BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Jim Denison
President, Denison Forum on Truth and Culture,
and Theologian-in-Residence, Baptist General Convention of Texas

Studies In The Gospel of Matthew: A Primer for Discipleship

Lesson Five
Live By Jesus’ Interpretation of God’s Will

Focal Text
Matthew 5:17-48

Background
Matthew 5:17-48

Main Idea
Jesus instructs his disciples to live a life of complete goodness springing from a heart grounded in the character of God.

Question to Explore
How can a life of discipleship be measured?

Quick Read
Living by Jesus’ ethic would revolutionize your life and world.

Commentary
A spider began a web at the top of an old, abandoned barn. The spider dropped a single line from the highest beam of the roof, and began to spin a web from it. Over time the web became larger and larger, and caught for the spider more and more food. The spider became happy, then complacent, proud of his success.

One day the spider noticed a single thread running from his web up into the darkness above. I wonder why that is there, the spider thought. It doesn’t catch me any food. So the spider climbed up to that single thread and cut it. And slowly the entire web came tumbling to the ground.

What is the single thread on which the Christian life depends?
In Matthew 5:17 Jesus set out the two options his disciples could choose: “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.” On one side stood the Jewish law with all its regulations. By seeking to fulfill them, the people thought they could earn standing with God and his blessing on their lives. But no one can keep the law fully; all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory and standards (Romans 3:23).

On the other side stood an itinerant carpenter/rabbi from tiny Nazareth and his revolutionary teachings. He offered not legalism but grace. He taught a life dependent on the love of our Father and the power of his Spirit. The Jewish authorities focused on outward law; Jesus focused on the spirit. They centered on rules; he offered principles to be fulfilled by his leading. They worked to avoid things and practices; he taught his followers to embrace life in the power of the Spirit. And he called them to the perfection only his Father could demonstrate and enable.

If his disciples would choose his path, they would find themselves fulfilling the Jewish law more completely than they could ever have accomplished in their self-dependent efforts. But first they must make him the King and Lord.

We face the same choice today. We can seek to obey the rules of our religion as we understand them, but we will fail God and ourselves. Or we can submit to Christ as our King and fulfill his word by his strength. Choose wisely.

In this week’s study we will survey much more material than can be taught in a single lesson. I encourage you to focus on those topics that are especially urgent for your class members, and I hope that this extended commentary will help.

**Live biblically (5:17-20)**

Jesus continued his sermon: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (Matthew 5:17a). “Do not think” is very strong in the Greek, literally *Never think that...*. “That I have come to abolish” means to deny the divine authority, to demean. “The Law or the Prophets” refers to the entirety of God’s word to this point in revelatory history.

Jesus went even further: “I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” (Matt. 5:18). “I tell you the truth” translates a phrase known to be used only by Jesus in all of ancient Judaism. It means literally, *I guarantee you this...*. 
“Until heaven and earth disappear” refers to the end of time (Revelation 21:1). “Not the smallest letter” refers to the Hebrew yod, the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet. “Not the least stroke of a pen” refers to the points on a Hebrew consonant. We would say, not the dotted I or the crossed T. “Will by any means disappear” utilizes the double negative, meaning will no, not ever disappear. “Until everything is accomplished”—until the Bible does its work, fulfilling its purpose.

Here Jesus endorsed the power and purpose of Scripture for his followers. He knew that God’s word keeps us from sin: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). It guides our lives daily: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps. 119:105). It brings us joy: “The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes” (Ps. 19:8). And it gives us hope: “Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

Now Jesus applied his principle: “Anyone who breaks 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 practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19). Here Jesus shows us who will be great in heaven, and who will be least.

The “great” will be those who practice and teach the word of God. Both are crucial, and in this order. The “least” will be those who break the “least” of the commandments of God and influence others to do the same—those who do not live by the word and will of God, and lead others away from his word as well.

So Jesus shows us how to be great in heaven. Now let’s ask an even more urgent question: how do we get there? “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). “I tell you”—these words come from Jesus himself. Your righteousness must surpass, an emphatic word that means to go far beyond, to outdistance greatly. Your “righteousness” must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees. What was theirs? What must ours be?

