The Heart of the Matter

Matthew 5:21-26

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh in 1984)

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In previous studies we have observed that the Sermon on the Mount includes chapter 5 through 7 of the Gospel of Matthew. In the last study we began a section which runs from Matthew 5:17 through the remainder of chapter 5 in which Jesus unfolds and clarifies the significance of the Old Testament Law as revealed in the character of those who are truly the children of God. In verses 17 through 20, Jesus makes clear what His relationship to the Law really was. He did not come to destroy or annihilate the Law or the Prophets - the Old Testament Scriptures - but to fulfill them.

1. The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

The key verse of the chapter, and possibly the key verse of the entire Sermon on the Mount, is verse 20: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.” The emphasis is on the righteousness necessary to be part of the kingdom which the Messiah will establish. Jesus makes clear that this righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Such a statement would have a great impact on the Jews of Jesus’ day. They had no concept of anyone being able to have a greater righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees. The Jews of today even admire the righteousness of those scribes and Pharisees.

Recently, I was reading a book written by a Jewish man with an introduction written by another man from a college in Philadelphia. These men were arguing that present-day Jews are the descendants of the Pharisees. They further made the point that Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament were totally wrong and were acting out of ignorance when they spoke negatively of the Pharisees. They indicated that no one could exceed the righteousness of those Jews of centuries ago. This makes it clear that such an attitude continues even down to today among the Jews. But, such is not the attitude of Gentiles today toward the Pharisees. When a Gentile today refers to someone as a Pharisee, it is not intended to be a compliment.
I would agree, tragically, that the unbelieving Jews of today are the descendants of the Pharisees. However, they are not alone as this study of Matthew 5:21-26 will show. Protestants, Catholics and other religious groups fall into the same mold because their approach is the same as that of the Pharisees: They desire to obtain righteousness by their own good deeds and strenuous efforts.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day were meticulous in trying to keep every little detail of the Law in its external conformities, but they neglected the need for inner cleansing and purity. Jesus was saying that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was not good enough because the righteousness produced and acquired by religious activity will not get anyone into the kingdom of heaven.

The same is still true today. Many people sit in churches on Sunday morning because they are trying to gain acceptance before God. That is part of the procedure they feel is necessary in order to be acceptable before Him and to get into heaven. Such individuals are following the pattern of the Pharisees. But Jesus said you must have a righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees to get into heaven.

From verse 21 through the end of chapter 5 of Matthew, Jesus elaborates on the righteousness that He is talking about. It is not a righteousness of external conformity to the Law, but a righteousness that comes out of a heart that is right before God. Without a proper heart condition, you cannot be acceptable before God regardless of your external conduct. In this passage Jesus is going to show how the force of various aspects of the Law goes beyond external behavior.

2. The Law of Murder

The first issue Jesus discusses, murder, is found in verse 21: “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’” The Old Testament Law given through Moses to the people of old said, “Thou shalt not kill” (Ex. 20:13, KJV). Jesus’ statement, “You shall not commit murder,” gives the impact of the original command as indicated in the New American Standard Bible: “You shall not commit murder” (Ex. 20:13).

People of the peace movement today often quote, “Thou shalt not kill.” But this command has nothing at all to do with warfare; it has to do with murder. That is clearly brought out in the Old Testament as God Himself sent Israel into the Promised Land and commanded the Jews to kill all of their enemies. He later judged Israel for not annihilating their enemies as He had told the Israelites to do. Thus it is not hard to understand that murder is the issue here. Deuteronomy 16 clarifies that point as it elaborates on the responsibility of dealing with those who were brought before the courts in Israel for judgment.

The scribes and Pharisees said that as long as you did not commit acts of murder, you have obeyed the commandment. They felt that not committing murder gave one a righteousness that made him acceptable to God. But Jesus went on to explain His position in verse 22: “But I say
to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”

The emphasis in verse 22 is on the word “I.” It could be translated, “I myself say to you.” In other words, the Law was given through Moses, and the scribes and Pharisees made their own interpretation of it. But now Jesus Himself is going to give the only valid interpretation. Chapter 7 will show that the people were amazed that Jesus taught as one having authority. He had the power and authority to take the Law and interpret what it said. He was, in fact, going beyond what the Law said to what it really meant.

