

Matthew 5:21-26

- Radical ethics -

Author: Evert Jan Hempenius

© 2017

www.christianstudylibrary.org

For any questions about this Scripture passage or the notes, please contact us through the Contact Us tab on the website.

Introduction

- ❖ Freedom of speech is an important human right.¹ It means also “freedom to proclaim the gospel.”
 - Unfortunately, in many countries, there is no freedom of speech nor the freedom to proclaim the gospel.
- ❖ But some people think that this gives them the freedom and the right to bully other people, other nations, and other religions.
 - History has shown that this can lead to massacres, holocaust, and discrimination, especially when a demagogue² exploits freedom of speech.
 - The use and especially abuse of social media have a great impact on the lives of people.³
 - Not only by words, but also by cartoons, images, videos.
- ❖ Jesus taught us the radical ethics of the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 5:21-26, he has shown that reconciliation and forgiveness are the high standards within the community of God. There is no room for racism, discrimination, demagogism, and not for murder.

¹ Freedom of speech. (2017, March 25). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech

² Demagogue. (2017, March 22). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demagogue>

³ Social media. (2017, March 26). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological notes, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand alone”.
- ❖ These sermon outlines refer sometimes to articles published on Wikipedia. This is done for accessibility reasons only.

Context

- ❖ To understand the teachings of Jesus, a brief summary of the background is necessary.
- ❖ The baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:13-17):
 - Before Jesus was baptized by John, he said: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this **to fulfill all righteousness.**”
 - And after: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw **the Spirit of God** descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’”
 - The Sermon on the Mount teaches this **fulfillment of all righteousness.** “For I tell you that unless **your righteousness surpasses** that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law...” (Mt. 5:20).
- ❖ The preaching of Jesus:
 - Jesus had already been preaching in the synagogues in Galilee for some time before he delivered his sermon on the mount. Matthew summarized these sermons as follows:
 - “From that time on Jesus began to preach, **‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’**” (Mt. 4:17).
 - Jesus continued and took over the ministry of John the Baptist:
 - “In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, **‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’**” (Mt. 3:1–2).
 - And later on, when Jesus sent out his twelve disciples:
 - “As you go, preach this message: **‘The kingdom of heaven is near’**” (Mt. 10:7).
 - These two aspects, repentance, and the kingdom are prominent in the Sermon on the Mount.
- ❖ The life of Jesus Christ:
 - Jesus taught the Law and the Prophets, and he lived according to the Law and the Prophets. The Sermon on the Mount reflects his life. He lived according to his own teachings and by doing so set an example for his followers, the disciples. A clear

example is found in Matthew 5:39: “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” When Jesus was arrested, he didn’t strike back.

❖ The future of the Kingdom:

- After his resurrection, Jesus summoned his eleven disciples to go back to the mount: “**All authority in heaven and on earth** has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations (...) and **teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**” (Mt. 28:18-20).
 - This authority is reflected in expressions like: “**But I tell you** that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Mt. 5:22).
 - And in: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘**Lord, Lord,**’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but...” (Mt. 7:20).

Form and structure

❖ The Sermon on the Mount consists of five main parts:

- 1. General calling to repentance and the promise of the Kingdom: Matthew 5:3-10, characterized by: “Blessed are...”
 - 2. Then Jesus turns to his disciples and all who want to learn from him: “Blessed are **you...**” The main theme is “**the prophets**” (Mt. 5:11-16).
 - 3. The central part is an exposition of the Law and the Prophets (Mt. 5:17-7:12):
 - “Do not think that I have come to **abolish the Law or the Prophets**; I have not come to abolish them but to **fulfil** them” (Mt. 5:17)...
 - The Lord’s Prayer is found at the center of the sermon!
 - “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up **the Law and the Prophets**” (Mt. 7:12).
 - 4. After his exposition of the Law and the Prophets, he returns to the theme of the Prophets and warns against “**the false prophets**” (Mt. 7:13-23). This contrasts with the second part of the sermon.
 - 5. He concludes his sermon again with a general call to choose: “**Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine...**” (Mt. 7:24-27).

❖ The structure of Matthew 5:21-26, which is part of 3. – the Law and the Prophets:

<i>Introduction</i>	“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago,	
<i>General rule according to the Pharisees (verse 21)</i>	‘Do not murder,	and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’
Jesus adds to and corrects the teaching of the Pharisees		
<i>In addition (1)</i>	But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother	will be subject to judgment.
<i>In addition (2)</i>	Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’	is answerable to the Sanhedrin.
<i>In addition (3)</i>	But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’	will be in danger of the fire of hell.
Reconciliation is the high standard		
<i>Reconcile to your brother (verse 23, 24)</i>	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.	
<i>Do not postpone the reconciliation to your brother (verse 25, 26)</i>	Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or 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.”	

