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Pursuing the Kingdom: The Heart of Kingdom Righteousness

Matthew 5:21-42

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Several years ago a city decided to restore an old historic bridge. And when they were finished, from all accounts, the bridge looked beautiful. It had fresh paint, clean stonework, and carefully restored railings. Tourists took pictures of it. Locals admired it. At a glance, it appeared perfectly solid.

But when engineers began their inspection, they discovered something troubling beneath the surface. Inside the structure, deep within the steel framework, corrosion had spread far beyond what anyone could see. The bridge had been maintained on the surface, but its inner structure had been quietly deteriorating for years.

The problem was not the appearance of the bridge. The problem was its heart. If you simply repainted the outside, the bridge might look impressive for a time, but eventually the hidden corrosion would cause a catastrophic collapse. Many of us have had the same experience with our cars here in New England. By the time you see the rust on the surface its already too late as the rust has already corroded the metal underneath. What was needed for the bridge, or our cars, was not another coat of paint. What was needed was a structural restoration from the inside out. That is very close to what Jesus is getting at in Matthew 5:21–42.

In the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, as we've seen, Jesus described the character of those who belong to His kingdom. And then Jesus clarified that He did not come to abolish God's law, or set it aside, but that he came to fulfill it.

Now, beginning in vs. 21, Jesus begins exposing something that is, sometimes, deeply uncomfortable for us to hear, that is the difference between external and internal righteousness. The religious leaders of the day had become masters at regulating outward behavior. Jesus has already alluded to this in vs. 20 when he said, "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." He will go on to further call this out as we make our way through the Book of Matthew, but now, Jesus goes on to reveal that God's law was never merely about outwardly following the rules. That's like throwing paint on an old rusty bridge or car. It was always about the condition of the heart.

Six times in our scripture today Jesus will say, "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you." Now, he has already made the point, in the previous section, that he is not contradicting Scripture but he is revealing what Scripture has always meant. He is peeling back layers of religious tradition to reveal the true depth of God's moral will, the true intent of the law.

And what we discover is this, the problem of sin is not simply that we sometimes break God's rules. The problem is that something inside us is deeply flawed. Anger, lust, dishonesty and revenge, these are not merely actions. They are symptoms of hearts that need transformation. For we are told by the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can understand it." (Jeremiah 17:9)

So as we walk through these words of Jesus today, we must resist the temptation to treat them as just some tips to live a good, moral life or ways to clean ourselves up on the outside. They are a diagnosis of the human heart and an invitation to a deeper righteousness that only Christ can produce in us. Now, our passage is a little longer today so you can remain seated but listen carefully as I read from the word of God found in Matt. 5:21-42. [Read Matt. 5:21-42]

Jesus begins with one of the most familiar commandments: “You have heard it said, ‘you shall not murder.’” Everyone listening likely felt comfortable at this point. This same thing happens every Sunday, in this church and in every other church, when the pastor is preaching on a certain topic and its one you feel you’ve already got so you start looking around for the people you think “need to hear this.” Well, most people can say that they have never committed murder. It is one of the clearest moral boundaries in human society.

But Jesus immediately moves beneath the surface. You haven’t killed anyone, that’s great, “But I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” Oh... Here Jesus reveals that the commandment against murder was never only about the act of ending someone’s life. It was about the spirit of hostility that leads up to it.

You see, murder does not appear out of nowhere. It grows from seeds of resentment, contempt, and hatred. Anger itself is not always sinful. Scripture shows that there is such a thing as righteous anger or being angry at the right things.

But the anger Jesus addresses here is a persistent, habitual attitude of disdain and hatred toward another person. Its an anger which broods, which will not forget, which refuses to forgive and which seeks revenge. And when we nurture and feed such an attitude of anger and disdain for another person, we are participating in the same way of thinking that leads to violence. Jesus is showing that sin begins internally long before it becomes visible externally.

Then he goes even further at the end of vs. 22 when he makes the point that insults and name calling are not harmless expressions of frustration. They are indicators that the heart has already begun to dehumanize another person. Now it’s important that we realize Jesus is not saying that anger and verbally lashing out at another person is the same thing or as bad as murder. But Jesus is declaring that, as His followers, we need to understand that God’s standard is not only the act itself but also the heart behind it.

