

Matthew 5:20 For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Righteousness is that which satisfies the demands of goodness or law. It is doing what is right. To be called righteous means that one is in a right standing with God. The Jews primarily thought of righteousness in terms of keeping the law.

The scribes and Pharisees were the religious teachers in Jesus' day who to the average Jew had reached the highest level of righteousness possible in keeping the 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions of the Mosaic Law (Stott, 74) and the thousands of rules in their own legal system. Therefore, for Jesus to demand even greater righteousness must have left His hearers gasping in dismay and conscious of their own sinfulness.

Verses 21-47 explain how the Pharisees' and scribes' righteousness should be surpassed. They reveal that true righteousness is to exceed Pharisaic righteousness in *kind* rather than *degree*. True righteousness is from the heart rather than mere outward observance. It is not enough to be content with an external and formal obedience, for the righteousness that is pleasing to God is inward righteousness of mind and motive (cf. Ro. 2:28-29; 9:6; Phil. 3:3). Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8).

This is the righteousness foreseen by the prophets as one of the blessings of the Messianic age (Jer. 3:33; Ezek. 36:27) when God would put His Law and His Spirit within us. Without this righteousness, none shall enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:21-47 is divided into five blocks of material each beginning with "You have heard ... but I say to you" (vv. 21, 27, 33, 38, 43). In this formula Jesus is not rejecting the OT and replacing it with His own teaching, but He is contrasting the Pharisees' interpretation of the OT with its true intent. He is displacing the erroneous idea that righteousness can be achieved by external conformity to the Law.

Matthew 5:21-22

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER ' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

The prohibition "Thou shall not kill" (Exo. 20:13) wasn't against taking a life under every circumstance, but was directed toward homicide and murder, for elsewhere the Bible condones capital punishment as well as wars designed to exterminate pagan tribes that inhabited the land (Stott, 82-83).

The scribes and the Pharisees were attempting to restrict the breadth of the commandment by limiting it to taking a human life. Jesus insisted that the application was much broader; it included thoughts and words, anger and insult (Stott, 83).

Jesus is not saying that anger and murder are exactly the same thing, rather He is stating that anger is murderous in principle. Anger is at the root of murder and therefore tantamount to it in God's sight. In the same way John said, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 Jn. 3:15). Since murder and anger are in the same category, the person who has hatred in his heart is liable to the same penalties that the murderer exposes himself to.

Mosaic legislation required that anyone who committed murder had to appear before a court to be judged. Judgment was certain. In the same way, God's judgment in relation to anger is also certain and Jesus is clear that the penalty for it is hell. Therefore, we must do all that is in our power to get rid of anger as quickly as possible (Eph. 4:26-27; Matt 18:30-34).

Here the word for hell is gehenna. It comes from a Hebrew word ge-hinnom (Valley of Hinnom), which is a ravine south of Jerusalem. The valley was once associated with the pagan god Moloch and the disgusting rituals that took place in Moloch worship (child sacrifice – II Ki. 23:10; II Chron. 28:3; sorcery - 33:6; Jer. 7:31). When King Josiah abolished these practices he defiled the valley by making it a dumping ground for garbage and the corpses of criminals (II Ki. 23:10). In Jesus' day it was a trash heap and smoldering with fires used to burn the trash. The place then became a picture of the eternal torment that awaits the unbelieving (Carson, 149; cf. Matt. 3:12; 25:41; Heb. 10:26; Rev. 14:10; 20:12-15).

Jesus now gives two illustrations related to anger. The first illustration deals with our attitude toward others during worship, the second is in a judicial setting. The first concerns a brother, the second an adversary. Remarkably neither deal with "your" anger but with our course of action if we make *someone else* angry. In other words, both deal with our response toward people we have angered rather than people we are angry with. This makes Jesus' point even stranger. If we are truly concerned about anger and hatred we should also be concerned when we cause others to be angry as well (cf. Eph. 6:4).

Matthew 5:23-26

23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

The picture is drawn from Jewish life as an individual is about to offer a sacrifice in the Temple. It is at this moment, when about to cast himself upon divine mercy and seek God's forgiveness that he recalls

that a brother has a complaint against him. What is he to do? Is he to say, "As soon as I have offered this gift I will go straight to my brother, and make things right?" No. He is to leave his offering and first reconcile with his brother. Not to do so makes our worship of God a mockery.

Jesus had already told us "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matt. 5:9). Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Ro.12:18).

