

Discipleship Questions

What is the focus of Matthew 5:21-48?

What is Jesus contrasting His teachings with throughout this section?

What was commonly believed and practiced concerning murder?

How did Jesus's teaching go deeper than the common ideas?

What was commonly believed and practiced concerning adultery?

How did Jesus's teaching go deeper than the common ideas?

What was commonly believed and practiced concerning divorce?

How did Jesus's teaching go deeper than the common ideas?



Lesson 5:
**Case Studies In
Righteousness, Part 1
(Matthew 5:21-32)**

Those who want to be in the kingdom of Heaven must obey the law of God and have a righteousness that is superior to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. For, the righteousness Jesus teaches is one that cuts deep into the heart of each person! Throughout this section (5:21-48), Jesus gives six case studies in righteousness that goes deeper than prevailing concepts of righteousness. In this lesson, we will look at the first three of these case studies (5:21-32).

Case Study #1: Murder (Matthew 5:21-26)

Remember that Jesus is not setting Himself in opposition to the Law and Prophets of the Old Testament, but against the common interpretation and practice of the law (i.e. the “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees). It was commonly held that those who commit murder (kill without just cause) would be subject to standing before the town court in judgment (Exodus 20:13; 21:12-14; Numbers 35:16-21, 30-31). While these rightly held that murder must be avoided, they were not nearly as concerned about other abusive conduct toward others. Jesus demonstrates that anger and verbal abusiveness makes one equally unrighteous before God as if one commits murder! Note that He used the language of being subject to the judgment of a local court and the highest court (Sanhedrin) to make the point of their guilt before God. Then, He demonstrates how serious these offenses are in the use of “hellfire” (Gehenna of fire, a reference to the valley of Hinnom south of Jerusalem where all manner of filth was burned), used to depict a future eternal punishment (Matthew 10:28; Mark 9:43-48). Although anger

is an emotion God has created us to experience that has a proper place when it is properly directed (i.e. toward sin, Mark 3:5), Jesus seems to use it here in the sense of being angry in a loveless way (Ephesians 4:26; 1 John 3:15). Jesus then gives examples of the way one may be guilty before God through our hateful words. These are: insulting another (“Raca” is an Aramaic term that insults a person’s intelligence, as if the one is empty-headed) and calling another a fool. Then, Jesus goes to an even deeper level of righteousness by demonstrating the need for a person to seek reconciliation with a brother or sister who has something against you because of your unrighteousness. Citizens of Jesus’s kingdom are not to proceed with their worship offerings to God if they have unresolved sin toward another (Psalm 51:16-17; Isaiah 1:10-18; 1 Peter 3:7, 10-12). Note that others may be unwilling to be reconciled, but Jesus is demonstrating a heart that desires and attempts to live peacefully with all and correct wrongs (Romans 12:16-18). Taking care of wrongs quickly (while they are small) will keep them from growing and the consequences (physically and spiritually) from becoming more severe.

Case Study #2: Adultery (Matthew 5:27-30)

It was commonly held that one should not commit adultery (Exodus 20:14). However, they appear to have stopped at staying away from the physical act of adultery that would make them subject to a capital offense under the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22). Jesus demonstrates that unrighteousness is not limited to failing to control oneself in this way, but even extends to lustful thoughts toward another (Exodus 20:17; Job 31:1). This would cut to the source of adulteries (Matthew 15:18-19). Like anger and verbal abuse is just as unrighteous as murder, looking with lustful intent at another (as an object to fulfill personal desire) is just as unrighteous as adultery! The seriousness of this unrighteousness is emphasized by Jesus speaking about gouging out the eye and cutting off the right hand (compare with Matthew 18:8-9; Mark 9:43-48). Like a gangrenous limb needs amputated to save the entire body, Jesus demonstrates the need to amputate anything from our lives that would cause us to sin and be cast into Hell! For, it is better to sacrifice something temporary than to experience eternal punishment in the fires of Hell. Note that physical mutilation is not Jesus’s ultimate point (as one could still lust with the left eye after the right eye was removed), but the amputation of things, environments, relationships, etc. that lead us into sin would apply.

Both lustful looks (i.e. the eye) and lustful acts (i.e. the hand) must be cut off and the heart corrected to be righteous!

Case Study #3: Divorce (Matthew 5:31-32)

It was commonly accepted that a man could give his wife a certificate of divorce if he found something unfavorable about her, although some held to strict views on divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). Jesus also made it clear that Moses permitted divorce in a broader sense than God desired (Matthew 19:8). The Pharisees appear to have accepted a broad sense of divorce, (Matthew 19:3, 7), while putting emphasis on the procedure of divorce (making sure a certificate of divorce was given). This caused women to be treated as objects that could be discarded. Jesus demonstrates that unrighteousness is not the result of merely forsaking the certificate of the divorce, but in divorcing a spouse for any cause except for sexual immorality (a broad term covering all forms of sexual intercourse outside of a God-approved marriage; Matthew 19:1-12). Divorce for any other cause and any subsequent remarriage results in adultery. Then, only the one who divorces his/her spouse for sexual immorality is free to remarry. The result of Jesus’s marriage law is a restoration to how things were intended in the beginning – a covenant between one man and one woman for life (Malachi 2:14-16; Romans 7:2-3)!

Conclusion

Righteousness in Jesus’s kingdom looks radically different from what was common in the Pharisees and scribes. Jesus is clearly not just interested in mere formalities and traditions in the observances of one’s religion. Instead, He desires hearts that truly love Him and righteousness that flows from such a committed heart observing His laws!

Discovering God’s Word Bible Study Series

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