

Small Group Leaders Notes

Matthew 5:21-26

Context

• **v17-20 Jesus came to fulfil the law and the prophets**

- V17-20 are difficult verses to understand as they deal with big topics including the relationship between Jesus and the law, the Christian and the law and the Old and New Testaments. We will preach a whole sermon on this passage in January so you do not need to deal with them in your Bible study. Nevertheless it is worth you having thought about what they mean before the study on 5:21-26.
- Jesus says that he has come to 'fulfil the law and the prophets' but what does he mean? Jesus fulfils the Old Testament (the law + the prophets = the Old Testament) in a several ways.
 - First, he fulfils it in the sense that what was predicted came to pass in him.
 - Second, he fulfilled the law in the sense that he fully kept the law. He lived the life that Israel were meant to live. He perfectly kept the law and in that sense fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law. By his death on the cross he offers us his perfect righteousness so that when God looks at us he sees Jesus' perfect record of law-keeping instead of our sin and failure.
 - Third, Jesus fulfils the law in the sense that he 'fills the law full.' In 5:21-48 Jesus takes different commands and shows us what the law really means. He fills full the commandment. Six times Jesus says something like, "You have heard that it was said... But I tell you..." He's not contradicting the law instead he is showing us the depth of the law. What Jesus is contradicting is the minimalist interpretations of the religious leaders. This is clear for 2 reasons. First Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said' rather than 'It is written.' He's talking about people's interpretations of the law rather than what the law actually says. Second, in v43 he says, 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemies."' The Law didn't tell people to hate their enemies, that was the interpretation of the religious leaders who wanted to make the law as shallow and easy as possible. Jesus comes to 'fill full' the law by showing us the depth of the law's demands. As we will see in our study the 6th command not to murder is not just about the act of murder, it's also about the anger in our hearts that is the root of murder. This is the fullness of the command.

• **Remember the initial hearers are disciples not enquirers**

- With every part of the Sermon on the Mount we must remember that Jesus is talking to people who are already his disciples rather than those who want to become his disciples. Jesus is not telling us what we must do to become one of his disciples. He's telling us how to live once we have become his disciples by his grace.

"Disciples are those who have recognised their own spiritual bankruptcy before God and mourned over their sin. They are those who have received God's mercy and who hunger and thirst to be more like Jesus, living righteous and holy lives. Their aim is to live, clean, devoted lives, at peace with God and bringing his peace to others. However, the key point is that they are not doing all this legalistically: that is, they are not trusting that these characteristics will make them acceptable to God. Rather they are living obediently, out of gratitude to God and drawing on the readily available resources of his grace to live lives that are distinctively different - living at the heart of this law of life." (David Jackman.)

Structure

- Each of the six parts of 5:21-48 follows the same basic structure;
 - Jesus introduces each new unit by saying **'You have heard that it was said...'** v21, v27, v31, v33, v38, v43
 - This is then followed by Jesus' filling full the law which begins with the words, **'But I tell you...'** v22, v28, v32, v34, v39, v44.
 - In our passage Jesus then provides 2 worked examples of what this means in practice in v23-24 and v25-26.

Tricky Bits

- **"Didn't Jesus get angry?"**
 - Someone might read this and point to Matthew 21:12 where Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out the traders and money-changers. 'Surely Jesus broke his own commandment?' Similarly they could point to Matthew 23:17 where Jesus calls the teachers of the law and the pharisees 'blind fools'. 'Again, isn't Jesus saying one thing but actually doing another?' Or someone might say, 'How can God tell us not to be angry when he is angry at sin?'
 - In each of those cases Jesus' anger is a righteous anger at sin and injustice. In a world of sin, false teaching, injustice and exploitation there is such a thing as righteous anger. Jesus is not talking about righteous anger when he tells us not to get angry in v22. The examples that he gives in v23-26 show that the anger that Jesus has in mind is the anger that comes from personal relationships. Too often we burn with anger at what other people have done to us rather than how they have treated God or other people.
- **"What does 'Raca' mean?"**
 - This seems to have been an insult aimed at someone's intelligence. In that sense we could paraphrase it as 'anyone who insults someone's intelligence is answerable to the court.'

Big Idea

Jesus shows that the command 'do not murder' goes deeper than our actions to the anger in our hearts.