The Pharisees were a small group, never more than 6,000 men. Their name meant separated ones, and it describes their passionate commitment to separation from regular life in obedience to the minutia of the Torah, the Law of God.

The Pharisees calculated that the Law contained 248 commandments and 365 prohibitions, and they aspired to keep them all. No group in human history has been more religious than were the Pharisees. If it were possible to go to heaven through human effort, their reservations in paradise would have been guaranteed.
But they were not: “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” “Certainly not” is a double negative “by no means,” meaning there is no way that you can enter heaven unless you are more righteous before God than were the Pharisees, the most religiously righteous people on earth.

In other words, you cannot do enough or be religious enough to go to heaven. The ladder doesn’t climb high enough. Religion won’t work, no matter how much of it you do. If it didn’t work for the Pharisees, it won’t work for us.

In the introduction to our study, our Lord made clear his insistence that we live by the intent of Scripture and his ability to enable us to fulfill that intent. If we submit to his authority and Spirit, he will empower us to live abundantly and joyfully. Every dimension of our lives will be transformed by his word and will for us.

What follows are six illustrations of that fact.

**Seek reconciliation (5:21-26)**

The first illustration: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment’” (Matt. 5:21). They “heard” this because the rabbis read the law to them in the synagogue each Sabbath, including this Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13). A murderer was “subject to judgment,” the local tribunal composed of seven people. These tribunals inflicted punishment for capital crimes with the sword. Then Jesus responded: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matt. 5:22a).

*When is anger wrong?*

Jesus was not dealing with the simple emotion of anger. This is an inevitable human reaction to hurt or harm. And it was an emotion Jesus felt himself. In Mark 3:5 Jesus “looked around at them in anger” for their unbelief. Ephesians 4:26 tells us, “In your anger do not sin.” The emotion of anger is not a sin.

Jesus was dealing with a different thing here. In the Greek language, *thumos* describes the spontaneous and unavoidable emotion of anger; it is not the word here. *Orge* is this word; it means anger that is long-lived, cherished in the heart, nursed, and kept alive. It is the deliberate choice to continue holding onto your anger, the absolute unwillingness to pardon and move on. Such cherished anger makes us “subject to judgment.” In other words, hating my brother is as wrong as the murder that hate spawns.

“Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin” (Matt. 5:22b). “Raca” was an Aramaic term of contempt that literally meant *empty-headed* or
stupid. In ancient Judaism, names were much more significant than they are for us. A name denoted a person’s character, and a word took on its own life and power.

So expressing your cherished anger by a term of contempt made you answerable not to the local tribunal but to the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of ancient Israel. They typically required reparations in money for such an insult to a person’s reputation and status.

“But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matt. 5:22c). “Fool” was the worst, most slanderous term you could use against a person in ancient Israel. It comes from the Greek word for moron, and meant a person who is morally deficient, corrupted, immoral, a person with no character or value whatsoever.

This level of anger deserves “the fire of hell.” The Greek says, the gehenna of fire. The Valley of Gehenna stood to the south of Jerusalem. During the reigns of wicked kings Ahaz and Manasseh, children were sacrificed to idols there. King Josiah stamped out such heinous sin, and made the valley a trash dump. Fires were kept burning there constantly to consume the trash; worms lived there and fed from the refuse. Jesus would later make Gehenna a metaphor for hell “where the fire never goes out . . . their worm does not die” (Mark 9:43,48).

What was Jesus teaching us? Refuse to hate or hurt your brother, no matter what he may have done to you. In a moment Jesus will teach us how to reconcile with him. For now, how do we handle the anger our pain has caused?

How do we handle anger?

Act on your anger immediately, before it takes root in your soul: “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Deal with this infection before it spreads. Admit it, and give it to God.

Guard your tongue, especially while you are angry: “If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless” (James 1:26). What we say shows who we are. Choose to pardon, for your sake and his. A wise old saint said, “I will never allow another person to ruin my life by making me hate him.”

The Didache is the oldest Christian theological document outside the New Testament. It gives us good advice: “Love those that hate you, and you will have no enemy” (Didache 1.3). Ask God’s help, and it will be yours. Who has made you angry this week?

