

July 14

Lesson 7 (NIV)

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

DEVOTIONAL READING: [Genesis 2:18-24](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Matthew](#)

[5:21-32](#)

MATTHEW 5:21-32

²¹“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²²But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge

may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

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

³¹“It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³²But 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.”

KEY VERSES

If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.—Matthew 5:23, 24

COVENANT IN GOD

Unit 2: A Heartfelt Covenant

LESSONS 5-9

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Recall the two *they said, but I* contrasts of Jesus regarding murder and adultery.
2. Explain the relationship between sinful thoughts and sinful actions.
3. Develop a strategy by which to monitor his or her thought life better.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. A Crime of Passion
- B. Lesson Context
- I. Murder (MATTHEW 5:21-26)
 - A. Judgment Follows (v. 21)
 - B. Anger Fuels (v. 22)
 - The Terrible Power of Anger*
 - C. Reconciliation Prevents (vv. 23-26)
- II. Adultery (MATTHEW 5:27-30)
 - A. Condemnation Follows (v. 27)
 - B. Lust Fuels (v. 28)
 - C. Resistance Prevents (vv. 29, 30)
- III. Divorce (MATTHEW 5:31, 32)
 - A. Document Finalizes (v. 31)
 - B. Sin Energizes (v. 32)

Was My Counsel Wrong?

Conclusion

- A. Transforming Inner Hypocrisy
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Corinthians	Ko-rin-thee-unz (<i>th</i> as in <i>thin</i>).
Deuteronomy	Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.
Ephesians	Ee-fee-zhunz.
Judaism	Joo-duh-izz-um or Joo-day-izz-um.
Pharisees	Fair-ih-seez.
Raca	Ray-kuh or Ray-kah.

Introduction

A. A Crime of Passion

Is extreme anger a valid defense for murder? Called the “provocation defense,” this line of thinking has two associated components. First, there is a widely held assumption that when people are in a rage, such persons are less responsible for their actions. The anger blinds them from rational response and unleashes violent behavior. Second, the provocation defense maintains that the rage that resulted in murder was provoked by the one murdered. This places some (or all) of the blame on the victim,

implying the person deserved to die. A classic situation for this might be the husband who catches his spouse in an adulterous situation and his rage results in the death of the wife and her lover. Sometimes called a “crime of passion,” such a person may elicit sympathy from the community despite the death of two people.

Courts generally consider provoked rage only a partial defense for murder in terms of lack of premeditation. The charge in such a case may therefore be limited to voluntary manslaughter. Attempts have been made to equate blind rage with temporary insanity. But this line of defense rarely results in exoneration.

B. Lesson Context

Matthew likely wrote his Gospel account after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70. This outcome marked the end of Judaism being focused on the sacrificial system as practiced by the priesthood in the temple in Jerusalem. What survived the temple’s destruction was a Judaism focused on the law and its interpreters, a shift that began in the Babylonian exile.

Any Jewish reader of Matthew’s Gospel would have been particularly interested in what Jesus had to say about the law. Jesus had no intention of demol-

ishing the Law of Moses, which included prohibitions against murder and adultery. Jesus’ approach to the law was one of great respect; but it also held that simply following the law in a public manner was futile because of hypocritical hearts.

Jesus’ teaching was not the simple righteousness of the Jewish teachers of the law and Pharisees of his day ([Matthew 5:20](#)), which would prohibit the physical acts of murder and adultery but say nothing to the heart of the matter.

The teachers of the law and Pharisees were educated men, held in esteem by common folks for their knowledge and exemplary public lives ([23:5-7](#)). However, Jesus knew the hearts of the teachers of the law and Pharisees (see [John 2:24](#)) and repeatedly called them hypocrites ([Matthew 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 29](#), etc.), ones who purposefully hid their sinfulness. He likened them to “whitewashed tombs,” looking clean on the outside but holding the uncleanness of dead bodies on the inside ([23:27](#)).

There is a basic three-part pattern to the following sayings of Jesus. First, he gives a statement of a commandment from the Law of Moses, framed as something taught from ancient times. Second, he presents an expansion of this law as given by later teachers and interpreters. Third, Jesus announces a more rigorous version of this teaching, looking to root

out the cause of the sin in the heart, not just the action itself.

