

Matthew 5:21-32 – Kingdom Relationships
St Mark's Northbridge – 14/02/2021 AD

BIG Idea: Jesus determines how we relate to one another as kingdom citizens

Pray.

Intro: Broken and Torn Apart

Christmas is usually a joyous occasion. But for some people, it isn't. While Christmas Day can be a time of great celebration and festivity, it can also be one of the saddest days of the year because it reminds you of what you have lost and what is broken. That as you look around the table, there are people missing – those in your family who haven't joined you for Christmas in many years.

Christmas can be a visual reminder of the breakdown in relationships and the pain that has been caused by what others have done.

And that's a snapshot of our relationships in this world: they are messy. While there are those who we get along well with, there are others who we don't. As we examine our lives, we see that all our relationships just aren't as they should be. It might be in your household with your children or with your spouse or with flatmates. It might be in your street or apartment block with your neighbours. It might be in the workplace with a colleague or a boss or a client. It might be at school with fellow students or a teacher. And dare I say it might even be here at church with those around you!

We all know that our relationships are messy and complicated. There are words which others have said which have hurt us. There are actions which others have done that have

caused and continue to cause pain. But equally there are words we have said and actions we have done which have caused much hurt to others.

Well in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples how they are to relate to others in a manner worthy of the kingdom of God. And in our passage Jesus addresses two very clear issues and causes for why our relationships can go so horribly wrong: murder and adultery. If you want to ruin a relationship or damage a community, then murder and adultery are two ways to guarantee that! And don't we know that! Don't we see that all around us!

But those who follow Jesus – those who are citizens of the kingdom – are to be different to the world around us, especially in the way we relate to others. As we heard last week, we are to be peculiar as we live in a world where things go wrong and our relationships are messy.

Entering the Kingdom of God: Broken and Righteous

Now before we have a look at our passage, I want us to remember two important things that Jesus has already said about entering the kingdom of God:

The first thing is that those who receive the kingdom of God are broken. Two weeks ago in the Beatitudes we heard Jesus say:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Entering the kingdom of heaven comes through being broken. Being poor in spirit. Being spiritually bankrupt before God with nothing to offer him. To enter the kingdom of God you are broken and know that you are broken.

And the second thing Jesus says about entering the kingdom is that your righteousness needs to exceed that of the Pharisees.

In verse 20, straight before this passage, Jesus says to his disciples:

20 ...that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus raises the bar here. It's not a mere acknowledgment of what God's word says, but obeying Him. To take God's word seriously and not just give lip service or keep up appearances, like the Pharisees.

So being broken and righteous both frame the Sermon on the Mount. And we must remember this as we are confronted by how radical Jesus' teaching is, especially for our relationships.

The Sixth Commandment: Murder (v21-26)

Well our passage begins with Jesus drawing our attention to the law which God gave to the Israelites.

- The Old and the New

And He highlights one of the 10 Commandments given to Israel. He begins with the commandment not to murder – part of the commands about how we relate to other people.

And then in verse 22 Jesus begins by saying: “*But I tell you...*”.

Jesus, with all his authority is saying something extra. Yes, God has commanded and forbidden murder, but there is more that Jesus has to say on the matter. He has come to fulfil what is written in the Law. So He says:

22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.

Just like murder, being angry with someone means you will answer before God. It's not just the actions that matter, but the motives – your thoughts and attitudes.

And it's not just what's in your heart, but how that spills over into action. In verse 22 Jesus goes on to list two examples of insulting and vilifying others.

It's not just the physical act of murdering someone, but it's about what's going on in your mind and heart, and what is on your lips as you speak to others. That's what God cares about. And Jesus wants his followers to relate well to others and not engage in insults and abuse, or hate-speech in the true sense of the word. For that is not how citizens of the kingdom of heaven are to conduct themselves.

And do you see there in verse 22 that Jesus is teaching about how his disciples are to relate to brothers and sisters. So while Christians are to speak well towards all people by

being gracious, and kind, and charitable, how we relate to fellow brothers and sisters is especially important.

