

May 19, 2002 by Steve Brandon



The Teaching of Jesus Christ - Perfect Righteousness (Part 1)

Matthew 5:20-26

Introduction (verse 20)

Contrast #1: Animosity (verses 21-26)

1. The teaching of the Pharisees (verse 21)

2. The teaching of Jesus (verses 22-26)

- Three illustrations (verse 22)

- Two examples (verses 23-24; 25-26)

We are in the process of working our way through the greatest sermon ever preached. It is so famous that it has been given a name. It is called, "The Sermon on the Mount." We are in the second major section of the sermon (verses 17-48). In the first section Jesus describes the kingdom citizens (verses 3-16). In this section Jesus puts forth His requirement of perfect righteousness. This point is brought out at the beginning of this section and brought out at the end of this section. It is mentioned at the top and at the tail of this section. Consider the following verses, ...

"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 20)

"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (verse 48).

The scribes and Pharisees were meticulous observers of the law. Jesus spoke how they gave a tenth of everything that they had, even down to the smallest spice! (Matt. 23:23). Jesus spoke how the Pharisees were white and clean and pure on the outside (Matt. 23:25,27), using the illustration of a clean looking cup and a white-washed beauty of a tomb. The scribes and Pharisees were external law-keepers. Yet, they often were focussed so much upon that keeping the external of the law that they "neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23). Furthermore, though they looked like a clean cup on the outside, they were "full of robbery and self-indulgence" on the inside (Matt. 23:25). Though they may look like a nice clean tomb, inside they were "full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:27).

This was nowhere illustrated to me better than when my wife and I had the chance to travel to Israel about 4 years ago. We were travelling from London to Tel-Aviv aboard a 737. On this flight there were a bunch of Orthodox Jewish people (as are on most flights coming into Tel-Aviv). We had a red-eye flight, which left London late in the evening, flew all night, and arrived in Tel-Aviv early in the morning. As we were approaching Tel-Aviv, all of the Orthodox Jews assembled themselves in the back of the plane, put on their prayer shawls, and begun to recite their prayers. (I am told that this is a common practice for the Orthodox Jews, as they come into Tel-Aviv). Here it was, the middle of the night and these "righteous" men were making all types of ruckus and noise on the back of the plane, just so that they could do their prayers. They were quite disturbing. It wasn't hidden to anybody. They almost seemed to want to make a show of their prayers.

On the external, they were very "religious" and "righteous" -- they were doing their prayers! In all this, I am sure that they thought themselves to be very "righteous." Yet, they were really quite obnoxious in their practice, and were not courteous and kind to the other passengers on board, at all. Everybody was trying to sleep, and here they were, creating a racket in the back of the plane. They very clearly demonstrated their lack of love for others. For some reason we had been placed in the very back of this jet -- the very last row. Perhaps we were seated there to learn this lesson of external righteousness.

We also observed some of their external righteousness in their eating habits. Orthodox Jews today eat only kosher food, prepared in accordance with the Old Testament laws and Jewish tradition. They demanded their specially cooked food to be them first, before anybody else received their food. If they inconvenienced the flight attendants with their special diet, the loving thing would be to be served last. However, they demanded to be served first.

This was the picture of the Pharisees at the time of Jesus. They kept a lot of external rules and regulations. They were convinced that they had met every requirement of the law. This is exemplified by the apostle Paul, who said that as a Pharisee, that he was found to be blameless in keeping the law (Phil. 3:6) - what an amazing assertion! This was the whole attitude of the Pharisees. They thought that they had kept the whole law, and others hadn't. At one point, in the life of Jesus, he told a parable to "certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). This pervaded much of the Jewish life, beyond merely the Pharisees and the religious people. When Jesus encountered a wealthy, influential man in society, Jesus told him to keep the following commandments, "You shall not commit murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother; and You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 19:18-19). The young man replied, "All these things I have kept" (Matt. 19:20). This illustrates the extent to which the Jewish people believed that they kept the Law of God, as given to Moses.

