

## **Matthew's Gospel**

### **Ch5:21-48 : The Law exceeded**

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New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most famous parts of the gospel accounts in the Bible, and possibly the most famous public preaching of the Lord Jesus. Even amongst non-Christians, this message is admired for the moral values the Lord promotes. So we're in an important part of our series in Matthew's Gospel for our message today.

Let's just step back for a minute and set the scene. In Matthew 4, verse 23 we read that:

"Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people."

Then chapters 5-7 contain the famous Sermon on the Mount section, all about the kingdom of heaven. After that, in chapters 8 and 9, we find the Lord Jesus, down from the mountain, and back amongst the people in their everyday lives. He heals a leper, a centurion's paralysed servant, and Peter's mother in law. He performed these miracles to show that He was the suffering servant described in Isaiah 53 (see 8:17), hundreds of years before the events in Matthew's Gospel occurred. We find the Lord in a boat calming a great storm, two demon-possessed men released from their possession, a paralytic man made to walk, a dead girl raised to life again, two blind men made to see, and a mute man made to speak. And then, almost at the end of Matthew 9, in verse 35 we get almost the same verse we started off with in Matthew 4:23:

"Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people."

I find it helpful to see this section as a whole, all about the kingdom of God, with these two very similar verses at either end. In it we get a sense of Matthew's message. It's not just about the blessings of belonging to God's kingdom, but it's about the Man who has power to bring about entrance into God's kingdom – the Lord Jesus Christ. The miracles that are recorded in chapters 8 and 9 are evidence that He was the Messiah. The Saviour who had been promised by Isaiah and others many years before in the Old Testament.

So, with that background in place we come to Matthew 5. Last week we considered the first 20 verses. The section contained the statements sometimes referred to as "The Beatitudes", in which the Lord describes the great blessings of belonging to the kingdom of heaven. These verses don't focus on how to enter the kingdom. The Lord deals with that elsewhere (John 3:3-5 for example). Here, he was speaking to His disciples (5:1). He was speaking to people who were already in the kingdom, if you like. He was explaining the kind of behaviours expected of disciples of the Lord – those belonging to the kingdom. And He was explaining the blessings, and the joys, and the "happineses", of belonging to His kingdom. I'm sure as you thought about those last week you

were blessed by them. If you happened to miss last week's message, you will find it on the Truth for Today website, and can either listen to, or read, the message for yourself.

As we came to the end of last week's section, we found two important things. First that members of God's kingdom are supposed to be witnesses and examples to the people around them. They are to be the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Their light is supposed to be shining so brightly, that people see them, and are amazed at how great God is. They will "glorify [God] in heaven" when they see the way you live. I don't suppose that's so much that they're impressed by how moral and upright you are, but they are impressed by how much God is evidently at work in your life. These issues were covered in last week's message, so we don't need to focus on them today. But it's surely worth being reminded of the practical challenges from that talk. If you're a Christian listening to today's message, how are you doing at being the salt of the earth and the light of the world? Are you living in ways that show the people you come into contact with how amazing God is? I suspect most of us will hear that challenge, and instinctively feel we could do better. Let's ask God to help us to do that for the rest of today, and the week ahead. May we know His help to be a light for Him in each of our individual circumstances.

The second important thing to notice at the end of the first 20 verses of Matthew 5 is found in verses 17-20. The kind of behaviour expected of members of God's kingdom wasn't just to be outward. It wasn't supposed to be focused on a few outward commands being well followed. It was aimed at the heart. They weren't to think that if they could just follow a few commands reasonably well they could enter God's kingdom. For that to be possible their righteousness would need to exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees, who were known for following the law to the letter. But this wasn't enough. Their proud hearts were unchanged – they followed their religious laws with intricate attention to detail. But they so often missed the point God's laws were supposed to convey. And it's this point that the Lord comes to deal with in the second part of Matthew chapter 5. Our focus for today is verses 21 to 48, in which we see the Law's demands exceeded. Jesus was aiming beyond mere obedience to the letter of the law.

