

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THOU SHALL NOT KILL

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### Matthew 5:21-26

In Matthew 5:21-26, we find these words that come from the mouth of our Lord Jesus.

*Matthew 5:21. You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.'*

*22 But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire.*

*23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,*

*24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

*25 Make friends 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;*

*26 truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.*

### You have heard that it was said

What can we learn from a passage like this? First of all, I would like you to take note of the glory of Jesus in this passage. I wonder if you can see it. The Lord Jesus said, *You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill'.* *You shall not kill* is the Sixth Commandment of the Ten Commandments. When the Lord Jesus said, *You have heard that it was said,* He was not only referring to the Ten Commandments but also to the interpretation that the religious leaders had of these commandments. And the problem was that the Pharisees and the scribes were teaching that only the physical act of murder is implied in that commandment.

Then the Lord Jesus says, *'But I say to you,* if you are angry with your brother, you have already committed a crime as bad as murder. You are likely to end up as much in hell as the person who committed murder.' *Whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire.* In other words, the fire of hell awaits the person who says to his brother that he is a fool. *'This is what I say to you.'*

What is the Lord Jesus doing? Here we see the Lord Jesus as the great lawgiver. He is not saying that there is anything wrong with the statement *You shall not kill.* He is saying, *'I want you to understand what this means. And what it means is that it must be understood at a much higher level than simply not literally killing a person, as the Pharisees and the scribes are teaching it to you.'*

## The glory of Jesus

What the Lord Jesus is doing is in fact to take the OT law and to bring out the full spiritual meaning of that commandment. Who would dare to expound the Word of God like this? So let us notice the glory of Jesus as the great lawgiver in these few words. He is able to speak with the authority of God for the simple reason that He is God. Jesus is none other than God manifest in the flesh in His divine glory. And the same person who gave the commandment to Moses is the One who is telling us what that commandment means. The glory of Jesus is to be seen by those who have the spiritual eyes to see.

Back in the OT, Isaiah already saw that glory. The apostle John says in the John 12:41 that Isaiah *saw His glory and spoke of Him*. Whose glory? The glory of Jesus. This is an astonishing statement for the apostle John to make. Where did Isaiah see the glory of Jesus? John tells us that it was in the temple, in Isaiah 6. Today we see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That's what Paul says in 2Corinthians 3:18. *We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory...* We, as believers, can see with unveiled face, the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. That's where we see God's glory. If you don't see it in Him, you won't see it anywhere.

We see this glory *as in a mirror* because no man can fully grasp the glory of the Lord. But it is certainly possible to begin to see and understand the glory of the Lord. And looking at this glory has a transforming power. *We are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory...* There are Christians who, when you look at them, you feel that they are motivated by a divine fire. And where does that divine fire come from? From seeing, with spiritual eyes, the glory of Jesus. Isaiah saw that glory. And when God called him to be a prophet, Isaiah said, *Here am I! Send me*.

## Seeing God

Now, not everybody can see the glory of God with the same clarity. What prevents us from seeing that glory? It is the lack of holiness. The lack of holiness. In Hebrews 12, the writer tells us these important words that unless you are holy, you will not see the glory of God. Without holiness, no man shall see God. Hebrews 12:14 says, *Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*.

'Strive for the holiness because without it, you will not be able to see God.' Remember these important words. I would like them to be clear in your mind and in your heart. We say that we are saved by faith. But make sure that it is the right kind of faith. A simple professing of faith does not make you a disciple of Christ. You see, faith in the Bible is to be understood in terms of that which enables you to be holy. You are not going to be saved, the writer to the Hebrews tells us, just by professing faith. Only by that faith which brings you into holiness, only that kind of faith will enable you to belong to God, to see God. Without holiness, no one shall see God. Faith is true faith only if it is a faith by which God's holiness becomes ours.

The OT says, *Be holy, for I am holy*. The apostle Peter says, *... as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct*. And Jesus says at the end of Matthew 5, *Be perfect as your Father is perfect*. The requirement of holiness is upon every disciple.

## Defining holiness

But what is this holiness? Holiness can be defined as 'totalness', a totality of commitment to God. There is no holiness without a total consecration to God. The basic step in holiness is that your heart is undividedly loyal and committed to Christ. There is no partial holiness. You are either holy or

you are not holy. You are either the Lord's, or you don't belong to Him. You are set apart totally for Him or you are not.