The point of this entire section of Scripture is teach the people what genuine righteousness before God was. The most religious people that

was in the community were the Pharisees, and Jesus said that their righteousness was not enough to get you into the kingdom of heaven. These Pharisees believed that they had kept the whole law. Yet, in reality, they had failed to keep the law. Jesus brought this out at the beginning of this section: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (verse 20). Jesus says that you need to go further than the Pharisees.

In this section, Jesus gives six contrasts of what the Pharisees taught and what God requires. The Pharisees taught an external code of conduct to be in compliance with the law of God. Jesus teaches a genuine righteousness with the whole man, that transcends mere external commands. (Of course, this doesn't ignore external conduct). While the Pharisees said that you were fine as long as you obeyed their rules, Jesus taught that God requires a righteousness that descends into your heart. While the Pharisees focused on rule-keeping, Jesus focused on heart-devotion.

Jesus sets up each of these contrasts with an introductory statement. Each of these statements are essentially synonyms, which direct our attention to the teaching of the Pharisees.

"You have heard that it was said, ..." (verse 27, 38, 43).

"You have heard that the ancients were told, ..." (verse 21, 33).

"It was said, ..." (verse 31).

Then, Jesus replies with the truth, "But I say to you, ..." (verses 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). You must realize what Jesus is doing with each of these contrasts. He is using these contrasts to reach an end. He is leading his listeners to see how far short the Pharisees have set God's standard of righteousness.

Whereas the Pharisees may have set the high-jump bar at three feet, which many able-bodied people could jump with a little practice, Jesus raises the high-jump bar to the ceiling. And says, "you need to jump over that bar." This is the point of verse 48, "Therefore, you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." **Jesus starts by saying, "You need to be better than the Pharisees" (verse 20). Jesus finishes by saying, "You need to be perfect like God" (verse 48).** Jesus says that your perfection must be in every part of your being: in what you feel (anger), in what you think (adultery), in what you say (vows), and in how you act (serving others).

The standard of the Pharisees has missed the point. In Leviticus 19:2, God had told His people, "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." To use the phrase of Peter, "like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15-16). God's character is our standard.

In weeks to come, we will look at each of these contrasts. This morning, we will only look at the first one. Let's look at ...

Contrast #1: Animosity

With each of these contrasts, we will look at two points:

1. The teaching of the Pharisees (verse 21)
2. The teaching of Jesus (verses 22-26).

Again, as is my habit, this is in accordance with how all of these contrasts are presented before us. This structure will help us to be more textual as we trace through this teaching of Jesus.

1. "You have heard that it was said, ..." (the teaching of the Pharisees)
2. "But I say to you, ..." (the teaching of Jesus).

Let's then, focus our attention upon ...

1. The teaching of the Pharisees (verse 21)

Jesus begins by putting forth the teaching of the Pharisees with respect to this whole matter of murder. Jesus said, "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'" Both of these commands come straight from the law of Moses. The first is a direct quotation from Exodus 20:13, a portion of what we call the Ten Commandments, "You shall not commit murder." The second is a correct implication based upon Numbers 35:30,31, where two witnesses are required to enact the death penalty, ... "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court" (Num. 35:30,31).

You might look at this and ask, "Well, what is wrong with this statement?" I say, "Nothing was wrong. It is in exact accordance with the law of God. The Pharisees on this point were exactly correct." The law of Moses plainly set out that murder was prohibited (Exodus 20:13). When a murder took place, there ought to be a trial based upon the testimony of at least two witnesses (Num. 35:30). If the court finds the man to be guilty, he was to be put to death, as it was told to Noah, before the law came, "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6).

With reference to murder, the Pharisees were exactly correct in that a murderer should be taken before the court. The court should then decide the guilt or innocence of the accused. If accused, the guilty party is deserving condemnation (that's what it means to be "liable" to the court -- it means, guilty before the court). The Pharisees taught that a man is not to be punished by personal revenge, but rather, through the fair trial of a court.

