

The Sermon on the Mount:

The *Antitheses* of Matt 5:21-48

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.
- The word “looks” in 5:28’s “everyone who looks at a woman with lust” is in the present tense. In Greek, the present tense often has a sense of continuous action, so this verse probably refers “not to noticing a person’s beauty, but to imbibing it, meditating on it, seeking to possess it.”¹
- While some ancient Mediterranean cultures saw lust as natural, Jewish writers didn’t think much of it. For instance, Job 31:1-2: “I have made a covenant with my eyes; how then could I look upon a virgin? What would be my portion from God above, and my heritage from the Almighty on high?” Some Jewish writers went as far as Jesus did in condemning it as the equivalent to adultery, as in the Testament of Issachar 7:2: “Except my wife I have not known any woman. I never committed fornication by the uplifting of my eyes” (written in the first or second century AD). In a culture where married women were expected to wear head covering so as not to tempt men, Jesus went beyond contemporary thought by placing the responsibility for the lust on the man, not the woman (Keener, 187).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Murder and anger

1. Read 5:21-48. The first of the antitheses condemns being angry² 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 fools³! 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 anger⁴ 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

¹ Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 189.

² v. 22 has literally “while being angered by,” *orgitzomenos*.

³ *moros*: foolish, godless, the same word forbidden in 5:22.

⁴ *orge*: anger, the same root as in 5:22.

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).”⁵

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.”

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.⁶

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”⁷, 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]

⁵ *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World* (2004), pp. 44-45.

⁶ Some ancient manuscripts have the additional phrase “without case” 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.

⁷ Craig Keener, *ibid.*, p. 183.

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 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 our small group 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 the advice in this passage contrast with Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount?

Lust and adultery

7. Jesus articulates an important principle, one so important Matthew repeats it in 18:8-9: That we are not merely to try not to sin, we are to try to stay the hell away from sin—to "deal drastically with sin. We must not pamper it, flirt with it, enjoy nibbling a little of it around the edges. We are to hate it, crush it, dig it out" [Carson, 46]. Stott adds:

"To obey this command of Jesus will involve for many of us a certain 'maiming'. We shall have to eliminate from our lives certain things which (though some may be innocent in themselves) either are, or could be easily become, sources of temptation. In his own metaphorical language we may find ourselves without eyes, hands or feet. That is, we shall deliberately decline to read certain literature, see certain films, visit certain exhibitions. If we do this, we shall be regarded by some of our contemporaries as narrow-minded untaught Philistines. 'What?' they will say to us incredulously, 'you've not read such and such a book? You've not seen such and such a film? Why, you're not educated, man!' ...The only question is whether, for the sake of this gain, we are willing to bear that loss and endure that ridicule."⁸

- a. How have you found it helpful to voluntarily limit what you see, where you go or what you do?
 - b. The Jews of Jesus' day famously sought to "build a fence around the wall" by surrounding it with restrictions and laws to prevent one from getting too near violating the law proper. How does Jesus' apparent raising of the bar in the Antitheses differ from this approach?
8. For all the controversy associated with the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Antitheses, there are close parallels in Paul's epistles. Whereas in the Antitheses Jesus directs his disciple toward a lifestyle which follows the spirit of the law, Paul in Galatians describes the fruit of such a lifestyle: "love, joy,

⁸ *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 91.

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” contrasted to the “works of the flesh”: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” Like Jesus, Paul spells out the eternal consequences of the latter: “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Similarly, where Jesus warns that it is better to pluck out your eye than to retain it but go to hell, Paul too condemns sexual immorality: “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry),” and warns, “On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”

So much for the similarities. How are Paul’s and Jesus’ articulation of life by the Spirit (of the law) different? In what way might this be because of their different audiences, Matthew writing with an eye toward Jewish converts, and Paul writing to Gentile Christians being pressured by Jewish converts? What else might explain the differences?

9. 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?

10. How did Luther, the Anabaptists, Aquinas and Bonhoeffer interpret these passages? What historical interpreter do you most agree with?



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.

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.