I. Murder (MATTHEW 5:21-26)

A. Judgment Follows (v. 21)

21. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’

Jesus begins with the sixth commandment from the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). The Greek word used by Matthew refers primarily and specifically to *murder* (also Matthew 19:18; 23:31, 35), not to a more general sense of killing (as in Luke 15:23, 27, 30). This commandment was spoken to *the people long ago* and passed down by them as well. Thus it does not originate with the teachers of the law or Pharisees; rather, it has its roots in the law God gave to Israel through Moses (Exodus 19).

Jesus does not quote just the sixth commandment itself. He adds part two—the consequence for breaking the law. A murderer *will be subject to judgment*. This means going before a judge in a local court and being executed for the crime (Exodus 21:12).

B. Anger Fuels (v. 22)

22. “But I tell you that anyone who

is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus has no quarrel with the sixth commandment or its enforcement. He intensifies it, however, by elevating murder’s frequent cause, anger, to a status where the *angry* person is also *subject to judgment* like a killer (see Ephesians 4:26; James 1:19, 20; 1 John 3:15).

Jesus is not presenting three categories of angry persons, just three ways to identify such people. The first is the one who rages against a *brother or sister* (a fellow disciple).

The second is a person who utters *Raca* against another, while the third calls another a *fool*. *Raca* is the ultimate angry insult in Jesus’ Jewish world, very much like the derogatory *fool* (Psalms 14:1; 53:1; 107:17; etc.). There is not a tight distinction between the words. Both are nasty things to call another person, but neither carries jail time or even a fine.

The punishments here do not seem to fit the crimes. Being angry in itself is not reason to go before a judge; neither is name-calling. Yet the person who calls another *Raca* is in danger of judgment from *the court*, another way to speak of going before a judge and being sentenced.

The results of these minor infractions should thus be taken together. Not only is the angry person in danger of judgment and standing before the court; ultimately the angry are *in danger of the fire of hell*, the final judgment of God.

What Do You Think?

What techniques can Christians use to squelch anger before it leads to judgment?

Digging Deeper

Considering Jesus' anger of [Mark 11:15-17](#), where should we draw the line between allowable anger and sinful anger? Is that line the same for everyone, or does its position differ based on personality? Why?

THE TERRIBLE POWER OF ANGER

In this decade, America has exploded with anger. The seemingly sudden, overwhelming change in public acceptance of the self-styled “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer” agenda aroused the passions of many. A series of shootings by police and of police brought riots and demonstrations to many American cities. Polarizing presidents were elected, making many Americans of varying political persuasions angry and fearful. Advocates of the “old South” reacted strongly when a movement gained momentum to

remove Confederate flags and statues. In some cases, rallies over the issue turned violent.

When passionately held values and opinions are called into question, Christians often feel moved to anger, but Jesus warns us of the dangers of allowing anger to gain control in our hearts. Murder and judgment can be the result. In fact, in Jesus' words, anger and murder are equivalent in terms of the spirit involved. How do you avoid God's judgment on your anger?

—C. R. B.

C. Reconciliation Prevents (vv. 23-26)

23, 24. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Jesus holds his disciples to a much higher standard than the teachers of the law and Pharisees hold for the people. He calls for not only our actions to be righteous but also our motivations to be governed by love (compare [1 Corinthians 13:3, 5](#)). Jesus' first key to dealing with anger is that we must *be reconciled* to those with whom we have conflicts.

Jesus illustrates this in a striking situational way. A person is *at the altar*, ready

to offer a *gift*, or offering. This is an act of worship, a time between the person and God. When the worshipper's mind remembers an unresolved conflict with a *brother or sister*, the gift should be left behind and the worship postponed until reconciliation is accomplished. Unreconciled relationships damage not only human interactions but also relationship with God. Jesus advises that we put our anger aside and take the initiative in restoring a broken relationship in order to be able to approach God.

We do not diminish the force and difficulty of Jesus' teaching by recognizing that he is using hyperbole in these verses (exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis; examples include [Matthew 18:6, 8, 9](#); [Romans 14:21](#); [1 Corinthians 8:13](#); etc.). An analogy in churches today might be interrupting observance of the Lord's Supper or postponing the offering in order to be reconciled to other believers. As God acts in love to reconcile us to himself ([John 3:16, 17](#); [2 Corinthians 5:18–20](#); [Hebrews 2:17](#)), so we are to act in love to be reconciled with others.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can Christians improve efforts in seeking reconciliation?