The difficulty of the teaching of the Pharisees isn't so much in what they said, as much in what they didn't say. With respect to this

entire matter of murder, their teaching left things right there, as I have described them. In the teaching of the Pharisees, they paid no attention to motives, or to desires. As long as you didn't murder anybody, you were fine with regard to this commandment. If you have never murdered anybody, you have nothing to worry about before God. This is where the Pharisees stopped.

If that was the standard of righteousness, I think that we would all be doing pretty well. I doubt whether any of you have murdered anybody in your life (I suppose that it is possible in our gathering this morning, ... but not probable). According to the standard of righteousness set by the Pharisees, I gather that all of you are doing quite well according to the standard of the Pharisees.

Let's turn from ...

1. The teaching of the Pharisees (verse 21)

to ...

2. The teaching of Jesus (verses 22-26)

He begins to address an issue that was lacking in the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus begins by giving three illustrations, all of which are in **verse 22**, "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty [enough to go] into the fiery hell." His three illustrations are anger, and two illustrations of evil speech.

I believe that Jesus is taking up this idea of murder, and getting to the root of the issue. **The root of the issue is animosity between two people** (thus the reason for my entitling the first contrast).

I know that this will be a new word for many of the children, so let me define it. It means, hatred, bitterness, malice, enmity, strife, dislike. Let me describe it to the children. Suppose you are playing with a friend, a neighbor, a cousin, or a brother or sister. This person does something to you that you don't like very much, perhaps they take a toy from you, or call you a bad name, or hit you, or bite you, or scratch you, or don't invite you somewhere, As a result, you begin to have animosity between you two, because you dislike them for what they did. Animosity describes the stirring hatred or tension or dislike between two people. Much of it is caused because you want something that you cannot have. Your friend wants something that they can't have -- whether it is a toy, some candy, personal time with daddy, or a baseball glove. For you children among us, the result of this is usually that you simply don't like your friend and don't end up spending much time with your friend, or you get into fights. There are often other children on the block to play with.

For you adults, it manifests itself in several ways. When you initially have tension with another person, for whatever reason, often you can simply avoid that person. But there are times, when avoidance isn't possible (relative, co-worker, neighbor, or fellow church-member). Still people can avoid each other (I have heard of family members not speaking to one another for years at a time. I have seen church members at odds with each other).

If things escalate, perhaps this animosity between two adults will develop into name calling and slander of the other individual. Perhaps even direct confrontations, where the words of hatred fly against each other in a heated argument. Then, these heated arguments become regular features. Marriages gone sour often experience this. When there is husband and wife together and there is animosity between each other, arguments will develop. Friendships turned to the worse can often experience this. Neighborhood feuds can develop into this.

If things continue to escalate, there will be physical retribution. Physical abuse in the home can occur. Wives are physically abused by their bigger, strong husbands. Parents, who are angry with their children can often physically abuse them. In neighborhoods, there can be physical fights.

The last step in this developing animosity between two people is ultimately the murder of one of the members of the feud. It's pretty difficult to have animosity with a corpse. The corpse won't fight back. This is the end result of animosity.

Note also, that this is all caused by selfishness. You will have conflicts with others, when you feel that you have been deprived of something that you deserve, whether by something physical, like a property line, or by something relational, like acceptance from another person. James, the brother of our Lord said it like this, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel" (James 4:1-2).

This is what happened to Cain. He didn't just rise up and murder his brother Abel. When God accepted Abel's sacrifice, and not Cain's, the Bible says that "Cain became very angry and his countenance fell." His anger got the best of him, and culminated in the killing of his brother. It began with animosity for his brother. It culminated in murder.

The Pharisees taught, that as long as you never got to the final stage, of actually murdering somebody, you were righteous. This is how the Pharisees could think themselves to be blameless from the standards of the law (as we saw above in Phil. 3:6; Luke 18:9; Matt 19:20). But Jesus, gets to the root of the issue. What is the root cause of murder? Animosity between two people.