Now, how do we reconcile your relationship with this person? Jesus tells us: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has
something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

“Offering your gift at the altar” describes the holiest moment a Galilean peasant might ever experience. Very rarely were non-priests allowed before the altar at the temple in Jerusalem, and only when they were bringing animal sacrifice for a very special occasion. Some would prepare for years or all their lives for this moment. This was something akin to baptism for us.

There you “remember that your brother has something against you”—not just that you have something against him. “Something” is anything. There is no distinction here as to whether this is just or not, whether you are wrong or wronged. If anyone has anything against you today, you qualify.

Leave your gift. Don’t give it to the priest but leave it where it is, despite the holiness and significance of this moment. The person comes first: “go and be reconciled.” Take the initiative to make things right. Only then can you give your gift to God. You cannot be right with me if you are wrong with one of my children. Our heavenly Father feels the same way.

How do we attempt this reconciliation? Go to the person directly: “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matt. 18:15). Don’t talk about the person, but to him.

Jesus paints the picture: “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way” (5:26a). According to Roman law, the plaintiff could carry the accused with him to stand before the judge. No arresting officer was needed. The Greeks called this apegagon—the legal act by which a man could catch another by the robe at the throat and drag him before the courts. Crimes that were subject to this action were stealing clothes at the public baths, picking pockets, house-breaking, and kidnapping.

The Jews allowed this action in the case of financial debt. A man owes you for services rendered, but won’t pay. You see him walking down the road, and are legally allowed to grab him and haul him before the judge. The defendant may be innocent of the charges, or guilty. But he can be arrested in this way nonetheless.

Why should we handle anger?
So you have such a situation, legally or relationally. You are at odds with someone. They accuse you, or slander you, or condemn you. Perhaps they’re right or wrong on the merits—Jesus doesn’t say. But you’re wrong with each other. What do you do?
“Settle matters.” The Greek word means to make friends, to seek good will with someone. It is a word describing the attitude that comes before the action, your heart before your hand. Don’t react to your adversary by becoming his. Don’t seek to repay his accusations with your own. Don’t hit back. Don’t plot revenge. Seek reconciliation.

When? “Quickly . . . while you are still with him on the way.” The adversaries could settle out of court before they reached the judge. But once before him, the law must prevail. Do it now. Don’t wait. No conditions. No exceptions.

Why? “He may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny” (Matt. 5:25b-26). If you delay, things will only get worse. Your private conflict will become public.

And your debt will become harder and harder to pay. You must pay “the last penny,” the Roman quadrans, a coin worth 1½ cents today. But you’re in prison, and so earning the money to pay this debt would be harder than ever before. Your family and friends will likely be required to help. The ripples of this conflict spread ever further and further. Things inevitably go from bad to worse.

When I taught at Southwestern Seminary, I had a student who missed three weeks of school and nearly died from a blood infection that started with a splinter in his thumb that he ignored. In my first pastorate, a member nearly died from a spider bite he ignored. In another pastorate, one of my best friends nearly died from a black mole on his shoulder he ignored until it became melanoma. Cancer spreads. Make right what is wrong, now.

The poet Edwin Markham lost everything when an unscrupulous banker betrayed his business confidence. He hated that man. And he could not write poetry, but doodled circles on paper for hours. Finally he realized he must forgive the man or die. He said aloud, “I forgive him.” For the first time in months, words began to flow. Looking at the circles on his paper, he wrote:1

He drew a circle that shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in.

Start your circle today.

Seek purity (5:27-30)

Our second illustration: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’” (Matt. 5:27). Here our Lord quoted the Seventh Commandment, cited specifically in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18.
Value sex as God does
From the very beginning, God made clear to his creation that sexual activity within marriage is normal and good. In fact, he commanded it: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1:28).

But God also made very clear that sex is his gift for marriage. Exmarital sex is always wrong:

If a man commits adultery with another man’s wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death. If a man sleeps with his father’s wife, he has dishonored his father. Both the man and the woman must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man sleeps with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. What they have done is a perversion; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. If a man marries both a woman and her mother, it is wicked. Both he and they must be burned in the fire, so that no wickedness will be among you (Leviticus 20:10-14).

If a man is found sleeping with another man’s wife, both the man who slept with her and the woman must die. You must purge the evil from Israel (Deut. 22:22).