Digging Deeper

Which elements of the world's view of reconciliation are useful to adopt, if any? Which should be rejected?

Why?

25, 26. “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

When an *adversary* has been created, such a person may seek legal actions against you. This example likely involves an unpaid debt of some kind and the simmering anger that such a situation can create. Jesus' context implies what we would call “debtor's prison,” incarceration ordered by a judge until a debt is paid. This is not a matter of breaking a law, but a legal remedy employed in Jesus' world to force repayment of a loan.

The debtor remains jailed until there is payment by friends or family, up to and including *the last penny*. This example is appropriate given that the Roman coin indicated is also the least valuable unit of currency available. Such a judgment results in great hardship for the debtor's family that is called on to satisfy the debt. With this example, Jesus demonstrates that maintaining an angry relationship is dangerous and self-defeating. We are wise to lay anger aside and be reconciled.

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What Do You Think?

What are some specific ways to deal redemptively with an adversary?

Digging Deeper

How will your response differ, if at all, regarding civil vs. criminal situations and cases?

II. Adultery (MATTHEW 5:27-30)

A. Condemnation Follows (v. 27)

27. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’

Jesus’ second example is the seventh commandment, which is the prohibition against *adultery* (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). Adultery is defined specifically as a married person having sexual relations with someone other than his or her spouse. Jewish tradition both upholds this prohibition and includes examples of the damage adultery causes (see 2 Samuel 11; 12; Psalm 51).

B. Lust Fuels (v. 28)

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

Jesus assumes the antiquity and validity of this commandment and then

expands it to serve for a greater variety of sexual sins (compare 2 Peter 2:14). His concern is to go behind the sin to the underlying cause, human lust.

Adultery does not begin with physical contact. It originates in the *heart*, the seat of imagination and will. The one who imagines a sexual encounter with a non-spouse has already begun to sin. Adultery is the fulfillment of lustful desire (Proverbs 6:25-29). The need to control how one looks at others exceeds the righteousness of the teachers of the law and Pharisees. Jesus wants us to give God more than obedient actions. True righteousness begins with giving God our hearts and abandoning an unrighteous, lustful thought life (1 Corinthians 13:5).

C. Resistance Prevents (vv. 29, 30)

29, 30. “If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Jesus again uses hyperbole to drive his point home (see commentary on Matthew 5:23, 24, above). His examples here are two body parts typically

involved in sexual sin. Rather than risk *hell* because of sexual sin, it is better to enter Heaven with one missing *eye* and one missing *hand* ([Mark 9:42-47](#)), isn't it?

The value of these body parts is extreme. Blindness is understood in Jesus' day to be a punishment for sin, a curse from God (see [John 9:2, 3](#)). Even partial blindness is debilitating. The disfigurement of a missing eye is socially unacceptable. For its part, the *right hand* is the social hand, used for greetings and eating from a common dish at mealtime. The left hand is the unclean hand, used for bathroom duties. Missing a right hand is as socially debilitating as an empty eye socket.

There is no command for eye-gouging or hand-chopping. Jesus' point is that we should do all we can to eliminate from our lives those things that lead to sexual sin. Because adultery begins in the heart, we should keep away from those things that result in lustful, impure thoughts. Extreme, aggressive measures are sometimes required to keep us from such temptations. Refusing to engage not only in adultery but also lust demonstrates love for a spouse and faithfulness to right relationships with others ([Ephesians 5:21-33](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are some common things Chris-

tians need to cut from their lives to keep sin at bay?

Digging Deeper

Which of those common things—things not necessarily sinful in and of themselves—do you see as the greatest danger?

III. Divorce

(MATTHEW 5:31, 32)

A. Document Finalizes (v. 31)

31. “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’

Jesus' third example moves beyond the Ten Commandments to a contentious issue in his day: divorce. He cites [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#), which intends to limit the harm of a divorce that has already happened. Even though this is not one of the Ten Commandments, it is seen as a word from Moses and therefore binding on the Jewish people.

Deuteronomy does not justify divorce but regulates it to prevent the worst abuses at the hands of divorcing husbands. (Wives could not divorce their husbands.) Moses' command to give a *certificate of divorce* gives the ex-wife a modicum of protection against hasty divorces, given the overall thrust of [Deuteronomy 24:1-4](#) (compare also [Matthew 19:8, 9](#)).

