



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 06**  
**Matthew 5:21-26: Topic 6.0**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

5.21 Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, Οὐ φονεύσεις· ὅς δ' ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει. 5.22 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ, Ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ· ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ, Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέειναν τοῦ πυρός. 5.23 ἐὰν οὖν προσφέρῃς τὸ δῶρόν σου ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον καὶ ἐκεῖ μνησθῆς ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ, 5.24 ἄφες ἐκεῖ τὸ δῶρόν σου ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου καὶ ὑπάγε πρῶτον διαλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου, καὶ τότε ἐλθὼν πρόσφερε τὸ δῶρόν σου. 5.25 ἴσθι εὐνοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου ταχὺ, ἕως ὅτου εἰ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, μήποτε σε παραδῶ ὁ ἀντίδικος τῷ κριτῇ καὶ ὁ κριτὴς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ καὶ εἰς φυλακὴν βληθῆσῃ· 5.26 ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδῷς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην.

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

21 »Ihr wisst, dass unseren Vorfahren gesagt worden ist: 'Du sollst nicht morden! Wer einen Mord begeht, soll vor Gericht gestellt werden.' 22 Ich aber sage euch: Schon wer auf seinen Bruder oder seine Schwester zornig ist, gehört vor Gericht. Wer zu seinem Bruder oder seiner Schwester sagt: 'Du Idiot', gehört vor das oberste Gericht. Und wer zu seinem Bruder oder seiner Schwester sagt: 'Geh zum Teufel', gehört ins Feuer der Hölle. 23 Wenn du zum Altar gehst, um Gott deine Gabe zu bringen, und dort fällt dir ein, dass dein Bruder oder deine Schwester etwas gegen dich hat, 24 dann lass deine Gabe vor dem Altar liegen, geh zuerst hin und söhne dich aus. Danach komm und bring Gott dein Opfer. 25 Einige dich mit deinem Gläubiger rechtzeitig, solange du noch mit ihm auf dem Weg zum Gericht bist. Sonst wird er dich dem Richter ausliefern und der wird dich dem Gerichtsdienner übergeben, damit er dich ins Gefängnis steckt. 26 Ich versichere dir: Dort kommst du erst wieder heraus, wenn du deine Schuld bis auf den letzten Pfennig bezahlt hast.«

**NRSV**

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**NLT**

21 "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'Do not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.' 22 But I say, if you are angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the high council. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell. 23 "So if you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, 24 leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. 25 Come to terms quickly with your enemy before it is too late and you are dragged into court, handed over to an officer, and thrown in jail. 26 I assure you that you won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

Matthew 5:21-26 begins a series of six pericopes that all have a common structure: "You have heard it said...but I say to you..." (Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη... ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν). These lead up to the climatic statement in verse 48: "But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." These six passages have often been labeled 'Antitheses' but the label is not entirely accurate. In philosophical logic, an antithesis

<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

represents the opposite of its counterpart, the thesis.<sup>2</sup> The aspect of this label that is accurate is only the sense of ‘contrastive’ statements. Virtually never are the two statements in these six pericopes placed in direct opposition to one another. Instead, the nature of the contrast varies from passage to passage. Usually Jesus’ position expressed in the “But I say to you...” segment augments or extends the idea of the Old Testament scripture appealed to in the “You have heard it said...” segment. Occasionally, Jesus’ viewpoint does stand in direct opposition to the scribal interpretation of the Old Testament passage; and this is the primary thrust of the pericope. Paying close attention to the nature of the contrast and identifying the specific thrust of the contrast is an important part of the interpretive process for vv. 21-47.

Additionally, one should pay close attention to the details of the “But I say to you...” segment in each of these passages. In the majority of instances, the core declaration of Jesus is then expanded with illustrations and further explanation, as the listing below suggests:



**Pericope 1: vv. 21-26**

**Premise:** 21 *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”;* and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.”