It's a long section so instead of reading it all in one go, we'll read sections as we go along. If you have a Bible with you, why not follow along as we go through each section. You'll notice that these verses easily split into sections, with some slight variations on verses that start, "You have heard that it was said", followed by a new instruction from the Lord Jesus, "But I say to you." We find this pattern starting in verses 21, 27, 31, 33, 38 and 43. The exact wording changes slightly each time, but the general pattern is that there was something they already knew, introduced using, "You have heard", and then something added to it by the Lord, introduced by, "But I say." Let's take each section in turn and see what the Lord has to teach us from it.

The first section is verse 21-26, so let's read that together.

"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.' 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. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 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. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny."

In this first set of verses, the Lord reminds His disciples of the command not to commit murder. Of course followers of the Lord Jesus should not murder! God views life as precious so His people should respect that and value life. They should not murder. That's an important point. But the Lord adds to this. He goes beyond the letter of the Law and aims at the heart behind it. People commit murder because they are obsessively angry with that person. And Jesus says not just "Do not murder", but, "Don't be angry with your brother." Don't get so angry with someone that you cry out, "Raca" – a word which means empty head. Don't call someone a fool in a fit of rage. Instead, disciples of the Lord should actively seek ways to be at peace with other people. So if they know they have a problem with someone they should go and sort it out.

The Lord describes a Jewish setting. Someone is going to the temple to bring a gift or make an offering. On the way they remember that someone is cross with them for some reason. They've done something or other to offend them. Jesus encourages them not to delay, but to go and put right their wrongs and be reconciled to their brother. This is beneficial for that person on a number of levels. First, it wards off the risk of being hauled before the judges and ending up in prison. Second, it restores a relationship with a brother. And third, it's pleasing to the Lord. Do you remember verse 9 from last week? "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God." Although this was a Jewish setting in its immediate context, surely there are practical implementations from this for us as Christians today? We don't go to the altar like they did in the Lord's time, but what if we are on our way to gather in church and we remember some way in which we've wronged another believer? Couldn't we follow the practical instruction of these verses and go and put things right with our brother or our sister in Christ? I wonder how that might alter our gatherings with the Lord's people. They would be more characterised by an absence of grudges, love for each other, and an absence of quarrelling. Is there someone the Lord would have you go and visit today to put right some wrong?

Do you see how the Lord is going beyond the bare minimum requirements of the Law here? Jesus wants us not just to avoid murdering people and then walk around patting ourselves on the back for how well we're doing. He wants us to do more. He wants us not to be angry with people without a cause and to keep our tempers in control. In the Lord's kingdom, a radical moral standard is expected of the Lord's disciples.

Let's move on to the next section, from verse 27-30:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 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. 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."

In these verses the Lord moves on from murder to marriage. He focuses on another of the 10 commandments – "You shall not commit adultery." And once again the Lord goes beyond the original commandment. He explains to His disciples that they shouldn't be satisfied at just refraining from sleeping with someone they are not married to. They should go further. They should avoid looking lustfully at a woman. Looking inappropriately at a woman was as if they were committing adultery with her in their hearts. Jesus says to avoid that kind of behaviour. And take deliberate action to avoid it. I think the verses about plucking eyes out and chopping hands off are not to be taken literally. Thankfully Jesus doesn't expect His disciples to be blind or have no hands. Rather the verses are intended to show how seriously we should fight against lust in our hearts. We should go to great lengths to avoid finding ourselves in situations where we lust in our hearts.

