

Jesus on Murder/Adultery/Divorce
Matthew 5:17-32

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- Jesus did not oppose the Law, but only a wrong interpretation of it, as in stressing regulations more than character. “Iota” refers here to the smallest Hebrew letter (“yod”). The point Jesus makes here is that God will hold accountable all who disregard even the smallest commandment. Verses 21-48 show what Jesus’ demand for a higher righteousness involves.

- Raca is Aramaic for “empty-headed one.” This insult is tantamount to the one that follows it (i.e. “fool”). “The hell of fire” refers to Gehenna, which is the opposite of paradise, and the place where the wicked would be burned up (according to some Jewish teachers) or eternally tortured (according to other Jewish teachers). Not only the outward act of murder, but also the inward choice of anger that generates such acts violates the spirit of God’s Law against murder.

- God would not accept an outward offering if one had oppressed or mistreated one's neighbor, and did not make it right. God accepted only sacrifices offered with a pure heart toward him and one's neighbor (Genesis 4:4-7; Proverbs 15:8; Isaiah 1:10-15; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21-24).

- Where Jesus presents the image of the court, Jewish hearers would have known that repayment of a debt must be to the last "penny" (i.e. quadrans - one of the least valuable Roman coins).

- Jewish teachers looked down on lust; some even went as far as Jesus in regarding it as adultery. Jesus does not have an issue with the doctrine of his hearers, but with the attitude of their hearts.

- Corporal punishment (e.g. cutting off appendages, see Exodus 21:24-25) is easier to bear than capital punishment - the decree of eternal death pronounced by the heavenly court. Some Jewish thinkers believed that one would be resurrected in the form one had died (i.e. with limbs missing, as in the case of many martyrs) before being made whole. Jesus employs such an image here.

- Under Jewish law, adultery referred only to misbehavior of the wife, not the husband. Matthew does not agree with this view (Matthew 5:28), but because his readers must obey the law of their communities, he deals only with the issue of the wife in this text.

- Some Pharisaic rabbis allowed divorce for almost anything (just as Roman law did); others allowed it only if the wife were unfaithful. Yet, the stricter rabbis did not view more lenient divorces as invalid. Jesus goes beyond the stricter position: not only does he allow divorce only if one's wife is unfaithful, but he regards divorce for any other reason as invalid, thus making remarriage in those cases adulterous. This appears to be hyperbole, as with Matthew 5:29-30.

- If Jesus' interpretation of the Law was stricter than what the Law said at face value, no one would have thought that he was contradicting it. Building a "fence" around the Law was a standard Jewish practice that involved making certain that the Law's intent was not broken.

Questions:

+ What does Jesus mean by saying he came to fulfill the Law and Prophets, not abolish them?
What does Jesus mean by saying, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven? Do you qualify? Why or why not?"

+ Why does Jesus make anger, insulting a brother or calling someone a fool equal to murder?
If anyone has something against you, what should you do about it? When will you act?

+ Why does Jesus make the penalty for lustful thoughts the same as the penalty for adultery?
If you struggle with lustful thoughts, what should you do about them? When will you act?

+ Jesus says sexual immorality is the only ground for divorce. What do you say, and why?
What would Jesus say about promiscuity and homosexuality? What do you say, and why?

+ Why does Jesus interpret these commandments in ways that make them impossible to keep?
After giving this passage serious consideration, what response does God expect from you?