Jesus said that if you are angry with another, you will be guilty before the court. Jesus said, that if there is animosity between you and another, you are guilty. Jesus uses the same phraseology in verses 21 and 22. In verse 21, Jesus said that those who commit murder will be "liable to the court" or "guilty before the court." In verse 22, Jesus said that those who are angry with his brother shall be "liable to the court" or "guilty before the court." It is the same phrase used. I simply means, "guilty!" (I don't know why the NASB chose to use two different phrases to translate this phrase. It is identical in both places.)

You murder, and you are guilty. You are angry, and you are guilty. Jesus is bringing animosity toward others back to the root. Let me add, for the sake of completeness that some texts include the phrase, angry "without a cause," to restrict this anger only to anger which is unjust anger. Certainly, this is what Jesus meant. The Bible isn't opposed to all anger. There is a righteous anger that is permissible -- anger that

arises solely because of God's glory being negated or diminished. God, Himself, gets angry. Scripture repeatedly (more than 100 times) describes God as being angry at others (Ex. 4:14; Num. 32:10; Judges 2:20). Praise be to God that He has described himself as "slow to anger" (Ex. 34:6; Ps. 103:8). But may I say, that the vast majority of "anger" is not righteous anger. Also, I believe that much of the "anger" thought to be righteous anger is not.

Jesus says, "everyone who is angry with his brother [that is, another person], shall be guilty before the court." **This wasn't something new.** Jesus was simply attempting to focus and direct the attention to the heart of the matter. In Leviticus, the law commands, **"You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart;** you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, **nor bear any grudge** against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:17-18). Listen to Prov. 6:16-19, "There are six things which **the LORD hates**, Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, A heart that devises wicked plans, Feet that run rapidly to evil, A false witness who utters lies, and **one who spreads strife among brothers.**"

Jesus is simply saying that the Pharisees focused upon the external act of murder, but God is concerned with the cause and the source of this, which is animosity between others.

Jesus gives two more illustrations of animosity between others. The first has to do with anger. The second and third have to do with speech, "... whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty [enough to go] into the fiery hell" (verse 22).

With each of these indictments, Jesus is focussing upon a greater and greater condemnation. Notice in verse 22, that to say, 'Raca' is to be guilty before the supreme court (i.e. the Sanhedrin). This was the highest court in the land. Then, Jesus says, to say, 'You fool,' is to be guilty before hell, which is final condemnation.

The word, "Raca," was simply a term of great contempt in Jesus' day which expressed hatred for another individual. Literally, it means, "empty" or "worthless." It describes an empty-headed, foolish man. I think that the best parallel to this today would be to call somebody, an "air-head." The word, "fool," likewise was a term of contempt in Jesus' day. It described the wicked man who lacked practical wisdom for living and made poor choices.

I remember reading these words as a little boy and thinking, "Wow, I had better not call anybody these words." I thought that I was pretty safe with the first one. It wasn't my habit to go around saying, "Raca" to other children. However, I was somewhat worried about the "you fool," one, because that was in my vocabulary. But I thought to myself, "as long as I stay away from these certain names, I would be all-right." I thought that I could call people by other names, just as long as I didn't say, "Raca" and "you fool." What had I done? I had done just like the Pharisees -- taking some sort of rule and restricting it to the letter of the law. I took Jesus' words to mean that I could use any other words to call my enemies, as long as I didn't say these two words that Jesus prohibited, "Raca" and "you fool"!

This is similar to the error of the Pharisees. **They held to the letter of the law, and missed the spirit of the law.** The letter of the law might hold you to a mere prohibition of murder. The spirit of the law would press you to "love your neighbor as yourself," which would guard against anger and evil speech.

