

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER TWELVE

MATTHEW 5:21-48

“I SAY unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of heaven . . . Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”

The first of these verses constitutes the concluding statement in the prologue on law. In that statement the inspirational principle of obedience is declared to be passion for a righteousness which exceeds that of Scribes and Pharisees.

In the giving of the laws of the Kingdom there was neither the abrogation of existing laws, nor the utterance of any which are to replace them. In other words, Jesus lays down no rules for the government of human lives. He rather enunciates principles and communicates a life, which life in itself is at once pattern and power, a revelation of purpose, and a dynamic for the realization thereof.

No soul living in His Kingdom is governed by anything external to himself or to herself. We are not governed by a law of carnal ordinances; we are not governed by anything which Jesus said from without; we are governed by the living Christ Who dwells within, and interprets His will to us by the Holy Spirit.

And yet speaking to these men who were to form the nucleus of His Kingdom He illustrated the ethic and illuminated the righteousness which exceeds, by reference to the Mosaic Law. This He did first with regard to human inter-relationships.

- He first quoted two illustrative commandments from the Decalogue (vs. 21-32).
- He then laid down two bases of wider social relationship by quotations from other of the writings of Moses (vv. 33-42).
- He finally declared that in His Kingdom the new attitude of men toward all other men, and especially toward enemies, is to be that of a great love (vs. 43-48).

In each case, after making quotations from the old economy, He interpreted their true meaning, and showed that He was not destroying but fulfilling. Making use of words they had been accustomed to, which had been interpreted by Scribes and Pharisees as to external obligation, He showed that these external requirements could only be fulfilled according to the mind of God, as men acted from an inner life which was pure.

From the Decalogue He selected the words which deal with the foundations of life the laws of murder and marriage; the organism and its organization

- **“Thou shalt not kill,”** - conditioning life as to the rights of personal being
- **“Thou shalt not commit adultery;”** - conditioning that social system into which life is to be built up.

He then made selections from what we have sometimes called the minor laws of Moses, and in doing so He laid two bases of a wider social application, and dealt with the twofold spirit which is to actuate men in their relationship to one another - *truth* and *justice*.

He conditioned their converse, banishing the oath, and establishing the simplicity of undeviating truth; and then showed them that justice is to be ensured between man and man, not from the center of personal insistence, upon rights, but from the new center of making a man supremely anxious to do something more for his neighbor than his neighbor has any right to expect him to do.

He then rose to the final and supreme word of love. He did not insist upon love among neighbors and friends. That, with a tender and beautiful scorn, He treated as of small value - **“If ye love them that love you, what reward have ye?”** There is nothing which exceeds about that. It is not wrong to love the man that loves you. It is not wrong to love your friend and neighbor, but there is no particular virtue in it; there is none of the righteousness which exceeds. Scribes do it, Pharisees do it, Publicans do it, sinners do it. So He began with the impossible **“Love your enemies”**

Here is a threefold process, moving out from the lower to the higher. In the individual man we first have laws conditioning physical life; then laws which condition mental attitudes; and, finally, one law conditioning spiritual being.

From the basis of the body, through the superstructure of the mind, we come to the crowning glory of the spirit. Such is the line of development in man.

So also in society comes first that which is physical life and its culture; then that which is mental the tone, the temper, truth, and justice; and then that which is spiritual love. Not that the lowest is divorced from the highest, for all the truth concerning life and the marriage relationship is smitten through with the crowning glory of a spiritual love; and the underlying inspiration of truth and justice is the love which He insists upon at last.

Into the warm light of the infinite Love the crowning glory are lifted all the lower relationships. It is a harmony, a great unity. The Master Lawgiver touches life in every one of its relationships.

Take, first, the illustrative commandments from the decalogue. **“Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”** These are the foundation laws of social relationship. You cannot build up a new society except as these fundamental facts and requirements are perpetually borne in mind.