What Jesus teaches here is so counter-cultural and peculiar. How often are we encouraged to blow-off some steam when we are angry. That if you've got a problem or disagreement with someone, then you tell them. You really tell them and give them an earful. Unfortunately, too many of our leaders in society give us regular examples of this. And unfortunately the internet can be a place where we are encouraged to unleash the inner keyboard-warrior and type what we think and trade insults without any regard for those reading it. Saying things to or about someone that you'd never say to their face. And sadly we as Christians are not immune from this.

But Jesus teaches another way. He doesn't say that Christians are never allowed to have disagreements or be angry.¹ But how you have your disagreements matter. Followers of Jesus won't descend to insults and vilify others.

Instead, Jesus teaches another way for dealing with our disagreements: by seeking reconciliation.

- **Take Action: Reconciliation**

Rather than getting angry and abusing others, followers of Jesus are to be proactive in seeking reconciliation.

And Jesus teaches this by giving two scenarios.

¹ "In your anger, do not sin" (Eph. 4)

The first is there in verse 23. This is a situation where two believers have gone to the temple to offer a gift. And if these believers know that there is a disagreement or problem between them, then they are to **immediately** seek reconciliation. They are to sort out their disagreement, and then carry on with their fellowship. The fellowship between God's people is greatly impaired when we don't settle our disagreements. Jesus cares about the disagreements that we have in the church and wants us to be reconciled.

The second scenario that Jesus gives is there in verse 25. And here Jesus is speaking about an enemy you might have – from the context it seems to be someone outside the fellowship of God's people. Those first three words in verse 25 are a good summary: "Settle matters quickly". Jesus doesn't want our disagreements with others to drag on and escalate. This doesn't mean that there should be no regard for justice or seeking restitution. But in any relationship that is broken or torn apart, we must avoid letting things escalate and snowball.

And again, this is so counter-cultural and peculiar to what our world and culture does when it comes to dealing with conflict in our relationships.

Over the past few weeks with the Australian Open in Melbourne there's been a lot of attention given to a couple of tennis players who are going toe to toe off the court as they exchange insults with one another quite publicly. And the media have lapped it up and it's generated headlines as these guys keep insulting each other and pour more petrol on a fire.

But Jesus offers another way: rather than letting things fester and grow, reconcile with your brother or sister. Jesus wants citizens of the kingdom to seek reconciliation rather than escalation.

So who might you need to reconcile with? Who might you need to settle some disagreements with?

Is there someone here at church who you don't talk to because of something that's been said in the past? Is there a family member or a colleague who you need to be reconciled with?

If there is, then please don't wait any longer. Go and be reconciled with them, quickly! Pick up the phone. Send a message. Grab a coffee with them. And be ready to show forgiveness instead of letting things drag on.

Now this doesn't necessarily mean that things will go back to how they were before. Sometimes there is deep hurt that others have done which can stay with us. But we must seek reconciliation.

And on the flipside, if you've hurt someone with something you've said or done, then have the humility to apologise and seek forgiveness.

As kingdom citizens we don't let problems escalate. But we seek to settle matters quickly.

The Seventh Commandment: Adultery (v27-32)

So while anger and our words to others can damage relationships, so too does adultery.

And that's what Jesus turns to next.

- **The Old and the New**

Again, Jesus reminds and upholds what God said in the 10 Commandments: that for God's people, adultery is forbidden. And again, Jesus has more to say on this matter.

He says there in verse 28:

28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Just like murder, with adultery Jesus is concerned about more than the physical act.

Jesus teaches that it's possible for you to commit adultery in your heart by lusting and desiring after someone who you are not married to. Here the essence of adultery is the covetous desire to have someone for your own sexual gratification.² A self-centred activity that becomes all about what you can get for yourself rather than giving yourself in service to another.³

And we all know to some degree or another just how damaging lustful desires and adultery is in our relationships. It rips apart families and communities. But more personally, lustful desires and thoughts distort our thinking so that we can start seeing and treating people as objects for our own use and pleasure.

Jesus says that for kingdom citizens, adultery isn't just a matter of the physical outward act but a matter of the heart and how we think.

² The lust of the heart is captured by seeing, desiring, and taking for yourself A bit like Adam in the Garden or King David with Bathsheba.

