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Bible Study

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During the course of Christ's ministry, the Pharisees and others raised questions about Jesus' adherence to the law and accused Him of trying to do away with the laws of Moses. Some of us today continue to look at the Old Testament as a portion of the Bible which is not as important as the New Testament for Christians.

In verses 17-20, Jesus very clearly states that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them. Christ also says "until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the law until every thing is accomplished." Jesus learned the Old Testament so well that when He was just twelve years old, He was well versed enough to astonish the rabbis in the temple. Throughout the Gospels we see that He taught the disciples to understand and believe the Old Testament. After His resurrection (Lk 24:25-27, 44-45), His last teaching to the disciples was from the Old Testament, the laws of Moses, and the fulfillment of the prophecies about Himself.

In verses 26 to 48 Jesus talks not only of the letter of the law but the spirit of the law as well. In verse 20, Jesus says "for I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." What Christ was pointing out was that the Pharisees were caught up in self righteousness, putting faith in strict observance of rituals without the true holiness of the heart required by God. The Pharisees felt that if they strictly observed rituals, God would ignore their sins of anger, hatred, etc., considering it unimportant.

In verses 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, and 44, Jesus gives his disciples six illustrations of the superficiality of the Pharisee. In verses 21-26, Jesus deals with the sin of murder and the emotions that lead up to it. Jesus starts with "it was said do not murder." To the Pharisee (following the letter of the law), the outward action of committing murder was sinful. Christ points out that what leads to murder, including the thoughts and emotions, are just as contemptible. From these feelings develop the extreme passion that leads to murder.

A person can be so angry that it can lead to hatred or contempt and sometimes even abuse. A number of murders that occur are the outcome of uncontrollable anger. If we analyze the law, "thou shall not murder", the spirit of the law seems to say do not stoke up anger, contempt, hatred, impatience, or even irritation, because these sins can lead to breaking the commandment. The remedy for this, says Christ, is that before going to church or prayer you need to ask for forgiveness from the person you have wronged, even if the wrongful deed is presumptive. If we do not make an attempt to put things right, then we are disobeying Christ. This is a very difficult command to follow, is it not? Especially when it's the "other person's fault" and you



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would rather grind his face into the earth. Believe me, getting rid of that burden of anger through the act of forgiving and asking for forgiveness can be therapeutic.

We need to be aware that we run the gamut of emotions continuously, and that some emotions are destructive. Witness our impatience, contempt, irritation, anger, and impure thoughts. The earliest example of destructive thought leading to murder is that of Cain killing Abel. The reason was envy, jealousy and anger. Jesus says that contempt towards any one, especially towards a brother or sister in Christ, is terrible in the sight of God, especially since we are all sinners.

In Mathew 5: 25, 26 Christ talks about something we are all familiar with. How often, when we disagree with someone, have we unthinkingly said, "So sue me?" Jesus says that when you have a disagreement, going to a court of law to solve the dispute is not the answer. He teaches that you should ask for forgiveness of the person and try to resolve the issue. Again, if you look at these verses in depth, they say that the sin of anger, contempt, and so on should be confessed to God in true faith and commitment. Once confessed we should humbly allow the Holy Spirit to work within us to do what is needed in peace, joy, and love.

In vs. 27 – 30 Mathew deals with adultery. Jesus points to the source of the sin of adultery as being equally important. Temptation is not a sin in itself. It is disobeying God's law that is a sin. Indulging in lustful imagination often leads to adultery, so Jesus taught that lusting after someone even if no action is taken is a sin. We often think it is silly when our parents tell us not to watch T.V. programs with violence and sex. Concerned parents realize how impressionable minds can be influenced in an evil way. This is also the bone of contention between concerned parents and those triumphantly waving the U.S. Constitution in the name of free speech at any cost.

Mathew vs. 31-32. Divorce. On the question of divorce Jesus is quite definite. God instituted marriage as a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman. God does not approve of the dissolution of marriage except for marital unfaithfulness. In today's world, where an example of the permanence of marriage is cause for astonishment and divorce is the norm; we need to look again at God's law on the sanctity of marriage. The often quoted reason for divorce is incompatibility; and it may be a legitimate reason. Different backgrounds, domination, violence and abuse may lead to divorce because one partner cannot be expected to lead a miserable life; devoid of hope or happiness. Christians who are incompatible should take God's teaching on anger and reconciliation to heart, and with God's help, try to solve their problems. However, those who have sinned in divorce and remarriage do not need to despair because God always forgives truly repentant sinners. When David married Bathsheba after having Bathsheba's husband murdered, God was very angry and punished David. When David truly repented and mourned at the loss of God's presence, he was forgiven. Christ did bear all our sins for us when He was crucified and it is up to us to accept Christ's gift of His sacrifice. This does not let us off our duties and responsibilities.

Sins, unfortunately, affect "innocent bystanders" and in divorce it is the children who are left with permanent scars. Not all divorced people are actually guilty of sin depending on various circumstances. Whatever it may be, when people return to the Christian fold with repentance and God's promise of forgiveness, the Christians in the



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church should not cause pain with disapproval and finger pointing. On the other hand they should help the people who are already suffering to heal with God's grace.

Verses 33-37 deal with keeping your word once given. Our words reveal what we are and accordingly our character is judged. In the past, it was considered honorable to keep one's word. People would trust you if you proved to be a person who kept your word despite losses. In John Chapter 1 it says "the Word was God." This shows that God puts great value on honesty and truth. He clearly dislikes lying.

Mathew vs. 38-42. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. If you were able to watch the movie 'Munich,' you would have heard this sentiment voiced by Golda Meir. This principle in the Old Testament (Lev.24:20) was given by God as a law for governance. It was not for use in personal vengeance. In fact, Deuteronomy 32:35 says vengeance belongs to God. Christ turns this law, in a personal quarrel, into a meek, self-sacrificing, and loving response. "Turn the other cheek," He says. If someone sues you for your coat; give it to him, plus a cloak. Do more good to the person who tries to harm you. Love your neighbor and your enemy and pray for them. Christ asks the question that should make one stop and think. He asks, if you love only those who love you, is there any difference between you as a Christian compared to others? If you greet only your 'brothers,' what more are you doing than the pagans?

Mahatma Gandhi has been admired and praised for putting these principles of Christ into action. It certainly helped win freedom for India without a lot of blood shed. The oft-quoted passage from 1 Corinthians 13:4 says "Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy..." Christ closes this part of the discourse by saying "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

In conclusion, Matthew 5:17-48 makes it very clear that Christ did not come to do away with the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. He taught His disciples to understand the Old Testament and to believe in it. He taught that the normal life of a person who lives by personal faith in God fulfills the law.

Jesus contrasted the pharisaical approach to the law with what a Christian should do. Pharisees assiduously kept the law by avoiding murder, adultery etc., but ignored the sentiments of anger, lust, lying, and impure thoughts that lead up to those sins. Jesus categorically says that all these emotions that lead to major sin are as equally bad. That is why Jesus compared the Pharisees to white-washed sepulchers, all show outside and empty of godliness inside. Christ taught "a soft answer turns away wrath" and "love thy neighbor as thyself." This includes your enemies as well.