[Matthew 19:8, 9](#)).

Since she can prove she is legally divorced, then perhaps she can remarry for her own well-being. The divorce procedure gives her some protection. For a divorced woman in Jesus' day, remarriage is the most financially stable option. Employment opportunities are few for women, and there are no government programs to offer even limited assistance. In the ancient world, a woman needs the protection by and provision from a man. This begins in her father's house and continues with her husband.

B. Sin Energizes (v. 32)

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.”

Jesus offers no absolute prohibition against divorce at this point (compare [Matthew 19:8, 9](#); [Luke 16:18](#)). Instead, he returns to a root cause of divorce: sexual sin. If a wife has committed *sexual immorality*, which encompasses many sexual sins and includes *adultery*, the husband has just cause to divorce her. This is the only justified cause for divorce that Jesus ever teaches in the Gospels. (The apostle Paul will later set forth another situation that allows for a Christian to divorce; see [1 Corinthians 7:10–15](#).)

The vagueness of the phrase “he finds something indecent about her” that allows divorce in [Deuteronomy 24:1](#) is ripe for abuse. A husband might interpret “something indecent” any way he wishes, and then divorce *his wife* and remarry the other woman without technically violating the seventh commandment. Misuse of [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#) allows the husband to maintain his social standing and the appearance of righteousness while still wronging his wife.

But outward appearances aside, the husband's motives are not thereby justified. Simple lust for another woman, fulfilled through the divorce process to allow a second marriage, is no better justified than adultery itself.

Furthermore, a husband's selfish justification of his problematic motives and his callous behavior creates ongoing problems for his ex-wife. If she is unable to find another husband, she may see her only choices to be either a life of abject poverty or a life of prostitution. Jesus' purpose is not to condemn the woman who remarries, but the man who causes her dilemma in the first place.

Using an overly broad interpretation of [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#) as a way to avoid being seen as having violated the seventh commandment is deeply flawed. It ignores God's intentions for marriage ([Genesis 2:24](#); [Matthew 19:4–6](#)).

What Do You Think?

How should church leaders handle a situation of previously divorced people desiring to be married, but their divorces do not meet Jesus' criterion in today's text?

Digging Deeper

How, if at all, is your conclusion modified by considering [Jeremiah 3:1](#); [Malachi 2:16](#); [Matthew 19:3-9](#); and [1 Corinthians 7:10-15](#)?

WAS MY COUNSEL WRONG?

As a young Bible college graduate, I was called to my first ministry. When a young woman in the congregation asked my opinion about a possible divorce from her husband, I didn't hesitate to offer the requested opinion in no uncertain terms. I was sure I knew the answer.

Many times over the years, I have regretted my self-righteous confidence in giving the answer that I did. Time and experience have taught me that I was reading Jesus' words but not hearing the spirit that prompted them.

I've come to see that I was more like a Pharisee at that point in life — mouthing what my religious culture accepted — than I care to admit. I've reconsidered, and I believe I've come to a fuller understanding of Jesus' teaching. What conviction might Jesus be calling you to recon-

sider?

—C. R. B.

Conclusion

A. Transforming Inner Hypocrisy

Anger and murder, lust and adultery: these are not feel-good issues. But they resonate in many lives. Our hearts can harbor unrighteous thoughts, attitudes, and motivations. Jesus calls for genuine righteousness, a life-changing orientation that does not excuse anger or lust, even if they don't result in murder or adultery. To Jesus, such matters of the heart cannot be ignored.

Responding to Jesus' call to righteousness is not possible with simple rule-keeping; it requires the love of God and love for one another ([Matthew 22:34-40](#); [Mark 12:28-34](#); [Luke 10:25-28](#); [1 John 4:7-12](#)). Jesus' approach cuts through all veneers of right behavior that mask ungodly attitudes and motivations. Jesus' approach also makes us aware of how unrighteous we actually are, how much we need God's grace.

The church today must maintain this insight as taught by Jesus. Keeping rules can never be seen as a pathway to being saved, for salvation is a free gift that cannot be earned ([Ephesians 2:8](#)). Yet despising or ignoring God's commands is not the way of the Christian either. The

New Testament speaks with one voice that says we should strive to live godly lives, to walk in God's light rather than the darkness of sin. This call demonstrates God's concern that his people live lives of righteousness.

