b. Fulfilling the Law: Six Examples (5:21–47)

“There are six antitheses; they divide easily into two groups of three. Of the first group, 5:21–26 discuss murder; 5:27–30, adultery; and 5:31–32, divorce. The second group, indicated at the beginning by the term πάλιν (“again”), includes the sections on perjury (5:33–37), retaliation (5:38–42), and the treatment of the enemy (5:43–48).¹ In these antitheses “Jesus is not criticizing the OT but the understanding of the OT many of his hearers adopted.”²

These are examples of what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:20 when he said “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.” In verses 21 through 48 we will learn “how” to exceed their righteousness.

(1) Murder (5:21–26)

Matthew 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’

“You shall not murder.” (Exodus 20:13, ESV)

You have heard

Not all of the things that were “heard” came from the Old Testament. “…in every case Jesus contrasts the people’s misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points, according to his own authority as the law’s “fulfiller”….”³

it was said εἶπον “…“it was said” represents a relatively rare passive form of the verb, errhethē, which is used in the NT specifically for quotations of Scripture or divine pronouncements….⁴ We know that what they often heard was the opinion and teaching of men. But in this case it was actually from scripture. “This is thus not a reference to human teaching but to divine declaration.”⁵ But it turns out that they misunderstood what was said, at least in the full implication of the command. Their view of this text was very narrow, they missed its implications for a broad range of human relationships.

to those of old

“This tradition was given “to the men of old” (τοῖς ἀρχαίοις) and has thus been handed down through many generations to the present. The evaluation of this tradition, however, is negative. Rather than constituting a proof verified by antiquity, the chain of

tradition is judged to be a history of error." This phrase "refers to authorities of the distant past. We are not told precisely who these authorities were. …. Rabbinic parallels show that “the men of old” can be biblical authorities or, from a later perspective, the early rabbis.”

All this reminds us of the only source of truth. As important as the opinion of Godly men may be, it is only the word of God that is the real and true source of truth. All men by the nature of their fallen condition can error. So we must continually return to the Word in search of truth.

**murder φονεύω** “To murder, kill a man unjustly….”

There are several Greek words that refer to killing, however, Jesus picks the one that only refers to killing a man unjustly.

“The LXX wording of Exod 20:13; Deut 5:18 correctly uses phoneuō, which like the Hebrew rāṣah refers specifically to “murder,” the intentional and unlawful taking of life, rather than a more general word for “kill.””

Jesus is not opposed to capital punishment as some incorrectly suppose when they read the Ten Commandments, but he is opposed to murder.

But, Jesus is saying, “One has not conformed to the better righteousness of the kingdom simply by refraining from homicide.” Jesus will now make it clear that this phrase contains within it much more than a prohibition to murder.

**liable ἔνοχος** “…pertaining to being guilty and thus deserving some particular penalty—‘guilty and deserving, guilty and punishable by.’”

**judgment κρίσις** “Separation, figuratively division, dissension, decision, crisis, turn of affairs, judgment.” “…what is in view is the whole process of being brought before the court, found guilty, and punished.”

“Jesus begins by citing the crime of murder in Exodus 20:13, for which biblical law required a Jewish court to execute the sentence of death (Gen 9:5–6; Deut 21:1–9….)

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But Jesus presses beyond behavior specifically punished by law to the kind of heart that generates such behavior.\textsuperscript{15}

**Matthew 5:22** But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother [without cause] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.

**But I say to you**

This statement \textit{But I say to you}, rejects “the claim by present interpreters that a specific interpretation of a Torah commandment—namely, the one they advocated—had been revealed to the men of old whence it came down to the present. What is not rejected is … the Torah quotation itself.”\textsuperscript{16} “What Jesus says ("But I tell you") is thus contrasted with what the disciples have hitherto heard, a superficial and potentially misleading reading of the OT texts as rules of conduct, whereas Jesus is now going to indicate the right (and deeper) interpretation and use of those same God-given texts.”\textsuperscript{17} It is by these evaluations and pronouncements that he is filling full (fulfilling) the content of the Old Testament.

\textit{angry ὀργίζω} “…be very angry, be enraged….”\textsuperscript{18}

One might wonder why the word anger is used here instead of the word hate. Perhaps it is because hate can be hidden deep in the soul with little visible evidence of its existence. However, anger lies closer to the surface and is very difficult to conceal. Anger feeds on hate and is dependent on it. Anger assumes the existence of hate.

