

WEEK 4: TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS

PART 1: ANGER AND LUST

Matthew 5:21–30



The Place of the Passage

In the first part of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made several short statements clarifying the truly blessed, happy, and flourishing life. Then he called his disciples to live as salt and light in the world—to live influential lives of good works for the common good and the glory of God. He also said he did not come to abolish the Scriptures but to bring them to their intended goal in himself. Now that his kingdom has dawned, his people must have a truer and deeper righteousness than that of the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees. Jesus now explains what this “greater righteousness” looks like in six different realms. Here we consider the first two: anger and lust. Jesus contrasts what his hearers were previously taught with his kingdom’s new standard of righteousness.

The Big Picture

Jesus contrasts what people previously heard from the scribes and Pharisees regarding anger and lust with the new standards of his kingdom.

Reflection and Discussion

Carefully and thoughtfully read this section of Jesus' teaching, Matthew 5:21-30. Then use the provided questions to help you think more deeply about the text. (See *ESV Study Bible* notes on page 1829; online at www.esv.org.)

Instruction about Anger (Matt. 5:21-26)

Jesus introduces each new topic in the rest of Matthew 5 with the words "you have heard that it was said" or "it was said" (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Where did Jesus' original audience hear these ethical teachings before—from the OT, the moral Jewish tradition, or a mixture of the two? Why would it have been shocking for Jesus' audience to hear him add after each one, "but I say to you . . ." (vv. 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)? What does this show us about the identity of Jesus?

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Jesus has just said that he came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). One way he brings the law to fulfillment is by showing God's deeper and higher standards for his new-covenant people, whom he will empower by giving them new hearts and the Holy Spirit. In light of this, how does the old-covenant command not to murder relate to Jesus' command not to be angry (vv. 21-22)?

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Read Ephesians 4:26 (cf. Ps. 4:4) and consider, Is it always wrong to be angry? If not, what is the difference between righteous and unrighteous anger?

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Note how Jesus describes the urgency of reconciliation¹ in Matthew 5:23-26. Why is reconciliation in relationships so vital?

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Read Colossians 3:13. How does this verse demonstrate Jesus' teaching on reconciliation? How does it also show us the way we can be motivated and empowered to pursue reconciliation?

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Instruction about Lust (Matt. 5:27-30)

Jesus brings the old-covenant² command against adultery to fulfillment by showing how lust is already adultery in the heart (Matt. 5:27-28). How is lust related to adultery?

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Think through Jesus' reasoning and motivation here and answer this question in light of them: Why is lust both wrong and foolish?

Jesus says to tear out one's eye or to cut off one's hand if they cause one to lust (Matt. 5:29–30). Neither action would actually prevent someone from lusting, since lust is a sin of the heart. What, then, is Jesus' point?

The New Testament is clear that no amount of good works or sin prevention will earn our salvation. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (see Eph. 2:1–10). Yet Jesus urges us to fight the sin of lust, "for it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (Matt. 5:29–30). How do we reconcile the gracious reality of salvation with the necessity of fighting sin?

What radical and practical steps might you need to take in order to fight against lust?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

THE DOUBLE CURE OF FORGIVENESS AND TRANSFORMATION. Jesus calls his people to a beautiful standard of peacemaking and purity in place of anger and lust. He clearly expects us to pursue these standards, and yet we must remember: he gives this teaching on the way to his cross and resurrection. It is through his dying and rising again that Jesus inaugurates the new covenant, regarding which the prophet Jeremiah promised not only complete forgiveness³ but also ethical transformation and power (Matt. 26:26–28; see Jer. 31:31–34). Cleansing and renewal together make up the double cure we need in order to pursue Jesus' standards. When we hear his standards, we must always (1) receive his forgiveness for our failures and (2) rely on the Holy Spirit's transforming power.

