

Matthew 5:21-22

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Jesus says that righteousness is a matter of both outwardly following the Law and inwardly reflecting the spirit behind the law. Acting in violence and harboring violent attitudes results in disharmony (unrighteousness).

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus just challenged the status quo by telling His disciples that, “unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). At that time, the Pharisees were viewed as the most righteous people in Israel, so this statement likely provoked surprised curiosity from the disciples. Jesus begins to give examples to demonstrate His Kingdom principles of Righteousness (harmony) which surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees.

The first principle is that Kingdom righteousness is both external and internal. The first example deals with the issue of *anger*.

Jesus begins with the primary subject of the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:5-6) later repeated as the famous sixth commandment in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13): *You shall not commit murder*. Jesus tells His disciples, *You have heard that the ancients were told* that it was a violation of God’s covenant to *murder* another person. The phrase *you have heard* likely means *you have been taught* God’s law by the scribes and Pharisees, or other rabbis.

At this point in history, Jews were taught the scriptures from their youth. Some believe the typical Jewish male would have memorized the entire Bible by the time they became an adult. It is clear from the writings of the gospels that the Bible was read and discussed regularly within the Jewish community (Matthew 21:42; 23:2-3; Luke 4:16-20). The entire Bible at that time consisted of all the books we know as the Old Testament. When Jesus burst onto the scene, there had not been any writings added to the Bible in four hundred years.

The ancients (G746) in the phrase *the ancients were told* literally means “the beginners” or the “old timers.” Jesus repeats this word in Matthew 5:33. *The ancients* could be a general reference to the era when God revealed the Old Testament from Moses to Malachi, or it could refer to the Exodus generation when the Law was officially given. Or *the ancients* could even refer to the period before the Mosaic Law during the time between Adam, Noah and the Patriarchs of Genesis. Murder was explicitly condemned by God in His dealings with Cain, and before the flood, and again in the Noahic covenant. Whomever Jesus is referring to, He’s speaking about men who lived a long time ago in the distant past.

This reference emphasizes the connection between these teachings of Jesus and ancient teachings familiar to His Jewish disciples. Jesus did not contest the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. He contested their application, or rather lack of application of the teachings (Matthew 23:2-3). As

stated just a few verses prior, Jesus was adamant that He did not come to overturn even the slightest aspect of any biblical writing, but rather to fulfill all that the Bible says (Matthew 5:17). Jesus emphasized that the Bible's application requires a transformation of the heart and mind.

His disciples also have heard that *whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court* (Deuteronomy 16:18). The words translated *liable to the court* are rendered in most translations "in danger, subject to, or liable to judgement." Murder is not only wrong, it is seriously wrong and must be prosecuted, tried, and punished. Under both the Noahic covenant and the Law of Moses the punishment for being found guilty of committing *murder* was death (Genesis 6:5-6; Leviticus 24:17-18; Deuteronomy 19:1-13).

Jesus expounds upon this sacred commandment by teaching from His own divine authority—*But I say to you*. Again, Jesus is not contradicting or changing the Bible, after all He just told them that He did not come to abolish or replace the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Jesus is revealing the inner principle of righteousness that transcends mere external acts. He is not giving a new code of ethics to supplant the old one. Jesus is applying the Law's teaching to the heart, and taking it beyond the visible realm. Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, which is a heart issue.

It is not enough to say "Well I didn't break the law and *murder* anyone, therefore I am righteous." *Everyone*, Jesus says, *who is angry with his brother shall be guilty* and therefore liable for judgment. God's righteousness (social harmony) does not come from simply abstaining from murdering your brother as Cain murdered his brother Abel. Righteousness comes from the heart, i.e. not being *angry* with your *brother* and thereby murdering him in your heart. Since God is the ultimate judge, and can see the thoughts and intents of the heart, this is quite sobering (Hebrews 4:12).

It is *anger* with a *brother* that is the violation of righteousness (social harmony). Murder is a horrific expression of a horrific heart condition. Murder is the effect. Anger is the cause. Anger and bitterness lead to the opposite of harmony and spoil the goodness of community. *Everyone who is angry with his brother is guilty* of disrupting the social harmony of God's order—not just murderers. It is possible to violate the spirit of the Law by living in anger and bitterness even as the commandment not to murder is kept externally. But any violation of the law, whether inwardly or outwardly, does not produce righteousness (social harmony).