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**brother ἀδελφός** “…a person who lives close beside others and who thus by implication is a part of a so-called ‘in-group,’ that is, the group with which an individual identifies both ethnically and culturally—‘neighbor, brother.’”\(^{21}\)

In some sense the **brother** is the only person you could be angry at. Not having contact with others, generally we do not have reason to be angry with them. It is the proximity and interaction with others, here called brothers, that generally lays the foundation for anger. In this conversation, Jesus would be talking about other Jews in their family or community.

The very first use of the word anger in the Bible is found in the story of Cain and Able. In this story we see the relationship between anger and murder.

> “… So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it.” Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him.” (Genesis 4:5–8, ESV)

Notice the phrase “why has your face fallen?” Anger is a precursor to depression, which this phrase describes. If the facts were known, it is hate and anger that is the root cause of much of the depression in people today. This hate and anger is generally expressed in one of two ways. If you have the power to do something about it, violence. If you are without power, depression. To some degree, this illustrates the difference between men and women in such circumstances. Because of their size and strength, men will often strike out in violence. Because of the lack of size and strength, women will often turn in through depression. But this is a generality for this depends on the object of the hate and anger, some men for good reasons cannot attack, so they turn in with depression. Some women can attack, and do.

If anger were removed from marriages, family relations, neighbors, people at work and church members—how much depression would remain? Maybe very little. The next time you reach for a bottle of pills or alcohol because of the deep depression you are going through—because your face has fallen—check the anger/hate setting, dealing with that may eliminate the need for that bottle.

Compare this counsel with that of others who says “Oh, my dear, how horrible this person has treated you. I don’t know how you can go on, dear, dear.” Etc., *ad nauseam*.

Am I discounting the reality of the pain and suffering that others can bring into your life? I am not, these things also happen to me as well and I too feel that pain. However, I am suggesting something other than hate, anger and depression as the proper response to these horrors (and they often are horrors). I’m suggesting the response of Job. Look to God, after all, he really is the one that has allowed all this in your life. Why has he done that?

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When you look to God, two responses are possible. One, he is using this mess to draw to your attention defects in your own soul. You sow and you reap. Change what you sow, change what you reap. Two, like Job you may be guilty of nothing. But God does not delight in doing you evil. However, he does delight in making you his treasured possession.

“They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.” (Malachi 3:17, ESV)

“On that day the Lord their God will save them, as the flock of his people; for like the jewels of a crown they shall shine on his land.” (Zechariah 9:16, ESV)

[without cause εἰκῆ] There is strong textual evidence to support this phrase.

There is much in this world that gives one cause for angry. Such righteous indignation reflects the holiness of God himself. Jesus tells these stories of the righteous anger of God.

“And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.” (Matthew 18:34, ESV)

The master here is Jesus.

“The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.” (Matthew 22:7, ESV)

The king in this story is Jesus.

“And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers.”’” (Matthew 21:12–13, ESV)

The word anger is not used in this last passage, but I don’t believe that there is any doubt that he indeed was—and with cause.

However, there is a problem with the phrase without cause. We all imagine we have cause when in conflict with a “brother” and it is therefore okay for us to be angry, thus nullifying Jesus’ instructions. It’s hard to respond to this for by these words, without cause, every person has a way to escape the obligations of this passage. But consider this, if the anger is directed to those who offend God, it is clearly justified. If it is directed to those who offend us—then we have a greater problem, we can be petty and make mountains out of molehills and hate and be angry. This is common but also clearly condemned in the Bible. We can also be magnanimous and let love cover a multitude of sins. This is not so common but clearly commended in the Bible. But some situations do not allow themselves to just be covered over and ignored, even by love. To these Jesus says:

“Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,” (Luke 17:3, ESV)
Generally the problem we face is not in forgiving a person who repents, it is dealing with a person who won’t repent and almost certainly blames us for what is so obviously their sin. It is easy to be angry with this person who won’t listen to reason, let alone the Bible.

Through the centuries Christians have been persecuted, defrauded, beaten and murdered. Certainly we have cause to be angry with such people. Cause or no cause, if we provide a home for this anger, it will do no damage to the evil person but it will certainly destroy us. So, the offense may be real and stand as an unaddressed wrong between us and “them” but living a wise and godly life demands that we put such emotions (thoughts) out of our life recognizing that they exist because God has allowed them to exist, i.e. Job. There were many people that treated Job badly but we have no record of him reacting with hate and anger at them for loss of property, family and health. He simply turned to God—not his enemies, and said ‘Why’. He never did get that question fully answered, but he did look in the right place for it.

liable ἐνοχὸς “…pertaining to being guilty and thus deserving some particular penalty—‘guilty and deserving, guilty and punishable by.’”

judgment κρίσις “…to judge a person to be guilty and liable to punishment—‘to judge as guilty, to condemn, condemnation.’