Jesus then gives an illustration to his audience. If someone is bringing an offering to the altar and remembers that a brother has something against them, reconciliation must take priority over religious ritual. In other words, worship without relational integrity is incomplete.

This reveals something profound about the character of God. God cares not only about how we approach Him in worship, but how we treat those made in His image. Spiritual devotion cannot be separated from reconciliation with others.

The application here is unavoidable. Many believers are careful about outward appearances, attending worship services, reading Scripture, participating in ministry, all the while quietly harboring unresolved resentment toward others. Jesus says reconciliation matters enough to interrupt worship. Kingdom righteousness refuses to allow anger to settle into bitterness. Pursuing the kingdom means that our lives should be constantly on the move toward peace, humility, and restoration in all of our relationships.

Jesus then turns to another well-known commandment: “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” Again, most listeners would assume they are safe. Adultery is another clear moral violation that we all agree is wrong. But once again Jesus moves beneath the visible act to the hidden intention. “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

Again, it is important to understand that Jesus is not saying that the physical act of adultery and adultery in the heart are the same thing. The act of adultery is far worse than adultery in the heart. Jesus’ point is not to say they are the same thing, but to say they are both sin, and both prohibited by the command against adultery.

What Jesus is doing here is exposing the deliberate harboring of sexual desire detached from covenantal love. Lust turns another person into an object for consumption rather than a person to be honored. It strips dignity and reduces image-bearers into simple instruments of gratification.

In the ancient world, many teachers minimized the seriousness of lust as long as the physical act of adultery was avoided. Jesus refuses that loophole. In other words, window shopping is still a sin. The point throughout this whole passage is, sin is not merely what we do with our bodies. It is also what we entertain in our minds for, it is said and rightfully so, that the eyes are the gateway to the heart. What we see shapes our desires and values, making it important to guard what we look at to maintain a healthy walk with Christ.

Which is why Jesus then intentionally uses some very dramatic language in vs. 29-30 when He says, “If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out... And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.” Jesus is not advocating for literal self mutilation for then we would all be walking around blinded with no hands. He is illustrating the seriousness with which followers of Jesus, those who are actively pursuing the Kingdom of God, must address sin.

Jesus simply stressed the point that one must be willing to sacrifice to be obedient. If part of our life is given over to sin, we must be convinced that it is more profitable for that part of our life to “die” rather than to condemn our whole life.

Next, Jesus brings up another topic that can be sensitive to a lot of us because many people carry deep wounds related to broken marriages, either our own or someone else’s. In vs. 31-32, Jesus confronts a casual view of divorce that had become common in first-century Judaism. Many teachers relied on a loose interpretation of Book of Deut. 24:1 to justify ending a marriage for almost any reason [quote].

But Jesus moves beyond legal loopholes and restores God’s original vision for marriage [quote]. Divorce was being treated as a simple legal transaction, write a certificate and the relationship is finished. Jesus exposes that this approach ignores the deeper covenantal nature of marriage. Marriage is not merely a contract between two people, it is a sacred covenant before God.

By saying that divorcing a spouse and remarrying can lead to adultery, except in the case of sexual immorality, Jesus raises the seriousness of marriage back to its God-given design. The issue is not merely the legality of divorce papers but the faithfulness of the heart. Jesus calls His followers to a righteousness that goes beyond legal compliance and reflects covenant loyalty.

Jesus calls his followers to honor the seriousness of marriage. In a culture that often treats relationships as disposable, Christians are called to view marriage as a lifelong covenant. This means cultivating faithfulness, forgiveness, and perseverance even when the relationship is difficult. The commitment made before God should shape how spouses speak to each other, resolve conflict, and remain devoted over time.

Jesus' words challenge the tendency to look for technical justifications instead of cultivating transformed hearts. The Pharisees asked, "What is legally permitted?" Jesus asks, "What reflects God's faithful character?" Followers of Christ should approach marriage not with the mindset of minimum obligation but with the desire to reflect God's covenant love.

This passage also reminds the church to respond with both truth and grace. While Jesus upholds the sanctity of marriage, the gospel also speaks healing to those who carry the pain of broken relationships. The community of faith must uphold God's design while also offering restoration, compassion, and hope through Christ.