3. Jesus’ Amplification and Interpretation

Jesus said that if you are angry with your brother, you are guilty. If you call him “Raca,” then you could go to the supreme court, the Sanhedrin. And if you call him a fool, you are in danger of hell. As you read these verses, you may get the impression that He is building the statements in order to indicate progression in seriousness. But the point is repeated emphasis. He is saying basically the same thing each time but is giving a little different emphasis to drive home the point.

The anger Jesus is referring to there denotes a settled, brooding kind of anger. “Raca” means empty-headed. Today, a similar expression might be dimwit or blockhead. But the attitude to which Jesus is referring is not the same as when Charlie Brown calls people blockheads in the comic strip. This is more serious than that. To say “You fool” is to cast aspersions on the character of the individual with an attitude of contempt or disdain.

The word Jesus uses in this passage to describe anger is a different word than is used for the fiery kind of anger that flashes up and dies down. This word refers to an anger that is tolerated, brooded over and harbored in the heart. If someone does something to rile you up, then you mull it over. Months or years later you still have not forgotten. It is seething underneath as you look for chances to get back at the person who hurt you or secretly hope that God brings tragedy or calamity into his life so that he will learn a lesson.

“Raca” expresses the disdain you have for an individual against whom you have been harboring anger. Before long you begin thinking of him as a fool – worthless or of no value. When you harbor anger against a person, you begin to look for things that are wrong with him, an opportunity to run him down. As you belittle him, you develop a feeling of superiority – you think you are better than he is and he deserves to be punished! You think it is time he was revealed for what he really is. These feelings often blend together as one comes out of the other.

4. The Relationship of Anger and Murder

The whole issue of anger is associated with murder. Jesus is just going back to basic issues. Do not lose the connection between verses 21 and 22. Jesus is looking at the command, “You shall not murder,” and is giving the background for it. If you are going to obey this command,
it is not enough simply to have never killed anyone. The condition of your heart is what is being examined before God. You can be a murderer in your heart even though you have not carried it out in your deeds. You would be glad if God would intervene and give the person some dreaded disease which would take his life. But do not forget that God is looking into the heart where the motives are. It reveals an attitude of spiritual disdain and contempt, looking down on others.

Such was characteristic of the Pharisees’ attitudes toward others. In the Gospel of John, Jesus healed the blind man who was later called before the religious leaders who demanded that he tell them what had happened. He told them that Jesus had healed him, but they did not like that. They demanded that he tell them again. Finally, in exasperation he blurted out, "Do you want to become His followers too?" Their haughty response to him, "You were born entirely in sins, and are you teaching us?" (John 9:34)

That is the attitude Jesus is talking about. The Pharisees saw the man as a worthless sinner and wondered if he thought he could teach them something. This indicates their spiritual contempt and their disdain for him as a person. They saw him as a sinner before God, but not themselves. They saw themselves as better than that.

The same attitude was displayed in Luke as two men came to pray before God. "The tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’" (Luke 18:13). But what did the religious leader say? "God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer" (v. 11). He was looking on the other man with contempt and disdain.

A proper concept of oneself is closely related to the first two beatitudes in Matthew 5:3,4: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Those who recognize their spiritual poverty are aware that they are guilty sinners, unworthy before God, deserving of condemnation -- but they cast themselves upon God’s mercy and grace. The person with an attitude described in Matthew 5:22 does not see himself in that way. He feels that he is better than others and has a contempt for them. He has a disregard for their value which can actually lead to the act of murder. Such actions come as a result of brooding over anger and hatred.

5. Anger and the Believer

Paul warned in Colossians 3 that this attitude should not characterize those who are the children of God. Such improper attitudes happen easily even in church as people harbor improper attitudes and feelings toward other believers. They begin to seethe inside, and as time passes the attitudes grow worse and the feelings grow more intense. But in Colossians 3, Paul says believers have died with Christ and have been raised to a new life with Him. Then he mentions all the characteristics of the old person that we should put away: "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth" (v. 8). Such attitudes and actions should not characterize the believer. Believers should never tolerate those kinds of feelings and attitudes toward others.
James 1:19, 20 gives an explanation: “This you know, my beloved brethren. But let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” The anger James is referring to is a response to a personal affront or a personal wrong. It produces a desire for vengeance. First John 3:15 is connected very closely with what Jesus is talking about: “Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” The connection is not hard to see. If you have that kind of hatred in your heart, God sees you as a murderer. You have a murderer’s heart even though you have not committed the act. Therefore, he who is angry with his brother has a murderer’s heart. He who views his brother with contempt and disdain has a murderer’s heart. God sees our lives and evaluates what is on the inside, that is what He sees as the basic root of the character of such a person. God sees that the individual has a murderer’s heart because it is full of anger and hatred toward a brother.