**Antithesis:** 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.

**Expansion:** 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**Pericope 2: vv. 27-30**

**Premise:** 27 *“You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.”*

**Antithesis:** 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

**Expansion:** 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

**Pericope 3: vv. 31-32**

**Premise:** 31 *It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.”*

**Antithesis:** 32 But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

**Pericope 4: vv. 33-37**

**Premise:** 33 *Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.”*

**Antithesis:** 34 But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.

**Expansion:** 37 Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No”; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

**Pericope 5: vv. 38-42**

**Premise:** 38 *You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”*

**Antithesis:** 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

**Expansion:** But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

**Pericope 6: vv. 43-47**

**Premise:** 43 *You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”*

<sup>2</sup>Merriam-Webster online definition of ‘antithesis’: 1 a (1) : the rhetorical contrast of ideas by means of parallel arrangements of words, clauses, or sentences (as in “action, not words” or “they promised freedom and provided slavery”) (2) : opposition, contrast <the antithesis of prose and verse> b (1) : the second of two opposing constituents of an antithesis (2) : the direct opposite <her temperament is the very antithesis of mine> 2 : the second stage of a dialectic process

**Antithesis:** 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

**Expansion:** 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

In such a comparative charting of these pericopes as above one begins noticing some patterns that otherwise would be hidden. In the premise segments, the introductory formula becomes progressively shorter in the first three. Then the fourth introductory formula goes back to the wording of the first, and begins shortening again. Additionally, the expansion elements in the antithesis segments also follow this same pattern; the first three move from extensive to non-existent. But in the second set the expansion elements begin short and expand out in the subsequent two pericopes. Both these patterns strongly point to a twofold division of the six pericopes: 1-3 and 4-6. But the nature of this division is not entirely clear. The topic list is [anger, adultery, divorce] and [oaths, retaliation, enemies]. This grouping can be understood in a variety of ways. And perhaps this was intentional by Matthew in his arrangement of the teachings of Jesus here.