And once again, isn't there good practical advice for us here? Whether male or female, we shouldn't be content simply with the fact that we haven't committed adultery. We should avoid lust in our hearts as well. Then, we'll avoid dangers in our Christian walk. We'll steer clear of pornography, or certain TV shows that are overtly sexual. They're not going to help us shine as lights in the world or be the salt of the earth. The people we meet might be impressed that we're clued up on the latest popular series on Netflix and the like, but if it's known for its sexual content, they're not going to see us and glorify God, are they! We'll also be deliberately careful about how we look at people of the opposite sex, and guard where we allow our thoughts to go. That's the kind of behaviour that the Lord expects of people in His kingdom, whether married or unmarried. And it's difficult isn't it. It's hard because this kind of living stands in stark contrast and conflict to so much of what is pushed in the world around us today. Some people do think Christian sexual ethics are strange and weird. But I want to encourage you to stick at it, because that is one of the ways we'll shine as light and bear witness to God's greatness today. Better to be a part of God's kingdom, than to face His judgement and end up in Hell!

The Lord has more to say about marriage in the next section, from verses 31-32. Let's read the verses:

“Furthermore it has been said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 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.”

In these verses, the Lord emphasises the importance of the permanence of marriage and warns against breaking the vows made before God when someone got married. The law made provision for divorce, but people in God's kingdom must make every effort to maintain a marriage, even in today's 'no-fault-divorce' culture. There might come circumstances where one spouse breaks the marriage commitment by committing adultery. Many Christians see the Lord's words here as allowing divorce in such circumstances. We don't have time to have any detailed discussion about divorce and remarriage here, but I think the Lord's words here are clear enough for us to see that the Lord expects us to take our marriage vows seriously and this is one way in which we can be salt and light in the world.

We move on from points about murder and marriage to instruction about the things we say. Let's read verses 33-37.

“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No’, ‘No.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”

Here the Lord quotes from Leviticus 19. The people of Israel were not to swear falsely by the Lord's name. I think the inference is that they might swear in the Lord's name, and make a promise to do something or other, using the Lord's name as a sort of guarantee that they really would do what they had said. Well, if they then failed to do what they had promised, or pay what they had owed, then the fact that they had promised “in the Lord's name” would bring dishonour to God, for God always keeps His promises. So God wanted the people not to swear in the first place, but instead to actually perform their oaths. But once again the Lord goes beyond the original command. Perhaps a devout Jew might heed the command in Leviticus 19, and not swear by the Lord's name. But maybe they swore by some other name to assert their trustworthiness.

Imagine today asking a friend to lend you £500. They might be worried that they'd never see the money again. In an attempt to prove your trustworthiness you might say, "Lend me the money, I'm good for it. I swear to God." Well, a godly Jew wouldn't have done that – it broke the command in Leviticus 19. But perhaps instead they might say, "Lend me the money, I'm good for it. I swear on my mother's life" or something like that. Well, Jesus is saying here that His disciples shouldn't do that either. They don't need to swear at all. They just need to be trustworthy. They need to be known as people whose 'yes' meant 'yes' and 'no' meant 'no.' They did what they said. They were reliable. They didn't need to do more than that. In fact any attempt to do so would be "from the evil one." Once again, the challenge is clear – are you known for being trustworthy in word and in deed?

From what we say, the Lord moves on to our attitudes in the final two subjects He takes up. First, in verses 38-42, Jesus talks about desires for revenge, and finally in verses 43-48 He talks about loving our enemies. Let's read verses 38-42 next:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."

The Law said that suitable recompense should be made when someone had been wronged. So if you accidentally killed your neighbour's sheep, you gave them one of your sheep, or things like that. The Law said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But, as we've seen so often already today, the Lord wanted His disciples to go further. They were to "turn the other cheek." They were to be known for their gentle spirit and their generosity, rather than their need to always justify themselves and get revenge for any wrong done against them. I don't think the Lord here is ruling out any legitimate prosecution for wrongs done against you. But I think He is telling His followers that they should be very, very slow to fight back and look for revenge. We live in a day that praises the asserting of your own rights, and demanding that you get what you deserve. It's hard to see from these verses how Christians can go along with such thinking.