There is a place for righteous anger using the same word we have been talking about. Believers are to be angry over sin and over rebellion against God. A danger is presented when considering a passage such as this one; one might conclude that Christians ought to be passive, easy-going, never riled or ruffled.

However, Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, “Be angry, and yet do not sin.” Wait a minute, you say. I just read in James that I am not to be angry because man’s anger does not work God’s righteousness. Now Paul tells me to get angry. Isn’t that a contradiction in Scripture? No. The determining factor is what your anger is directed toward. Is your anger a result of a personal affront or wrong? Or is it anger toward sin?

Ephesians 4:26 gives another guideline for anger: “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” You must deal with your anger immediately and not give yourself an opportunity to brood over it.

We know that not all anger is wrong because Jesus manifested anger on some occasions. In one situation He was going to heal the withered hand of a man on the Sabbath Day. The religious leaders were hoping to trap Him. If they could get Him to violate their concept of the Sabbath Day, they would accuse Him. They were not interested in the display of the power of God or the manifestation of His Messianic character in the healing. They wanted Him to violate their concept of the Law. Notice Jesus’ response in Mark 3:5: “And after looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored.” Jesus was manifesting anger, yet it was anger in the context of accomplishing God’s righteousness. He was not angry about something they had done or said to Him or about Him. He was angry about their sin. Their rebellion against God aroused His anger.

Jesus displayed this kind of anger on a number of occasions. “And Jesus entered the temple and cast out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer”; but you are making it a
robbers’ den’” (Matt. 21:12,13). Anger is manifested here against sinful conduct. These people were in rebellion against God. Jesus displayed His anger in Matthew 23:17 when He said, “You fools . . .” But Jesus said in Matthew 5 if anyone calls another person a fool, he is in danger of hell fire, yet in Matthew 23 we find him saying “You fools.” However, He then went on to correct their error. You must notice that this is in the context of their spiritual condition and attitude. It is not a matter of personal spiritual superiority or viewing them as worthless persons. It is a matter of recognizing their spiritual condition of rebellion against God.

Anger must be directed toward sin and rebellion displayed against God. Believers must be careful about an attitude of spiritual superiority. We as believers are, at best, unworthy sinners, guilty before God. If it were not for His mercy and grace, we would be destined for hell just as the unbeliever is. We are not superior. We are all guilty sinners before God. But some, by His mercy and grace, have been cleansed and forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the difference.

Believers also need to be careful in their attitudes toward fellow believers. We as believers should not allow a grudge or resentment over something from the past to affect our attitudes toward them. You may feel you have just grounds for anger or resentment. You may have been truly wronged. That still does not mean you have the right to harbor anger, resentment or an improper attitude. It helps me when I realize that I am imperfect and I have wronged people as well. I have been forgiven by God in spite of all my wrongs, and I ought to be one who is forgiving others just as I have been forgiven.

Unfortunately, anger is a sin that is tolerated in the church. People brood over wrong and mull over difficulties they have been through. If something happens on Sunday which they think is a real put down, they get up on Monday brooding and mulling it over and feeding on it. By Tuesday it is worse. That goes on for weeks and months. Before long, it becomes a pattern of life that ruins the believer’s walk with the Lord.

The background for the concept Jesus is discussing is found in Mark 7:21,22: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness.” Notice that murder comes from the heart along with all the other sins mentioned. Jesus is pointing out that the intent of the Law is to get to the root of the problem. It is not enough simply to tell someone not to kill another person. It is necessary to prescribe the conduct of those who have a transformed character. God always intended that the Jewish people would recognize Him as their Savior and believe in Him so that He might save them and manifest His character in their conduct. The Jews had forgotten about character. They had forgotten about the transformed heart. They were saying that if you do not murder, you will fulfill the Law. But that does not get to the basics. If you do not have a murderer’s heart, then you will not murder. If you do not have a murderer’s heart, then you are fulfilling the Law as God demands.

There may be an indication in Matthew 5 that in the Millennium when Christ rules on the earth, judgment will be carried out as is described in these verses. No overt act of sin will be tolerated in the Millennium. There will be no acts of murder. So a person with a murderer’s heart who
plans a murder will be judged by Christ before the deed is carried out. This will be realized in the context of the Millennium when Christ rules on the earth and the attitudes of the heart are judged to prevent any act of murder from occurring. The principle of this passage is operative even today.