Everyone who has anger toward his brother shall be found guilty before the court (literally judgment, G2920). God and the court of heaven are able to judge the heart (1 Samuel 16:7; Proverbs 21:2; John 2:24-25; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Jesus follows an escalation of being *angry*, as the anger produces action. At each step, the negative consequence grows. *And whoever says out loud to his brother 'You good-for-nothing' shall be guilty before the supreme court*. Even what we might consider a "relatively mild" insult like you are *good-for-nothing* is an externalization of anger. Speaking an insult and committing murder have different external consequences, but both are expressions of the same inward sin (anger), "for [a man's] mouth speaks from that which fills his heart" (Luke 6:45). Both will be judged alike by God. Jesus elevates the severity of the sin when anger is externalized. While unspoken anger toward *his brother* makes a man *guilty before the court*, showing anger by

saying to *his brother* that he is ‘*good-for-nothing*’ makes a man *guilty before the supreme court*. *The supreme court* is a translation of “Sanhedrin” (G4862).

The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish council during the 1st century A.D. Jewish tradition holds that this court began with the 70 elders Moses appointed in Numbers 11:16. By Jesus’s day, *the supreme court* (Sanhedrin) consisted of both Sadducees and Pharisees, but was led by the High Priest. This suggests that the Sadducees had more influence in its decisions. The Sanhedrin’s authority was limited by Rome. Rome withheld from them the power to enforce capital punishment.

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish tribunal that condemned Jesus and brought Him before the Roman governor, Pilate, because they wanted Jesus to be crucified. It appears that Jesus is using *supreme court* figuratively to demonstrate the greater severity of anger that spills out of the mouth. It is unlikely that He is saying that an individual will literally sit before the present council of Sadducees and Pharisees, whom He calls “sons of hell (*Gehenna*)” (Matthew 23:15). He is likely indicating that idle words of insult will get the attention of the highest levels of judgment in His “Kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus describes a third penalty for sinning in anger for *whoever says*, ‘*You fool*.’ This time, not only has the penalty escalated, it also is revealed in more descriptive language: *whoever says* this *shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell*.

The word translated as *hell* is “*Gehenna*” (G1067). *Gehenna* is the English transliteration of the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word “Hinnom.” Hinnom/*Gehenna* was the name of a valley just south of Jerusalem’s walls. In Jesus’s time, the Hinnom Valley, or *Gehenna*, was utilized as the city garbage dump and sewer. Its name stemmed from a family name, being originally called the Valley (“Gay” in Hebrew) of Hinnom (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35).

The Hinnom Valley or *Gehenna* was also called “Topeth” and “Valley of Slaughter” (2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7:32). Each of these alternate names are connected to a time when the Kingdom of Judah fell into idolatry, where this valley was used as a location for child sacrifice to the pagan god Moloch (2 Kings 23:10). During the Babylonian invasion, mounds of dead human bodies were piled in *Gehenna* (Jeremiah 7:32). The valley’s name carries forward to current times; it is currently called the “Hinnom Valley” and still sits just outside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem (although it is no longer a dump).

However, in the context of Jesus’s sermon, He is referencing a place where trash and the carcasses of dead animals were burned, and where dung was disposed. Consequently, Jesus describes *Gehenna* as a place where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44, 48). *Gehenna* appears eleven times in the gospel accounts (Matthew 5:22; 5:29; 5:30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15; 23:33; Mark 9:43, 9:45, 9:47, Luke 12:5), and one time in the epistles (James 3:5). In each instance it is translated *hell*. In each instance, a better approach would be to translate it as “Valley of Hinnom” and allow the reader the opportunity to interpret what Jesus meant by referring to this image of the smoldering combination landfill and sewage dump.

In the NASB, the English word *hell* only appears one other time where it is not a translation of *Gehenna*, and that is in 2 Peter 2:4, when *hell* is a translation of “tartaroo” (G5020). Tartaroo, or Tartarus was a region of Hades, the Greek concept of the underworld of the dead; Tartarus was the compartment for the evil or damned. In 2 Peter 2:4, Tartarus is stated to be a holding tank for fallen angels awaiting judgement. In the NASB, the named place of the dead is translated as “Hades” (G86). Hades occurs ten times (Matthew 11:23, Matthew 16:18; Luke 10:15, Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27, Acts 2:31; Revelation 1:18, Revelation 6:8, Revelation 20:13, Revelation 20:14).

Gehenna refers to a geographic location, and is figurative for foulness, death, corruption, evil, and rot. It is a geographical place with figurative meaning, such as saying “Wall Street” to refer to the world of high finance, or “Hollywood” to refer to the movie industry. It depends on the context what sort of foulness and death is being referred to by *Gehenna*. It seems if Jesus had meant Hades here, He would have said “Hades,” as He does at other times.