Then finally we come to verses 43-48. Let's read this final section of Matthew 5:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

In Leviticus 19, God commanded the people of Israel to love their neighbours, and be especially careful not to seek revenge against them. In Deuteronomy 23:3-6, God told the people not to seek the good of the enemies around Israel. Possibly that's where this idea of loving neighbours and hating enemies comes from. But the Lord again goes further than the Law. People in God's kingdom should not be satisfied with simply loving our neighbours, though perhaps we sometimes find even that a challenge! Instead we should love our enemies. We should bless those who curse us and do good to those who hate us. We should pray for those who treat us awfully. None of

these characteristics come easily, do they? And yet they are what the Lord expects of His followers. So let's challenge ourselves about these matters? Do I love my enemies? Do you? Who has treated you badly this week? Are you praying for them? Are you seeking their good? What might you be able to do for them this week that would be for their good? Ask the Lord to help you bless those who curse you! Remember, these are ways that we can be salt and light in the world and cause those we come into contact with to praise and glorify God as they recognise His greatness at work.

So then, we've come to the end of Matthew 5. If last week's section showed something of the blessedness of belonging to the kingdom of heaven, this week's section has been extremely challenging, hasn't it? Belonging to God's kingdom is a great blessing but the behaviour God expects of His people is of a high standard. Remember, Matthew 5 isn't really about how to enter God's kingdom, it's about how those in it should behave. It's a message for Christ's disciples. So we should not read this chapter and worry that if we slip up in any of these areas our place in the kingdom is at risk. No, the chapter isn't about how to enter the kingdom, but rather the blessedness of belonging to it.

I'm sure some unbelievers listening must be thinking, "I want that", Maybe you're thinking, "I want to be comforted", "I want to see God", "I want to obtain mercy", even, "How can I have it." From the second half of the words of the Lord recorded in Matthew 5, you're thinking, "Ah that must be it. I'll live like this. I'll not get angry. I'll not lust in my heart. I'll be trustworthy. I'll love my enemies and do good to them." Well, good intentions only last for a while, but they always end up in disappointment, don't they? Nobody has the ability to live like this, except the Lord Jesus. So the first part of the Sermon on the Mount is not just there to teach us how Jesus wants His followers to live. It also shows us our inability to live up to the standards. Why? At the beginning I said that the Sermon on the Mount is really just a part of a larger section from Matthew 4 to Matthew 9, which describe Jesus preaching the gospel of the kingdom. In this section, we don't just get a lot of fine moral teaching. Jesus is presented as the King of the kingdom, evidenced by His great miracles. We're supposed to see beyond the behaviour expected of His subjects to see the greatness of the King. It's only at the end of Matthew's Gospel that we find the Lord dying to be judged for the wrong we've done and thereby providing a way for entrance into the kingdom.

But in these early chapters, we supposed to recognise how much the people of Israel, and also the whole world, need a Saviour. Jesus is that Saviour (1:21). By and large, the people of Israel at the time rejected the Lord. They might have admired His fine ethical teaching, and been impressed by His miracles, but ultimately, they rejected Him. The Lord's invitations to the kingdom of heaven were rejected. If you've been listening to this series over the past few weeks and hearing something about how wonderful it is to belong to God's kingdom, don't react the same way – don't reject the Lord Jesus.

Today the offer goes out to all, that although the Lord Jesus is by and large rejected by the world, still He died for us, and He offers to us forgiveness of sins, eternal life, hope of heaven and a present place in His kingdom. As you recognise that in your own strength you'll never be able to measure up to the standards of God's kingdom, turn to the Lord and enter His kingdom on His terms – freely by grace. Then look to Him each day to give you help to live in ways that please Him, as salt and light in the world. May the Lord help each of us to enjoy the blessedness of belonging to His kingdom, and give us grace to live according to His commands so that our friends and family and neighbours see our lives, and glorify God.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Matthew 5:21-48, "The Law exceeded", talk T1269.

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