

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

OLD TESTAMENT – Deuteronomy 30:15-20

The Choice of Life and Death

16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God[a] that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 17 But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

30:15-18 – Life is full of choices; few carry eternal consequences. But this choice – do we follow our covenant God, or do we go away to follow other gods? – was as important as life itself. Trusting the Lord and living His way isn’t just the only way to stay alive; it’s the only way life can be rich, full, and productive – the way He created it to be. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10). God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from Himself, because apart from Him there is no real happiness and peace. To reject God’s mercy and to seek greater joy and satisfaction somewhere else is the surest way to personal and national ruin. (PBC)

Note from John 10:10 – LIFE AND HAVE IT TO THE FULL – This is the best kind of life: life lived in security and freedom, life with a purpose and goal, life with a capital “L.” – Life is an important word in John (used 36 times; but only 14 times in the Synoptics). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 12, Part 2)

Justin Martyr says, “God spoke thus to the man first created.” God’s ways with humankind this always remain the same. Daniel would describe how Israel brought down on themselves the curse of death and evil by departing from God’s Law – the whole Word of God (Daniel 9:11). (TLSB)

30:16 *ways...commandments...rules* – Each suggests a different emphasis. (TLSB)

30:19 *I call heaven and earth as witnesses.* The typical ancient covenant outside the OT contained a list of gods who served as “witnesses” to its provisions. The covenant in Deuteronomy was “witnessed” by heaven and earth. (CSB)

God informed Israel that His whole creation was summoned to testify that He had told His people in advance what the results of their choice would be: it was a matter of life and death. (TLSB)

choose life – Moses could be the Lord’s covenant mediator with Israel. He could urge them to do the right thing, but he couldn’t choose for them. They had to choose for themselves. (PBC)

On the basis that God had chosen them and established a covenant relationship with them based upon grace. Chemnitz: “These statements must not be understood as applying only to the concerns of this life, for in Luke 10:25ff., when the scribe says, ‘What shall I do to gain eternal life?’ Christ replies, ‘What is written in the Law ... this do and you shall live’ ” (*LTh* 2:620). (TLSB)

The most important question you and I will ever have to answer is, “What do you think of Jesus Christ?” Every other question – Where should I live? Whom should I marry? What school should I attend? What career should I pursue? – pales by comparison. There are only two alternatives: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36). (PBC)

30:20 *holding fast*. The Spirit of God, who breathed life-giving breath into Adam, breathes life-giving breath into His people through His Word. Cf Ezk 36:22–28. Irenaeus of Lyons: “Preparing man for this life, the Lord Himself did speak in His own person to all alike the words of the Decalogue [Ten Commandments]; and therefore, in like manner, do they remain permanently with us” (ANF 1:482). (TLSB)

HE is your life. When they chose the Lord, they chose life (v. 19). In 32:46–47 “all the words of this law” are said to be their life. The law, the Lord and life are bound together. “Life” in this context refers to all that makes life rich, full and productive—as God created it to be. (CSB)

We Christians also have life and death, everlasting salvation and eternal damnation, laid before us in the Word of God. He that believes the Gospel and trusts in the mercy of God in simple faith will have eternal life. He will also give evidence of his faith in his obedience to the Word and command of God. But lie who does riot believe the Gospel, preferring to live a life of sin and shame, will be lost forever. (Kretzmann)

30:11–20 The Lord’s declaration to His people to choose life is inseparable from His covenant of grace that He established with them. Israel’s history clearly demonstrates that they spurned the life God had reserved for them through His grace, pursuing death instead. Consequently, by rejecting God’s grace, they rejected the length of days God promised to those who love the Lord, walk in His ways, and keep His commands. • Heavenly Father, we pray for forgiveness, for all too often we pursue the way of death and evil rather than life and good. Forgive us for the sake of Christ, who perfectly obeyed Your commands and died for our sins. May Your Holy Spirit work mightily within our hearts. Amen. (TLSB)

EPISTLE – 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

On Divisions in the Church

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? 4 For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? 5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

3:1 *people of the flesh*. The Corinthians behaved like the “natural person,” not like believers. (TLSB)

σαρκικός means “having the nature and characteristics of flesh” as manifested in one’s attitudes and behavior according to Winter, “σάρκιος is best seen in this context as an explication of σάρκινος and an antonym of πνευματικός. Paul is searching for words to show the immaturity of their outlook.” (CC)

3:2 *milk, not solid food.* The simple message of Christ crucified (2:2). *solid food.* The great depth of spiritual insight that builds upon Christ. *not ready.* See Heb 6:1. Spiritual growth, like physical growth, takes time. (TLSB)

As their spiritual father (4:15), Paul had fed these babies in Christ milk, not solid food (cf. Heb 5:12–14; 1 Pet 2:2). That was appropriate as long as they were still beginners in the faith. But milk should not remain the regular diet for those beyond infancy. Some four or five years had elapsed since Paul first planted the church in Corinth. By now they should have developed the capacity for solid food. There is a strong reproach in the words: “But you are not yet able even now” (3:2). Paul calls them to spiritual maturity. (CC p. 108)

3:3 *you are of the flesh.* Like men of the world instead of men of God. They were following merely human standards. (CSB)

As they had not reached maturity, the spiritual outlook had not yet permeated the Corinthians’ thinking, which helps to explain many of the difficulties experienced in their community. *jealousy and strife.* Markers of immaturity (cf 1:11). *in a human way?* As a natural, fallen person. (TLSB)

3:4 *I follow Paul ... Apollos.* Paul presses his point home by reminding the Corinthians of what he had heard from Chloe’s people: one person was saying, “I myself belong to Paul”; another, “I belong to Apollos” (3:4; cf. 1:12). Such self-assertion over against one another was a sure sign that the Corinthians were conducting themselves like Spirit-less human beings. As he would later write to them in 2 Corinthians: “When [people] measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense” (2 Cor 10:12 NRSV) (CC p. 108-109)

It is noteworthy that now Paul only mentions two of the four factions he described in 1:12; the “Cephas” and “Christ” factions have dropped from view. Probably the “Paul” and “Apollos” parties were the largest and most vocal. (CC p. 109)

3:5 *through whom you believed* – Faith comes through hearing the Word (Rm 10:14, 17). (TLSB)

ἐπιστεύσατε—The aorist tense harks back to their conversion. They “came to faith” when they heard the Gospel and were baptized (1:13–17). (CC p. 110)

Apollos and Paul are simply servants of Christ and his people (3:22; 4:1). Their ministry is modeled on that of Jesus, who came not to lord it over others but to wait on them, not to be served but to serve (Mk 10:41–45; Lk 22:25–27). Through the ministry of Paul and Apollos the Corinthians had come to faith Paul carefully chooses his words in 3:5: “*through* whom [δι’ ὧν] you came to faith/believed,” not “*in* whom you believed.” In other words, the missionaries were merely instruments through whom God had called the Corinthians to faith. They were not to become objects of faith. (CC pp. 111-112)

assigned to each – Each worker is assigned a different sphere, perhaps geographically or perhaps by type of service. Each service is equally important, a theme taken up in ch 12. (TLSB)

Apollos and Paul were totally dependent on their Lord. Without him they could have accomplished nothing (Jn 15:5). Thus he alone, “the Great Master,” could properly claim the Corinthians’ faith and allegiance. He had assigned Apollos and Paul their respective roles in Corinth, and it was under his oversight and by his gracious provision (“as the Lord assigned to each,” 1 Cor 3:5) that their labors had led to the establishment of the church. (CC p. 112)

3:6 *I planted.* See Ac 18:4–11. Paul’s work was of a pioneer nature, preaching where no one had ever preached before. (CSB)

Sowed the Word. (TLSB)

Apollos watered. See Ac 18:24–28. Apollos worked in the established church, edifying the converts Paul had won. (CSB)

Nurtured the faith. (TLSB)

God gave the growth – By the Spirit’s power through the Word proclaimed by the apostles. (TLSB)