6. The Consequences of Failure

It is important to understand the seriousness of what Christ is talking about when He says someone will “be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matt. 5:22). The word translated “hell” (gehenna) is used eleven times in the New Testament. Gehenna was the dump outside Jerusalem in a large valley southwest of the city. It was the garbage dump for Jerusalem. Gehenna began to be used as a place of human sacrifice in the days of King Ahaz.

Gehenna is referred to in Jeremiah 7 as the valley of Hinnom. “And they have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind” (v. 31). This passage shows how fanatically zealous people can be in their religious convictions. In this setting, people are burning their own sons and daughters as human sacrifices. That is how dedicated and committed they are to the worship of the fire god, Molech. God says the concept never entered His mind that they should do this. He is showing how wrong people can be no matter how zealous they are. You have to be fanatically committed to your religious ideals to be willing to give your child to human sacrifice, yet that is what they were doing in the valley of Hinnom. Such actions are despicable to God. He cannot stand it. He never even conceived of it!

Where did such an idea come from? It comes from the doctrine of demons. You can meet the foul character who got this all going in 2 Chronicles 28:3: “Moreover, he [Ahaz] burned incense in the valley of Ben-hinnom, and burned his sons in fire, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord had driven out before the sons of Israel.” The sons of Israel have adopted the religious practices of the nations God drove out before them because of their vileness. Ahaz sacrificed his own sons as human sacrifices in Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom.

According to 2 Chronicles 33:6, Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, did the same thing: “And he made his sons pass through the fire in the valley of Ben-hinnom; and he practiced witchcraft, used divination, practiced sorcery, and dealt with mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking Him to anger.” This does not mean they walked through fire to the other side, but rather, they passed through the fire to the god Molech. They were human sacrifices in the valley of Hinnom.

Do not overlook in verse 6 what false worship does to God. It provokes Him to anger. We sometimes say, Well, at least they are good, moral, religious people. People who are not worshiping God according to His instructions are provoking and stirring Him to anger.

Later in Israel’s history a godly king, Josiah, came to the throne in Jerusalem and wanted to do
away with the system of human sacrifices that had been practiced in the valley of Hinnom. Second Kings 23:10 tells about Josiah: “He also defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech.” Josiah wanted to do away with this practice, so he defiled the place by making it the garbage dump of Jerusalem. All of the trash, refuse and dung from the city was dumped out there for centuries until the time of Christ. Characteristic of this place were the fires which were kept burning all the time -- night and day. This fact is referred to by Christ in the Gospels as the place where the fires are not quenched and the worms have not died. That means the fires burn there constantly. It was an abominable place, and Christ used it as a picture of hell, a place where the fire never goes out. He used it to describe a place of suffering and torment. That is the background of Gehenna.

7. The Reality of Hell

A couple of passages in the New Testament speak of this concept. Revelation 14 describes part of the Tribulation, a seven-year period of suffering. “And another angel, a third one, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives a mark on his forehead or upon his hand, he also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb’” (vs. 9,10). The mark on the forehead or on the hand marks off an individual as a worshiper of the anti-Christ, not a worshiper of Christ. Such individuals will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb.

Satan does not rule hell; Jesus Christ does. The people tormented in hell will be tormented in His presence. The description continues, “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (v. 11). There are some who have tried to say the concept of hell means destruction, then the suffering is over. But that concept does not fit here, because that would be some kind of rest; it would be relief from suffering and torment if you could cease to exist. The emphasis of Scripture is that they are tormented day and night into the ages of the ages. This is the strongest way to say eternity in the Greek language. Torment and suffering will go on forever and ever.

Some people try to approach things with human logical and say, *Do you really believe that Jesus Christ, the loving God and Savior that He is, could have people in His very presence who would be suffering untold agony and torment day and night forever and ever?* That is what the Scripture says. Did Jesus not say that not one jot or tittle could pass away until it is all fulfilled?