³ That is why pornography is so spiritually dangerous. Not only does it objectify a fellow human being who has been created in the image of God, but it is purely selfish. It is all about taking for yourself rather than sacrificially giving to another. Something that is so un-Christ-like.

- **Take Action: Removal (v29-30)**

And just as with anger and our words, Jesus calls for his followers to take action when it comes to dealing with sin, especially sexual sin and lust. Jesus calls for radical action.

In verses 29 and 30 Jesus calls for the removal of what causes you to sin. To remove whatever gets in the way of you living a pure and godly life.

And it's quite a shocking picture that Jesus uses here of pulling out an eye or chopping off a hand. But Jesus says, if that's what you have to do and if that's the extent you need to go in fighting sin, then do it. And that's because of what's at stake. The reality of judgment and hell means that you'd do anything to avoid them. In his kindness, Jesus here is warning his followers of the consequences of sin and calling us to take radical action.

So what action might you need to take in dealing with lust and sexual temptation? What might you need to remove?

Would you decide to stop watching a TV show because of its sexual themes and content which you find tempting? [Would you cancel your Netflix account?]

Would you decide to stop going to the beach in summer because the sight of others there is difficult for your purity?

Would you decide to walk a different way to school or catch a different bus to work because you know that there is something unhelpful that you see?

Would you decide to stop working out at the gym because of the temptations of those there?

Would you decide to stop reading novels by a certain author because you know that the plotline will inevitably have some form of adulterous activity which sets your imaginations running?

Would you decide to take your computer from your room or study and only use it in a public place so that you can't hide what's on your screen?

Would you decide to delete your social media account because of the pictures and advertising that's pushed at you?⁴

The point is, we must be ready and willing to take radical action and remove what can entangle and hinder us in our godliness. If you know that something is a problem for your godliness, then be proactive and take action. Get the removalists in. That's the courageous thing to do. Because as citizens of the kingdom of heaven we know the stakes. This is life and death. This is salvation and judgment. So our godliness and sexual purity matters.

- **Divorce (v31-32)**

Now it's in the midst of this teaching on adultery that Jesus speaks to the matter of divorce. Unfortunately, we know all too well the pain and devastating affects of divorce, if not directly, then indirectly with friends and family members, and those in our community. So it's good that Jesus teaches on it.

Since adultery is inappropriate sexual activity outside the bond of marriage, then it is here that Jesus locates his teaching on divorce.

⁴ I've got a fellow Christian brother who deleted his Instagram account because he wanted to remove the sexual temptation that he faced. He disconnected himself from that platform and other friends on there because he was concerned about his sexual purity.

So from what Jesus teaches here, let's note a few things that He says about divorce:

The first thing Jesus does in verse 31 is that he goes back to God's law in the Old Testament – the same pattern with his teaching on murder and adultery. And Jesus refers to Deuteronomy 24 where God gives the provision of divorce. As Jesus says later on in Matthew chapter 19, this provision for divorce was given because of hardness of heart – because of sin.

The issuing of a divorce certificate signalled that a marriage had come to an end. And this was a protective provision given by God since it allowed a woman to remarry and thus be supported by a husband. Otherwise she would most likely be destitute, having no support.

So while God's intention for marriage is that it is lifelong and heterosexually exclusive, there is a provision for divorce that He has put in place because of human sin.

But what had happened over time was that the Pharisees, amongst others, had cheapened the institution of marriage. They saw this provision of issuing a divorce certificate as a loophole for getting out of their marriages whenever they wanted to.⁵

Like for too many people today, marriage became a plaything that could be entered into lightly and left with ease.⁶

⁵ According to some historians, they were divorcing their wives frequently, and for many different reasons – some quite trivial such as their wife not serving food to their liking.

⁶ Another example where God's gracious provision to people is twisted and perverted for selfish ends.

So any sense of permanence in marriage was eroded by these practices, often carried out by the Pharisees.

But Jesus calls time on this. In verse 32 he says:

32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, Jesus raises the bar. He limits the scope for divorce. Marriages aren't to be ended for any and every reason. He notes there that the exception for divorce is when sexual immorality occurs. Because when extra-marital sexual activity occurs, it breaks the bond of a marriage. Adultery and the nature of it is such that it violates the marriage covenant and the promises made. And so Jesus says that divorce is permitted in that circumstance because of what has occurred.