First, the sacredness of life, and therefore the sternest possible dealing with anything which might issue in the destruction of life.

“Thou shalt not kill” - That is the first law of social life - individual life.

Life is so sacred a thing, received from God, that it must not be interfered with or destroyed by any other living being. That is fundamental. There are a thousand ways of killing; you do not merely kill a man when you shoot him or stab him. This word of the Sinaitic requirement is a word which safeguards, as with a flaming sword, every life from harm, wrought by any other life. **“Thou shalt not kill.”**

Then, **“Thou shalt not commit adultery”** - Here is a recognition of the sacredness of marriage, through which the race is to be propagated and trained.

God's first circle of society is not the Church, it is the family.

Races are to be made or unmade as the family is made or unmade. Nations are to rise to progress, to power; or to pass, to perish, in proportion as they obey or break this Divine law.

Thus with delicate touch the King takes out of the Decalogue the fundamental things when He would illustrate the righteousness which is to exceed.

What does He say about the first? He gives us the picture of Jewish legal proceedings.

- **“In danger of the judgment,”**
- **“In danger of the council,”**
- **“In danger of hell fire.”**

These phrases are purely Jewish. There was a court which dealt with minor matters, things of which, if a man were guilty, he was **“in danger of the judgment”** the lower court. There were other matters that could not be dealt with in the lower court, things in which it had no jurisdiction; they must be submitted to the Council, the Sanhedrin, the higher court. And finally there was the valley of Hinnom, where the bodies of criminals were thrown, where they cast all the refuse of the city, and the heaps were set on fire for their utter destruction.

Jesus, and those whom He addressed, were perfectly familiar with these things.

When He said **“judgment,”** nobody understood Him to mean the final day of assize; He meant this first tribunal, which dealt with minor matters. When He said **“the council,”** everyone knew He meant the higher court, the Sanhedrin. And when He said **“hell fire,”** they knew He meant that rubbish heap outside the city into which all its refuse was poured, and where fires were perpetually burning for its destruction; the rubbish heap on to which they cast the dead bodies of malefactors. Because this is a Jewish figure it does not lose its force. In the figurative the fact is always of greater force than the figure.

Now let us hear the King.

He says, If you are angry with your brother, you are “**in danger of the judgment.**” He is not now dealing with the actual Jewish judgment; that is the figure. The fact is His own judgment. You are in danger of having to stand before a tribunal, which is the tribunal of the criminal. Anger in the heart creates the condition of the criminal. This is the law inside the Kingdom. If you are angry with your brother, He does not say you will appear for judgment, but you are in danger of it. You are on the path of peril that may lead you there.

But if you say to your brother, “**Raca!**”

A great deal of time has been spent over this word, as to what it signifies, but this much is perfectly certain, it is a term of contempt. Address your brother with contempt, call him “**Raca,**” and you are “**in danger of the council.**” The offense is more heinous, it will take a higher court to deal with you, because your sin is subtler, and more pronounced.

But if you shall call your brother, “**Thou fool,**” which is a term of insult, then you are in danger of the ultimate punishment, of the casting out, of being counted fit only for the rubbish heap, which is outside the Kingdom of God, and shares neither its benefits nor its privileges.

When you are angry, when you hold a man in contempt, when you insult him, you are in danger of the Judgment, of the council, of hell fire. There is not a word about murder here. And there is not a word about killing here. There is no need. Jesus Christ does not begin to insist upon His penal code when a man has murdered; He arrests him before that. Murder in the making is arrested; and no man was ever murdered yet, whether by cool and calculating forethought, or in the heat of passion, but that at the back of it was the spirit that insults, the spirit of contempt, the spirit that is angry.

So to come back to the first of these, the King says: If you are never angry you will never murder. I will make your anger penal, and thus save you from murder. Life is to be sacred, so sacred that there is not to be the remotest chance of your hurting or harming by killing, because you will never hurt in insult, or despise in contempt, or nurse in your own bosom the anger in which lies the making of the ultimate murder.