Premarital sex is as wrong as extramarital sex:

- If a man accuses his new wife of violating her virginity before their marriage, “and no proof of the girl’s virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father’s house and there the men of her town shall stone her to death. She has done a disgraceful thing in Israel by being promiscuous while still in her father’s house. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deut. 22:20-21).
- “If a man happens to meet in town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the girl because she was in town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man’s wife. You must purge the evil from among you” (Deut. 22:23-24).

Sex is God’s gift for marriage. We are to refuse all adultery, of any kind. We are not to engage in sexual activity until we are married, and then with our spouse alone. This is the clear word and will of God.

Guard your mind to guard your life
How do we keep this commandment? How do we resist sexual temptations, especially in a culture that so surrounds us with them every day? To refuse adultery of body, first
refuse adultery of mind. Aristotle claimed, “What is a crime for a person to do, is a crime for a person to think.” Jesus proved that this is so: “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

The “I” here is emphatic—Jesus was asserting his own divine authority. This is just as much the command of God as the Seventh Commandment. “Anyone”—regardless of religious title, status, or significance. No exceptions are granted here.

“Who looks at”—the sin is not noticing a woman or a man. The sin is not the first look but the second. Luther was right: you cannot keep the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.

“A woman”—not specifically a wife, though this is implied. But adultery of the mind can be practiced with any woman, or with any man. “Lustfully”—meaning looking at a woman for the purpose of lusting. “Adultery with her in his heart”—the “heart” includes the intellect, the emotions, the will. It is the place from which actions find the origin and the source of all that follows. When we poison the mind, we poison the body. We poison the headwaters, which pollutes the river that flows out from them. The heart becomes the life.

Refuse the thoughts before they become actions. It will never be easier to refuse lust than when it first appears to your mind:

- “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (Job 31:1).
- “Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes, for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life. Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man’s wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished.” (Proverbs 6:25-29).
- Remember how David’s sin began: “One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful . . .” (2 Samuel 11:2).
- Paul counseled us: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Stay pure at all costs
What if you cannot? What if there is an area or activity in your life that continually leads you into lust of the mind? Luther was picturesque: if your head is made of butter, don’t sit near the fire. Here’s how Jesus advised us: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Matt. 5:29).
The “right eye” was considered the better of the two (see 1 Sam. 11:2, Zechariah 11:17), as is the “right hand” in verse 30. If it “causes you to sin”—the phrase means specifically the stick in a trap that holds the bait; when the prey touches the stick, the trap snaps shut. So it is with the eye, the trap that baits the mind.

What are we to do with a sinful “eye”? Rabbinic hyperbole was a common teaching technique in Jesus’ day. The rabbis would teach a deliberate exaggeration to make a point. It is so here. Taken literally, one leaves the left eye with which to view lustfully. Take both eyes, but a blind man can still think sinful thoughts.

Jesus’ point was simple: rid yourself of anything that causes lustful thoughts in your mind—premium channels on cable or satellite television; cable or satellite television; or even television. Use internet pornography filters on your computer, or even get rid of the internet itself. I have known of men and women who have changed their working relationships to avoid such temptation, and admire them for their courage in doing so. Do whatever you must. This is spiritual surgery—amputating the diseased limb to save the life of the patient. In this case, the soul. Because the malignancy is spreading.

Another illustration follows: “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell” (Matt. 5:30). The right hand was indispensable for work in the ancient world. People typically saw the left hand as a symbol for evil, and so they used it only for the most menial and demeaning tasks. Even today in many places in the East, to gesture to someone with the left hand is obscene.

Jesus’ point: get rid of anything you cannot control sexually. Anything that is causing you to lust must go, no matter how valuable you think it is. You would amputate your hand to save your life. So you must here.

Do it now: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18); “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22). These are commandments from our holy God who is also our loving Father.

You cannot obey the teachings of this text alone. You were not meant to. There is not one word of the Sermon on the Mount that can be fulfilled in human ability. We must have God’s help to do God’s will.

So ask Jesus to deal with the source—your heart. Ask God to forgive your every sin, and claim his cleansing and renewal: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
Then stay close to Jesus. Stay connected to the source of your power by praying and worshiping all day long, communing with Christ: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). When your enemy is shooting arrows at you, you’ll stay behind your shield.

