

Week 6: Matthew 5:17–48

Hook



Main Point: Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He didn't redefine the law; He taught the heart behind it.

While every state must follow federal law, each state has its own specific laws that make sense for its unique population. Sometimes these laws can become so incredibly specific to the state's culture and to the time period in which the law was passed, that today the law seems antiquated or even absurd. Listed below are a few examples of laws many would consider strange:

- In Virginia you cannot hunt or kill any wild animals or wild birds on Sundays, unless it is a racoon.
- In Tennessee you cannot hold public office if you have ever participated in a duel.
- In Oklahoma it is a misdemeanor to loiter about public buildings with the intent to listen in on conversations and to spread that information to harm others.
- In Billings, Montana, performers are always required to remain on stage throughout an entire performance.
- In Mobile, Alabama, silly string, snap pops, and other similar substances are banned.ⁱ

Q: Which of these laws do you find most ridiculous? Why?

Q: How would you respond if you were fined or arrested for breaking one of these laws?

Transition: In today's study, we will examine the righteous requirement of God's law, and how only Jesus could fulfill its demands. We will also discover that God cares about more than simply following His law; He cares about our heart toward Him and others.

Week 6: Matthew 5:17–48

Book

Main Point: Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He didn't redefine the law; He taught the heart behind it.

Matthew 5:17–20 [Read]

Talking Point 1: We need a greater righteousness to enter the kingdom.

Q: How did Jesus fulfill the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament)?

Q: How can we have a greater righteousness than the teachers of the law?

Having set up what it looks like to be a disciple in the kingdom of God, Jesus then addressed how this all related to the Old Testament law. Jesus did not come to give them a different law, He came to *fulfill* the law with His own life, death, and Resurrection. He was the only human being to ever live who kept the law in every point. His righteousness was greater than that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, which really said a lot. The Pharisees were absolute sticklers about keeping the law, even measuring their spices to tithe a perfect ten percent of everything they had! In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus revealed that the “righteousness” of the Pharisees was really for human approval, not for God’s (Matthew 6:1–8). They were fastidious in the most miniscule things but completely missed the big picture of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23). They followed the letter of the law but completely missed the spirit of it. They missed the heart.ⁱⁱ

New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Keener calls this section Jesus’ “thesis statement” for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. To this end, Jesus made this statement – that it takes a greater righteousness to enter the kingdom. Then He proceeded to defend it through the rest of the sermon, in His expositions of the law. In verses 21–48, Jesus “reinterpreted” the Ten Commandments. “You have heard it said, but I say ...” Except He didn’t actually reinterpret the *original* meaning; He tells them what it was always intended to mean. He wasn’t changing God’s Word at all; He was criticizing how their religious leaders had been applying it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus’ demands in the Sermon on the Mount were much more difficult than those of the Pharisees. Jesus didn’t abolish the Law, He made it harder! He closed with “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). But His goal wasn’t to establish a new and more demanding set of rules. It was to establish a “greater righteousness,” one that focuses not just on rules but on a change of heart (Ezekiel 36:26). The external rules were the same, but the application ran

deeper. Jesus' standard of righteousness is not just no murder, but no hatred or slander. Not just no adultery, but no lust. Jesus' standard of righteousness is nothing less than the perfect holiness of God.

On the one hand, this description of the kind of righteousness it takes to enter the kingdom points us to our need for Christ. We cannot uphold God's standard of morality. Only Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life, which is what made Him able to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins (2 Corinthians 5:21). The Pharisees thought they could uphold the law well enough to earn their way into the kingdom, but no one can. No one can live a perfect, sinless life of complete righteousness. As believers, it is not our own righteousness that makes us worthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. We have to put on His righteousness like a covering over our sinful selves (Romans 3:22; 4:3–25; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31, et. al.). Scholars call this *imputed* righteousness. On the other hand, Jesus' exposition of the Law does describe how we should live once we have put on Christ's righteousness. We know we can't attain this righteousness on our own, but it is still the standard of ethics in the kingdom of God. Just because we cannot do it perfectly doesn't mean we throw it out. As Paul said, just because we're under grace doesn't mean we keep sinning so we can experience more grace (Romans 6:1)! Now that we have been justified – declared righteous – through grace, we are to live in this righteousness. We have been given the Holy Spirit to empower us to do that.