Jesus has not yet done with this. He goes still further.

He now gives them a law by which they are to govern their own conduct. It is law by illustration rather than by rule.

“**Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee;**” not that thou hast aught against thy brother; that is another thing which the Lord deals with elsewhere “**If thou . . . rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee,**” if you have been angry with him, if you have called him Raca, or fool, if you have wronged him, what are you to do? Drop your gifts and leave them. You are first to be reconciled to your brother, “**and then come and offer thy gift.**”

So the King safeguards the altar of God from the unholy intrusion upon its steps, or the unholy pouring upon its fires, of gifts by men who have in their hearts something which is harmful to the community. That is the law. Obey it, and there will be no murder. Obey it, and life will become sacred; every man's life will become as sacred to every other man as is his own.

But the King goes further yet.

“Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

It would seem that Jesus is here passing behind the feeling that may be in a man's heart against his brother, and is dragging the arch-enemy into the light. Probably this term adversary refers here, as everywhere, to Satan. This is a figure of law. The adversary is the antagonist. It is strictly a legal word, and yet it is a curious fact that it occurs only four times in the New Testament, and every time it is used of an antagonist in law in a bad sense, and never in a good. It is the one word Peter uses concerning the great enemy, **“Your adversary the devil.”** And the Greek word very bluntly translated means, *“against right.”* It is the adversary in law, who is not on the side of righteousness.

But you say, Surely Jesus was not advising us to agree with the devil? Yes, exactly that.

Let us follow it carefully. Here again in a flash He reveals the relation Satan bears to all such as are in His Kingdom. Satan is not powerful over such as put their trust in God. Jesus said on another occasion, **“Satan hath desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat.”**

Now He says: If there is evil in your heart toward your brother, if you have wronged your brother, and he has that against you, then the adversary himself has a claim upon you; he can claim you to deliver you to punishment. His claim is established because of your wrongdoing.

- Haste from the altar,
- Be reconciled to your brother;
- Have the evil put away;
- Agree with your brother;
- So have done with the adversary that he may have no complaint.

Remember Satan is the accuser of the brethren, the one who charges us with sin. So long as we are living in sin he has right over us, even though we be in God's Kingdom; we give him the right to lead us into the place of ultimate penalty. Thus the King safeguards human life.

Oh this ethic of Jesus, how it scorches! It was so easy a thing to do no murder. Through the accident of birth, or the accident of earlier surroundings we are devoid of a certain kind of animal courage, and so do not murder. But, oh my soul, when He says if I am angry and contemptuous I am in danger of Gehenna, there is only one thing for me to do hurry to the Cross and its blood and its cleansing; to the Resurrection and its life and its dynamic.

This ethic of Jesus, which does not express itself in small rules, but in great principles; not in a decalogue on stone, but in a requirement in the heart, is the severest thing that the world has ever had.

Again, how will He feel with this whole question of the marriage relationship and the first circle of human society? This is one of the things that Jesus, the Infinite Purity, knew must for evermore be handled with a touch of infinite delicacy, and yet with the grip of steel. There are no words wasted. There is no long description, satisfying the morbid curiosity of the unclean. There is one swift, burning, heart-searching flame.

“Every whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

Let no man who begins to undervalue the sacredness of the marriage relationship ever dare to say that he is in any sense a Christian. Here speaks the flaming heart of the Infinite Purity, loving the bairns, taking care of succeeding generations. The sin that curses society is a sin of the heart.

Though that which Moses forbade be never committed, if the evil thing is there, the King says that it is sin. Stern words! Surely with love He is thinking of the little children. He is thinking of home, and the family; He is talking in the interests of the boys and the girls, of what they are to be when they touch the larger life. But there is no need to attempt to scent the rose, or to paint the glow of an evening sky, or to add any luster to Infinite Purity. Read it until it search you and burn you, and know for evermore that this is the ethic of purity in the Kingdom of the great King. So we pass to the two bases of wider social reform.