Because it is God who keeps giving the growth, “neither the planter is anything nor the waterer, but only God, who does the growing” (3:7). Back in 3:5, Paul had asked: “What, after all, is Apollos? What is Paul?” Now he answers, saying in essence, “We are nothing!” (cf. 2 Cor 12:11; Gal 6:3). Paul was keenly aware that the church lived totally by the grace of God, each church worker being totally dependent on God for any fruit in his ministry. What Luther wrote on the day before his death applies to all ministers of the Gospel: “We are beggars. That is true.” All glory for a fruitful ministry must be given to God alone. Whereas Paul and Apollos are nothing, God is everything. To emphasize this, Paul places “God,” θεός, last in 3:7. (CC p. 113)

3:7 *is anything* – Those privileged to share in this ministry may regard themselves as the world regards the Church, as nobodies (cf 1:28). “For without His grace, and if He does not grant the increase, our willing and running, our planting, sowing, and watering (1 Corinthians 3:5–7)—are all nothing” (FC Ep II 6). (TLSB)

But while Paul and Apollos are “nothing,” they are “one thing” in a vitally important ministry that will be rewarded by God. (CC p. 113)

God has chosen to grow his church from the seed planted and watered by servants called to a single task. Anyone who watches a gardener or farmer at work sees that planting and watering serve a common goal. Thus Apollos and Paul did not work independently of each other; they formed a harmonious unit, one in purpose, one in fellowship (Gal 2:9). (CC p. 113)

3:8 *are one* – Equal and united. (TLSB)

will receive his wages – The reward for faithful service, not implying that one can earn salvation. God’s favor is unmerited (e.g., Eph 2:8). The joy of success in Christ surpasses any payment. “We teach that rewards have been offered and promised for the works of believers. We teach that good works have merit, not for forgiveness of sins, for grace, or for justification (for these we receive only through faith), but for other rewards, bodily and spiritual, in this life and after this life” (Ap V 73). (TLSB)

Moreover, what matters most is not how much the Corinthians make of Paul or Apollos, but how God assesses their work. Again Paul is emphasizing that he and Apollos are servants, working for a master who will allot each of them his pay (“reward”) in keeping with his productivity (“work,” 3:8). (CC p. 113)

3:9 *God’s fellow workers* – As part of God’s team, they participate in His work. (TLSB)

God’s field. The people are God’s farm. (CSB)

God's building. They are also depicted as God's temple (vv. 16–17). He owns the farm and the building where both Paul and Apollos worked. (CSB)

Common NT depictions of the Church (e.g., Mt 13:24–33; 1Pt 2:5). Both projects call for laborers. (TLSB)

GOSPEL – Matthew 5:21-37

Murder

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults^{lb} his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell^{cl} of fire. ²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

5:21-48 The commentary on 5:17-20 argued that 5:21–48 is *not* a prescription for how a person may attain the righteousness that will allow him to gain entrance into the reign of heaven. Rather, in 5:21–48 Jesus displays standards of spiritual greatness for disciples who already now receive the blessings of the reign of heaven through faith in him, and who will, by grace, fully enter the glories of that reign on the Last Day. Before briefly considering the theology and application of Jesus' teaching on doing and teaching God's Torah commandments (5:19) that is contained in 5:21–48, three hermeneutical issues should be addressed. (CC)

First, if Jesus' sixfold saying “But I myself am saying to you” (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) involves a contrast of some sort between his authoritative revelation and something else, with what is Jesus making the contrast? Is the contrast between the Law of Moses and Jesus' own teaching? Or is the Christ pitting his own authoritative interpretation of the Torah against current scribal interpretations of the same? (CC)

Second, should Jesus' teaching be read as if he were here giving a full exposition on any of the six topics? That has sometimes been the way Christians have approached Jesus' teaching, especially with regard to the material on divorce and remarriage in 5:31–32. Or should Jesus' teaching be read as “general truth,” sweeping revelation that comes from the very heart of God, but does not give explicit answers to all of the specific questions that disciples (ancient or modern!) may have about the important matters that the Lord's words address? (CC)

Third, how can attention to the first-century context of Jesus' teaching help us to understand what he is intending to say and what he does not intend to say? A brief discussion of these three key issues now follows. (CC)

Regarding the contrast, some interpreters argue strongly that Jesus' teaching here is set as a contrast to the revelation that came through the Mosaic Law *per se*. However, at least three textual features lead us to a different conclusion: in 5:21–48, Jesus, the one who comes to fulfill the Law and the Prophets (5:17–18), is offering his disciples the true intention of the Law of Moses, in contrast to typical Jewish interpretations that Jesus' hearers will have encountered in the first century (CC).

First, when Jesus undeniably cites the OT Scriptures elsewhere in Matthew, he never says, “You heard that it was said” (which is the refrain in 5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43; a shortened version of that refrain is in 5:31). The first textual note on 5:21 gives the pertinent data. Second, while I have argued above that 5:19 (and not 5:20) is, in the most important sense, the theme or heading or introduction for Jesus’ teaching in 5:21–48, Jesus’ reference in 5:20 to “the scribes and Pharisees” brings to the attention of readers/hearers typical ways that Jewish interpreters understood the Torah in Jesus’ era. Furthermore, the crowds’ reaction when the Sermon is complete does the same thing: “For he was teaching them with the conviction that he had authority, and not *as their scribes* [taught]” (7:29). While the evangelist’s words in 7:29 contrast the *manner* of Jesus’ teaching, rather than its specific *content*, other teachers in Judaism are explicitly in the foreground. Third, Jesus’ identity as the One who fulfills the Law and the Prophets and the important continuity between Torah and his own teaching (implied strongly in 5:17–20 and discussed in the commentary on those verses) support the position here taken, to wit, that Jesus is expounding the true meaning of God’s OT commandments. (CC)

To repeat, in answer to the first question, I conclude that in 5:21–48 what Jesus offers to his disciples as they seek to do and teach the commandments of God (5:19) is the proper, authoritative interpretation of the Torah. The Torah will remain unchanged until all things take place (5:18d)—and all things do take place in Jesus’ death and resurrection. (CC)

The second introductory question is more important since a wrong answer to it can subject 5:21–48 to misunderstanding or even abuse. Jesus’ teaching in 5:21–48 should be received as sweeping, general truth and revelation from God. It is not case law. It does not contain explicit applications covering all particular circumstances. In the case of every one of the six units found in 5:21–48, we must make “adjustments” of greater or lesser size to avoid taking Jesus’ teaching to erroneous and (perhaps) ridiculous extremes that would contradict other Scripture passages. Jesus does not attempt or intend to supply his disciples with teaching that covers every possible scenario that fallen humanity’s pathetic shortcomings and sins might create. Great wisdom and broad knowledge of all the Scriptures must be brought to bear when applying the truths of 5:21–48 to the lives of disciples as they carry out their calling to be the earth’s salt and the world’s light (5:13–16). I can illustrate a few of the ways in which it is clear that Jesus’ teaching was not intended to be taken strictly and literalistically. (CC)

All interpreters would agree that some of Jesus’ statements must be “qualified” based on what he himself says elsewhere and on what the inspired authors of Scripture record elsewhere. First, when Jesus forbids anger against “your brother” (5:21–26), he surely also means to prohibit anger against non-Christians, even though he does not explicitly state that. In addition, Jesus’ own speech indicates that he does not mean to forbid *every* use of “insulting terms” such as “fool.” Second, despite the surface teaching of 5:27–28, Jesus must not be forbidding a man to look upon a woman so as to desire her when that woman is his wife, although Jesus does not mention that exception. Moreover, few would conclude that the Son of God is advocating self-mutilation as an antidote for temptation (5:29–30). Third, few would consider Jesus’ words in 5:31–32 to prohibit the remarriage of an unlawfully divorced wife whose husband has since died. Yet Jesus’ words do not specifically offer that kind of qualification; it must be supplied from 1 Cor 7:39. Fourth, unless one is willing to say that later disciples, including Paul, sinfully violated Jesus’ teaching regarding oaths, then Jesus’ words in Mt 5:33–37 are not an absolute rejection of all oaths, although if read literalistically his words offer that kind of *absolute* prohibition. Fifth, Jesus’ admonition in 5:40, if followed to the letter, would result in naked disciples, and 5:39, strictly speaking, could be used as a rationale for retaliating if one were struck in the nose rather than on the cheek. Sixth and perhaps most obviously, it would be difficult to find anyone who seriously entertained the possibility that Jesus’ words in 5:43–48 meant that we are to love *only* our enemies and persecutors. Surely the force of his words must be expanded to mean, “Love everyone, *even* those who hate and persecute you.” (CC)