We are declared righteous when we put on Christ's righteousness – that is justification. But sanctification is when the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to grow us more and more like Jesus every day. We are *declared* righteous and yet we *grow in* righteousness throughout our lives. The Sermon on the Mount describes this goal we are striving toward in our Christian life. We know we will never attain perfection in this life, but spiritual maturity presses on toward that goal with all our strength for the rest of our lives (Philippians 3:12).

Q: In what ways have you seen God grow you in righteousness since you became a Christian?

Q: Why is it important to let our righteousness be defined by Jesus, not the world?

Matthew 5:21–37 [Read]

Talking Point 2: It's the heart behind the law that really matters.

Q: How do anger and slander relate to murder? How does lust relate to adultery?

Q: What does Jesus mean by cutting out the part of your body that is causing you to stumble?

Through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” He answers His own question in the next verse: “I, the Lord, search the heart” (Jeremiah 17:9–10). Only God searches and knows us on that deep heart level (1 Samuel 16:7). That’s why only God can judge. What matters to God is not just keeping the law, but the condition of our hearts. This is why God always said, over and over to His people throughout history, some version of “You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 15:8). What matters is our hearts.

Jesus said the whole law could be summed up by two simple commands – love God and love others. The law showed His people what living out those two commands looked like practically for them. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reiterated this point by getting to the heart behind the laws God gave them in the Old Testament. Jesus focused here on the second half, loving others. He doesn’t go through all of the Ten Commandments, and He speaks to a few other laws that are not in the “Big 10,” but He gives a good sampling, which tell us that we are to take the same principle and apply it to the rest of the law. Jesus was clear in verse 19 that we cannot pick and choose which of the commandments we will obey. We must obey them all.

The principle is this—the law demands *perfection* in selfless love, not just in our external actions, but even in the deepest intentions of our hearts. As we said, we cannot keep it perfectly, which is why we need Jesus. Yet, all who have placed their faith in Jesus have been made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) and given a new heart in Jesus (Ezekiel 36:26) and will *want* to pursue this kind of love for others. The Holy Spirit dwelling in us gives us God’s love for other people (Romans 5:5; 1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:16–25).

Verses 21–22: Anger and Slander— It is not only committing the physical act of murder that is sin. Any inward “murderous” attitude of hatred or anger is just as sinful (1 John 3:15). And slander, in effect, is murdering someone with your words. The punishment Jesus offered for angry words, “the fire of hell,” is worse than the punishment for murder, which was only the death penalty. This doesn’t refer to righteous anger, as when Jesus turned over the table in the temple (John 2:13–17). Jesus even called the Pharisees “fools” (Matthew 23:17), yet we know Jesus did not sin. Also, God called people fools in the Bible a lot, especially in Proverbs. So it isn’t the mere use of the word “fools” that He was criticizing, but the murderous intent of the heart behind the word.^{iv} Righteous anger wants to heal; unrighteous anger wants to destroy. Righteous anger will lead you to do righteous things to fix the problem. Unrighteous anger will lead you to do unrighteous things that hurt the person, hurt yourself, and make the situation worse.

Verses 23–26: Reconciliation— The righteous way to handle our anger is reconciliation. Verse 23 begins with a “therefore,” which connects this verse to the section before it. This is an application of the anger law. Because anger is just as bad as murder, you must reconcile before you come before the Lord in worship. Unresolved anger with others is sin. And it doesn’t just cause brokenness in your relationship with that person, it also causes brokenness in your relationship with God. The reason we can’t bring our offerings to God while we have an issue with our brother is not due to some arbitrary rule God made up to keep us on our toes. It’s because our love for God is by nature bound up in our love for our brothers and sisters (1 John 4:20). We do not worship God in a vacuum but in community, as the body of Christ. The body of Christ cannot do God’s work in the world when parts of the body are broken off or warring with each other. You must be reconciled in order to worship and serve the Lord.

Verses 27–30: Lust— This is the same point as Jesus’ exposition about murder—it’s not just the physical act, but the heart behind it. Lust is a particularly difficult sin to handle because our culture sees nothing wrong with it. We even use it to sell cars and jeans and cheeseburgers. But Jesus took lust so seriously that He said you should cut out your eye if it causes you to sin. Obviously, this is hyperbole. Jesus often used hyperbolic statements to get people’s attention.^v He didn’t literally mean to cut out your eyes, or *everyone* would be walking around blind! He did mean get rid of temptation. Whatever is causing you to sin, get rid of it. Period. Your eyes are not what is causing you to lust. The real problem is something deeper. It could be pornography, movies, TV, or ads. It could be a certain person at work or the gym. It could even be an emotional connection with someone. You may have to cut out a relationship, go to the gym at a different time (or go to a different gym), or set up boundaries at work. Whatever you need to do to eliminate temptation, do it. It’s better to stop watching certain TV shows or quit your gym membership or even distance yourself from certain people than to live your life in lust, which can quickly turn addictive and destroy you from the inside even if you never act on it. Lust is like a cancer that needs to be cut out in order for the rest of your body to be healthy.