So that's why Jesus says that a man who divorces his wife for a reason other than sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery. He's saying, "Sure, you may have been legally divorced, it's on paper and official. But in the sight of God, you are still married". So in this example the man who divorces his wife for a reason other than sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery as he goes and remarries another woman. Because the original man and woman have not been lawfully divorced in God's sight.

Jesus wants those who enter the kingdom to uphold the sanctity of marriage. To be unlike the Pharisees who had trashed marriage and were causing adultery to run rampant.

While divorce is a provision which God has given, and which is permitted in the case of sexual immorality, it is not required or commanded. And I say that because it's possible that even with the hurt and pain that adultery and sexual immorality bring, that there can be reconciliation in a marriage. However, that's only a possibility and there's no guarantee that marriages broken by sexual immorality will heal.

Now this is not everything that the Bible teaches about divorce and separation, and remarriage. This is a huge topic and there are other passages which you might want to look at to think through it a bit more, including later on in Matthew chapter 19 where Jesus expands on this teaching and in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 where Paul addresses some specific instances of divorce and separation, including non-believing spouses. So there is more that the Bible says on this.

And this is also a topic that requires much prayer and wisdom. There are many factors in any relationship breakdown. And while sin is definitely a key factor, the specifics are not often clear-cut, black and white. So if this is something you are thinking through or want to talk through, can I suggest you speak to one of the pastors or a home group leader, or a trusted Christian friend who can walk with you through this.

But let's not miss the point that Jesus is emphasising about adultery and divorce: in a world that devalues marriage, Jesus wants lifelong faithfulness in marriage. It's not to be cheapened or undermined in any way.

So if we walked away from this teaching thinking, "aha I now know how someone can get of their marriage" – then we would be just like the Pharisees. We are not to be like them but to take faithfulness in marriage as seriously as Jesus does.

So just quickly I want to suggest a few things that we as a church can do in response to Jesus' teaching on adultery and divorce.

As you hear Jesus' words, you might have some repenting to do. You may realise that you have been involved in an unlawful divorce.

So I want to urge you, that if it is you, to repent. To come before God in repentance and with a broken spirit.

And if you are married, then remember the promises which you made on your wedding day. They are precious words – promises to exclusively love and cherish your husband or wife until death. That is God's expectation for your marriage. And they are the promises you have made.

And for those of us who aren't married, let's support and pray for those who are married – that they would keep their promises.

Entering the Kingdom of God: Broken and Righteous

Now I want to finish by coming back to what Jesus says about entering the kingdom of heaven.

To enter the kingdom of God, we are to come before Him as broken people. Hearing what Jesus says about the true nature of murder and adultery and divorce is confronting and exposing. And so repentance is going to be an appropriate response for all of us. We have all messed up in the way we relate to others. And if we haven't recognised that, then we must.

Those who are poor in spirit will enter the kingdom of God because Jesus makes it possible. He forgives our sins through His death on the cross for us. Murder and adultery are not unforgivable sins. Having hatred towards another or lusting after another or divorce are not unforgivable sins. But we need to repent in light of Jesus' teaching. For it is the poor in spirit who will enter the kingdom of God. So our posture must be one of being broken before God.

But equally, to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus teaches that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees.⁷ That's why as forgiven people, Jesus shows us how to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Our lives must be characterised by righteousness, especially in our relationships. And in Jesus we have the perfect model of this. He never got angry and verbally abused others. He never looked at a woman lustfully. Jesus

⁷ The order of this matters: Jesus gives us the standards for entering the kingdom of heaven and how one enters it by their own ability. You see, this teaching is given by Jesus to His disciples **after** he has called them. He doesn't say, "Do all these things successfully and then you'll enter the kingdom." No, Jesus calls his disciples, and then says, "this is how you live as a citizen of the kingdom".

teaches and shows us how to live as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. To live in a way that is counter cultural and peculiar.

So we are both broken and righteous and must be broken and righteous. And this must characterise our relationships with each other.

Let's Pray.