

The Sermon on the Mount

Matt 5:21-48: The *antitheses*, part 1

BACKGROUND

- The six passages in 5:21-48 which are structured around phrases like “you have heard it said... but I say to you” are traditionally called the Antitheses.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Murder and anger

1. Read 5:21-48. The first of the antitheses condemns being angry¹ with one’s brother or sister (5:22). Yet we read in Matt and Mark,
 - Mt 21:12: “Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.”
 - Mt 23:17: “You blind fools²! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred?”
 - Mk 3:1+: “‘Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?’ But they remained silent. He looked around at them in anger³ and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

D. A. Carson notes:

“Someone may well ask, ‘But didn’t Jesus himself get very angry sometimes?’ Yes, that is true... Is Jesus guilty of inconsistency? Indeed there is a place for burning with anger at sin and injustice. Our problem is that we burn with indignation and anger, not at sin and injustice, but at offense to ourselves. In none of the cases in which Jesus became angry was his personal ego wrapped up in the issue. More telling yet, when he was unjustly arrested, unfairly tried, illegally beaten, contemptuously spit upon, crucified, mocked, when in fact he had every reason for his ego to be involved, then, as Peter says, ‘he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats’ (1 Peter 2:23). From his parched lips came for rather those gracious words, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing’ (Lk 23:34).”⁴

Carson also notes that the examples Jesus gives—being angry at a brother or sister; saying *raka* (“empty head”); and not reconciling with someone who has something against you—are all in the context of personal relationships. He concludes that Jesus forbids “not all anger but the anger which arises out of personal relationships.”

¹ v. 22 has literally “while being angered by,” *orgitzomenos*.

² *moros*: foolish, godless, the same word forbidden in 5:22.

³ *orge*: anger, the same root as in 5:22.

⁴ *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (2004), pp. 44-45.

Richard Gardner, a Mennonite commentator, thinks Jesus refers to “hostile words and feelings that readily lead to acts of violence.” Both Michael Green and *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* think it’s *all* anger. Craig Blomberg believes interprets it as *righteous* anger.⁵

What do you think?

2. Which do you find harder to swallow about this first antithesis, that Jesus sets such a challenging standard or that the fires of hell are threatened? (Or choice *c...*)
3. “Jewish traditions naturally applied to [murder] the punishment of Gehenna”⁶, as in the intertestamental 2 Enoch: “He who carries out the murder of a human soul causes the death of his own soul, and murders his own body; and there is no healing for him for eternity” (60:1). “Jesus presses beyond behavior specifically punished by law to the kind of heart that generates such behavior. Anger that would generate murder if unimpeded is the spiritual equivalent of murder.” (Keener again.)

On the one hand, Jesus threatens hell in this passage and many others for specific offenses and more generally for “all who do evil” (Mt 13:41). Yet in this Sermon he also promises the Father’s forgiveness for all sins of those who forgive others, and later for all sins except those against the Holy Spirit (Mt 12:31). In John Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). As Keener also points out:

Most Jewish people understood the commandments in the context of grace; given Jesus’ demands for greater grace in practice (including in material that appears specifically Matthean: 9:13; 12:7; 18:21-35), he undoubtedly intended the kingdom demands in light of grace (cf. Mt 6:12//Lk 11:4; Mk 11:25//Mt 6:14-15; Mk 10:15). In the Gospel narratives Jesus embraces those who humble themselves, acknowledging God’s right to rule, even if in practice they fall short of the goal of moral perfection (5:48). But the kingdom grace Jesus proclaimed was not the workless grace of much of Western Christendom; in the Gospels the kingdom message transforms those who meekly embrace it, just as it crushes the arrogant, the religiously and socially satisfied. [Ibid., 161-2]

What does this context say about this potentially daunting or even threatening passage?

4. Occasionally we are insulted by someone who neither knows nor cares who we are. Maybe we are cut off on the road or treated rudely by a phone-sales person, for instance. Or maybe the angering rudeness comes from a colleague, someone who rightly or wrongly believes he or she knows us. Swallowing this slight or insult without retaliation or justification can feel like drinking a tall glass of ipecac, and even be physically unpleasant or painful.

Do you experience this? How difficult do you find it to hold back an ungodly response? Is there anything you’ve found makes this easier?

5. Associated with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the Jewish practice of *teshuvah* (meaning “return” or “repentance”). At its most basic level, this entails seeking out anyone whom one has offended

⁵ Some ancient manuscripts have the additional phrase “without cause” after the word “brother.” This is generally thought to be a later addition to explain a difficult text, though commentators also generally think the addition is a good one.

⁶ Craig Keener, *ibid.*, p. 183.

and asking forgiveness. Given the immediacy of the reconciliation advised by Jesus, one might imagine that Christians practice *teshuvah* at least weekly or monthly, much less annually.

Have you ever had someone approach you seeking forgiveness or reconciliation? How might we experiment with this practice?

6. James 4:1-12 addresses divisions as well as speaking “evil against” one’s brother or sister in Christ. How does James’ advice contrast with Jesus’ advice in the Sermon on the Mount?
7. Carson points out (p. 43) that in the Antitheses Jesus is using a characteristically Semitic form of hyperbole. This sort of hyperbole is seen when Jesus tells his followers to hate their fathers and mothers (Lk 14:26) when Jesus *really* means that he should have greater priority in the lives of his disciples than their parents do.

Is Jesus speaking hyperbolically in the Antitheses? If so, how?



Fun fact: The Qumran community took purity seriously. An organization charter found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (1Qs 7.5) assigns the punishment of reduced rations for one year and separation from the “pure meals” for the crime of accusing another of sin without proving the charge. Speaking “foolishness” carried a fine of three months’ reduced rations, while interrupting someone was just ten days.

Further fun fact: Some Christians have taken the eye-plucking verses literally. Origen of Alexandria castrated himself to avoid sexual sin. This practice became enough of a concern for the early church that the council of Nicea condemned it in 325.

Fun quote: “By confining the law of God to outward duties only, [the Scribes and the Pharisees] trained their disciples, **like apes**, to hypocrisy.” –Calvin, commentary on Mt 5:20-22.