These examples are (perhaps!) easy and obvious. This should not mask the important hermeneutical insight, however, that Jesus' teaching in 5:21–48 must be interpreted in harmony with other NT passages. The section cannot be read as literal and comprehensive. To repeat the point, Jesus' teaching is not legal, case law material. This insight will be especially important when it comes to apprehending the force of Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in 5:31–32 (see the commentary on 5:31–32, and more extensively, on 19:3–12). (CC)

The third hermeneutical issue highlights the importance of the first century as the appropriate backdrop for understanding Jesus' words in 5:21–48. The reference to “the altar” in the Jerusalem temple (5:23–24) is an obvious example of this. Jesus' teaching assumes that the Jerusalem temple cultus was still operating and that his disciples would still be participating in that cultus, for “all things” had not yet occurred in his death and resurrection (see the commentary on 5:18). A less obvious example that will be developed below is that knowledge of first-century Judaism and its understandings of divorce and remarriage must inform the interpretation of Jesus' *contrasting* teaching in 5:31–32. Jesus is teaching his first-century disciples to attend to his interpretation of God's will, and not to the competing first-century interpretations they have heard. Jesus' twenty-first-century disciples must reckon and wrestle with this important hermeneutical issue before applying his authoritative revelation on marriage, divorce, and remarriage to their own lives and situations. (CC)

Jesus' disciples are to receive his teaching in 5:21–48 according to the spirit of his words and to interpret it according to the analogy of Scripture. I know full well how this leaves open the possibility of diluting the force of Jesus' teaching to the point of ignoring it: “Well, Jesus can't have meant for me to do something as unreasonable as *that!*” This hermeneutical danger simply must be acknowledged and avoided to the extent that we sinners can do so. At the same time, we cannot abuse Jesus' teaching in 5:21–48 by taking it literalistically or legalistically, making it into something that our Lord never intended it to be, that is, casuistic legislation that offers comprehensive situational application for every possible scenario. (CC)

5:21 *it was said*. The contrast that Jesus sets up (vv. 21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43) is not between the OT and his teaching (he has just established the validity of the OT Law). Rather, it is between externalistic interpretation of the rabbinic tradition on the one hand, and Jesus' correct interpretation of the Law on the other. (CSB)

This means what the disciples had heard from Jewish religious teachers such as the scribes and Pharisees. (TLSB)

ἤκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις—The aorist indicative “you heard” could very well be translated as an English perfect, “You have heard” (so KJV, NASB, RSV, ESV, NIV). I have retained a somewhat more wooden past tense in order more clearly to show the contrast between what Jesus' disciples *heard* and what Jesus by his own authority now *says* to them. One should not think that the invalid biblical interpretations or applications that Jesus rejects in 5:21–48 were universally held in all of Judaism. The belief that anger deserves punishment just as much as actual murder does was found elsewhere in early Judaism. (CC)

Jesus is not merely quoting the OT. Rather, Jesus refers to various scribal interpretations of the Torah in order to offer by way of contrast his own authoritative interpretation. When Jesus directly quotes the OT, he never introduces the citation with ἐρρέθη, “It was said.” Instead, he uses expressions such as “It is written” (γέγραπται, 4:4, 7, 10; 11:10; 21:13; 26:31); “What this is” (τί ἐστίν, 9:13; 12:7); “The prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled that says” (ἀναπληροῦται ... ἡ προφητεία Ἡσαΐου ἢ λέγουσα, 13:14); “Isaiah prophesied, saying” (ἐπροφήτευσεν ... Ἡσαΐας λέγων, 15:7); “God said” (ὁ ... θεὸς εἶπεν, 15:4); “David

in the Spirit ... , saying” (Δαυὶδ ἐν πνεύματι ... λέγων, 22:43); and “Have not/never you read?” (οὐκ/οὐδέποτε ἀνέγνωτε, 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31). (CC)

Those of old – τοῖς ἀρχαίοις—The dative noun cannot be translated as an agent, “by the ancients.” The dative case very rarely expresses personal agency, and then only normally with a perfect middle or passive verb form, whereas ἐρρέθη is aorist. (CC)

murder. Several Hebrew and Greek verbs mean “kill.” The ones used here and in Ex 20:13 specifically mean “murder.” (CSB)

οὐ φονεύσεις· ὃς δ’ ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει—The negated second person future indicative φονεύσεις has the force of an imperative: “Do not murder.” οὐ φονεύσεις agrees verbatim with LXX Ex 20:15 (MT/ET 20:13) and LXX Deut 5:18 (MT/ET 5:17). This is the first reference in Mt 5:21–48 to what “was said.” It combines a direct quotation of Scripture—the Fifth Commandment—with a commentary upon it: “And whoever murders will be liable to the judgment.” This further shows that Jesus is contrasting his interpretation of the Torah with other views that were current in the first century, rather than just with the Torah itself. (CC)

liable to judgment. From a human court. (TLSB)

5:22 *but I say* – ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν—The pronoun ἐγὼ is unnecessary (since the verb λέγω is first person), and therefore emphatic: “But I myself am saying to you ...” This adds to the contrast between what Jesus’ hearers have heard from others who interpreted the Torah and what Jesus himself now declares to them as the true meaning of God’s Word. (CC)

Jesus stated His own teaching with the voice of authority (cf. vv. 28, 32, 34, 39, 44; 7:29). “Christ takes the Law into His hands and explains it spiritually” (FC SD V 10). (TLSB)

Is angry – Jesus takes aim at an understanding of the Fifth Commandment that his disciples had “heard” (5:21) from some Jewish teachers in their first-century context. Murder makes one liable to divine judgment. In itself, of course, this teaching is correct. But the Fifth Commandment entails more, and Jesus reveals the fullness of God’s intention in giving the commandment against unjustly taking the life of another. You can “murder” someone in your heart or with your words. Bitter insults partake of the same poisonous root as murder itself, and there is no essential difference in the sight of God; murder, anger, and bitter insults all can lead down the road to eternal damnation. It is an especially grievous matter when a disciple treats a fellow Christian, a “brother” (5:22), in this way. (CC)

Murder and anger both alike incur God’s wrath. Yet this teaching does not mean that anger and insult are identical to murder *in every respect*—and this is a crucially important distinction. Murder and anger are most certainly *not* identical in terms of the damage they may do in the horizontal realm of human relationships, or even in terms of the damage they do to the spiritual life of the sinner. James the brother of the Lord makes this dramatically clear in his epistle: “But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15 ESV) both theologically and practically, some sins are more “fully grown” than others and more clearly indicate a dire spiritual condition or wreak more dreadful spiritual consequences. A pastor or a fellow Christian would not deal with a person who committed the sin of anger in the same way as a person who committed the sin of murder! (CC)

Nevertheless, from the beginning, God’s intention in the Fifth Commandment was to prohibit not only the outward, fully grown sin of murder, but also malice in the heart against one’s fellows, and especially one’s fellow believers. To violate this will of God, revealed in the OT through Moses and now revealed

anew and interpreted by the authority of Jesus, is sin indeed, and those who follow Jesus will repent and urgently turn away from it. Reconciliation is the sign that disciples belong to Jesus, and “the refusal to be reconciled is the sign that the person no longer belongs to Jesus.” (CC)

With his brother – τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ—This first use of “brother” to mean “fellow disciple” flows from the first mention of God as “your Father” (5:16; also 5:45, 48, and often in chapter 6), the Father of Jesus’ disciples. This is a point of great significance. The Sermon on the Mount is overheard by, and in some sense also directed at, the spiritually ambivalent crowds who can only marvel at Jesus’ claim to authority when he is finished (7:28–29). But the Sermon’s truth of blessing and calling will only take root in those who because they are or become Jesus’ disciples can call God “Father” and regard each fellow disciple as a “brother” (ἀδελφός, 5:22–24). (CC)

Fellow believer. (TLSB)

Judgment – God’s judgment. (TLSB)

Raca. May be related to the Aramaic word for “empty” and mean “Empty-head!” (CSB)