First of all, truth. Here we need not tarry, for again the words are so beautifully simple. Jesus says oaths of any kind are unnecessary in His Kingdom. The new character will make the old oath superfluous. You need not swear by heaven or earth, by Jerusalem, or by your hair. You will say, Yea, and it will be yea. You will say, Nay, and it will be nay. Simple truth, profounder far in convincing men than all your laboured oaths. We know full well that an oath is always a revelation of a possibility of deceit.

We know perfectly well when a man is talking to us, if he begins to say that he is prepared to take his oath, we begin to think he is a liar. No man ever begins to offer to take an oath to prove a thing, but that one knows, that, even supposing this time he is true, the fact that he needs an oath to make one believe him, shows that at other times he is not true.

Jesus says:

- Do not swear by heaven, for it is God’s throne.
- Do not swear by Jerusalem, for it is His city, the **“city of the Great King.”**
- Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.
- Live in the consciousness of God, and you will not want to swear by things that are less than God.
- Do not swear by heaven, it is God’s throne.

Remember that, and you will always tell God's truth.

The earth green, beautiful is God's earth. Remember that, and on its sward, and on its dust, and on its heaving billows you cannot lie. Remember that you are in the presence of God; that He clothes the earth with green; He is in the city, with its thrill, and throb, and pressure; that He is watching the silver of your hair; and then you will say, No, and every man will know that you mean No; you will say Yes, and the world will believe it; because they have come to know you.

And, secondly, justice.

Justice is to have a new center, a new desire. It is to be secured to others by overplus of love. The old economy proceeded from the center of personal rights, but the new proceeds from the center of delight in undeserved and unnecessary generosity.

- The other cheek! The man who struck the one does not deserve the other.
- Thy cloak also! No man deserves your cloak if he has made you give your coat up.
- The second mile! No man deserves that we should go the second mile with him when he has compelled us to go one.

Notice, it is not if you go with a man, but if he compel you to go one, you must go the second. You say impracticable for London? Yes, utterly, until London bends at the Cross.

You will have truest justice from the man who does more than can be required, for the more always means the inclusion of everything which can be required. When one sees a man cheerfully tramping the second mile, justice is there in the first, but the demonstration of it is in the second. That is Christianity; that is the overplusage. It is more than is required.

The Christly soul, the man in the Kingdom is for evermore overfilling the measure, overstepping the necessity, doing that which no man had any right to expect from him. Justice becomes love-lit, and full, when He interprets it.

Finally, He says, love not your friends only, but your enemies. How does it culminate? "**Be ye therefore perfect.**" And that is not the end of the Sermon on the Mount. There is a great deal more to be said after that.

That commandment does not refer to anything except that which is set in close relation. Love your enemies, and so be like your Father. This is the ethic only, not the dynamic. Presently we shall have to say, be like your Father, and so love your enemies. For the moment love is the law, the rule, the regulation, the principle of life that crowns everything.

Go back over all this chapter, and you will find it is so.

- If you love you will never be angry, or call your brother Raca, or call him fool.
- If you love there will be no breaking down of the holy enclosure of marriage relationship, and the family circle.

- If you really love you will tell the truth, for a liar cannot love.
- If you love, as we have seen, justice will always be satisfied.

Love is everything. And so the whole law is fulfilled in the one word love.

Let us take these requirements of the King one by one, and by them let us test our lives. It is impossible for us to do so without being driven to the conclusion that, unless He does infinitely more for the world than give it a code of ethics, He has but mocked our impotence and revealed our weakness.

Thank God that we know Him not only, or first, as Lawgiver; but first as our great Redeemer, blotting out the sin of the past by blood, communicating new power by resurrection, and coming with us through all these human interrelationships, enabling us to fulfil them.

~ end of chapter 12 ~

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