

Deeper Discoveries

Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 5: Matthew 5:31–26



Literary Design

After making the astonishing statement, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 20), Jesus continues his sermon, repeatedly uses the pattern, “You have heard that it was said...but I tell you,” to show his authority and emphasize the true meaning of God’s law. Jesus’ purpose was to explain what he meant by righteousness that surpasses the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. [1] He explains the commandments and their true meaning, [1] which was much more demanding than mere outward obedience. The six examples address limited or mistaken understandings of the Old Testament law. [2]

Jesus’ teaching does not contradict the Law as given. Instead, what he says after “but I say to you” helps explain the full meaning of the quoted commandment. [3] Jesus is not simply replacing one command with another based on his own opinion. He shows how one commandment can help explain another. For example, the command against coveting helps us understand when lust becomes adultery. Likewise, the Law connects anger with guilt and judgment. Jesus is interpreting one commandment in light of other parts of the Law. [3]

The formula also shows Jesus’ unique authority to interpret the Law. Because Jesus uses this pattern six times, these teachings are often called “the six antitheses.” The repeated words “I say to you” place Jesus’ authority at the center. He is not simply repeating the interpretations of other rabbinic teachers. [2] He speaks with his own authority. The contrast between “You have heard that it was said” and “But I say to you” shows that the Law points to Jesus, is fulfilled by Jesus, and is rightly understood through Jesus. [4]

One last point. In the original language, Jesus emphasizes the word “I” in the phrase, “but I say to you.” No one present would have missed that emphasis.

[1] Thomas Tehan and David Abernathy, *An Exegetical Summary of the Sermon on the Mount* (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 53–54. Edited.

[2] Stuart K. Weber, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 1:65–66. Edited.

[3] Paul T. Sloan, *Jesus and the Law of Moses: The Gospels and the Restoration of Israel within First-Century Judaism* (Baker, 2025), 81–82. Edited.

[4] Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 628. Edited.

Old Testament Connections: Murder/Anger/Contempt

The Old Testament presents human anger as a dangerous force requiring constant restraint, linking uncontrolled wrath to foolishness, social destruction, and spiritual danger. The wisdom literature emphasizes that anger management reflects the depth of one’s character and understanding. Slowness to anger demonstrates great understanding, while a hasty temper reveals folly (Prov 14:29). The person who controls his spirit surpasses the mighty warrior (Prov 16:32)—suggesting that the heart’s attitude matters more than refraining from certain payback actions (which is what Jesus is teaching). Discernment produces patience with offenders, and overlooking insults constitutes genuine glory (Prov 19:11). On the other hand, fools fully vent their emotions, while the wise restrain themselves (Prov 29:11). Hot-tempered individuals ignite conflict, whereas those slow to anger extinguish it (Prov 15:18). Angry people generate strife and transgression (Prov 29:22). Harsh words kindle anger, while gentle responses defuse it (Prov 15:1). The psalmist urges abandoning anger and wrath, since fretting leads only to evil (Ps 37:8).

Now Psalm 37 is attributed to David. Perhaps he was thinking about his anger against Nabal (ironically meaning 'Fool') and how close he came to murdering him and his entire household in his fury at being insulted. David was the sinful fool in his anger, in mercy kept from worse. Read 1 Samuel 25 for the account.

How about Jonah? He had a good reason to hate the Ninevites. They were exceptionally cruel, blood enemies of Israel. Yet when Jonah burned with anger because the LORD had not destroyed Nineveh, what did the LORD say to Jonah? "Is it right for you to be angry?" (Jonah 4:5). Are those we're angry at worse than Ninevites?

Commentary (Michael Green, Sinclair Ferguson, Paul David Tripp)

[Green]: The prophets of old spoke with the words, "Thus says the LORD ..." when they delivered God's message. The rabbis, knowing they were not prophets, did not speak on their own authority. They usually introduced a teaching by quoting an earlier rabbi or saying something like, "There is a teaching that ..." But Jesus speaks in a completely different way. He places his own teaching, which fully supports the authority of the Old Testament, alongside centuries of scribal interpretation and says, "But I tell you ..." Who is this "I" who speaks with such amazing confidence?

First, Jesus addresses murder (5:21–26). The law commanded, "Do not murder" (and the verb means "murder," as in Exodus 20:13, not simply killing). The statement, "Anyone who murders will be subject to judgment," was added by the scribes (these words are *not* in the Scriptures). Jesus goes much deeper. He traces murder to its dark root in the human heart: hatred. The God who sees what happens in secret is concerned not only about the wicked fruit, murder, but also about the wicked root, hatred. Hatred may not be punished in a human court, but it has no place among the people of God. Anger will face God's judgment...God is not pleased with worship from hearts filled with bitterness toward someone else. [1]

[Ferguson]: I wonder if you've ever met a Christian who gets irritated or angry and says, "I don't suffer fools gladly." It sounds as though they regard that as a virtue, but they don't realize that it's destroying them. They are suffering from a clogging up of their spiritual arteries, and the love and patience of the Lord Jesus isn't able to pulsate through them, enabling them to pity and love sinners. [2]

[Tripp]: We are deceived by sin more often than we like to think...The angry man convinces himself that he's not angry; he's just standing strongly for the truth...We are all able to erect self-atoning arguments that make our anger seem not so sinful at all. [3]

[1] Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 93–94. Edited.

[2] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Things Unseen: One Year of Reflection on the Christian Life* (York, PA: Maple Press, 2024), 325.

[3] Paul David Tripp, *Everyday Gospel: A Daily Devotional Connecting Scripture to All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2024), 305–306.