Who will be responsible for this judgment? The first comment on judgment, 5:21, was probably a human court with the eternal judgment of God hanging in the background. But at this point in our story, the anger has not resulted in an outward offense, no one has been murdered unlike verse 21. Yet it is still stated that this person is subject to judgment.

We know of no court in ancient Israel or today that would address the attitude of anger that did not also include a criminal act. One would think that if such a court did exist, there would have been a very long line down the street waiting to hear cases. Therefore it would appear that in this situation, the judgment would be by God alone. The “when” is not addressed, perhaps it takes place both in time through the negative but just circumstances that enter the life of the hate filled and angry person and also in eternity by the decree of God.

So in this statement of judgment, it does not appear that we are talking of a human court. This person is liable to God’s heavenly judgment for his attitudes of anger and the hate that follows. “Earthly courts generally could not judge such offenses as displays of anger…. But God’s heavenly court would judge all such offenses….”

However, this next phrase, whoever insults his brother, moves beyond the emotion of anger to actions of anger and hate by means of name calling.

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**insults ῥακά** “…one who is totally lacking in understanding—‘numskull, fool.’”

“A word of contempt meaning empty, worthless, foolish…. Utter contempt….” It is an Aramaic loan word.

Where the anger may have been obvious in the prior statement although not legally actionable, here it progresses to contemptuous name calling, slander, and may now be legally actionable. Name calling humiliates and its intent is to hurt. “The primary concern about name calling is not just that it is an inappropriate way to vent anger but that it triggers anger in others. Jesus commands us not only to check our own anger but also not to provoke it in others.”

But name-calling is simply one example on how a person can express hate and anger. In fact, there are many other ways: looks, sneers, gossip and the most difficult of all—the privacy of our thoughts. All come under this prohibition of anger.

**liable ἔνοχος** “…pertaining to being guilty and thus deserving some particular penalty—‘guilty and deserving, guilty and punishable by.’”

**council συνέδριον** “…the highest Jewish council, exercising jurisdiction in civil and religious matters, but having no power over life and death or over military actions or taxation—‘Sanhedrin, the council of the Jews.’” It operated in Jerusalem and served as something of a Supreme Court for the nation. There were also “smaller tribunals in the cities of Palestine subordinate to the Sanhedrin….” These were also called councils.

It is probably to one of these local councils that Jesus is referring. We don’t know enough about their proceedings to know if they adjudicated matters like this or not. However, the flow of the argument suggest that the behavior of the name caller is calling for some kind of review, condemnation or judgment. We would call these actions slander and in our civil courts we do hold a person responsible for liable or slander. This may be the case here as well.

**You fool μωρός** “…pertaining to being extremely unwise and foolish—‘unwise, foolish, fool.’”

The pejorative language has not been restrained but has now repeated again, this time using a Greek word that means substantially the same thing. The anger is growing.

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liable ἐνοχὸς “…pertaining to being guilty and thus deserving some particular penalty—‘guilty and deserving, guilty and punishable by.’”

hell γέεννα “…a place of punishment for the dead—‘Gehenna, hell.’”

It would appear that the efforts of the “council” have not succeeded in bringing solution to this problem of hate and anger. The insults continue, as a result, this person is now in danger of hell.

“The Greek term γέεννα [Gehenna] is derived from a Hebrew phrase meaning 'Valley of Hinnom,' a ravine running along the south side of Jerusalem and a place where the rubbish from the city was constantly being burned. According to late Jewish popular belief, the last judgment was to take place in this valley, and hence the figurative extension of meaning from 'Valley of Hinnom' to 'hell.'”

of fire πῦρ

Adding “fire” to Gehenna makes it clear that Jesus is clearly talking about eternal damnation.

We should stop and summarize. These two words, Raka and Moron, are the terms Jesus uses to condemn name-calling. But if we think about it, we realize that in the arena of possible slanderous terms, these two are some of the milder ones available to us. And that is the lesson. If we stop right there at these terms, certainly we won’t be using the profane, cursing and racially slanderous terms that we could use. These words are so far beyond the pale of what a believer should be saying that they are not even entertained. Instead, we are told to be sensitive to much less pejorative language, and recognize that once we begin to think and act even in these terms, hatred has entered our souls.