Keep your mind focused on God: “Set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. . . . Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:1, 5). And you will have the victory of God.

**Value marriage (5:31-32)**
Our third illustration: “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce’” (Matt. 5:31). “Anyone who divorces his wife” points to an extremely common practice in Jesus’ day.

The Jews typically allowed divorce for any reason whatsoever. A man could divorce his wife if she spoiled his dinner by putting too much salt in his food; if she went into public with her head uncovered; if she talked with men in the streets; if she burned the toast. Rabbi Akiba said that a man could divorce his wife if he found someone more attractive.

To divorce his wife, the husband presented her with a *certificate of divorcement*. The most common form: “Let this be from me your writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that you may marry whatever man you will.” If he handed this document to his wife in the presence of two witnesses, she stood divorced, with no legal proceedings or protection whatsoever.

So Jesus spoke to a common situation, in which the structure of family life was collapsing and national morals were disintegrating. His words are significant and radical: “anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery” (5:32).

“Marital unfaithfulness” means adultery, sexual relations between a wife and a person not her husband. Such an act breaks the marriage union, rendering it null and void. Divorce otherwise “causes her to become an adulteress,” since she would have to remarry to support herself but was still bound to her first husband in the eyes of God. “Anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery” as well.

Jesus used similar words in Matthew 19:9. Divorce except for adultery is outside the word and will of God. This is the clear teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ.
What constitutes a biblical divorce?
Your class members may need more discussion of this point, encompassing the rest of Scripture on this very difficult subject. So let’s look at the larger counsel of God’s word on the issue of divorce. What follows is my interpretation of the Bible, not an official position of Texas Baptists or any other group. If it is helpful for you and your class, I will be grateful.

In addition to Jesus’ clear teaching, the Bible also says, “If the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace” (1 Cor. 7:15). If a believer is married to a non-Christian, and the unbeliever deserts the marriage, the believer is innocent.

Abandonment by a believer must be considered as well. What if your spouse is a Christian but refuses to stay in your marriage? What if you want to work on the marriage, to seek help and restoration, but he or she will not? This person has misused the freedom of will given by God. The Bible forbids this divorce, but the laws of our land do not. And the Bible clearly teaches that we are not responsible for the sins of others, but only our own.

Abuse is a third area we must discuss. Physical, emotional, verbal, or substance abuse are epidemic in marriages today. While the Bible nowhere addresses abuse specifically with regard to divorce, we can draw two conclusions from biblical truth.

First, abuse is always wrong: “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). And wives are to just as loving, supportive, and sacrificial with their husbands. Second, life must be protected: “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13). You must protect yourself and your children from abuse.

So biblical counselors recommend that an abused person separate from the spouse immediately. Get yourself and your children to safety. Seek intensive counseling. But don’t give up—God can heal any marriage if both partners will surrender fully to him. I’ve seen abusers repent and be restored. Consider divorce only as the lesser of two evils, in order to protect the abused, and only if there are no other options.

As I understand Scripture, these are the conditions under which divorce is permissible biblically: adultery, abandonment, and abuse. Note that the Bible does not prescribe divorce even in these painful circumstances, but only permits it.

If your marriage is struggling, remember God’s plan: one man and one woman joined for life (Gen. 2:24). He wants to help and heal your home. Seek help. If you’ve gone to biblical counseling without success, try someone else. Try again. If your spouse won’t go, go alone. To work on your marriage, work on yourself.
Don’t wait for your spouse to make you happy—find ways to make yourself happier. Seek new activities, work, ministries, friendships. And seek God together. It is a fact that couples who attend worship together have the lowest risk of divorce. Seek God’s strength and help. Ask his family to help you, to pray for you. Ask him to guide you to those who can help you most. Your Father wants to give you a new life together. There is wonderful hope for you today.

If you’ve been divorced
What if you’ve already experienced divorce, as a result of adultery, abandonment, or abuse? You are the innocent party. You will need counseling, healing, and help. But you must reject the guilt you may feel, and move forward into God’s grace and hope.

What if your divorce was not for biblical reasons? Here I must be very careful. I want to do nothing that will encourage someone considering a divorce to do so. The consequences of divorce are very real, and people who have experienced them know their pain better than anyone else.

