*DAILY DEVOTIONS*

March 20 - 25

“But I tell you . . .”

**Monday, March 20 Matthew 5:21-26**

*“ . . . that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment”*

  The Law has said that if you take another’s life yours is to be taken in return (Leviticus 24:17). This is the legal or external consequence. But Jesus says anything that leads to killing is wrong. It is not only the act that is to be avoided but the attitude of ill-will. So, he calls his disciples to be free from anger. While I may say that I have never killed, Jesus asks about my inner attitude of anger and hate, of destructive words and hostility. Anger wounds others and also warps my spirit when I am immersed in the feeling of wrath or indignation.

When Martin Luther King admonished his people “to avoid not only violence of deed but violence of spirit,” he was reflecting the teaching of Jesus. To hold another person in contempt, calling him a worthless fool or treating him as an outcast, makes one subject to judgment. The disciple is to have the highest regard for his fellow human being, to respect the sanctity of human life and to meet differences by the practice of love. To destroy human life is sin, and when it happens it is a consequence of sin.

*Instead of harboring anger, Lord, I will seek reconciliation. Amen.*

**Tuesday, March 21 Matthew 5:27-30**

*“ . . . that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery”*

  Adultery has to do with violating one’s promise to his or her spouse, and to God. This passage is addressed to the married in its primary meaning, although the teaching on pure thoughts and high regard for the personhood of others is a valid secondary interpretation. Married or single, purity calls us to see others as persons and not as bodies to be used for our pleasure.

Marriage is a covenant between two people for life, and adultery is to violate that covenant. Jesus expects his disciples to keep covenant in both deed and attitude. When two persons covenant to be husband and wife, for one to entertain thoughts of relating sexually to someone other than their spouse, makes them guilty of breaking covenant. Such would have committed adultery against the spouse, if even only in thought. This is the highest standard of fidelity in marriage! Jesus is saying that not only is the act of adultery sin, but the inner desire for adulterous experiences is sin as a violation of covenant.

*I will look at others, Lord, as persons to be respected, not objects to be used. Amen.*

**Wednesday, March 22 Matthew 5:31-32**

*“ . . . that anyone who divorces his wife . . . ”*

If to enter into marriage means to enter into covenant (see yesterday’s devotion), then to enter into divorce is to commit adultery, that is, to break covenant. Jesus’ intent in these verses was to affirm the permanent nature of marriage, and to make that point clear by simply stating that divorce is wrong. If however the covenant has already been broken (this is what Jesus means when he says, “except for . . . .”), then a legal divorce is permissible and remarriage justifiable. But, if a man divorces his wife who has done nothing to break the covenant of marriage with her husband, then he is *unjustly* making her a party to a broken marriage.

Jesus is against divorce. He is for marriage. He declares that marriage is a holy and lasting union created by God to make a man and a woman “one flesh.” Because he believes this about marriage, he believes divorce is always contrary to God’s creation design. But he goes along with the permission Moses granted to sinful Israel in permitting divorce when the covenant had been broken, and permitting remarriage.

*I pray for our marriages, Lord, that they may be strong. Amen.*

*DAILY DEVOTIONS*

March 20 - 25

“But I tell you . . .”

**Thursday, March 23 Matthew 5:33-37**

*“ . . . do not swear an oath”*

  The disciple is to be honest and trustworthy, making the swearing of an oath unnecessary. One’s yes is to mean yes, and one’s no is to mean no. Whatever is needed beyond this is because there is evil, for where there is honesty and trust there need be no more words. Jewish law permitted swearing an oath, and Jewish legal tradition had developed a hierarchy of oath swearing, a pattern which made some statements more binding than others. Jesus’ standard is “Do not swear an oath at all.”

Jesus here mentions four kinds of oaths that were a part of the Jewish hierarchy. In declining importance they are: those “by heaven,” those “by the earth,” those “by Jerusalem,” and those “by your head.” If I were to make you a promise and then swear to you that I will keep it “by my head,” you would be able to trust me. But, if I swore to you that I would keep it “by heaven,” I would have made you a much stronger promise. Jesus is telling his disciples to stop playing games with oath swearing, and to simply keep their promises.

*Lord, I will not seek loopholes to avoid doing what I’ve promised. Amen.*

**Friday, March 24 Matthew 5:38-42**

*“ . . . do not resist an evil person”*

We are free to live according to Jesus’ command to love one another when we refuse to have our behavior determined by the way we are treated. The disciple is not to live by the law which says “return evil for evil” but to live by the higher law of love. When we do so, we respond to the treatment we receive from others in a manner reflecting the freedom and love of Christ. This love was ultimately expressed by Jesus on the cross, where he showed love for his enemies and extended forgiveness to all.

Jesus’ four examples of how to “not resist an evil person” emerge from concrete experiences: being insulted (a slap to the *right* cheek implies a backhanded slap), being sued in court, being conscripted to support the Roman military (a Roman soldier could lawfully require a Jew to carry a burden), and being asked to help others with money. In each instance Jesus advocates grace that shuns retribution and goes beyond expectation. Turning the other cheek is not a surrender but a strategy of love.

*Lord, I will not allow the evil of others to obstruct my love for them. Amen.*

**Saturday, March 25 Matthew 5:43-48**

*“ . . . love your enemies”*

This is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible – not to understand but to live. To love our enemies is not the natural course of our lives. Only the disciple of Jesus Christ who has been born of the Spirit and knows the enabling grace of Christ can live this standard. This is the extension of Christ’s love, not of natural affection but of *agape* love which is an act of the will more than of the heart. Such love is not primarily something you feel but something you do, offering your life in the Spirit of Christ even to your enemy.

Jesus is the smartest man who ever lived. If we really believe that, we will begin to look at everything he said differently. Instead of saying that Jesus’ teaching in this fifth chapter of Matthew is impossible, we take seriously what he said and begin to live this way. Some may say: “I can’t.” Jesus responds: “Have you tried?” Jesus’ desire for us is to grow into doing things we never thought we could do. Like a baby who is constantly doing things it could never do before, so it is for us – with God’s help.

*Lord, what you ask seems impossible but with you all things are possible. Amen.*