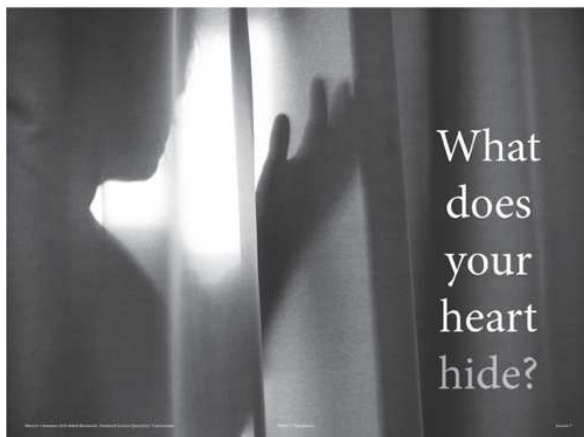
Our good deeds, however, have a hollow ring if they come from dark hearts. Only when our hearts are fully devoted to our Lord will our acts of mercy and justice be pleasing to God, the acceptable service of a transformed life ([Romans 12:1, 2](#)).

B. Prayer

Lord, cleanse our hearts from evil thoughts and attitudes. Keep us from the sin that entices us. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Righteous living demands more than
keeping laws.



Visual for Lesson 7. As the lesson concludes, point to this silently for 10 or 15 seconds. Then, without commentary, offer the closing prayer.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible](#)
Student

Into the Lesson

Before class, attach a 10-foot length of painter's tape at eye level on a wall of the classroom. Mark the tape at one-foot increments from 1 to 10. Then write each of these actions on a separate self-stick note: *adultery, smoking, cheating on taxes, lying to a spouse, lying to a boss, abortion, homosexual activity, dancing, working on Sunday, taking a pen from work, pedophilia, swearing, shoplifting a \$100 item, shoplifting a \$1 item.*

Randomly distribute the self-stick notes to class members. Have them affix the notes to your tape scale at a place that reflects the moral wrongness of the activity. On your scale, 0=Not immoral at all, 5=Moderately immoral, 10=Extremely immoral. Allow class members to place the notes without comment from you or other class members. Briefly review how each activity was ranked.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Crime Classification" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have students work in pairs to identify each of the crimes as a felony or a misdemeanor.

After either activity ask, "What are some criteria used to rate the seriousness of specific actions? Are those same criteria used decade after decade, or can the ratings change over time?" Lead into Bible study by saying, "Human systems of law and morality differentiate between major and minor infractions. But where does one draw the line? Jesus draws the line much closer to us than we might find comfortable!"

Into the Word

Divide students into two groups. Give each group one of the following assignments on handouts (you prepare). Have both groups read Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount as well as their case study. Then allow them to discuss in their groups how Jesus' teaching applied to the Old Testament case.

Murder Group. Jesus' words on murder and anger ([Matthew 5:21-26](#)). Jesus taught that anger can lead to hatred and even murder. He commanded that we not hold on to anger but seek to reconcile with the person with whom we are angry. He warned that there would be consequences for not resisting anger. *Case study:* Cain's murderous anger ([Genesis 4:3-12](#)). The Lord warned Cain that his anger would destroy him. Yet Cain held on to his anger. The result was Abel's murder and Cain's separation from

his family.

Adultery Group. Jesus' words on adultery and lust ([Matthew 5:27-32](#)). Jesus taught that lust is the source of adultery. He commanded that we do whatever we can to resist the temptation of lust. He warned that divorce was not the cure for lust and adultery; it only hurts one's spouse and causes a continuing cycle of serial adultery. *Case study:* Men returning from exile find young pagan women more attractive than their own wives ([Malachi 2:11-16](#)). The lust for younger pagan women compromised both the faith and future of Israel. By giving in to their lust, the men betrayed their long-time spouses and fathered children to be reared by pagan mothers.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Dissecting the Text" activity from the reproducible page. Have students work in small groups to complete as indicated.

After either activity, make a transition by saying, "Attitudes of anger and lust are not harmless. Unchecked, they lead to disaster. Let's develop strategies to monitor our thoughts."

Into Life

Have class members write "appreciation" and "separation" on masking tape strips, then press those onto their left and right hands. Have them think how appreciation of a person's good points

can alleviate anger. Have them think how separating from situations can defuse sexual temptation.