But at the same time, know that divorce is not the unpardonable sin. God can forgive any person who repents and returns to his word and will. Scripture is clear: “If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “All” includes divorce.

God wants to help you and heal you. He “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). The Bible is clear: “The LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion” (Isaiah 30:18). God grieves with you, cries with you, walks with you, and accepts and loves you, just as you are, right now.

As I understand Scripture, remarriage is a biblical option for you. With counsel and help, restoration and healing, I believe God can lead you into another marriage. In every church I served as pastor, our ministry staff and deacon leadership included people who had experienced the pain of divorce in their lives or their families. And God used them in wonderful ways.

Seek Integrity (5:33-37)
The psalmist complained, “The godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception” (Ps. 12:1-2). What was the last lie you told?

In our fourth illustration, Jesus addressed truth telling. He began: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord’” (Matt. 5:33). Here Jesus summarized passages from Leviticus 19, Numbers 30, and Deuteronomy 23. And Jesus agreed: lying is wrong.
So what is lying? It is speaking false words—half truths, exaggerations, misquotes, slander. It is giving false impressions—misleading about our accomplishments, income, or relationships. We sometimes do this in spiritual garb: Pray for the Smiths, they’re having trouble at home or Pray for the Joneses, their child is struggling in school. Gossip in the guise of spirituality is sin.

And it is withholding truth: “If a person sins because he does not speak up when he hears a public charge to testify regarding something he has seen or learned about, he will be held responsible” (Lev. 5:1). Listening to slander or gossip without correcting it; agreeing tacitly to falsehood; refusing to pay the price of truth—all these are covered by Jesus’ prohibition.

Why tell the truth?

Why tell the truth? Because God consistently commands and commends truth-telling:

- Without exception: “These are the things you are to do: Speak the truth to each other, and render true and sound judgment in your courts” (Zechariah 8:16).
- Every one of us: “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body” (Eph. 4:25).
- No matter how tempted we are to lie: “Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place” (Eph. 6:14).
- This is the key to peace with God and ourselves: “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin” (Malachi 2:6).

Why tell the truth? Because God condemns lying:

- Here is what the Lord thinks of lies: “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in men who are truthful” (Prov. 12:22).
- He warns us: “A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare” (Prov. 21:6).
- Lying breaks our relationship with God: “No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence” (Psalm 101:7).
- God must punish those who lie: “You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the LORD abhors” (Psalm 5:6).
- So God commands us: “Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices” (Col. 3:9).

Why tell the truth? Because our words reveal our souls. Jesus said, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). Our words are windows into our souls, and a witness we can never retract. How do we unring a bell?
Why tell the truth? Because our words mold our souls. James, the brother of our Lord and pastor of the first church at Jerusalem, makes the point clear: “the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

When we lie we become liars. Our words take on a power and life of their own. I don’t fully know why, but the words I speak shape how I think and feel. When I fail and then condemn myself, I become more of a failure. When I succeed and then encourage myself, I become more of a success. Our words reveal us, and they mold us.

*How do we tell the truth?*

How do we tell the truth? Here’s the key: give every area of your life to the Lord Jesus. Refuse to divide your days into sacred and secular, religious and the *real world*. Believe that God’s commendation of truth and condemnation of lying applies to your business practices as much as your Bible study teaching, to your private finances as much as your public faith.

Jesus continued: “Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King” (Matt. 5:34-35). The Jews of Jesus’ culture believed they could make an oath and then break it, as long as they did not swear by God himself. They could swear by heaven, or earth, or Jerusalem. They could swear by their heads, as though to say, My head’s on the line if I don’t do this. . . . They could swear by the secular, just not the sacred.

But Jesus was blunt: there’s no distinction. Heaven is God’s throne room, the place where he lives. If someone slanders America, we are upset. Earth is his footstool, his possession, and Jerusalem his city. Jesus continued: “And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No, ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (5:36-37). Our heads are his creation.

Greek philosophers taught that soul and body are separate, with spiritual and secular distinct. So, go ahead and keep your faith and your life in separate compartments. Tell the truth at church, but lie when necessary at work. Except that God is as present at work as in church. You belong to him as much there as here. The secular does not exist. No place stands outside God’s hearing, his caring, his judging or rewarding. Every word is spiritual, for it is spoken by a tongue God made. It reveals a heart that should be his. It shows who is on the throne of our mind and soul.

