

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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Thou Shalt Not Kill

Sermon On The Mount Series, Matthew 5:21

by Maurice Barratt

Jesus has told his disciples clearly that they cannot abandon the law in the age of grace. On the contrary, they must fulfil it, and this can only be done by love, by understanding and obeying the spirit of the law. We cannot fulfil the law simply by keeping the dead letter of it; that was the mistake of the Pharisees. Fulfilling the law demands a more costly way — the way of love.

Now Jesus tells us exactly what this means. If we are in any doubt as to what it means practically to fulfil the law, Jesus is about to remove all our doubts. He gives, not one, but six examples of how we are to fulfil the law. In each case Jesus contrasts what people thought the law meant with what it actually means - its root, the spirit of the law. But this contrast serves another purpose. It exposes us, because each example exposes our hearts. The heart is where the law is fulfilled — or not fulfilled — and in our case Jesus is out to prove that every one of us is guilty of failing to keep the law, no matter how righteous our outward actions and behaviour may be. Jesus doesn't want hypocrites for followers. So because he knows that the human heart is "deceitful and desperately wicked", he has to expose our hearts so that we know we are guilty. We need to see that we have a secret unholy life. Only then can the remedy be applied, by practising another secret life - but that will come later, in Chapter 6. For now we must be prepared to be exposed!

The Sixth Commandment

Jesus' first example is the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" (Matthew 5:21). It's a straight quote from scripture, the word of God (Exodus 20:13). Yet, surprisingly, Jesus does not say, "God said, Thou shalt not kill", or even, "Moses said ...". He says, "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time ...", as though it was hearsay or an old wives' tale. What Jesus is inferring is that these words of the commandment have become mere slogans — words that we think we understand and believe, and yet we have missed the heart of the commandment completely.

Qualifying The Law

Yes, it's a literal quote from scripture. But a single statement in the law is inadequate on its own. "Thou shalt not kill" is actually not strictly true, even according to the law. God's people were allowed to kill animals for sacrifice and for food; they were allowed to kill other men in warfare; they were allowed to stone or burn a man to death in justice. The law needs qualification. In fact, it takes five books of the law to qualify and explain the one-sentence statements of the Ten

Commandments. One statement can never make a doctrine. In English law, new precedents and new qualifications are being set all the time to laws that have been in existence for centuries. The old law still stands, it's not annulled; it's just that as time goes on, it needs more and more qualification and explanation as different cases arise. It's exactly the same with God's law.

"... and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgement". This part is not a quote from the Old Testament. This is merely how "them of old time" interpreted the one-sentence law.

Truth Speaks

But Jesus continues, "But I say unto you..." When Jesus speaks, truth is speaking; the spirit of the law, the fulfilment of the law is speaking. So we should listen carefully. What does Jesus do? He begins to expose our hearts, to go to the root of the matter, the spirit of the law. Murder, he says, is not simply an outward action — it is an inward attitude of the heart. The outward action is simply the fruit of the heart's attitude, taken to its logical conclusion. But the law only says, "Thou shalt not do the outward action". There is a saying, "The law is an ass", and the dead letter of the law of God, as it appears in print in the bible, is no exception. If you hate someone and want to kill them and beat them to a pulp, but they don't die, you've not broken the sixth commandment. If you despise someone and slander them viciously and send them hate-mail, but never lay a finger on them, you've not broken the law. Well, you might not have broken the letter of the law, but you have certainly broken the spirit of the law - you're just as guilty of murder as if you'd stuck the knife in or pulled the trigger.

"Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause is in danger of the judgement" (verse 22). Here is the first illustration by which Jesus exposes us. Anger is murder in the heart. It is the mildest form of murder; a man may be angry and never show it outwardly, never even speak an angry word. It is purely in the mind. The law can never deal with this, of course, because the law can only deal with the outward effects of anger, the physical results. But many moral Christian people have terrible anger inside, yet they never show it, because they've learned to repress it, to hold it inside. They've never learned to deal with it properly, they've just become moral hypocrites. This is not good for them or for the church. It needs to be exposed. This is why Jesus has to deal with the roots. Love will always deal with the root of a problem; its cause, not its symptoms or results. Anger is the root of murder.

The Seed Of Murder

Jesus uses their own words as a case against them: having anger in your heart is enough to put you in grave danger, danger of judgement. Note that it's only danger of judgement, not judgement itself. What Jesus is saying is that if you become angry without good cause you have the seed of murder, the spirit of murder, in you; and that seed will grow just like any other seed until it breaks out in evil action - and then you will have to face judgement.