Once we have completely yielded our life to God, then we are a person who can be filled with the Spirit. I say, 'can be', because the filling of the Spirit comes to the person who asks for it. We must ask God to fill us with His presence. Often, in the spiritual life, we don't have because we don't ask. The Lord Jesus says to the disciples in Luke 11:13, *How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!* The Spirit-filled Christian is someone who has learned to ask God to fill him with the Holy Spirit.

Why do I insist so much on holiness and being filled with the Spirit in this passage about killing? Read the teaching of Jesus here. He says, 'The standard of righteousness that I require of you is much higher than that of the Pharisees and the scribes. It is such that the moment that you are angry with your brother, you have already committed a crime as bad as murder.'

If we are honest with ourselves, we immediately realize that there is no way we can meet such a standard of righteousness and holiness unless we are filled with the Spirit. It is only when we are filled with the Spirit that we begin to know the power that comes from being a Christian. The transforming power of God is that which enables us to meet the standard of righteousness that Jesus expects from us.

### **Angry with a brother**

Now let's take a closer look at this standard. Look at v. 22. The Lord Jesus says, *Whoever is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.* The word translated 'judgment' also means 'court'. It is simply a technical word for the local courts of Israel. Each Jewish town had a local court to deal with local legal issues.

Then the Lord Jesus says, 'If you insult your brother, you are going to be liable for a lot of troubles.' In other translations, we have, 'If you say to a brother 'Raca!' What does 'raca' mean? It comes from an Aramaic word which means 'empty'. If you say to a person 'raca', you are saying that he is an empty headed person, and therefore you are insulting his intelligence. So if you say to your brother, 'You empty headed man, you idiot', you will be liable to the council. The council here is simply a word which refers to the Sanhedrin, the great council of Jerusalem, which dealt with the most important cases in the country.

And then, the Lord Jesus says, If you say to your brother, 'You fool!' The word fool is a stronger word than the word that is translated 'raca' because in the Bible, it has strong spiritual overtones. In Psalm 14:1 we read, *The fool has said in his heart, there is no God.* It is the fool who says this kind of thing, a person who is spiritually and morally degraded. So if you say to a person, 'You fool', you are implying that he is a godless person. And if you pass such a judgment upon a brother, then you are liable to hell fire.

Now consider this, that in this verse, there is an advance from the less serious to the more serious. From the local court, to the Sanhedrin, to hell fire. The local court of 23 judges, the Sanhedrin of 71 judges, and hell fire, the judgment of God. We find the same thing about anger. From the simple anger, we then have the anger that goes on to carry out a statement that says, 'You fool!' An action is involved here. Then the more serious charge that says, 'You godless fellow!' That is a very serious charge because it is to say that he doesn't know God at all. And when you do that, you are passing the death sentence on him. It is a statement of condemnation that wipes him completely out of the kingdom of God.

## **Is anger a sin?**

You would have noticed that the underlying theme of v. 23 is the problem of anger. Now when the Lord Jesus says, *Every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment*, does that mean that to be angry is always wrong? Some have dealt with this question by distinguishing two kinds of anger. There is an anger that is prolonged and carried around. And they say that it is this anger that the Lord Jesus is referring to. Then there is another Greek word for anger. It is the word *thumos*. This word refers to a temporary anger, an anger that dies down quickly as opposed to a continued anger.

Personally, I don't think that this distinction is helpful. The Lord Jesus is speaking here of an anger which relates to murder. And whether it is a cool and calculated anger, or it is an instant burst of anger, both can kill. It doesn't matter what kind of anger it is. The problem is that both can give birth to murder.

Other people have said that not all anger is evil. There is a righteous kind of anger in which a person is angry because of sin and injustice. It is often said in the Bible that the wrath of God, or God's anger, is provoked by the sinfulness of the people. The unrighteous anger is the one which is selfish. It is felt because our ego has been offended. The Scriptures do make the distinction between righteous and unrighteous anger. But we have to acknowledge that human anger, even for the Christian, is rarely totally righteous. By and large, we are angry for selfish reasons. Deciding whether one's anger is righteous or unrighteous is a difficult exercise because even when it seems obviously justified, I suspect that after close examination, we will find that it was not as pure as we thought it was at the beginning. Purely righteous anger, only God can express it.

