

Anger and Grace **Matthew 5:17-26**

Every society has certain rules or accepted behaviour that make it different. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us what those are for the Kingdom of God. He does so by raising the issue of the law.

Two Robbers of Joy

Jesus mentions the kingdom three times. So this is about how we can enter into true happiness now and enjoy that forever. But there are two thieves who would rob you of that joy. The first is lawlessness. We can think the only way to be happy is to throw off God's laws. But Jesus says he has not come to abolish the Law, and that it has enduring relevance to our lives. True joy only comes with whole-hearted, loving obedience to God.

The second robber is legalism. We can either think we must obey God's law to earn entry to God's kingdom, or once in, to earn his blessing. But religious legalism is no way to joy. It either drags us down or makes us proud. Jesus says it can never save. In fact our righteousness must exceed that of the most law-keeping people of Jesus' day. How can that possibly be?

A Matter of the Heart

In the rest of chapter 5 Jesus gives examples of what he's talking about. He wants you to see that God's law is far more penetrating than you imagine. The first example is the commandment against murder. Jesus says this goes much deeper than committing homicide. It includes thoughts and words as well as deeds, because long before murder is an issue of the hands, it's an issue of the heart.

But as well as deepening the law, Jesus widens it. It includes not just you getting angry with others, but you causing others to get angry with you. He uses two pictures in v23-26 of when someone might have something against us. In both cases Jesus says, do all you can to be reconciled. Why? Because whether it's your anger, or someone else's, anger destroys.

If we are to enter and thrive in God's kingdom, Jesus says we need a righteousness of the heart. An inner, not an outer righteousness.

New Covenant, New Hearts

Jesus came to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. Only Jesus can ever say that he has perfectly kept God's law. And God does something wonderful with Jesus' righteousness: as we put our faith in Christ, it is counted to us. But that is not all. Jesus fulfilled all the prophecies concerning the Messiah – but also all the laws of priests and sacrifices. At the cross the full weight of God's law fell on him – and he paid the penalty for us. As he does so he brings about a new covenant: the covenant of grace.

As we put our trust in what Jesus has done for us he gives us a new heart. We want to obey God. But we do that not through lawlessness or legalism but the third way of grace. God's grace teaches us to say no to unrighteousness – because God's grace humbles us, and it makes us love him. So we don't react with proud anger when we are wronged – instead we forgive. And because God loves us, we love him, and want to obey.