This must be the intention of Jesus. He, Himself, called the Pharisees, "you foolish ones" (Luke 11:40). He, Himself, called His disciples, "foolish men and slow heart" (Luke 24:25). But Jesus didn't say these words with animosity in His heart. He said it with love (according to verse 44). It isn't only these exact words, which will merit judgment on your behalf. In every culture of every day, there have been words which are equivalent to these words. Rather, it is the source of these words that will end in judgment.

Notice that these words arise from within. It is the animosity of one towards another which causes them to speak these things to one another. It comes from the heart. Your defilement comes from within, "that which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man" (Mark 7:20-23).

Jesus instructs us not to simply stop with the external act of murder. Neither should we simply stop with the exact words that we utter to others. Rather, we need to deal with the heart of the matter.

This has great application for the church, for us at Rock Valley Bible Church. One man called these sins listed here, "the sin of the church!" When members of the same church have something against one another. As they gather week by week, they can't ignore it, because they are like family, which gathers frequently. The sad fact is, however, that they often don't deal with it. Sure, they may attend church and have a nice smile on their face, but within their heart there is hatred towards that man in the third row, or towards that woman sitting in the back.

Jesus' message to us this morning is simply this: if you have hatred in your heart toward others, you are as guilty as any murderer. Sure, perhaps you have not manifested your animosity toward another by pulling a trigger and murdering another, but you have anger toward them in your heart. Jesus said that the murderer of verse 21 is as guilty as the one who is angry in verse 22. You can't get around it. "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

And I ask you church family, "is this true of you?" Is there any animosity between you and others? Within the church? With those outside the church? Now, certainly, the gospel brings division between people. Certainly, the gospel stirs up the hatred of others toward us. But is it in your heart, "to love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you?" (Matt. 5:44)? I don't think that Jesus' words here are simply against those who have anger or have verbalized certain derogatory things against others. I believe that Jesus is addressing the issue of animosity between others. This is the spirit of what Jesus is saying.

Don't be a Pharisee and say, "I'm not angry with so-and-so, I'm ... **disturbed** with so-and-so. Jesus said that I just can't be angry with

somebody. He didn't say that I can't disturbed with anybody." Don't be a Pharisee and say, "I have **a problem with** so-and-so, and have thought quite a lot about their weaknesses and how they have wronged me, but I've never actually said anything against them. I have just thought it in my mind, so I am doing fine with respect to Jesus' words here." Perhaps you might use other non-Biblical words to describe your animosity, like "**disappointed**" or "**frustrated**" or "**struggling with**."

Is that not simply defining your righteousness on a higher level, perhaps than the Pharisees, who stopped at murder? You are simply stopping at expressing that animosity using "anger" to describe it. You are simply silent about your animosity. If you are doing this, you are getting the letter of what Jesus is saying exactly right, but have missed the spirit of His words entirely. Where the Pharisees may have set the high-jump bar at three feet, you may have raised it to five feet, through your manipulations of Jesus' words. Yet, the standard of righteousness Jesus is putting forth here is more like 20 or 50 feet!

If you want to enter the kingdom of heaven, you need to have a righteousness that surpasses the scribes and Pharisees. They only looked to their external acts to see if they qualify. But Jesus says, look to your heart. So I ask you, "Is there enmity in your relationships? Is there strife in your relationships? Is there jealousy in your relationships? re there outbursts of anger in your relationships? Are there disputes" in your relationships?" These are what Paul calls, the deeds of the flesh, Gal. 5:19-21. If there are, I plead with you to deal with them, today!

I confess to you all that Jesus describes me with these words. They are deep and penetrating. I think of anger. This week, I have been more angry with my children than in recent months. Perhaps I might say impatient, but it essentially comes to anger. I have thought evil of others this week. Oh, perhaps it didn't get to my mouth this week, but it was within me, trying to get there. "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom. 7:24). If you knew the wickedness of my heart, you wouldn't come to hear me preach. If I knew your heart, I would think there to be no hope.