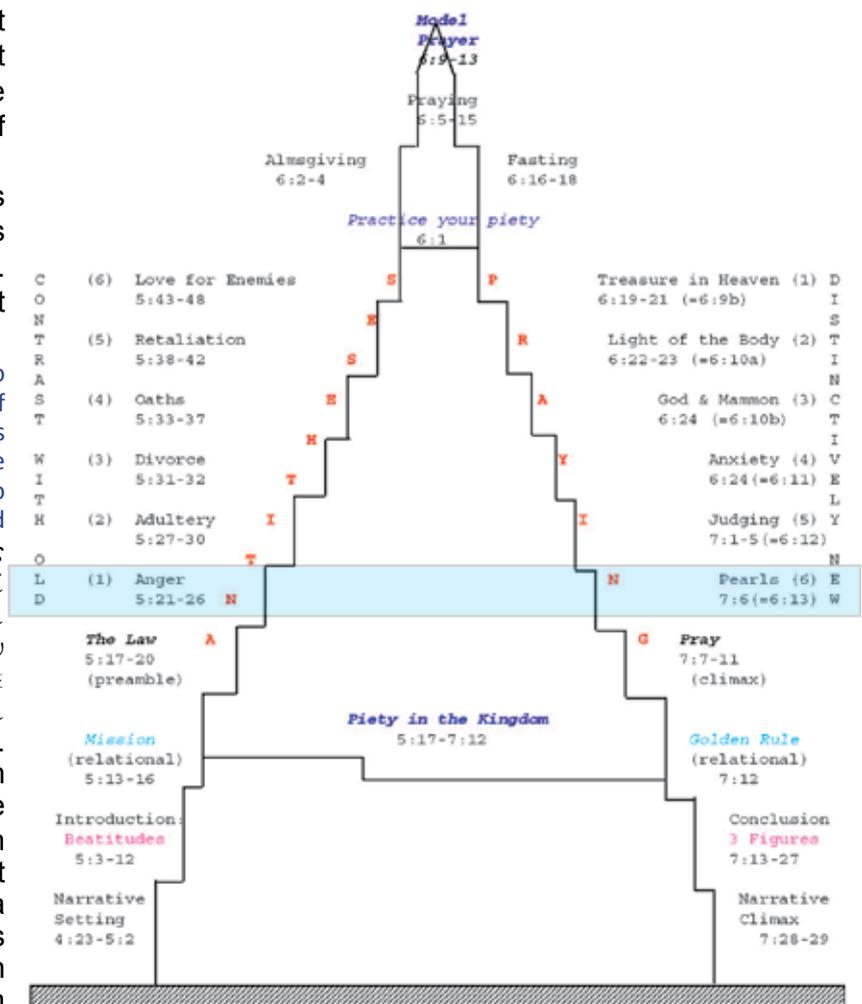
**Literary Aspects:**

**Literary Form (genre).** The literary pattern of the core premise / antithesis expression in its dual form is unparalleled in ancient literature. The “you have heard that it was said...” segment can be occasionally found in scribal and later rabbinic Judaism as a way to introduce Old Testament scripture texts. But the contrastive element “But I say to you...” set in tension with the first statement is unheard of in ancient Judaism. With this contrastive declaration Jesus assumes a level of authority way beyond any ever claimed by a Jewish scribe. Even when Jesus’ contrastive viewpoint is targeting current interpretive understanding of the Old Testament more than the Old Testament text itself, the tone of authority would have been startling to the Jewish scribes of his day.

The most varied literary patterns will surface in the expansion elements of the pericopes containing expansions. In this first pericope, two different expressions show up.

**First, the religious illustration:** “23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (5.23 εἰς τὸ θυσιαστήριον κἀκεῖ μνησθῆς ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ, 5.24 ἄφες ἐκεῖ τὸ δῶρόν σου ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου καὶ ὕπαγε πρῶτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου, καὶ τότε ἔλθων πρόσφερε τὸ δῶρόν σου.). One notable point here is the shift from the second person plural in ‘you have heard’ (Ἠκούσατε) to the second person singular in both illustrations. The effect is to individualize the illustration with a more direct personal tone. The focus is worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day. Thus the first illustration closely ties into the religious thrust of both the premise and antithesis

**The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount**  
*Matthew 4:23-7:29*



Source: Lein L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, “Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

declarations.

**Second, the debtor court illustration:** “25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” (5.25 ἴσθι ἐνιοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου ταχὺ, ἕως ὅτου εἶ μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, μήποτε σε παραδῶ ὁ ἀντίδικος τῷ κριτῇ καὶ ὁ κριτῆς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ καὶ εἰς φυλακὴν βληθήσῃ· 5.26 ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδῶς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην.). The second person singular emphasis continues through this illustration. The solemn pronouncement in verse 26 adds a distinctive tone of heightened seriousness to Jesus’ words here.

**Literary Context.** This first pericope in vv. 21-26 stands as a header topic to the six pericopes in vv. 21-48. The shaping of the language of introduction is matched by that in the fourth pericope in vv. 33-37. The implication of this is not certain, although it has the effect of creating two sets of three pericopes. Some implications may possibly be drawn also from its counterpart at the end of the Sermon in 7:6 with the emphasis on anger and prejudice toward certain groups: “Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you.”<sup>3</sup> A certain tension between the two texts encourages moderated understanding of both.

**Literary Structure.** The core structure is very clear, and has been alluded to above. A block diagram of the words of the text will highlight the connection to the details to the core expressions in this pericope.

30 <sup>5:21</sup> **You have heard that it was said**  
to the ancient ones,  
“You shall not commit murder,”  
and  
“whoever commits murder  
will be liable  
to the court.”

<sup>5:22</sup> But  
31 **I say to you,**  
that whoever is angry with his brother  
will be liable  
to the court,  
and  
whoever says to his brother, ‘Raka’  
will be liable  
to the assembly,  
and  
whoever may say, “Moron,”  
will be liable  
to the fires of Gehenna.