We should also keep in mind that if Jesus had used these more objectionable words, we might be inclined to think that the less offensive ones would be acceptable. But by choosing these words we can see that not only are the extremely abusive ones forbidden, even these are as well.

The three results of hate have moved from judgment (by God), to the council and last to the hell of fire. Although these three actions have not resulted in an outright murder, they are driven by the same heart of hate that results in murder. The whole point is this, anger and hatred is subsumed under the command “you shall not murder.” This is Jesus’ argument. Here he fills up the Old Testament with this new meaning.

But before we move on, we must ask about Jesus’ own use of the word fool.

“You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?” (Matthew 23:17, ESV)


Although on shaky ground, not every use of the word fool is slanderous. Sometimes it is a spiritual analysis. In fact, it is used 76 times in the bible, 42 of them in Proverbs alone, a book of wisdom which often speaks about fools. So Jesus and others have used this word not as a hateful put-down, but as a spiritual evaluation. Such use is not forbidden.

Reconciliation (5:23-26)

The anger, hate and name calling discussed in verses 21 and 22 are certain to destroy relationships. Verses 23 through 26 describe how to mend these relationships. Two illustrations on problem solving are given, one in verses 23-24 addresses the heart condition and a second in verses 25-26 addresses a legal condition.

Reconciliation Driven by Conscience

Matthew 5:23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,

So oūv "…markers of result, often implying the conclusion of a process of reasoning—'so, therefore, consequently, accordingly, then, so then.'"35

Or “That being the case—hating your brother and all—this is what you are to do.”

offering your gift at the altar

This offering is an act of public worship. For most people in Israel this could only take place after a long and arduous trip from home to Jerusalem. From where Jesus is then speaking, that would be from Galilee to Jerusalem. The story is directed to a Jewish audience dedicated to Temple offerings.

something against you

Mark has something similar to say yet different at a critical point:

“And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” (Mark 11:25, ESV)

Paul is even more general yet:

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?” (1 Corinthians 6:1, ESV)

So it is not certain that the other person’s attitude against you is a critical element in this story. “The question is not, however, who expressed anger first but who should take the

initiative in reconciliation.” No matter who is the guilty party, it is necessary to address such a break quickly. In fact, the other person may have something against you because of your own bad behavior. So just because it is the other person who is offended, that does not mean that it is the other party who is at fault. His conscience may be more sensitive to God than your own.

But, ideally the two people would meet each other on the road, each running to reconcile with the other.

**Matthew 5:24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.**

**leave your gift there before the altar and go**

Again, “The only “altar” at which an offering could be made was that of the temple in Jerusalem. This saying, presumably uttered in Galilee, thus envisages a worshipper who has traveled some eighty miles to Jerusalem with his “offering” (probably a sacrificial animal), who then leaves the animal in the temple while he makes a journey of a week or more to Galilee and back again in order to effect a reconciliation with his offended brother or sister before he dares to present his offering.”

How quickly must you do this? Right in the middle of worship when this comes rushing in and crushing in upon conscience, stop! You must address this now! To Jesus, that’s how important this is. “Worship that is acceptable to God cannot take place against the background of a damaged human relationship which is being ignored.”

In the light of our strife ridden families, churches and work places, one can imagine that there may not be as much Biblical worship taking place as we would like.

Interestingly, the early church applied this instruction to participating in the Lord’s Supper: “On the Lord’s own day gather together and break bread and give thanks, having first confessed your sins so that your sacrifice may be pure. (2) But let no one who has a quarrel with a companion join you until they have been reconciled, so that your sacrifice may not be defiled.”

It is such an important doctrine that Jesus will mention it again in the Lord’s Prayer.

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40 On a side note, notice that the Church is worshiping and participating in the Lord’s Supper on Sunday, “the Lord’s own day”, not Saturday.

“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:14–15, ESV)

reconciled διαλλάσσομαι "To change one’s own feelings towards, to reconcile oneself, become reconciled."42

“The altar is the place where one goes to become reconciled with God…."

But in his story, Jesus insists that reconciliation between others is necessary before reconciliation with God is possible.

“It is more important to be cleared of offense before all men than to show up for Sunday morning worship at the regular hour. Forget the worship service and be reconciled to your brother; and only then worship God. Men love to substitute ceremony for integrity, purity, and love; but Jesus will have none of it."44

Reconciliation Driven by Duress and Consequence

Matthew 5:25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.

Our second illustration involves a court trial. The last illustration on reconciliation was of a man driven to act because of his own offended conscience. In this one before us, the reconciliation is driven by duress; the person is on the way to court and most probably jail.

