, lose the books or magazines. If certain movies or TV shows take you to dangerous places, then don't watch those movies or TV shows. If you have friends who seem to so easily influence you into wrong thinking or wrong behaviors, separate from those friends. Get rid of whatever may be necessary for the sake of the Kingdom. If the Kingdom struggles to have first place in your life, in your attitudes, in your affections, in your actions, get rid of whatever stands between you and the Kingdom having its full and rightful place in your life. It is about having the long view of eternal life in the Kingdom versus the momentary pleasures of sin. Whenever you see a moment carrying more weight than eternity, that's a red-flag danger signal. Don't ignore it!

Divorce/Remarriage. *And then Christ continues: It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:30-32.*

Now this is a reference to words Moses gave to Israel back in Deuteronomy 24. The initial idea was to put some sense of process whenever marital issues occurred, so that a moment of anger or frustration or dissatisfaction didn't completely torpedo a marriage. During the time frame that it would take to actually find the appropriate authority who could actually write and then have that authority make out a certificate of divorce, other remedies might present themselves that would preserve the marriage. Ending a marriage was thus intended to both demand and create some time for thoughtful consideration and not just be a knee-jerk reaction. But, over the centuries, what constituted appropriate grounds for divorce had become very casual for some Jewish husbands (who were almost exclusively the initiators of divorce actions), including such things as a wife not aging well (fading beauty) or because she burnt the dinner - in other words, pretty much anything once a husband grew tired of her. Jesus wanted to take away such frivolous excuses because all it was doing was rupturing families and society, leaving everybody at risk of the sin of further adultery because God would have seen no rightful reason for the divorce, and leaving guys pretty much free (in their own minds) to hook up with somebody new - not to mention making a mockery of God's planned intention that *a man ... is united to his wife,*

and they become one flesh - Genesis 2:24. So Jesus greatly narrowed the possibilities of what constituted an appropriate basis for ending a marriage to basically one thing, and one thing only: sexual immorality within a marriage relationship - because physically uniting with somebody outside of marriage was physically destroying the union intended solely for the marriage.

Oaths: "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:33-37.

This was not a Scripture at all, but an example of the many traditions that had grown up over the centuries that had become assumed to be Scripture. Many times, even in our own day, people seem to need to use oaths to somehow strengthen our assumption of truth, i.e., "I swear to you," or "I swear upon the graves of my children," before making their statement that they hope their oath will somehow then validate their words as true. The point Jesus makes is that we have no control over any of the things that we would commonly use to underscore the truth of our testimony- not the heavens, not nobody's lives, not the earth or anything else. We need to simply speak truth and, if what we say is indeed truth, that will be enough. Truth doesn't need extra help.

Retaliation: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:38-42. "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" is actually a Biblical instruction; the book of Exodus phrases it this way: "[I]f there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"- **God speaking, Exodus 21:23-25.** And God Himself reaffirmed this in the book of Leviticus: "**Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury**"- **God speaking, Leviticus 24:19-20,** as well as in Deuteronomy. But the intention of these words was to provide legal guardrails for any punishments that were pronounced by judges, that they be ultimately fair and equitable, as well as providing a reason to not even place yourself in the position of causing somebody bodily injury. "What you do to them will be done to you" could have quite the chilling effect of lowering one's desire to go after somebody.

A slap on the right cheek actually refers to an open-handed slap with the back of the hand; such an action was meant to be an insult (kind of like in the old days when somebody took a glove and slapped it across an adversary's face). The idea is not to return one insult for another, even in the case of this action. That too often merely leads to an escalation that glorifies nobody. It is about how to express the love of Christ in any situation. And it is also a means of underscoring the Kingdom awareness that, as Christ said to His disciples: "**Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul**" - **Jesus Christ, Matthew 10:28a.** In other words, not no body, not no circumstance, can touch the eternity I have to look forward to, meaning that nothing can happen to me in this life that can truly hurt or harm me. Those are, as Paul so beautifully phrased them, **light and momentary troubles - Paul, II Corinthians 4:17a.**

The idea of somebody suing you and taking your shirt (your inner garment) went back to the idea in the courts of the time that suing for a shirt was allowable, but a line was drawn in suing for a person's coat,

the outer garment which provided greater warmth and, for poor people, could also double as a blanket. But Jesus is saying to be willing to go even farther to achieve a reconciliation with an opponent than even the courts would demand.

The idea of going two miles versus just one referred to a practice at the time from the Roman occupying forces called "compulsion," which allowed troops and other officials to make their subjects perform whatever menial task they chose, including hauling a load of some kind on their backs. The normal routine was to carry that load for a mile, but then to let them go due to the carrier becoming tired after that distance and also to prevent any further resentment against the Roman authorities from festering any more than it already was. But Jesus was telling His followers to be willing to go beyond minimal obligation to the point of an "extra mile" in the name of Kingdom love and service.

