**Matthew 5: 21-32 Living the right relationships**

This and next week’s sermons focus on the next section of the Sermon of the Mount found in chapter 5 verses 21-48. This section is known as the Antitheses because 6 times (2 today and 4 next week) we hear Jesus making statements to the effect of ‘You have heard it said…but I say to you…!

Now it’s important to realise from the start that at no point does Jesus dismiss the teachings of the Old Testament. Rather he focuses on the interpretation of it, by contrasting his interpretation of the Old Testament with the prevalent faulty interpretations and applications that surrounded him. As Wilkins says *In each antithesis, Jesus demonstrates how the Old Testament is to be properly interpreted and applied and, thus, how the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled.*

You see, in Jesus’ day, both the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees held considerable sway over the lives of the common people. They decided how the Scriptures should apply to people’s lives, so if you wanted to follow God, you had to do what they said! Imagine if I suddenly said ‘You must live your life in this way and this way etc - what would your response be? You wouldn’t stand for it and would probably say things like ‘On your bike Tim’, yet in Jesus’ day, the people didn’t have such freedoms.

Unfortunately, over the centuries, the Teachers of the Law and the Pharisees had gone wrong in their interpretation of the Scriptures by taking a legalistic approach to obeying the law in all things external - i.e. those things that people can see, rather than focusing on what it means to obey the law internally speaking i.e. from the heart. In other words, heart felt obedience is what really matters and it what Jesus focuses on. This is what the antithesis are all about. So how are each of these structured? Each antithesis contains the same 3 parts:

First Jesus introduces the Old Testament passage with the expression ‘You have heard that it was said…’

Second Jesus either cites or alludes to a current popular interpretation or traditional practice of the Old Testament passage he has quoted. This popular interpretation is what is causing the law to be applied in a faulty manner.

Third, Jesus gives his own interpretation of the Old Testament passage, thus restoring its intended meaning and application to people’s lives.

So with this in mind, let’s now examine the first two antitheses found in today’s passage, beginning with the first one found in v21 - *‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgement’*. Here Jesus is taking the sixth of the ten commandments: You shall not murder. This commandment’s prohibition historically focused on those who chose to kill from a premeditated and deliberate position, such as recent news reports suggest was the approach taken in the murders of Sarah Everard and Sabina Nessa. This commandment didn’t apply to the killing of animals, defending one’s home; accidental killings; or involvement in a nation’s armed forces.

However, Jesus widens the definition of how a person’s life can be removed besides the physical act of murder in three cases. The first case is through anger. Now there is a case for righteous anger as Jesus exercised - we’re not talking about this kind of anger. Instead Jesus is focusing on the destructive kind of anger that doesn’t value or respect people. How many of you have ever got angry with someone else?

This is not to say we should suddenly agree with everyone over everything - rather, how we disagree with people around us is what this is about! If anger is allowed to rear its head in our lives, when left unchecked and unresolved, murderous thoughts are sown in one’s life. When anger escalates, it can sadly lead to catastrophic consequences, resulting in the taking of innocent lives.

As such, Jesus is challenging us to learn to get rid of anger from our relationships, because if we don’t, we too will face judgement. What do you need to work on to ensure in your relationships, you value and respect people?

The second and third cases focus on calling another person ‘Raca’ which means ‘empty-headed’ or calling a person ‘You fool’. The Greek word for this latter name is ‘More’ from which we get the English word Moron. Both of these seek to attack and take away a person’s identity. Jesus reminds his listeners that the penalty for both of these will be judgement.

You see, each of these three cases are ways in which a person’s life can be removed from them - yes they may still be physically alive, but these cases highlight how lives can be damaged. Our words and actions do affect the lives of those around us. The old saying in the school playground *‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’* is a lie. Words and actions do devalue other people’s lives, sometimes with severe consequences.

The good new is that Jesus offers an antidote - the first is if you know someone has something against you, you need to make the first move to go and sort it out. The urgency of this is reflected in the action of leaving ones gift at the altar where temple sacrifices were of great importance to the people, in order to sort things out. Now it’s true that sometimes in life, people don’t want to sort things out - they would rather live with division and cause trouble - many of us will know people who choose to live like this. The question for us to ask ourselves is whether we have done everything possible to be reconciled to them?

In the same way, if you’re facing legal matters, it’s best to try and sort them out before they get to court. What matters is seeking reconciliation that hopefully creates friendships out of adversarial relationships. All this according to Jesus, is what it means to truly live out the sixth commandment ‘You shall not murder’ So what do you need to do to live this commandment out fully in your life?

The second antithesis we read in verse 27 says *You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery. But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* Here Jesus is taking the seventh of the ten commandments: ‘You shall not commit adultery’, and the tenth commandment ‘You shall not covet’.

The truth of adultery is that it destroys relationships because it betrays the trust between two people. In Scripture, we see this term used to describe both intimate encounters between two people, of whom one at least is married to another person, **and** the way in which the people of Israel went after gods other than Yahweh. Instead of focusing on one’s relationship with God or one’s marriage partner or looking for an available person to marry if one is single, adultery wrongly focuses ones energies, thoughts and actions on what one shouldn’t have. It is, in every sense of the word ,about desiring the forbidden fruit!

The remedy for this according to Jesus is to become completely single minded in ones devotion to God and to a marriage partner. To illustrate this, Jesus deliberately exaggerates using the pictures of maiming oneself through gouging out an eye or cutting off a hand. Jesus says this to emphasise the seriousness of this situation. If we are to live the way God has designed us to, then we need to look to that which builds each other up and not that which destroys. We all have to make a choice.

If we have a life partner, are we truly faithful to them - are we singly focused on them? In a similar way, if we love God, are we faithful to him? What is in here, in our hearts, will ultimately reveal where we stand on this issue, because it is all too easy to fall into spiritual adultery and to dishonour the relationship he calls us to live in with him, by not giving him the devotion we are called to.

Does your relationship with your partner or Jesus need sorting? If so, reach out to him and ask him to help you, and he will! What is your heart saying to you today? After all, the internal attitudes of the heart are the foundation and source of our external actions. What do we need to change in our lives today?

Let us pray.