"... and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council ..." This takes things a step further. "Raca" means vain or worthless. It shows you despise your brother. This is not

just inward anger; now it has broken out into angry words. Self control has been lost. So the danger is more severe. What judgement does Jesus mean we shall face? Certainly Christ's judgement in the future. As Christians, we shall have to give an account before the judgement seat of Christ for every idle (or vain) word we have spoken.

What about "the council"? The council is the "high court", the place where serious accusations are brought against people. At the judgement seat of Christ, there will also be accusations. None of them will come from the devil, for he will be bound in prison for a thousand years. These accusations will come from our fellow men. Jesus said that the men of Nineveh would rise up in the judgement against his generation and condemn it, because the Ninevites had repented at the preaching of Jonah, but God's own people would not repent at the preaching of Jesus (see Matthew 12:41). Nineveh was threatened with utter destruction if they did not repent; so the Ninevites will demand justice from God. They will say, "God, how can you let these Israelites off the hook when they didn't repent and yet we did?" And their accusation will stand. Might we not justly be accused by others, if we, having been forgiven all our sins, become angry with our brother and call him a fool? He might be the very one who accuses us before the judgement seat - and how would we answer?

"... but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." This is the ultimate judgement. To call a person a fool is to curse him, to damn him. In the bible, a fool means the lowest sort of person, the most godless. "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14:1). The simple act of calling another person a fool is preparing your own soul for hell. It's as serious as that.

The Conclusion

"Therefore", says Jesus (so this is a conclusion to what has been said so far) "if thou bring thy gift to the altar ..." (What is this gift? It means anything you bring to God as part of your worship — your money, sacrifice, praise, prayer.) " ... and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." Jesus doesn't say, "If you have anything against your brother"; he says "If he has anything against you" — if you've said something that's offended him; if he, indeed, might have anything to accuse you of before God — how important that you put it right. It's not only important for us; it's so important to God that he will not accept your offering, sacrifice, worship or prayer until you deal with this problem. God says to the man in church, "Go thy way" — Go home, go away, and don't come back again until this is dealt with. So many times God said to Israel that their sacrifices did not please him. "I hate, I despise your feast days ... though you offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them ... take away from me the noise of your songs" (Amos 5:21-23). David says profoundly in Psalm 51:16, "Thou desirest not sacrifice ... thou delightest not in burnt offering." Why? Because David knew that what really interested God was the heart. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (verse 17). If we get our inner heart attitude right, then we can come and offer our gift at the altar. "Then shalt thou be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering" (verse 19).

What About You?

Have you offended your brother or sister in any way? How about your minister or pastor? Does anyone have anything against you? Have you borrowed something from work or from a friend and not returned it? The owner may have something against you. Has someone given you something, and you've not thanked them for it? Have you criticized someone unjustly, murdering their reputation, making fun of them, belittling them in the eyes of others? If so, don't go to church until you've put it right. You'll be wasting your time and God's. He won't be pleased. He won't hear your prayers. He says so! Deal with the roots. It's a very serious matter.

Jesus has yet more advice to offer. How important this matter is! "Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing." Agree quickly. The longer you leave it, the deeper you'll get yourself in trouble.

A Real-Life Example

Let me tell you about someone I knew personally. This lady told me an astonishing thing. She said her father and mother had not spoken to each other for twenty years. They weren't divorced; they lived in the same house, but they'd never said a word to each other all that time. Their daughter had never heard them speak to each other. If they wanted to communicate to each other, they passed messages on bits of paper, or used the daughter as a go-between. Why? Because of some petty incident way back in the past, some trifling argument that got blown up out of proportion, and instead of one or the other of them seeing sense and apologizing, neither would give way. So they held on to their anger, became totally trapped, and made a living hell for themselves and their daughter. They were "paying the uttermost farthing".

And that's just in this life. The consequences in eternity must be more serious by far. No wonder Jesus said, "Agree quickly". If you end up in prison, you'll have to pay a heavy price. But you can avoid it all now, "while you are in the way", just by having a contrite heart and taking action. If you don't deal with the beginnings now, you'll have to pay the full amount later. The saying is true, and worthy of our serious consideration: "A little trouble now saves a lot of trouble later".