ῥακά—BDAG describes the debate over the precise force of this “term of abuse/put-down relating to lack of intelligence, *numskull*, *fool*.” That it is a negative term is certain from the context in which Jesus here uses it, standing as it does between “being angry” and “fool.” (CC)

Sanhedrin. Religious court. (TLSB)

You fool – Duzzle Tier – Fool is a word of contumely (Rudeness or contempt in behavior or speech; insolence. An insulting remark or act) which is more forceful than “raca”; for “raca” belongs in sphere of the intellect, while “fool” touches upon the ethical domain. (Ylvisaker)

μωρέ—Jesus’ prohibition against calling someone a “fool” must not be absolute, since in 23:17 Jesus himself calls the scribes and Pharisees “fools and blind men” (μωροὶ καὶ τυφλοί). The book of Proverbs contains many descriptions of the kind of person whom God considers a “fool,” and Pss 14:1 and 53:2 (53:1) declare, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” See also 1 Cor 15:36, where Paul calls a hypothetical questioner “Fool!” (ἄφρων). (CC)

Another term expressing anger and abuse. (TLSB)

hell. The Greek word is *ge(h)enna*, which derives its name from a deep ravine south of Jerusalem, the “Valley of (the Sons of) Hinnom” (Hebrew *ge’ hinnom*). During the reigns of the wicked Ahaz and Manasseh, human sacrifices to the Ammonite god Molech were offered there. Josiah desecrated the valley because of the pagan worship there (2Ki 23:10; see Jer 7:31–32; 19:6). It became a sort of perpetually burning city dump and later a figure for the place of final punishment. (CSB)

Lit, rubbish pit near Jerusalem, where fire always smoldered. Symbolic of eternal punishment. “He says that we must not kill, neither with hand, heart, mouth, signs, gestures, help, nor counsel” (LC I 182). (TLSB)

τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός—Literally, this is “the Gehenna of fire”; the genitive is descriptive in a Semitic way. The term γέεννα originally referred to the Valley of Ben Hinnom, a ravine on the south side of Jerusalem. The place was regarded as desecrated because of the human sacrifices to Molech that apostate Israelites offered there (2 Ki 23:10; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31–32; 32:35). From the second century BC onward, the place was “equated with the hell of the last judgment.” (CC)

5:23 offering – ἐὰν οὖν προσφέρῃς—This use of οὖν is truly inferential. The exhortations of 5:23–24 follow logically and ineluctably from the seriousness of the sin of “murdering” your brother through anger or words (5:22). (CC)

The altar – τὸ θυσιαστήριον—This is presumably the huge altar that stood in front of the Herodian temple. Its dimensions were “fifteen cubits high, and with a breadth and length extending alike to fifty cubits, in shape a square with horn-like projections at the corners, and approached from the south by a gently sloping acclivity.” (CC)

Jesus’ statement about bringing an offering to the altar of the temple that was destroyed in AD 70 shows the extent to which his teaching is directed at first-century realities. Valid applications to modern situations have to take into account the differences between our historical context and that which Jesus presupposed. (CC)

This is an offering to be sacrificed on the temple altar. Augustine: ‘We may interpret the altar spiritually, as being faith itself in the inner temple of God, whether prophecy, or teaching, or prayer, or a psalm, or a hymn, and whatever other such like spiritual gift occurs to the mind, it cannot be acceptable to God unless it be sustained by sincerity of faith’ (NPNF1 6:12-13). (TLSB)

Although the “altar” of 5:23–24 is clearly not to be equated with altars in modern church buildings, there is a fortuitous theological connection by way of Paul’s teaching regarding the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11. Believers must not approach the Eucharist when they are harboring division and especially bitterness and a competitive, comparing spirit over against their fellow communicants. To do so invites God’s judgment. The liturgical custom of the “passing of the peace” immediately before the eucharistic distribution is a meaningful opportunity for all in the congregation to acknowledge that the reconciliation Christ Jesus has effected in his death and resurrection must remove bitter divisions between those who commune together. (CC)

something against you. A fellow believer has a grievance against the worshiper. (TLSB)

5:24 first be reconciled – ὑπάγε πρώτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου—Robertson notes the classical idiom of linking ὑπάγε with another imperative, here διαλλάγηθι (“go ... be reconciled”). The forms of ὑπάγω used in the NT always employ the present stem, and many of the imperative forms of this verb in Matthew are linked to another imperative. (CC)

The first priority for a worshiper is to seek reconciliation with an offended believer. (TLSB)

He does not specify in 5:23–24 the type of sacrificial offering that one might be bringing to the altar. His point, however, is clear and taught throughout Scripture. The believer cannot pretend that the horizontal relationships that he carries on with his fellows are independent of his relationship with God. His vertical relationship with God must affect his horizontal relationships with his brothers. Unless a broken horizontal relationship is repaired and nourished, it can damage the vertical relationship. If you remember that you have sinned against your brother and he has something against you, you cannot go to church and act as if nothing needs to be done! (CC)

Matthew 15:18-19, ¹⁸ But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Luke 6:43-45, ⁴³“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

Then come and offer your gift – και τότε ἐλθὼν πρόσφερε τὸ δῶρόν σου—The present tense of the imperative πρόσφερε does not, by itself, justify an ongoing translation, such as ours (“and then come and resume offering your gift”). But in 5:23 Jesus describes an act with a present subjunctive (ἐὰν οὖν προσφέρῃς, “if you are bringing”) that was interrupted. The context, then, justifies translating the present imperative πρόσφερε here in 5:24 as “resume offering.” (CC)

5:25 *come to terms quickly* – ταχύ—As with πλεῖον (“greatly”) in 5:20, this neuter singular adjective functions as an adverb, “quickly.” (CC)

Jesus’ second illustration is a judicial one (5:25–26). He urges the same truth as in 5:21–24, underscored by an “amen” saying (“*Truly* I say to you,” 5:26). It is not necessary to treat this illustration like a parable or other form of allegory in which the “opponent,” “judge,” and the judge’s “servant” represent specific figures. Jesus’ point is clear enough. Do not neglect your relationships with fellow disciples. Be reconciled; give up your anger and seek forgiveness. Just as the sin of murder is damnable before God, so is the sin of anger and bitterness. Before him all sinners are alike in their need for mercy, which he provides in Jesus (5:7). (CC)

Jesus urged immediate action in resolving disputes. (TLSB)

Ephesians 4:26-27, ²⁶“In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold.”

While you are going...to court – μήποτε σε παραδῶ ὁ ἀντίδικος—The negated subjunctive verb παραδῶ forms a negative purpose clause: “lest, so that this does not happen,” that is, “lest that opponent hand you over.” The definite article in ὁ ἀντίδικος is anaphoric; “*the/that* opponent” refers back to τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου, “your opponent,” mentioned earlier in 5:25. (CC)

Put you in prison – καὶ εἰς φυλακὴν βληθήσῃ—After the subjunctive (παραδῶ) in the preceding negative purpose clause, the future indicative verb βληθήσῃ denotes a “further consequence” (BDF, § 369.3) to be avoided. Not only will you be handed over to the judge and then in turn to the attendant, but also “you will be thrown into prison.” (CC)

5:26 *penny*. The smallest Roman copper coin. (CSB)

The end for someone who is angry with a fellow believer (v 22) and does not seek reconciliation (vv 24–25) is imprisonment. (TLSB)

οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδῶς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην—According to Blomberg, the κοδράντης is “the second smallest Roman coin in first-century currency.” As indicated in the textual note on 1:25, the precise semantics of “until” clauses in Matthew must be decided on the basis of context, and not on the basis of grammar alone. The sense of this verse, especially in light of the dangers of “fiery Gehenna” in 5:22, seems *not* to be, “After you have paid the last cent, *then you will get out* from there [from prison],” but rather, “You will not get out from there without paying the last cent, and in fact, *you will never get out*.” Instead of referring to a time of release, the clause refers to the severity of the exacting punishment. (CC)