*Oh, that is more terrible than I can ever understand,* people say. I cannot understand it either. It is more terrible than I can imagine, but I know that not one jot or tittle can pass away until everything is done just as God said. That means people will be tormented day and night forever and ever without one-half of one second’s rest from torment in all eternity. After hundreds of billions of trillions of years as we mark time, the torment will still continue on and on and on.
Satan is not in hell today. He does not rule hell. But he will be cast into hell for eternity at the end of the thousand-year reign of Christ. “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). A thousand years earlier at the beginning of the Millennium, the beast (the anti-Christ) and the false prophet have been cast into hell. A thousand years later they are still there, and now Satan joins them where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Revelation 20:15 also says that anyone whose name is not in the Lamb’s Book of Life joins them in this torment which will continue day and night forever and ever. That is hell. It is exceedingly awful.

It is amazing how people will debate it and try to skirt the issue. There are people today, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, who teach that hell is not eternal suffering. But it is eternal because God says it is. If it is more awful than we can imagine, it is still true because God said it.

The thing that amazes me is how people can argue whether or not God could really have prepared such an awful place when the simple thing to do is believe in His salvation and avoid the place. But people would rather debate whether or not God could send people to hell than to take the remedy that He gives to avoid it. This shows how sinful we really are. God assures us that hell awaits those who do not believe in Him and the salvation He has provided. Hell is going to be populated by religious people who have the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees but are lacking the righteousness of God that is needed for heaven.

When Jesus speaks of being “guilty enough to go into the fiery hell” (Matt. 5:22), we ought to understand what He is talking about -- eternal condemnation, eternal suffering, forever and ever. This shows the seriousness of not having a heart that has been cleansed by God and made right before Him. And it shows how serious the matter is for the scribes and Pharisees to say that as long as you do not commit an act of murder, you will be pleasing to God. Jesus is saying that there are many men and women who have not committed an act of murder who are in danger of going to hell because they have a murderer’s heart. They harbor anger, resentment and contempt for others which is a revelation of their spiritually depraved condition. The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked above all things.

8. Illustration Regarding Your Relationship With God

At this point Jesus proceeds to give two illustrations of what He has been saying in verse 22. The word “therefore” in verse 23 indicates that what He is about to say is built on His previous discussion. These, then, are some practical applications of the statements He has already made. He continues in verses 23 and 24: “If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.” The point is that first you should make things right with your brother. In this passage Jesus is referring to a fellow Jew, but in the broader context it would include a fellow believer. If a brother has something against you and you know it, go and make it right.

The Jews of Jesus’ day concluded that if someone had something against them, all they needed to
do was make a sacrifice that would wash it clean, then on they could go. People have not changed a bit. They view going to church on Saturday night or Sunday as a spiritual car wash. If you have a bad week and get dirty, you just drive through the car wash and it cleans everything up; then you drive for another week, and as it gets dirty again, you drive through the car wash again. Many people recognize that they have lied, cheated or lusted during the past week. So when the weekend rolls around, they just drive their spiritual car through the wash and everything comes out all right. That is their concept of a religious life. Do you know why so many people go to church week after week where salvation or the Word of God is not taught? It is because going there is their spiritual car wash.

That is what the scribes and Pharisees did in Jesus’ day. If they failed to measure up to what they knew was God’s standard, they felt they could simply offer a sacrifice and go on with their lives. They had no concept of the fact that their hearts were not being changed. If we are not changed on the inside, no amount of external cleansing will take care of the real problem.

Sometimes when I take my car through the car wash, I sit on the inside as it goes through. But unfortunately, nothing happens to the inside as I sit there. I could take my car through the wash for the next ten years, but the inside would get dirtier and dirtier unless I did something about it. The wash only cleans the outside.

All many people are interested in when it comes to a religious experience is to get cleaned up on the outside. That was the emphasis of the scribes and Pharisees. But God says He looks on the inside where the real examination takes place.

In the example Jesus gives, it is important to see that the order must be right. You do not present your offering as an act of worship to try to cover up for the past. You must first make things right with your brother, then make your offering to God. Religious activity cannot replace right action.

It is amazing how some people try to reverse the order even in churches today. They sit in the church service while harboring grudges and resentment against other people. They try to cover it up and think that as long as they attend church, sing the songs and go through the motions, somehow that will make them all right. Such worship is not acceptable, because the heart is not right. Whom do they think they are fooling?