Love/Enemies: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" - Jesus Christ, Matthew 5:43-48.

Now, while the words "love your neighbor" have a Scriptural basis, God in fact speaking them in Leviticus 19:18, nowhere in the Scriptures would you have found then (or in our NT scriptures now) any admonition that allows for "hate your enemy." Now there may have been a rationale that, if we are supposed to love our neighbors, then the opposite, to hate our enemies, must also be true. But Jesus quickly shoots that idea down, replacing it with words that were truly radical - a complete break from what so many in His audience that day would have learned and understood. But the rationale behind His words was incredibly simple - that children of the Heavenly Father should be a resemblance to their Heavenly Father.

While that is not possible by looks, it is more than possible by actions - actions that reflect a loving Father who pours out mercy on the "righteous and unrighteous" alike. Our actions should go beyond the common examples of anybody naturally loving those who love them. All levels of people do that. We are called to be distinct, reflecting the singular distinction of the Kingdom, as well as reflecting the perfection of the King of that Kingdom.

APPLICATION

There are a couple of really important takeaways from this section of Christ's teaching. One takeaway is that Christ redefines sin, our "missing the mark" of God's holiness. He does this in a number of ways:

First, He reminds us of how God views us - a view literally with "in sight." Now Christ's audience that day should have already been aware of how God viewed our lives; there were two prime examples already laid out in their Scriptures:

1. From God speaking to Samuel: ***"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" - God speaking, I Samuel 16:7b.***
2. From God speaking to Jeremiah: ***"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve"- God speaking, Jeremiah 17:10.***

That's why Jesus made such a point of examining the heart; as He Himself said: ***"[The] mouth speaks from that which fills [the] heart" - Jesus Christ, Luke 6:45b (NASB2020).*** And as He would say later in this same sermon: ***"[W]here your treasure is, there your heart will be also" - Jesus Christ,***

Matthew 6:21.

Second, how God views us raises the profile of sin, reminding us how very much we are literally surrounded by our sins - our outward actions, our inner thoughts, our emotional responses, everything. Sin is our starting point, which may have reminded his audience of Jeremiah's famous lament: ***The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? - Jeremiah 17:9.*** And as David had sadly observed: ***"The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. [His conclusion?] All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one - David, Psalm 14:2-3.***

And third, because of how God views us, we are helpless. How can I have any hope for eternal life if God views my "incurably" sin-sick heart so completely, inside and outside, all my thoughts as well as all my actions? How can I have hope when my life is beyond cure? As the priest Ezra understood: ***"Lord, the God of Israel, You are righteous! ... Here we are before You in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in Your presence" - Ezra 9:15.*** And as the prophet Jeremiah sorrowed in the helplessness before God that sin had brought both to himself and to his nation: ***He has walled me in so I cannot escape; He has weighed me down with chains - Jeremiah, Lamentations 3:7.*** Well, that sense of helplessness in the presence of the all-seeing, all-knowing, absolutely perfect God is what is meant to drive us to our knees, begging God to give us the only life that can please Him - the life of His perfect Son! All of this is meant to bring us to Christianity's most basic, most important tenet: "I can't." Only with the life of Christ can I truly have the life of the Kingdom that Christ has been teaching.

CONCLUSION

I said there were two takeaways from Christ's words today. So here's the other one: These thoughts of Christ are not only so important to how we live our lives, but also so relevant in the face of the culture in which we live. You see, this culture has been doing its best to counter Scripture with its own redefinitions - of many things:

1. Our culture has redefined God.
2. Our culture has redefined religion ("religious beliefs have to be changed")
3. Our culture has redefined life.
4. Our culture has redefined marriage.
5. Our culture has redefined family.
6. Our culture has redefined gender (the "Equality Act").
7. Our culture has redefined hate speech.

This is NOT about Republican/Democrat or liberal/conservative. This is about "people need the Lord." This is about praying passionately for the souls of those who lead our nation, that God would intervene in their lives. Paul said that, when somebody surrenders to God through Jesus Christ, ***all things become new - Paul, II Corinthians 5:17b (NKJV).*** Do we believe that? And most emphatically of all this is about God! What did Moses tell the nation of Israel at the end of his life? ***"Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only . . . Do what is right and good in the Lord's sight so that it may go well with you" - Moses, Deuteronomy 6:13, 17-18.*** That's who we honor; that's who we serve, that's who we follow - and nobody else. Let's pray!