And what is more, the word translated 'angry' here in Matthew 5:22 does not refer specifically to a sinful anger. Because the same Greek word is used in Ephesians to speak of an anger that is not sinful. In Ephesians 4:26, Paul quotes an OT passage and says, *Be angry, and do not sin*. So it is possible to be angry and not to sin. When Jesus says, *Whoever is angry with his brother*, we understand that He is referring to a sinful kind of anger on the basis of the context in which this word is used. Not because the definition of the word itself commands it.

## **Anger that becomes sin**

I am of those who believe that emotions are neither good or bad. They are only a reflection of the condition of our soul. It is how we decide to respond to our emotions that determines whether they become good or bad. The anger that Jesus is speaking about in Matthew 5:22, is the anger which makes a person to say to his brother, Raca, or fool. It is an anger full of bitterness, an anger that despises and seeks revenge. It is an anger full of hatred.

And in that sense, John says in 1John 3:15, *Whoever hates his brother is a murderer*. The person who hates his brother has committed a murder. Hate is equal to murder. So if you are angry with your brother, and you let that anger grow, it will inevitably become hatred. And the Lord Jesus tells us that in the eyes of God, that's sin, even if you have not done anything in action. Why is it so? Because the person who is angry so as to hate his brother has the same feelings and spirit as a murderer. God looks and judges by the heart, not just by the behavior.

## **Seeking reconciliation**

Having said that, the Lord Jesus goes on in His teaching and applies this principle to two specific situations. The first one has to do with someone going to the temple to offer a sacrifice to God. The second one speaks of a person going to a law court to answer the charges of an enemy. The

pictures are different, but in both cases, the basic situation is the same: someone has a grievance against you. And it follows that the basic lesson is the same for both situations.

The lesson that the Lord Jesus is teaching through these two illustrations is this. If there is anything wrong in your spiritual life, put it right immediately. Don't waste time because any hesitation can be very costly. So He says, 'When you are in church worshipping God and you remember that someone has something against you, leave the church service and be reconciled to your brother. God does not accept the worship of a person who is not right with his brother. And then, you come back to worship God.'

'Or, when you are on your way with your accuser, when you are going to court, make friend quickly with him. Settle your debt with him without delay.' In this illustration, I don't think that Jesus is only referring to the human court. He is also speaking of the spiritual court. Make right with God quickly. Put your sins right immediately before you come to the judgment. Because by the time you come to the judgment, it will be too late. *Your opponent may ... deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.* There is no time to waste. The longer you let a sin to hang around, the stronger that sin becomes and the more difficult it will be to deal with it. And the more likely it will end up with the judgment that comes with it. A spiritual man acts quickly when it comes to getting right with God.

## **Getting right with God**

There is another principle that we need to notice here. The Lord Jesus says that our relationship with God is directly connected with our relationship with one another. Don't think that you have a good relationship with God just because you have your quiet time every day and that you spend long periods of time in prayer. That is good, but it is not enough. Because it also depends on your relationship to your brothers and sisters.

The Lord Jesus says in v. 23-24, 'When you come to the altar to bring your gift, and you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there.' Why? Because God is not going to accept it. God does not accept the worship of a person who does not have a right relationship with His people. Leave your gift there and get right with your brother. Be reconciled to him. And then come back and offer your gift.

You see, our relationship with God is directly affected by our relationship with one another. If your relationship with your brothers and sisters is not right, you are wasting your time to try to get through to God. A person cannot expect to be right with God if he is not right with his brother. And so, a broken fellowship with another person means broken fellowship with God.

Think of marriage. Marriage is a wonderful experience of intimacy, of commitment and of love. But marriage is not necessarily easy, and we have to sadly recognize that when it does not work well, it has been a trap for some Christians, a trap that has hindered their relationship with God. The apostle Peter tells us that in order to be right with the Lord, we have to be right with our wife and our family. Listen to what he says in 1Peter 3:7. Every married person should take note of these words. He says, 'Behave in a considerate manner with your wife, treating her with honor as the weaker one.' What for? *So that your prayers may not be hindered.* If our relationship with our wife is not right, our communion with God is going to be hindered. The same principle is implied here. A break with another person means a break with God.

I began this message by saying that holiness allows us to see the glory of God. *Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God* (Matthew 5:8). Without holiness, there is no real communion with God. But holiness has to do also with our relationship with our brothers and sisters because our relationship with God is directly affected by our relationship with one another.

The Lord Jesus, in this passage, is raising the standard of righteousness far above that of the Pharisees not because He wants to make life difficult for us, but because He wants to show us the pathway to seeing His glory, the pathway to spiritual power, the pathway to being a true disciple of Christ.