A WORLD WITHOUT ANGER. Jesus' teaching on anger serves not just as an urgent ethical standard but also as a hopeful glimpse of the world to come. Jesus is showing the ethical beauty of the community he creates through his kingdom. Since the kingdom has already dawned, those who follow Jesus can and will live according to his standards, though certainly not perfectly. But this is our great hope: when the kingdom comes in all its fullness, it will give way to a new creation, in which the Lord's people will fulfill his standards perfectly. The new creation will be a world without murder, anger, or strife. It will be a world of perfect peace and joyful harmony. Jesus' commands ultimately turn our gaze to the horizon of his return, when all will be set right.

Whole-Bible Connections

FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW. Jesus' instruction on anger and lust come in the context of his claim to fulfill the law and the prophets (Matt. 5:17). He did not come merely to clarify or to reinforce the law. If he had done so, he would have merely unpacked and explained what it meant not to murder or commit adultery. Instead, he calls his people not just to avoid murder but to avoid getting angry. He calls them not just to avoid adultery but to avoid lust. Jesus is bringing the Old Testament commands to fulfillment in himself. The murder and adultery commands are part of the Scriptures that prophetically anticipate the new-covenant era, in which Jesus brings a deeper, heart-rooted, holistic obedi-

ence. In light of this, the command not to murder is fulfilled in God's people as they renounce unrighteous anger (5:21–26). The command against adultery is fulfilled as they renounce even lustful thoughts (5:27–30). Each command is caught up in the bigger story of the Bible that finds its fulfillment in Jesus' kingdom and the heart-level transformation he brings.

Theological Soundings

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS. Six times in Matthew 5 Jesus says something like, "You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . ." (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44). Jesus contrasts what his disciples had heard and been taught (both in the Old Testament and from teachers of the law) with his own instruction. Jesus therefore demonstrates that he is the ultimate authority to whom people must now look. Jesus is not just a good man and a great ethical teacher; he is the divine Son of God to whom people from every nation must submit.

SIN AND THE HEART. Jesus repeatedly emphasizes that the ethical standards of his kingdom cannot be met by mere external obedience. It is not enough to avoid murder; Jesus condemns anger and insults and calls us to pursue true reconciliation (Matt. 5:21–24). It is not enough to avoid adultery; Jesus says that looking at someone with lustful intent is already adultery committed in the heart (vv. 27–28). Jesus teaches elsewhere that "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander" (15:19). Sin is not just what we do; it flows from the inside out.

JUDGMENT AND HELL. As Jesus addresses the sins of anger and lust, he speaks about people's being "liable to the hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22) and their bodies' being "thrown into hell" (5:29). Jesus draws attention to the eternal consequences of sin. Humanity's sins, such as anger and lust, are harmful to others, are offensive to God, and warrant eternal judgment. All those who refuse forgiveness through Christ will one day stand before him to hear the sentence of eternal death. But let us not misunderstand: The fact that Jesus spoke about judgment does not diminish his love; it demonstrates it. He warned about hell because he did not want people to experience it. Indeed, when he spoke of hell he was also speaking of what he would experience on the cross in the place of sinners like us who deserve to go there.

Personal Implications

Reflect on how to apply what you have learned in this text to your everyday life. Make notes below on personal implications of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the

Whole-Bible Connections, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole. Also write down what you have learned that can lead you to praise God, repent of sin, trust his gracious promises, and live in obedience to him.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Matthew 5:21–30

As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment to pray and ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Matthew 5:21–30. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.

Definitions

- ¹ **Reconciliation** – The restoration of a positive relationship and peace between alienated or opposing parties. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has reconciled believers to God (2 Cor. 5:18–21).
- ² **Covenant** – A binding agreement between two parties, typically involving a formal statement of their relationship, a list of stipulations and obligations for both parties, a list of witnesses to the agreement, and a list of curses for unfaithfulness and blessings for faithfulness to the agreement. The OT is more properly understood as the old covenant, meaning the agreement established between God and his people prior to the coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of the new covenant.
- ³ **Forgiveness** – Release from guilt and the reestablishment of relationship. Forgiveness can be granted by God to human beings (Luke 24:47; 1 John 1:9) and by human beings to those who have wronged them (Matt. 18:21–22; Col. 3:13).