9. Old Testament Examples of Sacrifice versus Obedience

Looking at the Old Testament is a reminder that the demands of God have not changed. David said in Psalm 51:6, “Behold, Thou dost desire truth in the innermost being.” What Jesus is saying about the Law is no different from what God demanded a thousand years earlier as David wrote. David knew the significance of the Law. God demands truth in the innermost being. David continues: “For Thou dost not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; Thou art not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise” (vs. 16, 17). The basic issue is the condition of the heart -- the inside rather than the outside. The psalmist wrote in another passage, “If I
regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps. 66:18). That is very simple, isn’t it? Wickedness harbored in the heart prevents a right relationship with God.

Isaiah 1 reveals how God feels about improper worship. “‘What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?’ says the Lord. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts?’” (vs. 11,12). God views the improper worship of these people as trampling His temple. It is a desecration. “Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and Sabbath, the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them. So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you, yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood” (vs. 13-15).

Jeremiah wrote similarly in Jeremiah 7:9,10: “Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered!’ -- that you may do all these abominations?” The Jews had come to the conclusion that they could do whatever they wanted during the week, then come and offer sacrifices to God and everything would be all right. They viewed religious experiences as a spiritual car wash. They thought they could commit all their sins, practice all their vile acts, then go through their religious observances and be clean.

What kind of God would He be to just clean up after us so we could go sin more? If you have not dealt with the issues of the heart, you have not dealt with the real problem. A right relationship with God is more important than any kind of sacrifice one could offer. “Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22). A right relationship with God comes by faith in Him and the revelation of Himself. Without coming to Him in faith, the external activity is unacceptable to God.

The offering of sacrifices is not the means for getting rid of sin. Neither is religious activity the means of accomplishing that. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 15:8). Only those who have been cleansed by faith can come and offer an acceptable sacrifice. But even the sacrifices of those who have not been cleansed in their hearts are an abomination to God.

All of these passages point out that if you have not been cleansed by faith in the salvation God has provided, your worship is an abomination to Him. We Christians sometimes lose sight of that. We sometimes think that people who are in cults and other religious groups that are not in agreement with the Word are at least good people. They are religious people and they worship. But God says that is an abomination to Him. He hates and despises their religious activities. Oh, you say, you should not speak against other people’s religions. But I am speaking against that which God hates, despises and finds abominable. Their sacrifices and worship are an
abomination to Him if they have not been cleansed by faith in the death and resurrection of God’s Son.

Two verses in the Book of Proverbs make similar statements about those whose worship is unacceptable to God. Proverbs 21:27 says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination.” Proverbs 28:9 says, “He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, even his prayer is an abomination.” God hates even the prayers of those who do not listen to His Word. How many religious people offer prayers to God who do not listen to His Word and submit to it? God says He hates their prayers; they are an abomination to Him. These verses show what a serious matter this is. Therefore, when Jesus speaks about coming to worship God with a right heart, one must understand how significant it is to make things right with other believers if there are difficulties between believers. So the first illustration Jesus gives in Matthew 5:23,24 relates to our relationship with God.

10. Illustration Regarding Your Relationship With People

The second illustration He gives in verses 25 and 26 is a practical principle relating to our relationship with other people. Jesus said, “Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.” This is simply good, practical advice in pursuing reconciliation with those with whom we have problems. Such a course saves much personal heartache. It is necessary for the proper worship of God, and it is also necessary in having the right kind of life.

We live in a day where society is governed by the courts. We have a proliferation of lawyers and lawsuits. This passage gives good, practical advice for believers to follow: Seek to work things out through reconciliation. Another way of approaching the same principle is to realize that you do not always have to have your way and show that the other person is wrong. If you insist on your own way, that often results in heartache and further problems.

What is your attitude toward others? You ought to seek to make things right before you attempt to worship God. Do not think you can worship Him instead of making things right. You should be seeking harmony with others even for your personal benefit to avoid the heartache and difficulties you will face if you do otherwise.

How is your attitude? No one else can know what you are thinking. You may have resentment in your heart against another person. You may have anger or an attitude of contempt which you are covering up so others cannot see it. But you cannot cover it up from God. He knows the condition of your heart.

Back the question up one step further. Has your heart ever been cleansed by faith in Jesus Christ? You can go through all the external motions of going to church, singing the songs, listening to the same sermons and doing the same things for a hundred years and still be in danger of going to hell. Salvation is not a matter of going through religious externals. It is a
matter of believing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died to pay the penalty for your sins. If you will believe in Him, God will cleanse your heart on the inside and make you a new person. He will give you a new heart so you can be an acceptable person before Him. Then your conduct will be different because you will be a new creature in Christ.