Thanks be to God that "Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law" (Matt. 5:17). This is the good news of the gospel. Jesus Christ saves sinners. For those who believe in Him, we have a righteousness, that is not our own. Our righteousness isn't derived by attaining to some standard of the Law, but our righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Phil. 3:9). If you are ever going to attain to this perfect righteousness that Jesus requires in verse 48, you will need to have a righteousness that is not your own.

Jesus says that if you speak in a derogatory way toward anyone, you are guilty and deserve hell. The only one who will save you from that is Jesus. He is the way, the truth and the life, nobody comes to the Father, but through Him. You aren't going to come to the Father based upon your own works. You will come only through the righteousness of His Son. Believe on Him, and you will have life!

The burden of this message isn't to raise the standard only to press you to jump higher than the Pharisees. I'm seeking to give to you the standard of righteousness which Jesus requires -- perfect righteousness, down to your heart. As such, in now way will I seek to lower the standard, which Jesus presents, to make it easy for us to merit life eternal. I'm seeking to present to you God's standard of holiness, for which we naturally strive. But, when we realize God's righteous standards, we can only cry out to God for mercy, because we know that our holiness won't save us. Yet, we long for such a righteousness (1 Peter 1:15-16).

In verses 23-26, Jesus gives us two examples. These examples will illustrate the importance of his point.

Example #1 (verses 23-24), "If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

Jesus describes an Old Testament saint, who sinned in some way. In accordance with the requirements of the law, he was bringing his sacrifice to priest to be offered up in exchange for his sin. He describes this man at the very foot of the altar, ready to give his sacrifice to the priest. But, suddenly, as he holding the lamb in his arms, a thought comes to his mind. He remembers that someone has something against him. He remembers that someone is angry with him. (The implication is that he did something wrong and he knows that if he goes to talk to this person, he can reconcile with him. I don't believe that Jesus is here talking about the case where reconciliation is impossible, otherwise, there is no way he could have worshiped in the last year of His life, so great was the hostility against Him. He can be the peacemaker Jesus spoke of in verse 9. As Paul instructed in Rom. 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.") Jesus says that he should leave his offering there upon the altar and go talk to his friend. He should tie up his lamb near the altar, put a sign on the animal that says, "property of _____, I will be back to offer it up." When things are cleared up between them, and there is no animosity any more, he should return to present his offering to the Lord.

This is the importance of Jesus' teaching here. **Jesus says that you cannot be right with God, unless you are first right with men.**

The implications for us are easy. We don't bring sacrifices, because Jesus fulfilled the law. Yet, we do bring "sacrifices of praise" (Heb. 13:15). If we come to worship God, and we know that there is tension in some of our relationships, Jesus says, "Don't bother in coming to church." The Psalmist says it like this, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the LORD will not hear" (Ps. 66:18). The Psalmist says, "Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who as clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood, and has not sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4).

Have you ever done a futile thing? Have you ever tried to rake leaves on a windy day? As soon as you are done, your lawn is suddenly filled with more leaves. Have you ever tried to shovel your driveway, when the snow is coming down hard? When you are done shoveling, your driveway is full again. Sure, you have put forth lots of effort and have had lots of activity, but no progress was made. So is it futile to seek to worship God when your relationships with others aren't right. Oh, yes, you sing lots of words and pray many prayers, and hear much spoken, but God has simply ignored your worship. Jesus says that you cannot be right with God, unless you are first right with men.

Calvin asks, "Is it not absurd, that the duties of charity should be esteemed more highly than the worship of God?" (Commentary on Matt. 5:23). We often think of the two great commandments that Jesus gave as being in order of priority, "love God with all your heart" and "love your neighbor as yourself" (see Matt. 22:37-40). Yet, the priority Jesus presents here is the reverse. This is because, as Calvin said, "It is a

false and empty profession of worshiping God, which is made by those who, after acting unjustly toward their brother, treat them with haughty disdain."

Example #2 (verses 25-26), "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent."