Technical and hermeneutical notes

- ❖ It is important to realize that Jesus preached his sermon around 30 AD in Galilee.
 - To Jews living in a country,
 - which was part of the Roman Empire;
 - who had contact with the Hellenistic (Greek) and Roman culture; this culture was prominent in a city like Tiberias (Lake of Tiberias = Sea of Galilee) and the Decapolis, nowadays Jordan.
 - To Jews,

- who frequented the synagogues and were used to listening to the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes, their spiritual leaders at that time;
 - who were expecting the promised One (according to Dt. 18:15-18; Mal. 4:4-5; Mt. 11:3);
 - who were longing for the restoration of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 11:12), the main theme of the teaching of Jesus.
- ❖ This background is needed to understand some passages of the sermon, especially those that speak of persecution (Mt. 5:10-12), pagans (Mt. 6:7, 32) and of hypocrites.
- The selection of topics found within the Sermon on the Mount reflects some debated issues among first century Jews such as (Mt. 5:31-32; Mt. 19:3-9). Jesus doesn't cover all aspects of the Law, for instance, the fourth commandment (Sabbath Day) is not found here, although it was hotly debated between the Pharisees and Jesus (Mt. 12:1-8). Neither does he refer to the greatest commandment (Mt. 22:37-40).
 - He especially confronts the teaching of the Pharisees and Scribes. Some of the topics found in the sermon are also found in Matthew 23, where he condemns them for their hypocritical stance.
 - Jesus doesn't give a new set of rules or applications but teaches a different mindset. This mindset is governed by (see application):
 - the blessings of the Kingdom (Mt. 5:3-10);
 - the Lord's prayer (Mt. 6:9-13), the central part of the sermon.
- ❖ "Most scholars believe the Gospel of Matthew was composed between AD 80 and 90, with a range of possibility between AD 70 to 110 (a pre-70 date remains a minority view)."⁴ It is interesting to note that Jesus refers to "the altar." "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." Since the altar at the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the later Roman emperor Titus AD 70, the question remains why Matthew did include this reference of Jesus to the altar, while at the time of writing his gospel the altar didn't exist any longer. Therefore a date of composition before AD 70 is more likely.

Verse 22

- ❖ But = "δέ": 3. **a marker with an additive relation, with possible suggestion of contrast, at the same time.**⁵
- ❖ 'Raca' (NIV: An Aramaic term of contempt) = "ῥακά": **a term of abuse/put-down relating to lack of intelligence, numskull, fool** (in effect verbal bullying).⁶

⁴ Gospel of Matthew. (n.d.). Retrieved February 09, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gospel_of_Matthew

⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 213).

- ❖ Fool = “**μωρός**”: *foolish, stupid*. c. The meaning of **μωρέ** Mt 5:22 is disputed. Most scholars take it, to mean you fool, sometimes also with the connotation of an obstinate, godless person.⁷

Verse 24

- ❖ Reconcile = “**διαλλάσσομαι**”: **to be restored to normal relations or harmony with someone, become reconciled**.⁸

Verse 25

- ❖ Settle matters = “**εὐνοέω**”: **be well-disposed, make friends; make friends quickly with your opponent= settle the case quickly with your plaintiff** (Mt 5:25).⁹
 - This is based on “**εὐνοια**”: 2. **a positive attitude exhibited in a relationship, good attitude, willingness**.¹⁰

Exposition

Verse 21-22

- ❖ **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago...”**
 - This is the first example in which Jesus teaches the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5:17-7:12).
 - **“You have heard.”** You are the disciples, and the people standing on the slope of the mount listening to Jesus. Jesus refers to the teaching of the Scribes and the Pharisees, which they (= you) had heard in their synagogues. He doesn’t refer to the teaching of the Old Testament, nor is he quoting the Old Testament.
 - **“that it was said.”** The Scribes and Pharisees read, explained and applied the words of God, which he had given to the people of Israel by his servant Moses. “That it was said” refers to the authority of Moses (and God), which doesn’t mean that these words were exactly taken from the Old Testament.
 - **“to the people long ago.”** This refers to the ancient people of Israel.
- ❖ **“Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.”**
 - The Pharisees referred to the sixth commandment (Ex 20:13; Dt 5:17).

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 903)

⁷ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 663).

⁸ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 232).

⁹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 409).

¹⁰ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 409).

- The second part is a summary of different passages found in the Old Testament. (Examples: Ex 21:12–14; Nu 35:12; 16–21; 30–34. Dt 21:7–9; 1 Ki. 2:5, 6, 31, 32.)
 - Jesus endorsed this short summary.