Applications

- **Realise how serious our anger is before God.**
 - Like the Pharisees we can be tempted to read the 6th command and think that because we haven't murdered someone we have kept the command. Jesus shows us that the full meaning of the command extends to the anger in our hearts. In that way this command finds us all out. We may not have killed someone but in our hearts we have all hated someone enough to wish them harm. *'Anger and insults are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of somebody who stands in our way'* (Stott.) *'Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer,'* (1 John 3:15.)
 - We must not fall into the trap of thinking that anger only matters when we act upon it. What happens in our hearts matters to God. He is not just concerned with external righteousness but a righteousness that flows from our hearts.

... Are you holding onto anger and bitterness that you need to confess?

- **Take immediate action to mend broken relationships**

- In both of the examples (v23-26) the application is that the person should take immediate action to put things right. In the first example the scene is the temple and the person is to leave their gift right there in front of the altar to go and put things right. Jesus is saying that if we're not reconciled to others then our religion is just a sham.
- Notice that it is the other person who has the problem. In other words Jesus is saying, it's not just enough to control your own temple, we must also not arouse the anger of others.
- How about this for a modern equivalent, *"If you are in church, in the middle of a service of worship, and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave church at once and put it right. Do not wait till the service has ended."* (Stott)
- In a church the size of BEC it can be easy to let bad relationships and hurts fester. We can grumble and moan either to others or just to ourselves. We can sit somewhere different on Sunday so we don't have to speak to them. We can join another home group or even more to another church. Jesus is telling us to put things right now. Remember 5:9? We show that we're children of God by being peacemakers.
- Reconciliation can take a long time and it can be costly (v25-26) but then it cost God infinitely more to reconcile us to himself. In response to his costly reconciliation he calls us to heal relationships even if that is costly.

... Is there a relationship that you need to fix? What can you do about it today?

... Is there someone who has something against you? What will you do to begin the healing process?

Questions

Starter - We all get angry or annoyed at times. What sort of people and situations get you angry?

The danger with a study like this is that we all pretend that this isn't a problem for us... when it is! Right from the start we need to set an honest tone. The aim of this question is not to celebrate or glorify sin, we just want to set the tone for honest application. You might like to ask people to turn to the person next to them to talk about this question. Make sure you have thought for yourself. Perhaps it's a particular person at work. Maybe it's when you are driving in the car. Maybe queue jumpers make you angry. Be as honest and practical as you can be, this will help the rest of the group.

1. Have a look at v21-22. 'You shall not murder' is the 6th command. How deep does Jesus say that this command goes?

Deeper than we'd like. We're happy for God to say do not murder, but we start to get uncomfortable when Jesus shows us that includes anger and insulting people. It is worth recognising that our instinct, like the Pharisees, is to limit the law so that we are ok.

- What does this teach us about God and his standards? How do his standards compare to ours?

We need to see that God's standards are perfect! They are far higher than ours! This might cause some people to express how hopeless it is because "none of us are perfect!" If the conversation heads in that direction then it is a wonderful chance to remind people of the gospel. None of us measure up to God's standard, we're all poor in Spirit, but as we mourn this, and humbly come to Jesus to be made righteous we find forgiveness, life and a place in his kingdom. Make sure that people see that the law isn't the way into the kingdom but it is the way that Jesus expects us to live once we're in the kingdom.

At this point someone might raise the question of righteous anger. 'Surely Jesus isn't saying all anger is bad?' Hopefully the Tricky Bits should help you to steer the group through this important question without getting sidetracked.

2. In v23-24 who is angry?

It's important to notice the subtly. In this case we are not the ones who are angry, instead it is someone else who is angry with us. We are not just responsible for our own anger, we also must take action when someone else is angry with us.

- Can you think of a contemporary equivalent to this scenario?

See John Stott's example quoted above.

3. Looking at v23-26 how are we to respond when someone has a problem with us?

Though the scenarios are slightly different the basic point is the same - we are to act immediately.

- Why do we find it hard to respond like this?

There are many different reasons. We might not want to make things awkward. We might be worried that it will only make things worse. We might be too proud. We might feel that it wasn't our fault or that it is not our job to make the first move. None of these change what Jesus is saying, we are to take action now.

- Can you think of how Jesus practiced what he was preaching here?

The gospel is all about Jesus taking the costly initiative to put the relationship between us and God right. We broke the relationship, ours was the debt, by rights we should be the ones to make amends, but Jesus took the initiative.

• How will Jesus and the gospel help us to respond to people who make us angry?

When we remember how merciful, kind and forgiving God has been to us then his mercy should begin to change our hearts.