Verses 31–32: Divorce— Jesus handled this quickly here but expounded on it more later. Moses allowed the people to divorce, Jesus said, but he only did it because of their “hardness of heart;” “it was not this way from the beginning” (Matthew 19:7–10). In both places, Jesus condemns divorce except in cases of adultery. Keener writes that by this point in Jewish history, divorce was allowed for any reason. Anything the husband didn’t like about the wife was called “unfaithfulness” or “disobedience.” The law even said you could divorce your wife for the “disobedience” of burning bread! Jesus’ explicit emphasis exclusively on sexual immorality helped to protect these women as well as uphold God’s view of the sanctity of marriage.^{vi} This is a hard truth in our culture, where divorce and remarriage are common even among Christians. We also have a culture in which many people leave a marriage just because they

aren't happy anymore instead of holding God's view of marriage, which is about loving the other person unconditionally.^{vii} At the same time, there are some who use this verse to justify staying in an abusive marriage, which God certainly does not condone. We need to take great care in applying this verse – not use it to justify any sort of abuse, but also to hold married people accountable to their vows and to work hard to make their marriages work.

Verses 33–37: Oaths— From talking about the sanctity of the marriage vow, Jesus moved on to talk about oaths made to the Lord. The concern with swearing an oath by God's name is related to the third commandment, taking the Lord's name in vain. Keener writes that breaking an oath in the ancient world was dangerous. They believed the deities would avenge you with a curse if you swore by them and then broke your oath. So, some Jews had created surrogate things to swear by—like their right hand, heaven and earth, Jerusalem, God's throne, or other “substitutes” for God. But Jesus' concern, just like in the Old Testament, was that you shouldn't worry about the consequences of breaking your oath; you should just not break it. Just tell the truth and keep your promises. Again, it is a matter of the heart.^{viii} Let your word be so trustworthy that you don't need to swear an oath for people to believe you will honor your word.

Jesus' statements on divorce and oaths both take seriously the concept of a vow while not legalistically focusing on the vow itself. The point of Jesus' teaching on divorce is not to figure out which loopholes make it “okay” to divorce your spouse but instead to encourage you to honor the sanctity of your marriage. His teaching on oaths is not about figuring out what we can swear by to keep from breaking the third commandment but instead about not breaking the oath.

All these comments by Jesus are about this “greater righteousness” – a higher level of integrity in the way we relate to other people, from our most intimate covenant of marriage to our everyday relationships. In every example, the difference is *selfless* love for others.

Q: What things surprise you about Jesus' exposition of the law here? What questions or concerns do you have about His high standards of ethics?

Q: How did studying through this together make you think differently about lust or anger or breaking your promises?

Q: How do Jesus' points relate to selfishness vs. selflessness in the way we love others?

Matthew 5:38–48 [Read]

Talking Point 3: Followers of Jesus are defined by unconditional love for *all* others, including our enemies.

Q: Does Jesus really mean we should let people abuse or take advantage of us? If not, what does He mean?

Q: How would loving your enemies change *you* from the inside out?

“An eye for an eye” was part the retributive justice of Israel’s legal code. Jesus did not comment on the appropriateness of such judicial rules. His concern was with the inappropriateness of such a formula to *personal* ethics. In each of the three cases in which “an eye for an eye” was used in the Old Testament, the call was for a proportionate retribution – the punishment fitting the crime. Its intended purpose was to keep people from taking their own vengeance.

Honor and shame expert Jerome Neyrey explained that this whole section is about Jesus’ calling off the honor game. Ancient cultures were based on a system of honor and shame. You were born with a certain level of honor based on your socio-economic standing, but you could gain or lose honor depending on what you did. People in Jesus’ day did not associate with people of a lower level of honor than themselves, in friendship or in business. But everything Jesus did flipped the honor game on its head. He ate with *everyone* regardless of status. In back-to-back chapters of John, He had deep theological conversations with the lowest of the low (a Gentile woman with a sinful reputation) and the highest of the high (Nicodemus, one of the highest-ranking Pharisees). He healed lepers, Gentiles, and people from the most honorable families. In all He did, Jesus showed that He valued *everyone* equally.