5:21–26 Jesus teaches that not only murder but also anger makes one liable to the hell of fire. He urges His disciples to energetically seek reconciliation with fellow believers who might be vexed with them. This stern preaching of the Law causes us to take stock of our own behavior and to confess that we often, through sinful anger, fall. Our only hope for salvation is to trust the reconciliation that Christ accomplished by His sacrificial death (cf 2Co 5:19). Having been reconciled to God, we may be reconciled with one another. • Mighty Judge, cover my outbursts of sinful anger with the embrace of Your reconciling peace. Amen. (TLSB)

Adultery

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

5:27-30 Jesus speaks now with authority about God’s original intention in the Sixth Commandment (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18). In Mt 5:27 he merely cites the commandment itself and does not explicitly mention or add any of the current understandings of this commandment among Jewish teachers of his day. The larger context, however, shows that Jesus will be contrasting inadequate interpretations of “You shall not commit adultery” with God’s true intention for sexual purity among his people, the disciples of Jesus. (CC)

God’s will is that his people exhibit sexual purity in inner thought as well as outward deed. In the heart, a man or woman can fall into grievous sin, for out of the heart come the various sins that defile a person (15:18–20). Impure thoughts are a radical danger to the life of discipleship, both for OT Israel and for Jesus’ disciples. (CC)

5:27 *not commit adultery* – οὐ μοιχεύσεις—This negated second person future indicative has the force of an imperative. This Greek translation of the Sixth Commandment agrees verbatim with LXX Ex 20:13 (MT/ET 20:14) and LXX Deut 5:17 (MT/ET 5:18). See also the third textual note on 5:21, with οὐ φονεύσεις. (CC)

5:28 *looks...with lustful intent* – πρὸς τὸ ἐπιθυμῆσαι αὐτήν—Matthew uses πρὸς τό plus an infinitive to express purpose in 6:1; 13:30; 23:5. The same construction in 26:12 can hardly be purpose in the strict sense, as if the woman who anointed Jesus specifically intended to anoint him for burial; probably closer to the mark there is a sense of result. If one takes this construction here in 5:28 as strictly purpose, Jesus’ meaning is severely narrowed: a man commits adultery only if he looks at a woman for the purpose—with the prior intent—of desiring her. However, Jesus’ meaning seems broader than that,³ so I have translated the construction as “so as to desire her” to allow not just for purpose, but also for result: with no prior intent to sin, a man may look upon a woman, but if he then desires her, he has already committed adultery. (CC)

The manuscript tradition shows a slight grammatical “discomfort” with the accusative αὐτήν, “her.” Some manuscripts read αὐτῆς, the genitive of the feminine personal pronoun, since the verb ἐπιθυμέω, “to desire,” often takes a genitive case object. Grammatically, then, the accusative pronoun could be the *subject* of the infinitive, resulting in this translation: “Every man who looks at a woman so that *she* desires ...” However, contextually that is highly unlikely, so I have taken the accusative pronoun as both the original reading and as the object of the infinitive. (CC)

Burning sexual desire (1Co 7:9). (TLSB)

Already...adultery ...in his heart – ἤδη ἐμοίχευσεν αὐτήν—The combination of the adverb ἤδη, “already,” and the aorist indicative ἐμοίχευσεν, “he committed adultery,” produces an English perfect: “he *has* already committed adultery.” The sin has already happened. (CC)

Sin is not merely outward action. Jesus identified the sinful heart as the source of all evil (15:19). Augustine: “There are three things which go to complete sin: the suggestion of, the taking pleasure in, and the consenting to” (NPNF 1 6:15. (Cf. Gn. 3:6; 1 John 2:16. (TLSB)

This brings to mind the three steps in Psalm 1:1. See notes below:

walk in. Order his life according to. (CSB)

Don’t begin to accept their values. (PBC)

“go with the wicked in their planning” (Beck)

Not follow their advice, plans or pattern of life. (IB)

“who has not shaped his conduct after the principles (plans) of the ungodly.” (Leupold)

Wicked – Getting loose from God and falling into evil. (Leupold)

counsel. Deliberations and advice (see Pr 1:10–19).

stand. Station oneself.

Don’t hang around with them. (PBC)

We do not slow down to “stand in the way of sinners,” listening to their supposed wisdom and joining them in their sinful actions. (LL)

sinners. See v. 5; those for whom evil is habitual, for whom wickedness is a way of life. (CSB)

Means their manner of living. When a man “takes his stand” in such a way he is committed to the nefarious (evil – infamous) way of life that marks all who are walking in it. (Leupold)

sit. Settle oneself. – Make yourself comfortable. (PBC)

“Nor taken seat in the assembly of scoffers.” Birds of a feather flock together. Mockery and ridicule of that which is holy have often drawn men together in this unholy cause. This last has plainly advanced farthest away from God. (Leupold)

Mention is made here of the “seat” of the scoffers. They come together for the purpose of holding unholy sessions, so that one may encourage the other in his enmity against God. They talk together with unrestraint, and so their exchange of ideas develops into a scoffing session, as one encourages the other by displaying a bold front in defiance of God’s Word and will. The sin of scoffing, mocking, and indulging in profanities flourishes best in the company of like-minded people. Everyone who attends such a meeting is apt to be swept away to engage also in such wicked talk. (Stoekhardt)

Walk...stand...sit – Luther and birds overhead but not nest in hair. – It does briefly indicate that, when a man once begins to live in the company of men who are separated from God, both will find themselves becoming involved ever more deeply. (Leupold)

The English idiom “already has committed adultery *with her*” should not be misunderstood to imply that the woman must be guilty of complicity in the sin. Notice that in the Greek, the woman is the direct object of the verb: the man (literally) “already has adulterated her.” He has committed the sin. Notice too that the sin occurred “in *his* heart.” (CC)

As we noted about anger and murder, we note here too that lust is not the same as adultery *in every respect*. For one thing, whereas physical adultery involves the willing complicity of both parties in the sin, when the adultery is committed only in a man’s or woman’s lustful thinking, the other party is innocent of any wrongdoing. Jesus’ wording in 5:28 places the blame squarely on the one who is looking with such evil intent. And to repeat the comment from the discussion above on 5:21-26, the spiritual condition of someone who commits physical adultery will not be identical to that of someone who looks lustfully but refrains from acting upon that desire. A person who commits physical adultery but then genuinely repents surely is forgiven completely in Christ (cf. Jn 8:11), as also is a person who commits adultery in the heart and then repents. However, as Jesus indicates in Mt 19:9, physical adultery may cause irreparable damage to a person’s marriage (and perhaps other relationships), and broken marriages in turn negatively impact the church and society in many ways. To be sure, lustful thoughts damage marriage and other relationships, but those relationships may remain even though the one who commits adultery in the heart struggles and repeatedly commits the inner sin, then repents. Finally, an obvious difference is that, unlike lust, physical adultery can result in the communication of venereal diseases and also in pregnancy, and children born into broken homes may suffer a lifetime of dysfunctional relationships. (CC)

5:29–30 Jesus is not teaching self-mutilation, for even a blind man can lust. The point is that we should deal as drastically with sin as necessary. (CSB)

This is hyperbole, though such punishment was known (*Jos, Life, 169*). Jesus used strong and exaggerated language to emphasize the seriousness of sexual sins. Such sins (and other abuses) wreak havoc with personal relationships. If an eye or hand leads one to commit sin, it would be better to get rid of these body parts than go to hell (cf. 18:8-9). (TLSB)

5:29 *causes you to sin* – σκανδαλίζει—Of the twenty-nine NT occurrences of the verb σκανδαλίζω, Matthew’s Gospel uses it fourteen times. Although context must indicate the severity of the stumbling, virtually every time in Matthew it involves the very real danger of apostasy and damnation. Since Jesus in 5:29 and 5:30 compares the alternatives of entering life with a body part missing versus the whole self being thrown into Gehenna, the verb in 5:29 and 5:30 has its strongest possible force: the person who stumbles is excluded from eternal life and instead is damned to Gehenna, hell. It also has that strongest meaning in 11:6; 13:21, 57; 18:6, 8, 9; 24:10; 26:31, 33. In 15:12, the verb may have the lesser force of “offend,” and it certainly conveys that lesser meaning in 17:27. (CC)

Tear it out – συμφέρει γάρ σοι ἵνα ἀπόληται ...—This expression is repeated in both 5:29 and 5:30. The verb συμφέρει is impersonal: “It is better.” The subject of the verb (the “it”) is the entire clause headed by ἵνα, “that one of your members perish and your whole body not be thrown into Gehenna” (5:29), as reflected in the translation. The two subjunctive verbs (“perish” and “[not] be thrown”) are part of the same ἵνα clause.