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

Give Peace A Chance

At fourteen years of age I stood outside my parents' bedroom door armed with a carving knife with the intention of murdering my father as he slept in his bed. I was fully capable of such action. The anger which had grown within me for years had developed into an all-consuming hatred. I could think of nothing else but his destruction, When my sister, who was six years younger than I, refused to back down from an argument, I was so incensed that I put my hands around her neck and began to squeeze. I managed to silence her, but it was only when I saw her face going red and her knees begin to buckle in my grasp that I realised what I was doing. I let go of her in disbelieving horror and as she fell to the floor gasping, I ran to my room. Not long after this, my brother, who was four years senior, was also on the receiving end of my fury. For what seemed like hours, he had been teasing and taunting me, and in a fit of anger, I picked up the nearest thing to me and tried to hit him over the head. As he put his hand in the air to protect himself, I saw the carving knife I was holding slash into his arm, which he had thrown up to protect his face, and again was shocked and horrified at what I had done. My mother had been quick to apply the tourniquet to stem the flow of blood and then he was rushed to hospital, where he received stitches to repair the damage. These incidents unnerved me, and made me look at myself as others saw me. My growing resentment had made me so volatile that I would react without thinking to every situation, and the person I was growing into made even me afraid.

Sense Of Responsibility

For a while, the memory of these incidents helped me to control my temper, even though it was against my nature, I tried very hard to think before I reacted. My older sister and only brother had rushed into marriage as soon as possible to escape the environment and had married at very early ages. My mother, who had vowed on countless occasions to divorce my father, repeatedly backed down from any such action, as having three children to care for, she felt financially vulnerable, Thus I felt responsible, at the age of fourteen and the eldest of the three remaining children, to take the matter into my own hands to rid my family of my father who had inflicted physical and mental pain upon us for as long as I could remember. As I premeditated what I would do, my twisted mind had worked out my defence for the police.

After my crime had been discovered, I would reason with them that they knew what went on in my home, after all, we regularly called for them to stop the fighting in the house. I had questioned a policeman on one occasion and asked him why he didn't arrest my father and put him in prison, he replied that he was 'unable to interfere in a domestic argument'. I can remember my frustrated fear as I looked into his eyes and said 'Are you waiting for him to murder one of us before you will take action?' He looked at me with resigned compassion and said 'In a word, yes. I'm sorry lass'. The police knew the position and I felt confident that they would fully understand my actions. Being fourteen and under age, I felt certain that they would take me away and put me in a home where I

would be looked after and perhaps one day be adopted by somebody who would really care for me. This was my dream, and I had deluded myself into thinking that what I was planning to do was not evil, it was my duty.

Fear Wins Out

As I stood outside my parents' door at the dead of night, these thoughts kept urging me to go into my Father's room to plunge the knife into his sleeping body. But the reality of what I was about to do made my heart beat so fast and so loudly that I felt it would awaken everyone in the house. As I began to creep through his door my heart beat so loudly that a dreadful fear came upon me. I thought he would hear my heart before I reached him, wake up and impulsively react to what I was doing by grabbing the knife and plunging it into me. The thought of the outcome being my death instead of his made me back down from this action and I crept to my bedroom in absolute humiliation at my cowardice. I hated myself for not being able to stand up to him.

I left home as soon as I could legally escape. To me, marriage was not an option. I saw it as leaping from the frying pan into the fire. I rented a bed-sit and, away from the violent environment of my family, I began to relax. From the age of nine and throughout all my traumatic years living with my family, I had continually gone to church and regarded myself as a Christian. My new-found freedom allowed me to throw myself into church activities. My total life revolved around the church. It was during this time, when my defences were down a little, that God managed to find a chink in my armour and His sword of truth pierced my heart when I was challenged with what Christianity was all about.

The Truth Hits Home

Alone in my bed-sit I had suffered terrible nightmares that caused me to wake up screaming, sobbing and sweating, making me afraid to go to bed at night. After sharing my traumatic dreams with a very close Christian friend in the hope of receiving some comfort and consolation, my conception of Christianity was verbally attacked. 'If a man says he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar, and the truth is not in him' was quoted to me, 'and that goes for your father, mother, sister or brother. From the tone of your conversation I know that you are full of bitterness and hatred towards your parents.' As he preached at me he told me in no uncertain terms that the essence of Christianity was forgiveness and love, and that if I wanted to call myself a Christian, I had to make a decision to alter my attitude. I was incensed by what I had heard, but God worked on these words and this scripture would not leave me in peace. It gnawed away at my heart as the nightmares continued and I was forced to come to terms with the fact that I was the one with the problem, not my parents. I had left home seeking escape but my problems had come with me and were robbing me of my peace. In my bed-sit my hatred had no effect on my parents, it was only twisting and gnarling me up inside. In abject defeat, I confessed to God that I had a problem and asked Him to rid me of this hatred. Even as I prayed I felt totally justified in my emotions, but I knew that Christianity and hatred were not compatible. I asked God to heal me and change my heart towards my parents.