Special note

- The sixth commandment does not forbid capital punishment (Rm 13:4).
- ❖ **“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”**
 - **“But”** does not contrast this statement with the former one. It is an emphatic **“but”** or **“AND I tell you.”**
 - **“Is angry with”** does not refer to a moment of anger, but a state of anger. Brothers who ignore each other. There is no reconciliation. They “kill” each other not by murder, but by bullying, silencing, ignoring, and evading each other.
 - **“Be subject to judgment.”** What is the difference between an actual murder and silencing someone to death? Both offenses will be subject to judgment, although in society we accept the latter case as part of daily life!
 - Anger, hate, and jealousy are a cause of murder. Cain killed Abel because he was angry with God and jealous towards his younger brother (Gen 4:5-8).
 - “So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. (...) Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.”
 - Other examples: Gen 37:4, 8; 1 Sa 17:27, 28; 18:8, 9; 20:30–33; 22:12.
- ❖ **“Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin.”**
 - The exact meaning of ‘raca’ is not known. In effect, it is verbal bullying and it was probably morally accepted in the Jewish society.
 - It is not accepted in the kingdom of God and Jesus said that this offense is answerable to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, bypassing the lower courts.
 - Is this reference to the Sanhedrin an example only, or did Jesus really mean that the Sanhedrin should be involved in cases of verbal bullying as offenses against the law of God?
 - Only when an offense is very severe, it would be justified to summon someone to appear in the Sanhedrin.
 - Verbal bullying can have a severe impact on the lives of people. Scripture warns for “the word” as a “deadly weapon”:
 - “His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords” (Ps 55:21; see also: Ps 57:4; Ps 59:7).

- “They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows” (Ps 64:3).
- There are similar sayings found in the Book of Proverbs:
 - “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (Pr 12:18).
 - “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man’s inmost parts” (Pr 26:22).
- ❖ **“But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”**
 - In this case, there is not a court nor a Sanhedrin involved. The offender will face judgment immediately. James, the half-brother of Jesus, wrote the following:
 - “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. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (Ja 3:6-8).
 - When is fully realized, which impact words have had on the course of history and the fate of people, then these words of Jesus can be understood.
 - The holocaust of the Jews started with words.
 - Jesus made his disciples aware of the impact of words.
- ❖ The judicial background, how to deal with cases of murder is found in Genesis 9:6:
 - Every man is created in the image of God (Gen 1:26, 27; Gen 5:1; Gen 9:6; Ja 3:9).
 - “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.”¹¹ (Gen 9:6).
 - James applied this to the use of words:
 - “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness” (Ja 3:9).

¹¹ This one of the basic principles for the administration of justice.

- ❖ The ethics of the Kingdom of God are radical ethics. Societies consider murder as a severe crime and bullying as a lesser crime or even not as a crime (1), is turned upside down by Jesus (2).

Severity (1)	CRIME	CONSEQUENCE	Severity (2)
	'Do not murder,	and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'	
	But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother	will be subject to judgment.	
	Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,'	is answerable to the Sanhedrin.	
	But anyone who says, 'You fool!'	will be in danger of the fire of hell.	

Verse 23-26

- ❖ **“Therefore”**

- The previous verses are followed by a conclusion in which Jesus showed the importance, the necessity, and urgency of reconciliation.
- Verse 23-25 is **“therefore”** a continuation of verse 22:
 - **“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment...”**

“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.
- Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to **court**. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or 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.**”

- ❖ **“if you are offering your gift at the altar”**

- Jesus didn't explain what kind of gift is meant. Historically speaking, this saying had only significance for the hearers, while the temple still existed (see below).

- ❖ **“and there remember that your brother has something against you,”**

- Jesus did not specify **“something,”** therefore it might be anything which is a burden to the relationship among brothers, family members, church members, citizens in general.

❖ **“leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”**

- God is patient. He will wait for your gift. Reconciliation to your brother (sister) is priority number one. Return to normal relations and live in harmony with each other.
 - Does Jesus mean that this gift which is left in front of the altar is a pledge towards God to resolve the matter among brothers first?
- The same thought and urgency are expressed in the comment of Jesus on forgiveness. “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Mt 6:12, 14-15).
- Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with your brother walk hand in hand.
 - Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”
 - The Law and the Prophets are the main themes of this part of the Sermon on the Mount.
 - “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6; Mt 12:7).