The two reconciliation stories illustrate two types of people. The first is driven by conscience; the second is driven by fear of consequence. Yet in both cases, they deal with the problem of anger. But some have no conscience or fear of God and respond to neither, they are incorrigible, hopeless, irredeemable. They are not reconciled to God or man. They live lives of anger, hate and self-destruction, all the while blaming others for their own misery.

terms εὐνοέω “…the verb εὐνοεῖν (“be well disposed,” “make friends with someone”) indicates reconciliation….."45 The word means “…benevolent, kindly, which is from εὖ … well, and νοûs … mind. To be well–disposed or well–intentioned toward another, to be friends…."46

The terms “be well disposed” and “make friends with someone” address the original issue—anger. So again, Jesus is advancing solution in the place of the anger. In other

44 D. A. Carson, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5–10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 45.
words, be reconciled and be friends. Abraham Lincoln was asked, as the war drew to a close, if he was now going to destroy his enemies. He replied, “I destroy my enemies when I make friends with them.” It was his intention to impose an easy reconciliation of the South in the Union. Those that led in Congress after his death driven by hate and anger imposed a bitter and harsh reconciliation instead. As a result, it took over a century for the two half’s of the country to heal the breach. The solution to anger is not more anger, as the then leaders of the nation seemed to imagine, it is to “come to terms quickly, “be well disposed,” “make friends with someone”. And it is still the proper solution today.

**accuser ἀντίδικος** “An adversary, enemy, or opponent in a lawsuit….”

The accuser mentioned in this verse may be the very same person mentioned in verse 22, however, because reconciliation did not take place because of conscience, now the person is confronted with the legal consequence of his behavior.

**while you are going with him to court**

The untoward anger expressed itself outwardly in slander. Now this person is heading to court to face charges based on this defamation of character.

**lest your accuser hand you over to the judge**

The implication here is that the defendant has lost and now faces a stiff fine. Can he pay the fine? If not, the accuser has the option to hand the defendant over to the judge for further legal remedy. “While Gentiles sometimes sold debtors into slavery to pay off a debt (cf. 18:25), sometimes the debtor was imprisoned until relatives and friends could come up with the shameful payment…”

**Matthew 5:26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.**

paid ἀποδίδωμι “…to make a payment, with the implication of such a payment being in response to an incurred obligation—‘to pay, to render.”

The person could now pay the fine if he had wealth stuck away that was not publically known at the time of the trial. Presumably he had refused to make this known in the hope that the accuser would simply take what was offered and let him off the hook for the rest. It did not work out that way and now he is in prison. In order to get out of prison, he can now avail himself of these funds and pay his debt. If he had no funds but did have family and friends that would pay this debt, this would also provide for his release.

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However, if he simply did not have access to any funds, he would stay there indefinitely. Indefinitely could be a very short time if he had no family or friends that would bring him food. The Romans did not generally “support” prisoners. They would simply let you die.

“The justice system envisaged is not Jewish since there is no evidence for imprisonment for a financial obligation in the Jewish legal system; it is part of the Greek and Roman patterns of justice.”50 This is an important point; we should not lose sight of Jews living under Roman oppression. The Roman oppressor continues to impress us as the background of the Sermon on the Mount.

*penny κοδράντης* “…a Roman copper coin worth 1/4 of an assarion or 1/64 of a denarius—‘quadrans, penny.’51 Equal to about 11.25 minutes of work in that era, maybe $1.50.

“…we are probably to understand that the human judgment scene (though intended literally) is meant to point beyond itself to the analogous judgment of God, to whom we must ultimately answer for our behaviour towards others.”52 “Through a variety of terrible, graphic images, Jesus indicates that when one damages one’s relationships with others one damages one’s relationship with God, leading to eternal punishment (cf. 18:21–35).”53

The consequence of not solving the problem quickly is viewed in cataclysmic terms. The two illustration on reconciliation (5:23-26) make an important point. Jesus will not have us live with broken and damaged relationships. Paul sums it up this way:

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Romans 12:18, ESV)

Now it does not always depend on us, but “if possible” we should pursue peace.

In conclusion, Jesus introduced the story to discuss the true meaning of the biblical prohibition about murder. In the story, he makes it clear that anger is a form of murder, certainly murder in the heart. He expands the story explaining that name calling, even the slightly offenses names, let alone the gross ones, are forbidden and are themselves expressions of anger and hate and are precursors of murder. He then address reconciliation making it clear that the unreconciled state is dangerous and not at all acceptable to one who enters his kingdom.