<sup>5:23</sup> Therefore  
if you lay your offering  
upon the altar,  
and  
there  
you remember  
that your brother has something  
against you,  
32 <sup>5:24</sup> **leave your gift**  
upon the altar,  
and  
33 **depart,**  
first  
34 **be reconciled to your brother,**  
and

<sup>3</sup>The detailed exegesis of 7:6 will come in Session 21. For a detailed exegesis of this text in advance, see Lorin L Cranford, “Throwing Your Margaritas to the Pigs: A Rhetorical Reading of Matt. 7:6,” *Gemeinschaft der Kirchen und gesellschaftliche Verantwortung. Die Würde des Anderen und das Recht anders zu denken. Festschrift für Professor Dr. Erich Geldbach*, pp. 351-363. Vol. 30 in *Ökumenische Studien*. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004.

then  
coming  
35 **offer up your gift.**

36<sup>5:25</sup> **Come to terms**  
with your accuser  
quickly  
while you are  
with him  
on your way,  
lest your accuser hand you over to the judge,  
and  
the judge hands you over to the guard  
and  
you will be thrown into prison.

37<sup>5:26</sup> **Solemnly I tell you,**  
you will not get out of there  
until you have paid the last penny.

As noted above the foundational structure is the premise statement (#3) with the antithesis statement (#31). This is followed by the two expansion illustrations of the antithesis statement: a) the gift on the altar (#s 32-35) and b) the debtor court (#s 36-37).

### Exegesis of the Text:

**Premise statement:** 21 *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder”; and “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.”* (Ἰκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, Οὐ φονεύσεις· ὃς δ’ ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει.).

Although τοῖς ἀρχαίοις could be translated ‘**by** the ancient ones,’ most agree that the better expression is ‘**to** the ancient ones.’ The message was spoken to the people in ancient times, rather than by them. The reference goes back to the people in the Old Testament era, especially to those at Mt. Sinai when Moses delivered the Law to them.

The first of two references, “*You shall not murder,*” goes back verbatim to the LXX reading of Exodus 20:15. The sixth commandment of the Decalogue prohibits committing murder. What is targeted here is murder, not the taking of life through legal execution. Even a casual reading of the Law of God in Exodus and Deuteronomy uncovers the dozens of times in this same law where execution for certain crimes was mandated by the Law. To use the sixth commandment as a scripture against capital punishment is a total twisting of the text out of its clear context. Other grounds may very exist for opposing this practice, but clearly the Old Testament Law of God doesn’t. The action of killing another person unlawfully is clearly in view here.

The second of the two references, “*whoever murders shall be liable to judgment,*” is not found directly anywhere in the Old Testament. Instead, the statement is a summary reference to numerous OT Laws prescribing judgement and punishment upon those committing the act of murder. Murder is defined differently in differing situations in the OT code, and thus different punishments are prescribed. These range from accidental killing to carefully planned killing. The statement here simply gathers up the range of situations, all of which subjected the individual to a legal process before council authorities in the Old Testament era and into Jesus’ day.

**Antithesis:** 22 *But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.* (5.22 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὃς δ’ ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ, Ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ· ὃς δ’ ἂν εἴπῃ, Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.).

The contrast to the Old Testament principle against murder is not to set it aside. Rather, it is to extend the Old Testament principle against the act of murder to include inner attitudes and verbal actions under the prohibited. Thus in the Kingdom of Heaven it is wrong to possess the attitudes that lead to verbal abuse of others, and can lead to the overt violent action of murder. This much from Jesus’ words is very clear.

Somewhat puzzling is the way these words are structured in a threefold expression:

if you are angry with a brother or sister,  
*you will be liable to judgment;*  
 and if you insult a brother or sister,  
*you will be liable to the council;*  
 and if you say, "You fool,"  
*you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