Therefore, radical action must be taken over against lustful thoughts and desires, for in the sight of God such “inner adultery” is the same as the external action. To lose an eye or a hand is no small thing; neither

will it be painless to turn aside from the temptations and habits of sinful lust. Left unchecked, such desires can lead to damnation. With a strong hyperbole the Lord lays out the options. Which is better for you? To be resurrected and then cast with your body intact into hell's eternal torment, or the resurrection to eternal life without an eye or a hand? Be rid of such desires when they arise in your heart! (CC)

5:27–30 The question asked in Pr 6:27 depicts the dangers that arise from lustful intentions: “Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned?” Christ wants us to exhibit sexual purity in our inner thoughts as well as our outward deeds. When we are guilty of sexual sins, Christ calls us to repentance and faith, to look to His cross for pardon and cleansing. • “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps 51:10). Amen. (TLSB)

Divorce

³¹“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

5:31 GIVE HER A CERTIFICATE OF DIVORCE – δότω αὐτῇ ἀποστάσιον—We know, on the basis of both the Mishnah and a first-century-AD specimen recovered at Masada, the essential wording of a first-century writ of divorce. The writ in the Mishnah reads as follows:

The essential formula in the bill of divorce is, “Lo, thou art free to marry any man.” R. Judah says: “Let this be from me thy writ of divorce and letter of dismissal and deed of liberation, that thou mayest marry whatsoever man thou wilt.” The essential formula in a writ of emancipation is, “Lo, thou art a freedwoman: lo, thou belongest to thyself.” (CC)

The writ discovered at Masada, dated to AD 72, reads: “That you are free on your part to go and become the wife of any Jewish man that you wish. And this is to be for you from me a writ of divorce and a *get* [גט] of release.” Notice that the very wording of the writ assumes that the woman who has been divorced will remarry. (CC)

The essential wording of a divorce certificate was “Lo, you are free to marry any man.” Cf 19:3–9, where the Pharisees question Jesus about divorce. (TLSB)

5:32 *except for marital unfaithfulness*. Neither Mk 10:11–12 nor Lk 16:18 mentions this exception. (CSB)

ESV has “sexual immorality.” The Greek word refers to adultery – sexual intercourse between a married man or woman and someone other than a spouse. Cf. Lev. 18 regarding other sexual sins. (TLSB)

παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας—The meaning of πορνεία here has been widely debated. Some attempt to limit its meaning to something like “incest” or “forbidden degrees of marriage,” with reference to Leviticus 18, which forbids marriages to close relatives. But the context here provides no clue for such a semantic narrowing. As the commentary will show, that limited meaning also neglects to take sufficiently into account the debates going on in Judaism between the schools of Hillel and Shammai in the first century AD. The term πορνεία here probably retains its common, broad meaning, “adultery,” that is, intercourse by a married man or married woman with someone other than his wife or her husband. Since in this context it pertains to married persons, it is better translated “adultery” than “fornication.” (“Fornication” can refer generally to intercourse between any people besides husband and wife, but it also can refer more specifically to intercourse between unmarried people.) (CC)

This phrase, “except for a matter of adultery,” pertains to both cases—both the man who divorces his wife (5:32a) and the man who marries a divorced woman (5:32b). (CC)

ποιεῖ αὐτήν μοιχευθῆναι—The Lord’s words here refer specifically to the sinfulness of the husband who wrongfully divorces his wife. The husband is the subject of ποιεῖ, which means “he makes” or “he causes” the sin. It is not immediately clear whether, or in what way, the wife is also guilty of sin, for “he *makes* her to have adultery committed [against her].” This use of the aorist passive infinitive μοιχευθῆναι in 5:32 is different, for instance, from the passive use of μοιχεύω in both Sirach 23:23 and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 7.131 (7.7.1), where the woman had adultery committed with her, and she is also guilty of sin. Here in Mt 5:32 the woman wrongfully divorced is *not* guilty of sin. When a man is the subject of the active voice of μοιχεύω and a woman is the object, the sense might be woodenly rendered as “he adulterated her” or more idiomatically as “he committed adultery with her” (cf. BDAG, s.v. μοιχεύω, b β). In the passages in Sirach and *Antiquities*, the sense of the passive voice of μοιχεύω with the woman as the subject of the verb is expressed woodenly as “she was adulterated,” and there is no doubt that the woman fully participated in the sexual sin. (CC)

Here in 5:32, the husband who divorces his wife except for a matter of πορνεία “makes her to be adulterated.” How precisely does wrongful divorce by the husband cause the *innocent* wife to have adultery committed against her? (Presumably, a wife who wrongfully divorces her husband likewise would cause adultery to be committed against him.) BDAG (s.v. μοιχεύω, b β) explains that a passive form of the verb with a woman as subject has an active meaning and says regarding 5:32 that by the wrongful divorce the husband “*causes her [the wife] to commit adultery* (if she contracts a subsequent marriage).” In light of contemporary practice of divorce in first-century Judaism, this is almost certainly correct; see the commentary on 5:31-32 and especially on 19:3–12. (CC)

NA²⁷ gives no variant readings at all for this clause. As a salutary reminder that the textual apparatus in NA²⁷ is a mere summary of the evidence, Swanson notes that most of the manuscripts used for his database read μοιχᾶσθαι (the present passive infinitive of μοιχάω) in place of μοιχευθῆναι. In either reading, the woman is still the subject of the infinitive. Since the passive voice of μοιχάω can mean “be caused to commit adultery” (BDAG, 1), the meaning is not changed by the variant. The variant μοιχᾶσθαι is probably caused by assimilation to the near context; the last clause in 5:32 has another form of μοιχάω. (CC)

The focus here is on the responsibility of the husband in matters of marriage and divorce. What have Jesus’ disciples heard from others? What “was said” (5:31) by teachers in Judaism regarding God’s will for husbands and the way they should deal with their wives? Jesus summarizes the teaching that stands in contrast to God’s intended truth; in effect, it is “If you are going to divorce your wife, you must give to her a certificate of divorce.” The main clause in 5:31 receives the main emphasis: “Let him give to her a certificate of divorce.” The question for some at least in Judaism was not whether or under what circumstances to divorce, but *how* to do so. What Jesus quotes in 5:31 is not a citation of the Torah’s teaching, for the Law nowhere contains this command. Rather, Deut 24:1–4 *presupposes* or *permits* the practice of divorce and mentions the giving of a certificate of divorce, but that is not the subject of the passage. (CC)

Deut 24:1–4 reads:

When a man takes a wife and marries her, if she does not find favor in his eyes because he has found in her some indecency [MT: עָרְוַת רְזָרָה; LXX: ἄσχημον πράγμα], and he writes for her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and belongs to another man, and the latter man hates her and writes for her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter

man who took her to be his wife dies, then the first man who sent her away may not remarry her by again taking her to be his wife, after she had been defiled, for that is an abomination before the Lord. And you shall not cause sin in the land that the LORD your God is giving to you as an inheritance. (CC)

The Hillel-Shammai debate centered around two issues. First was the meaning of the phrase rendered “some indecency.” The Hebrew construct phrase is literally “nakedness of a word/matter/thing,” meaning “indecency” or evidence of prior “improper behavior.” The LXX translates it as “shameful matter.” The school of Shammai took the phrase to mean “adultery,” which then was the only grounds for divorce allowed by that passage. But the followers of Hillel had a looser interpretation: (CC)

[They] concluded that the strangeness of the phrase suggested that there was an extra meaning hidden in it. . . . They therefore concluded that the two words referred to two different grounds for divorce—“indecency” and “a matter.” This meant that one could base a divorce on an act of “indecency” or on “a matter,” which meant “any matter.” (CC)