The converse of this truth is expressed in Mark 11:25, 26: "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions." Likewise Jesus taught us to ask God to "forgive us our debts as we have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12).

The Bible continually reminds us that God is more concerned with our hearts than our outward religious activity (I Sam. 15:22; Ps.51:16, 17; Isa. 1:11-17; Jer. 7:8-11). It is more important to restore relationships with others than to perform religious duties.

By way of application, it is more important to be clear of your offense before your brother than to show up at church to worship. We should get our relationships in order so that we can worship God from a pure heart.

The second example is from the law (5:25, 26).

In Jesus' day an offender was thrown into jail until his offense was paid. Because he was in jail he had no means to repay his debt and be released unless friends or family paid it for him. Thus people were wise to settle matters on the road to court rather than at the judgment.

Luke 12:57-59 helps make this passage easier to understand. In Luke Jesus warns men to be reconciled to God before it's too late. Both Luke and Matthew are stressing the same urgency of being reconciled as soon as possible – one to God, the other to men.

Many think that they can enter the Kingdom simply because they are good people. "At least I haven't murdered anyone", they say. Yet here Jesus strips all illusions of self-righteousness away, for who is not guilty of anger?

ADDITIONAL NOTES: OUR PROBLEMS WITH HELL

Probably the greatest difficulty people have in believing in hell is in reconciling the love of God with eternal punishment. If we, whose love cannot compare to the love of God, could not send someone to hell, how could God do such a thing? Furthermore, the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. No matter how bad someone is, no one deserves an eternity of torment.

In order to discuss this difficult subject, we must understand a little about the attributes of God. An attribute is an inherent quality of God that helps define who He is. For example, we say God is love, holy, eternal, and unchangeable. All of these describe qualities about Him, therefore, they are called attributes.

God's wrath, unlike His love, is not considered one of His attributes. Wrath is the response of His holiness to sin. Where there is no sin, there is no wrath. By contrast, the love of God will always be there. When a holy God confronts sinful man, wrath is the natural outcome. If we dilute the wrath of God we dilute His holiness.

One problem we face in understanding how a God of love could send someone to hell is that we don't understand perfect holiness, love, nor do we understand the hideous nature of sin. If we were honest with ourselves a lot of the things the Bible calls sin don't seem all that bad. Consequently, we cannot understand why God would have such a severe reaction to them. If we truly understood the nature of sin we would free ourselves of it completely for it would be utterly offensive to us. The fact that we can live among sinners rather easily and take pleasure in sin ourselves demonstrates how far short we fall of perfect holiness.

Therefore, we must first come to grips with the fact that we cannot understand God's holiness and His violent response to sin based on our own understanding of it. God has revealed the proper response to sin based on His own perfect character. The response to sin is wrath and judgment. If we do not share the same response it is because we are flawed, not Him.

Secondly, we are confused about how love and wrath could co-exist since in our experience anger and love usually exist in two separate compartments. Love drives out wrath and wrath drives out love. We come closest in bringing the two together when we must deal with a wayward child, but normally we do not think of a wrathful person as loving.

But this is not the way it is with God. God's wrath is not a blind, emotional outburst. It is a reasonable response to the sinner who affronts His holiness. If sin did not offend Him, He would not be holy. Men deserve the wrath of God. They do not deserve His love. If God loves, it is because He chooses to do so for there is nothing in us that compels Him to love us. The real mystery isn't in God's wrath it is in His love.

Thirdly, many of us are mistaken in believing that forgiveness entails overlooking another's faults, turning a blind eye, or that it is a necessary requirement of love. That is, if someone sins against us or God, we believe that we are required to forgive them unconditionally or we are not acting in love. The assumption is that to love is to forgive and to forgive is to love. Of course, love does often lead to forgiveness, and forgiveness is a loving thing to do, but the question is must God forgive us if He loves us? The answer is, No! In spite of the fact that God loves us, forgiveness is not unconditional. This is obvious or all would be saved and the cross would be unnecessary. Forgiveness of sin is conditioned upon repentance and faith in Christ. God demonstrates His love for us through the cross, but at the same time forgiveness cannot take place apart from it.

Finally, even if we were to convince ourselves that there was no hell, denial does not change reality. Failure to believe that God is a God of wrath actually lessens our ability to appreciate the cross. The cross is where the love and holiness of God meet. God is so holy that He cannot endure the slightest sin, but so great is His love that He poured out His wrath upon His Son to our benefit.