In the night fog, a ship’s captain saw what appeared to be another ship’s lights. To avoid a collision, he signaled the approaching ship: “Change your heading 10 degrees west.” Back through the fog came the reply: “Change your heading 10 degrees east.” The
Matthew 5:17-48. Live By Jesus’ Interpretation of God’s Will

captain replied with clear irritation: “I am an admiral—change your heading 10 degrees west.” Came the response: “I am a seaman fourth class. Change your heading 10 degrees east.” Furious, the admiral blazed his message: “This is a United States Navy vessel under orders of the U.S. government. Change your heading 10 degrees west.” Came the reply: “Change your heading. I am a lighthouse.”

Live by the truth. Speak the truth. Or you’re sailing your ship in a foggy night, and the rocks are near. What heading do you need to change this week?

Refuse vengeance (5:38-42)

Our fifth illustration: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’” (Matt. 5:39). And it was.

This statute, known to history as the lex talionis, is the oldest law in the world. It first appeared in the Code of Hammurabi, the man who ruled Babylon (ancient Iraq) from 1792-1750 B.C.2 Exodus 21:24-25 states it clearly: “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

Note that the law was intended not to justify conflict but to limit it. Without it, if you scraped my car, I could wreck yours. If you injured my son, I could kill all your children. This law limited revenge. It also took vengeance out of individual hands and put it into the courts. The judges of ancient Israel determined what constituted proper restitution for injury, and they levied monetary fines as a result. They developed elaborate ways to ensure the rights of all citizens.

Jesus added: “But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person” (Matt. 5:39b). Even though you have the right, don’t insist on your rights. Then Jesus gave us four examples of this principle in action.

The first regards our honor: “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (5:39b). “Strikes” in the original means to slap. The right hand was almost always the one used in public. So to slap your right cheek with my right hand is a back-handed insult. This was not a threat to life and limb, but an insult to character and reputation. It was a sign of great contempt and abuse, so that the rabbinic fines for such an action were twice those of other physical injuries.

Jesus says: do not retaliate. Do not slap back, although this would be within your rights. Do not prosecute for financial gain, although this also would be within your rights. Turn the other cheek instead. Do not insist on your rights.

Next Jesus spoke to our possessions: “If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (5:40). The “tunic” was the inner garment, an undershirt
with sleeves. It could be taken in a lawsuit. But the “cloak” could not—it was the outer garment that protected a poor person from the elements and served as his bed at night. And so Exodus 22:26-27 forbids keeping the cloak. But not Jesus: “let him have your cloak as well.” Even though it is your right to keep it, and he has no right to take it, do not insist on your rights.

Now Jesus came to an issue of great urgency for us today: our time. He says, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (Matt. 5:41). Here Jesus refers to a custom known and despised by every person who heard his Sermon. A Roman soldier could require any Jew to carry his military pack for the distance of one mile. No matter where you were going or what you were doing, the soldier could force you to do this. But none could force you to carry his pack for two miles. Jesus said to do it anyway. Sacrifice the time, even though it is your right not to. Do not insist on your rights.

Finally Jesus dealt with our money: “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (5:42). Give when you are asked to give, and lend when you are asked to lend. Not foolishly; God’s word counsels us to be wise in our use of money (Prov. 11:15; 17:18; 22:26-27).

But Jesus does teach us to help when we can, even though you don’t owe this person anything, even though it is your right not to. Do not insist on your rights.

Instead, return hate with love, harm with kindness, evil with good. Do not lower yourself to the one who has taken from you. Simply refuse. You can choose not to insult those who insult you and not to hurt those who hurt you. When your honor or possessions or time or money are taken, do not take back. Take the high road. Show the high character. Be the presence of Christ.

Jesus is our example: “When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23). He was insulted for us, and suffered for us. He wore our sins on his body, our failures on his soul. He had the right to call 10,000 angels to his side, to end his crucifixion before it began, to condemn all of humanity to a hell we deserve. But he did not claim his rights. Now he invites us to faith in him, to experience his forgiveness for our sins and the eternal life he died to give. Do you have his eternal life today?