Jesus here describes the situation in which you are being taken to court. (He leave out the reason for being taken into court, but the assumption is that you are guilty of some crime.) Jesus here says that in your guilt, you ought to seek reconciliation with your opponent before you ever stand before the judge. If there is some wrong, seek to make it right. Rather than put yourself in subjection to the judge, work something out with your opponent. Because once your case comes before the judge, he will be merciless. The judge will had you over to the police officer, who will, in turn, throw you into prison. There you will sit until you pay every last penny you owe.

I believe that Jesus is using this story to illustrate the consequences of not dealing with the animosity in your relationships between people. Unresolved tensions will be dealt with. Jesus instructs us to deal with them today, before you come to court. If we bring this back to the context, I believe that Jesus is describing some of the consequences that await an individual who is too hardened to admit his guilt and seek reconciliation. The one who is hard and rigid and refuses to humble himself and admit his error will find himself in a worse place.

When Jesus described this person being thrown into prison, He is describing the debtor's prison, which was a dreadful place. In this place debtors were thrown into prison until they paid back everything. However, while they were in prison, they had no means to earn any money to pay back what they owed. It is a hopeless case. Jesus is simply pointing out that it is important to resolve relationships with others, rather than letting a judge arbitrate. Is there animosity between you and another? Reconcile, today. "While you are with him on the way"! (verse 25).

Many of the truths here, parallel eternity. Make things right here upon the earth, while you have time, before you are delivered up the Judge of the universe. **Just as God never received the sacrifice of the one who had something against His brother, so also will He never forgive the one who isn't humble enough to admit the error of his way and seek forgiveness and restitution with those he has offended.** If God won't accept the worshiper, neither will He withhold judgment from the one who isn't reconciled to his brother.

How hard this is to reconcile with others. May God give us the grace to be humble enough to reconcile our differences with each other, that we might live in harmony with others. May the grace of Jesus Christ empower us to seek forgiveness, while forgiveness may be found. May we pledge before God to do as Paul did, "I also do my best to maintain always **a blameless conscience** both before God and before men" (Acts 24:16). My goal this morning is the same as Paul's was: "the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and **a good conscience** and a sincere faith" (1 Tim. 1:5).

This morning, we are celebrating the Lord's Supper. This passage has been a great reminder to us of the importance to be at peace with all men. It is our custom to come to 1 Corinthians 11 before we celebrate the Lord's Supper. It fits in perfectly with our message this morning. "But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you" (1 Cor. 11:17-19).

The Corinthians were coming together to celebrate the Lord's Supper, a sign of the unity our hope before God -- that our hope is only in Jesus Christ, to forgive and pardon our iniquities. Yet, there were divisions and factions. According to Jesus' teaching, their worship was vain and useless. There was tension and animosity between each other, which was unresolved. Before they took of the bread and the cup, they should have gotten up from their seats and gone to the party they offended and sought peace. Then, and only then, they should have celebrated the Lord's Supper. Rather, they were selfish in their dealings, "Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God, and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you" (1 Cor. 11:20-22).

The Lord's Supper is for all those who have trusted in the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The elements here aren't for those who don't believe that Jesus really died for their sins according to the Scriptures. The elements here aren't for those who don't believe that Jesus raised from the dead according to the Scriptures. So, before we celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning, I simply ask you, "Do you have something against your brother?" If you do, don't participate in the Lord's Supper. Rather, leave your sacrifice upon the altar and go and reconcile. Perhaps that person is sitting here. Go to them, before we distribute the elements and reconcile. Then, participate. Perhaps there is a family member with whom you are not reconciled. Don't participate in the Lord's Supper this morning, but when you get home, call them. Seek restitution.

In verse 27, Paul told the Corinthians, "Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly" (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

Let's come to God with clean hands and a pure heart. This is what it means to eat the bread or drink the cup in a worthy manner. With nothing between us and others. Let's celebrate the Lord's Supper together in harmony. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is from brother to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1).