**Attitude**  
**Principle**  
**Verbal**  
**Court**  
**Verbal**  
**Eternity**

How should these three declarations be taken? Some see these as 'stair casing' increasingly worse concepts so that the final one is the worst violation of the three. But in reality hardly any difference exists between 'insulting' a brother and calling him a fool. Ἰακά and Μωρέ are but an Aramaic and a Greek way of saying essentially the same thing. The difference is the language used to insult. Thus the "if" clause sections<sup>4</sup> merely distinguish between attitude and verbal expression. The three main clauses do seem to possess an increasingly more serious specification of liability. At least at first glance. But close examination raises serious questions about the legitimacy of such an assessment. Liability (ἐνοχος ἔσται) is liability in all three instances. The delineation of 'judgment' (τῇ κρίσει), 'council' (τῷ συνεδρίῳ), and the fires of Gehenna (εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός) all speak of accountability ultimately before God. The three designations then emphasize the concept of judgment, the concrete experiencing of it familiar to Jesus' first century audience in the local councils and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, and the ultimate accountability of eschatological condemnation. All of these fundamentally grow out of divine revelation and procedure.

One important issue relates to possessing anger and issuing verbal criticism. Should Jesus' words here be taken as absolute prohibition of both anger and verbal criticism? At first one might conclude Yes to this question. But such an answer puts one squarely in conflict with other scriptures in the New Testament. On several occasions in public ministry, Jesus himself both possessed and expressed intense anger toward some folks.<sup>5</sup> In a specific situation the apostle Paul advocated getting angry: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger..." (Eph. 4:26). The biblical materials recognize a legitimate place for anger in certain situations, but also understand the potency of anger and that it quickly pushes the individual into wrong actions. Consequently, it must be carefully controlled and allowed expression only where appropriate. And this is primarily where God and God's ways are being callously rejected.

Verbal criticism of others poses a similar pattern across the New Testament. Here Jesus said we're not to call others either Ἰακά<sup>6</sup> or Μωρέ.<sup>7</sup> But in both Mt. 7:26<sup>8</sup> and 23:17,<sup>9</sup> Jesus labeled individuals as fools. The heart of church discipline clearly advocated in the New Testament is built off a negative assessment of the behavior or beliefs of a church member. What Jesus is talking about here is an anger out of control that leads to verbal abuse and possibly to violent action against another person. This is absolutely forbidden to the disciple of Christ.

Accountability for our attitude and actions -- both verbal and physical -- is clearly affirmed by Jesus in line with the Old Testament concept of accountability for physical action. Elsewhere Jesus affirmed this accountability, in particular for our words, down to an amazingly minute level:

34 You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; 37 for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned. (Mt. 12:34-37, NRSV):

The best interpretive approach to this threefold structure seems to be to view it as a triple emphasis made for stressing the importance of accountability and expanding the OT code to include the attitude and verbal expression under this accountability.

**Expansion 1:** 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ( 5.23 ἐὰν οὖν προσφέρῃς τὸ δῶρόν σου ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον κάκει μνησθῆς ὅτι ὁ ἀδελφός σου ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ, 5.24 ἄφες ἐκεῖ τὸ δῶρόν σου ἔμπροσθεν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου καὶ ὕπαγε πρῶτον διαλλάγηθι τῷ ἀδελφῷ σου, καὶ τότε ἔλθων πρόσφερε τὸ δῶρόν σου.)

After the core premise / antithesis expressions come two illustrations of the antithesis segment in

<sup>4</sup>In the Greek sentence, these clauses are known as a third class conditional protasis. This construction was widely used to set up non accusatory 'what if' situations. The main clause 'what then' clauses, called the hypotaxis, provides the assessment of the potential situation were they to take place.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Mark 3:5 (NRSV): "He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored."

<sup>6</sup>For a listing of 'good-for-nothing' (Ἰακά) see the NAS NT Greek Lexicon listing.

<sup>7</sup>For listing of 'fool' (Μωρέ) see NAS NT Greek Lexicon listing. Some twenty different Greek words relate to this concept of being foolish, as topics 32.42 - 32.61 in the Louw-Nida *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* illustrate.

<sup>8</sup>NASV: "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like **a foolish man** (μωρός) who built his house on the sand."