Jesus next addresses oaths. On the surface, this may seem like an odd thing for Jesus to bring up, especially along other serious matters like murder, adultery and divorce. In the religious culture of His day, people often used elaborate oath formulas to make their words appear more trustworthy. Some would swear "by heaven," "by earth," or "by Jerusalem" in order to give weight to what they were saying while still leaving room to avoid full accountability. Religious leaders had even developed complicated distinctions about which oaths were binding and which were not.

Jesus exposes the deeper problem. The need for oaths reveals a lack of consistent truthfulness. If a person's character is trustworthy, their simple word should be enough. Instead of relying on verbal formulas to guarantee honesty, Jesus calls His followers to integrity that makes every word reliable. When He says, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No,'" He is calling His disciples to lives so marked by truth that additional guarantees become unnecessary. Kingdom righteousness produces people whose words reflect the character of God, who is perfectly truthful.

As believers, we are called to cultivate consistent honesty. In everyday life as Christians, we should be known as people whose word can be trusted. When we say we will do something, we follow through. When we speak, others should not have to question whether we mean what we say.

The point is, we should reflect God's character through our words. Since God is truthful and faithful, His people should speak with the same reliability. Integrity begins in the heart. The goal is to become people whose character makes our simple "yes" trustworthy and our "no" dependable. Jesus calls His followers to such deep integrity that their simple words carry the weight of truth, reflecting the faithful character of God in everyday speech.

The Heart Behind Retaliation (5:38–42)

Finally, Jesus addresses retaliation. "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is quoted from Ex. 21:24 and was originally given to ensure justice was proportional. It was meant to prevent excessive revenge. But by Jesus' time it had become a justification for personal vengeance. Instead of limiting retaliation, it became a justification for it. If someone wronged you, you had the right to get even.

Jesus overturns this mindset by calling His followers to a radically different response. Rather than seeking personal retaliation, disciples are to practice sacrificial love and generosity. Turning the other cheek, giving more than what is demanded, and going the extra mile illustrate a heart that refuses to answer offense with revenge.

The kingdom of God is marked not by the pursuit of personal vindication but by the willingness to absorb wrongs in love. Jesus is not abolishing justice in society. Rather, He is confronting the human impulse for personal revenge. Kingdom righteousness replaces retaliation with grace.

As believers, we are called to surrender the instinct to “get even.” When we are insulted, mistreated, or taken advantage of, our natural response is retaliation. Jesus calls us instead to entrust justice to God and respond with humility and restraint. We to reflect the heart of Christ. Jesus Himself embodied this teaching. When He was insulted, beaten, and crucified, He did not retaliate but responded with forgiveness and sacrificial love.

Jesus challenges his followers to display a countercultural witness. In a world that thrives on revenge, outrage, and self-protection, followers of Christ demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel by responding to wrongdoing with grace. Jesus calls us to relinquish personal retaliation and instead respond to wrongs with humility, generosity, and grace that reflects the sacrificial love of Christ.

When we step back from Matthew 5:21–42, the weight of Jesus’ teaching becomes unmistakable. He has taken familiar commandments and expanded them beyond simple outward behavior into the realm of the heart. Anger becomes as serious as violence. Lust becomes as serious as adultery. Honesty becomes absolute. Revenge becomes forbidden.

If we are honest, these words expose us. For who among us has never harbored resentment? Who has never entertained sinful thoughts? Who has never spoken carelessly or desired retaliation? Jesus is not merely raising the moral standard. He is revealing that the true problem is deeper than behavior, its inside of us, its our very hearts.

However, the purpose of Jesus’ words here is not despair. It is preparation for grace. For the same Jesus who reveals the depth of God’s righteousness will soon walk toward the cross to accomplish what we could not. He fulfilled the law perfectly and he bore the judgment our sin deserves. And through faith, he gives us his righteousness in exchange for our filthy rags.

Then, and only then, through the work of the Spirit He begins transforming our hearts so that our lives increasingly reflect the righteousness He requires. And as His Spirit reshapes our hearts, the corrosion of sin is replaced with something stronger, lives formed by grace, truth, mercy, and love. That is the righteousness of the kingdom. And it begins not with perfect performance, but with surrender to the King who changes hearts. Let's pray and prepare our hearts for the Lord's table. [Pray]