

Christ's Explanation Of The Fifth Commandment.

Text: Matt 5:20-26

Suggested Hymns:

173RS, 277, 610, 327, 330

1) How The Fifth Commandment Is Transgressed

2) How The Fifth Commandment It Is Kept

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 5:20–26, *²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

“²⁰ For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Not a more startling revelation could Jesus have made to the Jewish people. At that time the scribes and Pharisees were held in the highest esteem. They

were considered models of the race as to piety and holy living. It was their righteousness for which they were renowned.

Nowadays, when we hear the name “Pharisee,” we think of a hypocrite. The great mass of them were hypocrites indeed, but we must remember that there also were sincere men in that sect, men who never thought of putting on a false appearance or pretending, but truly meant what they did and said.

Think of men like Nicodemus,¹ who secretly believed in Christ, and Saul, afterwards Paul the Apostle, who tells himself how strict a member of that Jewish sect he had been.²

The Pharisees at that time were looked upon with awe and reverence by all the common people. As the devout Roman Catholic looks up to the monk, so the devout Israelite looked up to the Pharisee and says within himself, ‘*What a pious man! See how much he prays, how strict he is with himself, what good works he performs! If I was as good as he is, I would be sure of heaven.*’

Yet Jesus says, “²⁰*For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.*” What must the people have thought when Jesus said this! They certainly were amazed, and did not know what to make of it. For who could do more, who could be better than the scribes and Pharisees?

But by way of illustrating the above statement Jesus proceeds to show from the Fifth Commandment, which He explains, that such righteousness as that shown by the Pharisees and scribes will never suffice to attain to eternal glory. Christ deliberately selected this commandment for this purpose.

If there is any commandment which, in our own opinion, we have truly fulfilled, it is the fifth, which says, “*Thou shalt not kill.*” Let us hear what the Son of God has to say about this commandment, and then make the application to ourselves.

Let us consider with the help of God’s Holy Spirit, *Christ’s Explanation Of The Fifth Commandment*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. How The Fifth Commandment Is Transgressed

²¹ ***“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’”*** Christ here refers to the letter of the Law.

The Fifth Commandment is transgressed by outright murder. The letter stands; it has never been repealed. It is “of old time,” and is valid unto the end of days.

But it is a serious mistake to adhere to the outward letter, and to deny the spirit which the letter implies and suggests. It is a serious mistake to explain the Fifth Commandment to mean that nothing more is prohibited in it than the act of killing.

Jesus therefore continues, saying, ²² ***“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”***

Here we have the explanation of the spirit of the Fifth Commandment, uttered by the mouth of the eternal Son of God, in whose mouth no guile was ever found, and who, being the Author of the Law, can alone give us the true interpretation of the Law.

And O how humbled we must feel to find that we are constant transgressors of that commandment which we were quite confident of having kept above all the rest! How unhesitatingly we must exclaim, with the Psalmist in Psalm 143:2, ² ***“Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous!”***

You may imagine that you have kept the Fifth Commandment. But have you? The Fifth Commandment is transgressed already in the heart. ***“Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”*** Anger in the heart, the mere presence of anger, the slightest emotion of resentment, even when not betrayed by looks or acts, is a crime before God, a crime so enormous as to be worthy of divine judgement.

In the smaller towns of Palestine there were seven elders, and in larger towns twenty-three elders, before whom the murderer was tried; and to show the

enormity of the crime Jesus says that anger is murder in the heart, and is just as punishable before God as outright murder before men.

Have you never been angry without a cause? There is a cause for anger when anger is directed against sin. Moses was angry when he found the children of Israel worshipping the golden calf, and he was so angry that he smote the two tables of stone containing the Ten Commandments, which he had brought down from Mount Sinai, against the rocks, reducing them to fragments.

Jesus was angry when in the temple He found the vendors and money-changers who had turned the house of prayer into a den of thieves, and He made a whip of thin cords and drove them out.

But has your anger always been directed against sin? Have you always been free from personal anger? Have no thoughts of resentment ever disturbed the tranquillity of your mind? Who can answer in the affirmative, if he would tell the truth? I am sure I cannot.

You may imagine that you have kept the Fifth Commandment. But have you? The Fifth Commandment is transgressed by gestures, by angry looks, by demonstrations of wrathful defiance.

“Whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council.” The sin of murder originates in the heart, with anger, but it may pass through several stages before the act is committed.

One such a stage is saying to the brother, *Raca*, that is, giving expression to your ill-feeling in some way, even if it was by a meaningless interjection or comment. It is, perhaps, the same thing as giving vent to your ill-feeling by hissing, by clenching the fist, shooting daggers with the eyes, and the like.

Before God this is a sin of such dimensions as to render it necessary to be acted upon by the council if it was to be brought before a human court. The council was a higher court than the court of elders in the towns.