❖ **“Settle matters quickly.”**

- Do not postpone reconciliation! It may be too late:

“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way,	<i>Settle matters quickly...</i>
or he may hand you over to the judge,	<i>It is still not too late.</i>
and the judge may hand you over to the officer,	<i>It is still not too late.</i>
and you may be thrown into prison.	<i>It is still not too late.</i>
I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.	<i>It is too late.</i>

- The NIV repeats “may”. Compare this with the ESV: “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.”

- The apostle Paul wrote: “In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold” (Eph 4:26-27; See also Ps 4:4; Ps 37:8; Rm 12:21; Ja 1:19).
- ❖ **“I tell you the truth,”** (ESV: “Truly, I say to you”)
 - Truly = “**ἀμὴν**”: **truly**, beginning a solemn declaration but used only by Jesus (*I assure you that, I solemnly tell you*).¹²
- ❖ **“you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”**
 - Jesus made a similar statement in Matthew 18:21-35:
 - “And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Mt 18:34-35).
 - You will have many opportunities for reconciliation, BUT there will come an end to it, then you must repay the last penny!
 - **It is very important to realize that God is a just judge, doing justice.**

Application

Verse 21-26

- ❖ God is a God of justice and in his kingdom reign righteousness and mercy.

Verse 21-22

- ❖ Jesus taught the protection of life in all its aspects: a new and radical way of thinking.
 - Read the admonitions of the apostle Paul:
 - “For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder” (2 Cor 12:20).
 - “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Eph 4:26).
 - “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph 4:31-32).
 - “But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips” (Col 3:8).

¹² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 53).

- ❖ The sermon might pay some attention to the so-called “freedom of speech,” the use and abuse.
 - Although some think otherwise, freedom of speech and expression may not be recognized as being absolute, and common limitations to freedom of speech relate to libel, slander, obscenity, pornography, sedition, incitement, fighting words, classified information, copyright violation, trade secrets, non-disclosure agreements, the right to privacy, the right to be forgotten, public security, and perjury.¹³
 - The social media can be a source of slander

Verse 23-26

- ❖ In these verses, Jesus stressed the importance, the necessity and the urgency of reconciliation.
 - Reconciliation and forgiveness are number one priorities in the kingdom of God.
 - Be aware of “cheap reconciliation” or “cheap sorry.”
- ❖ True reconciliation is made possible by a changed heart which:
 - Is meek, longing for righteousness and mercy, which is pure and looking for peace (Mt 5:5-9).

Confessions

- ❖ The confessions of the Christian Church are worth studying with regard to these teachings of Jesus.

Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 40

- ❖ 105. Q. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to dishonour, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another; (*Gen 9:6; Lev 19:17, 18; Mt 5:21, 22; 26:52.*) rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge. (*Prov 25:21, 22; Mt 18:35; Rom 12:19; Eph 4:26.*)

Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself. (*Mt 4:7; 26:52; Rom 13:11-14.*)

Therefore, also, the government bears the sword to prevent murder. (*Gen 9:6; Ex 21:14; Rom 13:4.*)
- ❖ 106. Q. But does this commandment speak only of killing?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that he hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge, (*Prov 14:30; Rom 1:29; 12:19; Gal 5:19-21; Jas 1:20; 1 Jn 2:9-11.*) and that he regards all these as murder. (*Jn 3:15.*)

¹³ Freedom of speech. (2017, March 25). Retrieved March 27, 2017, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_speech

❖ 107. Q. Is it enough, then, that we do not kill our neighbor in any such way?

A. No. When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, he commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves, (*Mt 7:12; 22:39; Rom 12:10.*) to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him, (*Mt 5:5; Lk 6:36; Rom 12:10, 18; Gal 6:1, 2; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12; 1 Pet 3:8.*) to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies. (*Ex 23:4, 5; Mt 5:44, 45; Rom 12:20.*)¹⁴.

Other confessions:

- ❖ Westminster Larger Catechism (Q/A 134-136).¹⁵
- ❖ The Roman Catholic Church has a very elaborate catechism concerning the fifth commandment. They use a different numbering of the commandments.¹⁶

Bibliography

Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hagner, D. (1993). *Word biblical commentary: Matthew 1-13*. Dallas: Word Books.

Hendriksen, W. (1973). *New Testament commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Nolland, J. (2005). *The Gospel of Matthew: A commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.

Stott, J. (1992). *The message of the Sermon on the Mount: Christian counter-culture*. (2nd ed.). Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

¹⁴ Lord's Day 40. (n.d.). Retrieved March 28, 2017, from <http://www.heidelberg-catechism.com/en/lords-days/40.html>

¹⁵ Larger Catechism. (n.d.). Retrieved March 28, 2017, from <https://www.opc.org/lc.html>

¹⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church - The fifth commandment. (n.d.). Retrieved March 28, 2017, from http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a5.htm