Change of Attitude

The nightmares immediately ceased and at last peaceful sleep was restored. God then began to work on my attitude and caused me to remember things that my parents had said that had happened to them in their younger years. We are all products of our environments, but I hadn't allowed my parents to have a past. Now God, was reminding me of what they said, I realised that they too had passed through many painful experiences. Being away from the family environment, I could look on objectively and realise that very often my father had been provoked to violence by my mother's cutting words and rebellious spirit. Being a strong woman, she had never willingly backed down, she always seemed to need to be beaten into subjection. As time went on, God did an incredible work in my heart and totally delivered me from my hatred, and replaced it, not only with understanding, but with love for my parents, Unfortunately, as my heart grew warmer towards them, their hearts grew colder towards me, and they adamantly refused to have any dealings with me. Any attempts at reconciliation always seemed to end up in painful arguments.

Plea For Forgiveness

Since I was nine years old, my parents and I had attended the same church and, like myself, they had called themselves Christians, A few years after I left home, my father was elevated in the church and made a deacon which meant that he was called upon each week to administer the communion. It was the church's practice for four deacons to stand on the platform, two deacons to the right and two to the left, to administer the bread and wine, and the congregation would come forward one row at a time to kneel at the communion rail and be served by them. My father would always be on the opposite side to where I was so that he would not have to administer the communion to me.

But one Sunday morning as the communion was in progress, I walked round the back of the church and switched sides so he would have to serve me. 'This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ', he said as he held out the bread towards me. I looked up into his face and said, 'Dad, I'm sorry for all I've done to cause you any grief, will you forgive me?' Pause. 'This is the body of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Again I said, 'Dad, I'm sorry for all I've done to grieve you, will you forgive me?' Pause again. 'This is the ..' 'Dad!' At this point he looked into my eyes, really embarrassed and confused, but I knelt there looking at him, pleading for him to acknowledge me, and eventually with wet eyes he said, 'Yes, I forgive you' to which I replied 'And I forgive you', and I took the bread he was offering and ate it. At the end of the meeting he rushed towards me, put his arms round me and began remonstrating with me as to why I had done this and why I had done that, but I cut him short and said 'Dad, that's the past, let's forgive and forget it and be friends instead of enemies'. At this we embraced as father and daughter and I knew that our hearts had touched. But from the back of the church, my mother had seen our embrace and by the time the evening meeting came, everything was back to normal and they ignored me again.

Another Try

Some time later, I did the same with my mother. While the communion was in progress I went to the back of the church where my mother was sitting with her head bowed in prayer, and, leaning over

her shoulder, said that I was sorry for all the problems I had caused her and asked her forgiveness. She started to argue with me in the silence of the communion and a deacon told us to go out into the vestibule to talk there instead of in the church. I pleaded with her again saying that I was sorry for all the problems I had caused her and asked if she would forgive me. I had caught her off guard and she didn't know how to respond, but feeling trapped by being in the church and not wanting to miss her turn at the communion rail, she quickly said yes, so I grabbed hold of her arm and we walked down the aisle towards the communion rail together and knelt side by side to take the communion. But this also came to nothing and she firmly told me that she 'did not want reconciliation'.

Rebuffs are very hard to take, yet I am amazed that no matter how many rejections I have had it has not thwarted me from trying to be at peace with my parents. It's only proved that God has really done a miracle in my heart in thoroughly removing all the hatred and anger that I once felt. As Christians, we give an account to God for our own actions, not for the actions of others, and for this reason alone, I am truly grateful that God was able to deliver me from this hatred and anger that I bore towards them. For years unforgiven memories ruined my life even after I was removed from the situation - those who choose to hate pay a high emotional price to hold on to their grievances. If we allow God to transform us, by renewing our minds, we can prove for ourselves that Christ's teaching is not mere theory, it is something to be experienced and will bring the joy and peace which all our spirits crave.