It was the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, consisting of seventy men, who passed the sentence of death upon the murderer, subject, however, to the ratification of the Roman governor.

And can you say that the anger of your heart was never portrayed in your face? that you always remained calm and quiet and never gave vent to your ill-

feeling in gestures and looks designed to show how hot you were? Who can dare to say that?

You may imagine that you have kept the Fifth Commandment. But have you? The Fifth Commandment is transgressed by abusive language also. ***“Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”*** To hurl such epithets at anyone as calling him a fool in your rage, or to use similar language intended to wound his soul and hurt his feelings, is committing murder with the tongue.

And before God that is a sin so enormous as to be considered above an earthly tribunal, or an offence which an earthly court would have to punish in the severest and most painful way if it was to look upon sin as God does.

And can you say in truth that you have never uttered a word of malice against your neighbour, that you have never called him an derogatory name, never chided, or never used abusive language? O how many murders are committed daily with the tongue! How unceasingly we transgress the commandment which we were so confident of having kept!

The spirit of the Fifth Commandment as explained by our divine Lord Jesus brings home to us our sins, and must convince us all, that if God would deal with us after our sins and reward us according to our iniquities, we would be eternally lost.

And if God would take us to account for the rest of His commandments, we would fare no better. Our righteousness, based on the fulfilment of the Law, fades away into nothingness. It is really true, as we read in Isaiah 64:6, ***“But we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.”***

2. How The Fifth Commandment It Is Kept.

And now, in the second place, let us consider how the Fifth Commandment should be kept.

Jesus says, ²³ ***“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”***

²⁵ ***“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the***

officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”

The Pharisees, against whose supposed righteousness this passage is directed, certainly knew that their hearts were not free from anger. They also knew that such anger was a sinful emotion. But they expected to make amends for these deficiencies by offering sacrifices at the altar, by praying, and by an outward religious behaviour.

In this way they expected to do so much more good for the little wrongs which they had done, that God would overlook their sinful emotions, and become favourably disposed towards them, especially since they were so conscientious and zealous in bringing their gifts to the altar.

Now what does Christ say to that? Can anyone please God with an outward gift and gain God's favour by an outward religious performance, while, at the same time, he is angry with his brother and his heart is filled with hostile feelings?

Can anyone keep the Fifth Commandment and stand guiltless before God as to the crime of murder, while he is at odds with his adversary, and refuses, and does not seek, reconciliation? No, Jesus says, “²⁴ *leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*”

God does not want your gift, your sacrifice is an abomination to Him, your religious service is disgusting to Him, as long as your heart harbours those ill-feelings against your brother, as long as you have not secured, or at least endeavoured to secure, his reconciliation.

This, then, is the way in which the Fifth Commandment should be kept. It should be kept not only by refraining from the terrible deed of murder, not only by taking heed not to harm or injure our neighbour in his body, not only by helping and befriending him in every bodily need.

It should not only be kept by abstaining from abusive language and insolent exclamations and demonstrations, or gestures, but it should also be kept by subduing those angry emotions, those thoughts of wrath, hatred, envy, revenge which naturally crop forth upon the wicked soil of our sinful hearts.

And not only by subduing them, but even by not having them; the very presence of these emotions in our hearts is sin. It is true, we cannot prevent these sinful emotions and thoughts. They will come. We are sinners by nature. We cannot make ourselves different from what we are.

But with the help of God's Holy Spirit a Christian can do so much at least as to check the sinful emotions, to conquer his own sinful heart, and to subdue it. He can force himself to abandon his passion.

You cannot do that of your own natural power, of course. To conquer your own sinful heart you must, first of all, be endowed with power from on high. You must learn to know that you are a damnable sinner, and sincerely believe that Jesus Christ, who came into the world to seek and to save that which was lost,³ has atoned for your sins by His painful suffering and bitter death on the cross.

You must appropriate to yourself the righteousness of Christ and thus be made a true child of God. Then the Spirit of God will descend upon you and give you strength to fight successfully against your own sinful flesh.

May the Lord, then, grant us all, His grace to walk in His commandments. And although we can never perfectly fulfil the Fifth Commandment because sin will cling to us as long as we live, let us not have our divine Lord's explanation be proclaimed to us in vain.

Let us be quick in agreeing with our adversary when there is strife and contention. Let us not allow the sun to go down upon our wrath.⁴ If we have wronged a brother, or if a brother has wronged us, let us not wait for him to come to us, but go to him and offer to him the hand of reconciliation.

Let us always be ready and willing to forgive and never permit the poisonous weed of hatred and revenge to thrive in our hearts. Thus we shall be true children of our heavenly Father and inherit the blessing: *"Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God."*⁵ Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 3:1

² Acts 22:3

³ Matt 18:11

⁴ Eph 4:26

⁵ Matthew 5:7-8