Thus the first-century debates between Pharisaic schools shifted the emphasis from that in the Scriptures to casuistic arguments and splitting of hairs. The dominant interpretation of Deut 24:1–4 and matters of divorce at the time of Jesus’ ministry was almost certainly the more lax view of the school of Hillel, which allowed a husband to divorce his wife for virtually any cause whatsoever. Divorce itself was assumed to be an available and acceptable option. The really important thing was to divorce in the right way. The lengthy and detailed discussion found in the Mishnah is eloquent testimony to the deeply flawed hermeneutic that guided at least some teachers in first-century Judaism. All this is probably what “was said” by some in Judaism about divorce (5:31). (CC)

Is God’s will for marriage merely that when a divorce is chosen, the divorce should take place according to some legal procedure that grants a measure of protection and future security to the wife who is being put away? With divine authority Jesus reveals the truth that marriage is much more than that! In a stunningly comprehensive revelation, he categorically denies the validity of divorce in general, though he acknowledges that where sexual unfaithfulness (*πορνεία*) has occurred, then divorce may be regarded as permitted. Divorce is *never* God’s will or intention. When a man divorces his wife, he separates what God has joined together (see 19:6), and it is the same as him committing adultery and forcing his injured or innocent wife into a remarriage that, likewise, is tantamount to an adulterous union *because it destroys the marriage union that God has created* (5:32a). Jesus’ words continue to address the same situation in 5:32b. Even a man who marries a woman who was wrongfully divorced—who was divorced for a reason other than sexual unfaithfulness—participates in the violation of the original marriage; he too commits adultery! (CC)

Divorce is the same as adultery, because both violate and destroy marriage. However, is divorce the same as adultery *in every respect*? As with the previous topics (anger versus murder in 5:21–26 and lust versus physical adultery in 5:27–30), so here too, even though the two sins may have different practical consequences, both are equally culpable and damnable in God’s sight. Nevertheless, divorce is not the same as adultery in every way. When two people are involved in literal adultery, both parties are equally guilty. But an unjust divorce, that is, one that occurs for a reason other than literal adultery, involves the wronged spouse in “adultery,” and yet she is not guilty. Practically speaking, divorce inflicts greater harm on children, relatives, and the fabric of society, whereas less harm is done by adultery if the spouses can reconcile and remain married. (CC)

Furthermore, should Jesus’ teaching in 5:31–32 be understood as a comprehensive declaration that covers every situation and that brooks no qualifications or exceptions? On the face of it, that seems inherently unlikely. We have already seen in the context immediately before this teaching that there are obvious

ways that such qualifications for Jesus' words are both natural and necessary (see the commentary on 5:21-26 and on 5:27-30). In each of the units of the following context (5:33-37; 5:38-42; and 5:43-48), a similar hermeneutic prevails. Perhaps it might be helpful to offer just one example of how it seems unjust to take Jesus' teaching literalistically. Jesus declares that if a wife is wrongfully divorced by her husband, then he makes her participate in adultery. Yet she is the innocent party! What is she to do if her sinning husband then remarries, precluding the chance that she could reconcile with him (cf. 1 Cor 7:11)? The Lord's words "everyone who divorces his wife ... makes her to have adultery committed [against her]" (Mt 5:32) can hardly be understood as saying that the *innocent party* in a cruel divorce must not remarry, lest she be guilty of permanent adultery with her second husband. Moreover, if a man is permitted to divorce a wife who was *guilty* of adultery, would that guilty party then be free to remarry? That is what a literalistic reading could conclude, for Jesus' words, strictly speaking, only forbid unjust divorce and remarriage after an unjust divorce. To the other extreme, a strict, literalistic reading of Jesus' words might dictate that even an innocent spouse who is wrongly divorced could never remarry. But the Lutheran tradition, at least, has not been willing to read Jesus' words in that way. The Lutheran Confessions label as unjust "the tradition that prohibits remarriage of an innocent party after divorce." (CC)

I am acutely aware of writing these words in the early twenty-first century in the context of the morally relativistic climate in North America. Divorce is rampant in society at large, and the situation is only somewhat better among the ranks of those who hold membership in a Christian church. I am also acutely aware of the extent to which sinful human beings will abuse the teaching of Jesus in 5:31-32 once they are told that Jesus doesn't cover every possible situation here. That problem of abuse, however, cannot be solved by pretending that 5:31-32 is something that it is not. There are ways in which divorce or remarriage are *not* the same as adultery. Jesus' teaching here does not specifically address every conceivable situation that would allow divorce. Neither does he include circumstances that would allow a divorced spouse to remarry another. If one were to presume that he did, then the inevitable conclusion would be that the apostle Paul contradicts the teaching of his own Lord and Master, since Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 has a more extensive discussion that includes such allowances. (CC)

Nevertheless, what Jesus *does* teach is just what he says. In his day, as in ours, the common presumption in society was that divorce was not that big of a deal, and the important matter was just to carry out the divorce in the right way. Against this, the Lord's voice of authority thunders! Divorce is sin! Divorcing your spouse is like forcing her or him into an adulterous union! Divorce, like adultery, shatters a sacred union that God intends to be permanent. Even in the case of a spouse's sexual unfaithfulness, Jesus allows, but does not command divorce. Those who think that the goal is how to divorce and then "still be friends" or have an "amicable divorce" or "realize that neither one of us really was to blame" have strayed far from God's will in the Torah, which Jesus clarifies and amplifies in his teaching for his disciples. In this brief teaching, Jesus simply says, "Do not divorce." To do so is, in the sight of God, as terrible a sin as adultery itself. Instead, let your light shine in the presence of other people; be faithful to your marriage vows, and so bring honor to your Father in heaven (5:16). (CC)

ANYONE WHO MARRIES THE DIVORCED WOMAN COMMITS ADULTERY – ὅς ἐάν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ, μοιχᾶται—The last verb is from μοιχάω, which is used only in the passive voice in the LXX and the NT. BDAG, 1, offers the meaning "be caused to commit adultery, be an adulterer/adulteress, commit adultery." The parallel in Lk 16:18 has μοιχεύει. This supports understanding the passive voice as having an active meaning also here: the man who "marries a divorced woman *commits adultery*." (CC)

Because marriage was often arranged for economic purposes, frequent divorces forced women into adulterous remarriages. (TLSB)

A man who married a divorced woman was guilty of adultery. However, Scripture acknowledges that in some cases a believer may not be at fault in a divorce (1 Cor. 7:15). In such circumstances, forbidding the believer to remarry could double his sorrow. (TLSB)

Once again, the Lord's teaching is in some ways difficult to understand precisely. Presumably, the woman he marries was divorced wrongfully; she is a woman who was divorced for some reason other than adultery (πορνεία, 5:32a). Does the man who marries such a woman commit adultery because his marriage to her is not recognized by God? Or does the man who marries a wrongfully divorced woman somehow participate in that prior wrong by marrying the divorced woman? (CC)

Reading the sign of the cross in marriage means growing together in the Word, praying with and for each other, and encouraging and supporting one another with the Word of God. A recent study in a secular university found that of the 1287 couples who daily prayer and studied God's Word together, only one marriage ended in divorce. (.3 %) The national average for divorce now hovers near 50%. (Tom E. Eggold – 8/15/ 2010)

5:31–32 Jesus condemns the easy divorce practices of His day that resulted in adulterous relationships. He teaches that the sacred union of marriage is lifelong. Jesus' authoritative teaching concerning divorce has often been violated, as have His teachings about other sins (cf vv 21–42). As God's children, we all need Jesus' teaching and encouragement to let our lights shine as we faithfully fulfill our marriage vows and honor the vows of others. The child of God who is guilty of a sinful divorce has the assurance that Jesus bore this sin also. • Lord Jesus, take away our sin. Be the cord that binds together Christian wives and husbands. Amen. (TLSB)

Oaths

³³“Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ ³⁴But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; ³⁵or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. ³⁶And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. ³⁷Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