<sup>9</sup>NRSV: "**You blind fools** (μωροὶ καὶ τυφλοί,...)! For which is greater, the gold or the sanctuary that has made the gold sacred?"

order to provide explanation of the implications of Jesus' words. The first of these is religious in orientation. Anger -- and perhaps prior verbal exchange -- lay in the background of the illustration for making an offering in the Jerusalem temple.<sup>10</sup> The worshipper comes into the temple to make a required sacrifice to God as a part of his worship of God. Upon approaching the altar he remembers that a serious disruption of relationship exists between him and a fellow Jewish brother. The instruction is for the offering to be 'put on hold' before it can be given to God. The worshipper is to leave the temple and search out his brother to seek reconciliation of relationship. This is to be sought after and hopefully achieved before the offering can be completed back in the temple. Very critical in the illustration is the so-called vertical / horizontal religious principle in Judaism and Christianity. You can't legitimately worship God so long as broken relationships exist with others. In this context of 5:21-26, the emphasis on that broken relationship is anger and verbal abuse being present. One should note that the focus point is not on the worshipper's attitude toward the other person. Instead, it is one the other person having "something against" (ἔχει τι κατὰ σοῦ) the worshipper. This intensifies the burden on the worshipper.



Clearly not all broken relationships are 'healable' as experience teaches. Paul understood this and offers his insight at this point in Rom. 12:16-18:

16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 *If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

**Expansion 2:** 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (5.25 ἴσθι εὐνοῶν τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ σου ταχὺ, ἕως ὅτου εἶ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ, μήποτε σε παραδῶ ὁ ἀντίδικος τῷ κριτῇ καὶ ὁ κριτῆς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ καὶ εἰς φυλακὴν βληθήσῃ· 5.26 ἀμὴν λέγω σοι, οὐ μὴ ἐξέλθῃς ἐκεῖθεν, ἕως ἂν ἀποδῷς τὸν ἔσχατον κοδράντην.)

The second illustration shifts from a religious example to the infamous debtor courts of the ancient world.<sup>11</sup> The scenario is culturally different from anything in the modern world, and thus poses some challenges for clear understanding. What Jesus described is an individual who owes money to another person, now defined as an 'adversary' or 'accuser' (τῷ ἀντιδίκῳ). For some undefined reason this money hasn't been paid back and the adversary is making a move to file legal charges against the individual in the ancient Jewish court system. Quite interestingly both individuals are walking together on the road headed to the court to set in motion the legal process. The admonition in the example is for the person owing money to be reconciled to the other person before they get to the court and begin the legal process. The motivation is that the legal process will most likely result in the imprisonment of the person owing money. And that this person will remain imprisoned until every last penny of the debt is paid back.

Thus Jesus' second example comes from everyday life in ancient Palestine and has a practical thrust: reconciliation is far better than suffering the consequences of broken relationships. With divine accountability in the background with possible eternal consequences, the example takes on a high level seriousness.

Both these illustrations underscore the point of the antithesis in v. 22: in the Kingdom of Heaven positive relationships with others is essential to legitimate relationship with God. Although the concept was present in the Old Testament code, its importance wasn't stressed adequately. Positive relationships begin inwardly with proper attitudes. They then move to verbal exchange and actions taken with one another. This is Jesus' extension of the Law in the Old Testament, which is not as much an extension as it is a heightened emphasis on an already existing principle. The scribal interpretation of the Law by Jesus' time had pushed this aspect so far into the background that it was largely lost. Violent actions was the interpretive emphasis they stressed. Jesus corrects this failure of interpretation and pushes us back to the deeper implications of God's expectation on us as His people.

<sup>10</sup>For a similar emphasis elsewhere in Jesus' teaching, see Mark 11:25 (NRSV): "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses."

<sup>11</sup>For a different application of this illustration in Jesus' teaching, see Luke 12:57-59 (NRSV): "57 And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? 58 Thus, when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison. 59 I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."

**2. What does the text mean to us today?**

- 1) How do you relate to other people around you?
  
- 2) Do you control your anger properly?
  
- 3) Are you willing to seek reconciliation of broken relationships?