Jesus was intentionally counter-cultural. Taking your own revenge was considered honorable in the ancient world (v. 38). The phrase translated “do not resist” literally means “do not stand against” (v. 39) and was a phrase used to refer to an honor challenge. Slapping someone on the right cheek was not about violence, it was a show of dishonor (v. 39). Both Greco-Roman and Jewish culture viewed it as extreme humiliation. Giving someone both your shirt and your tunic would leave you naked, a grave public shame (v. 40). “Forced to go a mile” was an example of how ancient peasants could be forced by anyone more honorable than themselves to give service without pay, the way Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus’ cross (Matthew 27:32), another public display of shame. Jesus used these extreme examples of shameful situations to show that He “requires His disciples to step apart completely from the honor game ... they are not in any way seeking to win, even by passive aggression.”^{ix}

Jesus called us to love everyone, just as He did. Unconditional, self-sacrificing love for all people, whether their status is “equal” to ours or not, whether they be friend or enemy. In

verse 43, the first part of the quote, “Love your neighbor,” is from the law (Leviticus 19:18), but the second half is not found anywhere in Scripture. Hatred of enemies such as the Romans, who oppressed the Jews, may have been taught by some religious leaders of the day, but hatred is nowhere condoned by God. What reason did Jesus give for loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us? It’s what God does. In His infinite mercy, God loved us while we were yet His enemies, so much so that He sent His Son to die for us (Romans 5:10). Loving your family and friends and those who are nice to you is human nature but loving your enemies and those who mistreat you only comes from God (vv. 46–47). God loves and serves and provides for the whole world, even those who hate Him. This is godly love, *agape* love, love that isn’t like the world’s. It is the difference between human love and godly love, the kind of love that only comes from the Holy Spirit’s changing your heart (1 Corinthians 13; Galatians 5:16–26).

Q: Without naming names, what are some qualities or types of people that make it hard for you to love someone? How can you love those people?

Q: Why is it important for us to call off the honor game? What does it have to do with love?

Q: In what ways do you need to change in order to live the way Jesus describes in this section of the Sermon on the Mount? What particular issues are a struggle for you?

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Took

Main Point: Jesus did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. He didn't redefine the law; He taught the heart behind it.

Although some state laws may seem extraordinary, it's important to know the context in which they were written. Tennessee's law, for instance, that prohibited public office for those who participated in duels was written to deter the increasing violence that was resulting from duel challenges.^x In a similar way, as we understand the heart behind God's law, we gain a greater understanding of who God is and His purpose in fulfilling the law through Jesus.

Q: Is there a correlation between man's law and God's law? Explain.

Q: How does receiving Jesus' righteousness affect our ability to obey God's law?

Q: How can we go about following God's law without focusing exclusively on external behavior? Why is this important?

CHALLENGES

THINK: Look back at each of the points Jesus made. How would you summarize His teaching? How does Jesus describe what it looks like to love others? What difference would it make in the world if we showed this kind of love?

PRAY for those who persecute you and for those on "the other side" of whatever conflicts you are experiencing. Pray for God to give you compassion and love to see their side of the issue. Pray for God to release you from the need to defend yourself or fight back. Ask Him to bring peace to your heart and the situation. Pray to be an instrument of His peace.

ACT: Choose one issue in your life in which God needs to work on your heart. Maybe it's lust or anger or loving your enemies, or maybe it's something else. Pray for God to change your heart, but also think through at least one concrete action step you can take toward that change of heart. Maybe you need to set up a boundary against lust or anger. Maybe you need to ask someone to forgive you and seek reconciliation. Maybe you would choose to do an act of kindness for someone you consider an enemy.

Hook, Took & Editing by Jonathan Adkins

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▣ <https://www.usatoday.com/list/news/nation-now/weirdest-laws-every-state/53ad0541-3518-4432-adc4-0fec193d389e>

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▣ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.2007).

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▣ Craig Keener *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

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▣ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children” *The Hauerwas Reader* (London, UK: Duke University Press, 2001).

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ix

▣ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

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▣ <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/dueling/>