5:33 *again you have heard* – *πάλιν ἠκούσατε* ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις—This beginning marks 5:33–48 as the second triad of teachings in Jesus' authoritative interpretation of the Torah. (The first triad was 5:21–32.) The marker is a structural one; there is no evident reason why these two sets of three topics each are grouped as they are. Three features indicate the beginning of this second triad. First, Jesus uses the full introductory formula, “You heard that it was said to the ancients,” which had not occurred since Jesus used it to begin the first triad (5:21). Second, Jesus adds the adverb *πάλιν*, “again,” before the full formula. Third, each unit of Jesus' teaching in the first triad began with the generalizing participle “everyone who ...” (*πᾶς ὁ* plus a participle in 5:22, 28, 32), but that stylistic feature is absent from the three units that now follow in 5:33–48, indicating that they are a new set of units. (CC)

you shall not swear falsely – *οὐκ ἐπιορκήσεις*—The negated second person future indicative has the force of an imperative. The verb *ἐπιορκέω* occurs only here in the NT, and in the LXX only in 1 Esdras 1:46 and Wisdom 14:28. Some argue that it means “swear falsely, perjure oneself” (BDAG, 1), but perjury is obviously sinful, and there would be no need for Jesus to denounce it. Most likely it means “break one's oath” (BDAG, 2). Jesus is not citing the OT here. The Second Commandment uses a different idiom that literally renders the Hebrew: οὐ λήμψη τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου ἐπὶ ματαίῳ (LXX Ex 20:7; Deut 5:11). (CC)

Jesus' authoritative interpretation of Torah continues in a second triad of subjects. Especially for modern Western readers, the topic to which Jesus' teaching now turns firmly locates Jesus' ministry and Matthew's Gospel in a first-century Jewish context. An elaborate system of ranking oaths as to their validity and binding force existed among at least some teachers in Palestinian Judaism.⁵ Jesus broaches the subject not with a citation from the OT, but with a reference to that hierarchy of oath-taking. In light of Jesus' criticisms in 5:34–36, his reference in 5:33 to what his disciples were hearing from some teaching authorities could be paraphrased as follows: “Do not break oaths. Rather, be sure to honor the oaths that are sworn directly to the Lord, for these have a more binding force than oaths that are sworn by something else.” (CC)

Just as OT Law permitted divorce, so also the swearing of oaths was allowed. Jesus condemned swearing falsely and breaking an oath. (TLSB)

5:34-36 *by heaven...earth...Jerusalem...head* – θρόνος ἐστὶν τοῦ θεοῦ—The subject, unexpressed here, is “heaven” in the preceding phrase, and this phrase is the predicate. “Throne” is the predicate nominative, and the clause is a good example of Colwell's Rule. For other reasons, it is clear that “heaven” is not just “a throne of God” but “*the* throne of God”; in other words, the context makes it clear that the noun “heaven” is definite rather than indefinite. When such a definite noun precedes the linking verb in its own clause, as here, it typically lacks the article. The identical construction occurs twice in 5:35. (CC)

μήτε εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα—This use of εἰς is unusual, especially since ἐν has already been used twice (5:34b, 35a) to express that “by” which an oath is not to be sworn. The change of preposition likely signals the end of the three-item sequence (ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ ... ἐν τῇ γῆ ... εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα) and identifies the next clause (5:36) as a new sentence with its own main verb: μήτε ... ὁμόσης. (CC)

πόλις ἐστὶν τοῦ μεγάλου βασιλέως—Since the first two items (“heaven” and “earth”) by which men are not to swear belong to God, it is likely that the third one, Jerusalem, is here viewed as God's city and the “great King” is God himself. (CC)

Jesus criticizes that hierarchy of oaths on two grounds. First, the Son of God condemns the entire mindset that assigns varying degrees of importance or binding force to a solemn promise depending on the particular formula or wording of the promise. To swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem is all the same as invoking the name of God himself. All things in creation belong to God and are related to him. Oaths and promises that invoke as binding authorities such things that are related to God cannot be ranked or quantified. Words are more important than that. Any oath is a promise to God. It is better not to swear at all (5:34–35)! (CC)

Second, Jesus rejects the distinctions that had become important in first-century Judaism because, while causing words themselves to be devalued, such casuistry also causes people to have an inflated view of their own importance and significance. To swear by one's own head implies that one can actually effect a change of some significance. Jesus pointedly underscores how self-deceptive that is. No man can even change the color of a single hair on his own head. Why, then, swear by means of it? Let spoken words have their proper significance, and let the people who speak them remember their own frame, that they are but dust (Ps 103:14) and that nothing will prosper and no vow will be kept unless God enables it to happen (James 4:13–17). The tendency to use words carelessly, to break promises, and to exalt oneself by means of one's words come from one certain source: “the evil one” (5:37), Satan himself, the father of broken and misleading and empty promises. (CC)

Modern applications are close at hand. In our legal system, how often is the promise to “tell the truth, the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth” nothing but a sham and a mockery? Even words that are not framed as a formal oath have power, and we are responsible for what we say and how we say it. How

many attempts to repair damaged relationships are stalled when one person hides behind the form of his words with the excuse “Well, all I said was ...”? This metaphor still has power, and all the more for its rarity: “His word is his bond.” The disciples of Jesus can be such men and women, and in saying what they mean and only what they mean, they will salt the earth (5:13). (CC)

As already noted, Jesus’ words here cannot be taken as a comprehensive prohibition against all oaths at all times. The same Lord who spoke of dragging a camel through the eye of a needle (19:24) and of chopping off body parts to avoid temptation (5:29–30) knows full well the power of hyperbole, of sweeping truth broadly stated. This same Lord, when placed under oath by the high priest, gave sufficient answer to set in motion his death and resurrection (26:63–64). (CC)

When taking an oath, many Jews refrained from using God’s name but substituted some other significant term. Jesus pointed out that other terms closely related to God (e.g., “His throne, footstool, city.” Some people believed that swearing by an object other than God lessened their responsibility for keeping the oath or vow (cf. 23:16-22). (TLSB)

5:34 *do not take an oath*—ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ὀμόσαι—After the verb of saying (λέγω) the infinitive ὀμόσαι expresses indirect discourse. To express the same thing, instead of the infinitive, Matthew could have used a clause headed by ὅτι followed by ὀμόσης, an aorist subjunctive (which is in 5:36): “But I say to you *that* you should not swear.” (CC)

Jesus instructed His disciples to refrain from taking any oaths. “We are not to swear in support of evil, that is, to support falsehood, or to swear when there is no need or use. But we should swear for the support of good and the advantage of our neighbor” (LC 1 66). (TLSB)

5:36 *your head* – This is another example of substituting a lesser object for God. But even the hairs on one’s head are under God’s governance. (TLSB)

5:37 *yes...no* – Nevertheless, the disciples of Jesus are not to use words lightly or take oaths as if such swearing may or may not possess binding force. To make a promise in the presence of God or of human authorities that God has established is no trifling matter. Nor are Jesus’ disciples to have an inflated view of their own importance. Speech matters. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. It is the devil himself who wants you to think differently about your words. (CC)

The truthfulness of a believer’s yes or no cannot be enhanced by swearing an oath, as Peter found out (26:72-74). (TLSB)

from evil – ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ—I have translated “from the evil one,” that is, from Satan. In Matthew πονηρός occurs in simple adjectival use fifteen times, and eleven times it functions as a noun. In its nominal uses, it is neuter (“evil thing[s]”) in 5:11; 9:4; and 12:35 (third use). As a masculine form, it refers to evil human beings in 5:39, 45; 13:49; 22:10 and explicitly to Satan in 13:19, 38. In this verse and in the Lord’s Prayer (6:13), the genitive singular form (τοῦ πονηροῦ) can be either masculine or neuter. If it is the latter, it would signify the abstraction “evil.” But in light of 13:19, 38 and the other uses of the substantized adjective, both here and in 6:13 Jesus almost certainly refers directly to Satan as “the evil one.” (CC)

5:33–37 Jesus tells His disciples not to take an oath at all, expressing a general rule of conduct for them. The bottom line for Jesus is truthfulness. When believers lie or exaggerate commitment, they are not letting their light shine. This rule applies especially when believers converse with fellow Christians. However, there may be times when Christians will be asked to take an oath in their earthly affairs or

contacts with governing authorities. Out of loving consideration for this request, Christians may comply. Thanks be to God that He vowed to save us (cf Ti 1:2) and fulfilled that vow by His Son's life, death, and resurrection for our salvation. • Lord Jesus, help me speak the truth in all my conversations and testimony. Amen. (TLSB)