Hades is a Greek word that stems directly from Greek mythology. But apparently it was a sufficiently accurate picture for the Jews to use the term to express biblical thoughts. Acts 2:27 quotes Psalm 16:10 and “Hades” is substituted directly for the Hebrew word “Sheol” which is used throughout the Old Testament to mean grave, or place of the dead. Jesus validated this usage of “Hades,” most particularly in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In that parable, Jesus depicts two compartments, separated by an impassable gulf. On one side of the gulf is Abraham’s bosom (paradise, from the description) and on the other side of the gulf is a second compartment containing the rich man, who lives in torment (Luke 16:19-31).

Therefore, other than the passage in 2 Peter (tartaroo), the reader can gain clarity by substituting “Hinnom Valley” or *Gehenna* each time they encounter “hell.” Hades is a real place, as Jesus makes clear. Jesus told the thief on the cross “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). However, Hades is not the ultimate destination for the eternally damned. They go to the lake of fire. Both Hades and Death are destined to be thrown into the “lake of fire” along with the devil and his angels (Revelation 20:10; 14-15).

Jesus will consistently use descriptions such as “*Gehenna*”, “fiery furnace,” and “outer darkness” as a contrast to entering His Kingdom. The pictorial contrast is between living in the dump/sewer outside the city walls in squalor and stench—vs. living inside the city in a comfortable house. These references generally apply to consequences for our deeds, so they do not fit the biblical context to be descriptive accounts for spending eternity separated from God. The Bible teaches that spending eternity as a child of God is unconditionally and graciously given on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ as God’s Son, and is not connected to deeds (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Eternal separation from God in the lake of fire is reserved for those whose names are not written in the book of life because they did not believe in Jesus (Revelation 20:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is speaking to His disciples and wants them to fully participate in His kingdom. Full participation in the Kingdom is gained by righteous living from the heart. Believers who are unfaithful and live unrighteous lives still go to Heaven when they die, but to their deep regret, they will miss out on the present reward of enjoying Christ in this life and participating fully in

Christ's future reign in the next life (Matthew 25:14-30; Romans 8:16-17; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Timothy 2:11-13; 2 Peter 1:10-11; Revelation 21:6-7).

In telling His disciples *whoever says 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery Gehenna*, Jesus means that their inward anger and hurtful words can cause them to miss out on good consequences from living the principles of the Kingdom of Heaven. Instead, people who live angry lives get the severe and harmful consequences of sin and the world. In the case of harboring anger or bitterness, it observably turns our hearts into a *Gehenna* (a landfill, a garbage heap). Smoldering anger rots our joy, destroys relationships, breaks down our physical health, and robs us of fulfillment.

The world presents its lifestyle as satisfying, pleasurable, and beneficial. With this example, Jesus makes clear the true reality is quite the opposite. Not entering His kingdom through righteous living is like remaining outside Jerusalem in the Hinnom Valley, living among the rot and sewage. It is living like a squatter in *Gehenna*, the valley filled with death, sewage (waste), and decay. The proper picture for the world's kingdom is the ever-smoldering corruption of dead carcasses burning in the *fiery Gehenna*. Jesus is presenting a stark outcome for the choice his disciples must make. This applies to the thoughts they dwell upon, as well as the words and deeds that flow from those thoughts.

This picture could also apply to the Judgement. In Jewish understanding, it was likely the disciples in the audience considered themselves at risk of spending time in the afterlife having corruption burned away from them. This is still a common understanding in Jewish thought. This perspective was probably held widely by the early church, and in time morphed into the medieval teaching of Purgatory. The medieval church improperly granted church officials authority over God's refining fire. They then corruptly and incorrectly sold "indulgences" for cash, claiming that this allowed people to sin without consequence in the Judgement.

The fact that some teachings about God's refining fire are inaccurate does not negate its reality. In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul gives an illustration of believers' earthly deeds being subjected to refining fire. Some deeds perish in the fire, some remain. But the person himself will be "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Corinthians 3:15). The Bible is consistent that obediently following God is beneficial both in this life as well as in the next (Mark 10:30).

Later in Matthew, Jesus again emphasizes how severely evil and even careless words will be judged:

"For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matthew 12:34-37).

All of the examples from Matthew 5:21-22 demonstrate that in addition to our actions toward others, the things we say to them, even the attitudes we harbor towards them, all determine whether we are being righteous or unrighteous. Whether we are sowing harmony or division.

Whether we are choosing life or death. They showcase the first Kingdom principle of righteousness: Righteousness is not only a matter of external harmony from following the Law's letter with outward behavior. Righteousness is an inward, spiritual harmony by honoring the Law's spirit in the heart.

Biblical Text

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”