If so, where will you share it with someone else? What personal conflict is troubling you most today? Will you show the selfless love of Jesus Christ to that person this week?

Sometimes a disciple of Jesus must wield the sword in love, to protect his neighbor from an enemy. Sometimes that disciple must sheath his sword in love, to protect an enemy from himself. Let us pray for the love, wisdom, and courage to know the difference.
Love your enemies (5:43-48)

Our last illustration begins: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy” (Matt. 5:43). “Love your neighbor” is a familiar biblical injunction. We find it as early as Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.” “Neighbor” comes from *nigh-bor*, one who is *nigh or near*. Loving our neighbor is a basic and familiar Christian ethic.

But were Jesus’ hearers really taught, “hate your enemy”? In fact, they were. The Jewish rabbis considered fellow Jews their neighbor. Everyone else, the Gentile world, was not, and was in fact their spiritual enemy. The Gentile world would corrupt them with its defiled food, customs, and paganism.

Here we find basic humanity exposed. It’s easy to love those who like us and are like us. It’s hard to like those who are not like us and do not like us. It’s human nature to love our neighbor and hate our enemy.

Then Jesus took his stand: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). This statement has no parallel in the Jewish tradition or literature. No religious teacher in world history ever defended such an ethic. This is the action which makes our love both real and possible.

Jesus expanded these words by saying, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28). When we pray for our enemies, our love becomes real. It moves from sentiment to substance, from feeling to action. It takes wings and grows feet. It becomes practical and tangible. And when we pray for those who persecute us, our actions produce feelings. We act out love, and eventually feel love. It’s a process that takes time, but it works.

Such forgiving love in action reveals our spiritual genetics: “that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:45). God blesses both the evil and the good. Sun shines and rain falls on the unrighteous and the righteous. And we’re glad, for we’ve all been evil and unrighteous.

A father should love his children, whether or not they love him; and so God loves us. A sibling should love his sister or brother, whether or not they love him; and so should we. Such love shows us to be our Father’s children.

Otherwise we are no different from the children of the world. The tax collectors, the most despised people in Israel, love those who love them. The pagans destined for hell greet those who greet them. It is human nature to love those who love us. It is divine nature to love those who do not.
Such selfless, forgiving love fulfills the purpose for which we were created: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). “Perfect” translates the word teleios. In this context it means to achieve the purpose for which we were intended. In this sense a screwdriver is “perfect” if it does its job. It is not sinless—it may have nicks on the handle and paint on the blade. But if it turns the screw it was meant to turn, it is teleios.

What is our intended purpose? Jesus made it clear: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. God is love (1 John 4:8), and he has created us to love as he does, to forgive as he does, to love our neighbor because we love our Father and to prove we love our Father by loving our neighbor. And so selfless, forgiving love is the purpose for which we exist.

According to legend, when Barabbas led his revolt in Jerusalem, several people were killed, among them the only son of a carpenter in that city. With revenge in his heart, that father bribed the Roman soldiers to let him make the three crosses used the day of Jesus’ execution. He made the cross for Barabbas much heavier than the other two, to increase the suffering of his son’s murderer. However, when Barabbas was freed and Jesus crucified in his place, our Savior had to carry his cross. That’s why it was so heavy that Jesus stumbled and Simon of Cyrene had to help carry it.

It’s only a legend, but its spiritual point is true. Jesus’ cross was heavier than any other. Not because it weighed more physically, but spiritually. He carried the sins of the world on it. Including mine. Including yours. From that cross he prayed that his Father would forgive us. And so he does. Now he asks only that we give what he has given to us. And he will help us give it.

**Conclusion**

This week we have studied some of the most revolutionary principles that have ever been taught. Whether you focus on anger, divorce, sexual purity, integrity, vengeance, or enemies, you’ll teach your class to follow Jesus by depending fully on his word and Spirit. Imagine a class or congregation filled with people who lived by such an ethic, and you’ll envision your Father’s intention for your teaching ministry.

Nowhere is Jesus’ sermon in Matthew 5—7 more practical than in this week’s study. Or more urgent.
Matthew 5:17-48. Live By Jesus' Interpretation of God's Will

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1 Edwin Markham, “Outwitted.”