The Bob Mendelsohn Digital Biblical Library Commentary Series

The Gospel According to Matthew

Matthew 5: The King Speaks

Key Verse

"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew 5:17)

Big Idea

The King is elevating the Torah, clarifying its demands and synthesizing

its teachings as He calls His followers above and beyond mere outward obedience. Kingdom rightness reaches beyond outward behavior into the heart, shaping how we treat God, our neighbors, our enemies and one another.

Introduction

The crowds have been growing. People have come from Galilee, the

Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan. They have heard Yeshua proclaim the Kingdom, and they have seen Him heal people suffering from all kinds of diseases. His first disciples have left their nets and begun following Him. Now Yeshua goes up on a mountain, sits down, and begins to teach.

For the next three chapters, Matthew will give us what has become known as the Sermon on the Mount. Yeshua will speak about blessing, righteousness, Torah, anger, marriage, prayer, money, worry, judging others and much more. These are not disconnected sayings collected together because they sound good. The King has announced that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Now He begins teaching His followers what life under God's rule looks like.

From time to time in this commentary I use the term "rabbi" for Yeshua and other Jewish teachers. Strictly speaking, that nomenclature was not in common use in the way we know it until decades later. But sometimes current vocabulary helps us understand the roles and relationships involved, so I will use it occasionally with that qualification in mind.

Matthew 5 begins with the Beatitudes, where Yeshua describes as blessed

people whom the world might easily overlook: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the gentle, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted. He then calls His followers the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

From there Yeshua turns to Torah. He has not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfill them (5:17). He takes familiar commands concerning murder, adultery, divorce, vows, retaliation and love for one's neighbor and pushes His disciples beyond outward compliance to the

intentions of the heart. The chapter ends with perhaps its most demanding statement: “Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48).

Opening Prayer

Father, as I listen to the words of

Yeshua, help me not merely to admire them or agree with them. Show me where His words challenge the way I think and live. And give me the willingness to follow the King wherever His teaching takes me. Help me to hear Yeshua as His first talmidim heard Him and challenge the way I think and live today. Teach me a rightness that is not merely about the things other people can see, but about what is happening in my own heart. Amen.

Commentary

Blessed Are…

Matthew 5:3–12

Yeshua begins with what we have come to call the Beatitudes. The name comes from the Latin beatus, meaning blessed, but the thought is thoroughly Jewish. The Hebrew ashrei is familiar from the Tanach, especially the Psalms: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked” (Psalm 1:1). Ashrei is not simply another word for feeling happy. Some of the people Yeshua calls blessed are mourning, persecuted and insulted. They may not feel happy at all. Yeshua is describing people who are rightly situated before God and announcing how the Kingdom sees them.

And I don't think these are eight unrelated sayings or eight personality types. Yeshua is giving us a portrait of Kingdom people. The poor in spirit are not one group while the merciful and peacemakers are other groups. These qualities belong together. Kingdom people know their need of God, mourn what is wrong, hunger for rightness, show mercy, seek purity and make peace. Sometimes living that way will bring persecution rather than applause.

There is even a structure around the whole section. The first Beatitude ends, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3), and the eighth ends with exactly the same promise (5:10). Everything between them sits inside that Kingdom framework. The King has announced that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Now He is describing what people living in that Kingdom look and act like.

Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3). Yeshua begins in an unexpected place. We usually think of the blessed person as the one who has plenty—plenty of resources, confidence, security or success. Yeshua begins with someone who knows that he is poor. This is not an invitation to think badly of ourselves or to announce that we are worthless. The poor in spirit recognize that when we stand before God, we don't arrive with enough spiritual capital to put Him in our debt. We need Him.

That makes dependence, rather than achievement, the starting place of discipleship.

Years of Bible knowledge, ministry experience or religious credentials may all be valuable, but none of them makes us independently wealthy before God. We enter His Kingdom knowing our need. And notice that Yeshua does not say that someday the Kingdom might belong to such people. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The King has come, and the people who know they need Him are precisely the people He calls blessed.

Those Who Mourn

Matthew 5:4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (5:4). This sounds almost contradictory. How can mourning possibly be a blessed condition? Yeshua is not suggesting that sadness itself is good or that God prefers miserable people. The blessing is in the promise that those who mourn will be comforted.

We should not limit this to mourning over someone’s dying. It also includes mourning over our personal sin, since repentance certainly belongs here. To widen the category, we mourn because something is wrong. We mourn death and broken relationships. We mourn injustice and the damage sin does to us and to people we love. We mourn things in our communities and in our world that are simply not the way God intended them to be. Jewish people certainly know something about mourning. Our history has given us plenty of reasons to grieve.

Words from the prophet Isaiah may be sitting behind Yeshua’s words here. The prophet speaks of the One who comes “to comfort all who mourn” and to give those who mourn in Zion “a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning” (Isaiah 61:2–3). The Kingdom does not require us to pretend that everything is all right. In fact, the closer we come to God's rightness, the more clearly we may see what is not right. But mourning is not the end of the story. Yeshua says that comfort is coming.

Life Application

Sometimes Christians seem uncomfortable with grief. Someone is

hurting and we sometimes quickly reach for a Bible verse. Someone has suffered a terrible loss, and we feel a need to explain what God is doing. There is a time for Scripture and there may be a time for explanation, but sometimes the faithful thing is simply to sit with someone and mourn. Yeshua does not say, “Blessed are those who understand why everything happened.” He says, “Blessed are those who mourn.”

The Gentle

Matthew 5:5

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (5:5). Many translations say “meek,” and that word has acquired an unfortunate meaning in English. We can hear meek and think weak—someone timid, passive or easily pushed around. That is not what Yeshua is describing. Gentleness does not mean the absence of strength. It is strength that does not need to keep announcing or proving itself.

Yeshua is drawing directly from Israel's Scriptures. Psalm 37:11 says, “But the humble will inherit the land.” That psalm is particularly helpful because it describes a world where the wicked sometimes appear to be doing very well. They prosper, they exercise power, and they seem to be

getting away with it. The psalm tells God's people not to fret or become like them, but to trust the LORD and do good. Their apparent success will not be the final word.

The language of inheriting the land would have resonated with Jewish listeners. Land, inheritance and promise belong together throughout the Tanach. Yeshua does not tell the gentle to seize the land or overpower whoever presently possesses it. They inherit it. An inheritance is received. The Kingdom challenges the assumption that the world ultimately belongs to the strongest person in the room.

Hungry and Thirsty for Rightness

Matthew 5:6

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (5:6). Here we meet one of the important words in Matthew: righteousness. I prefer at times to use the word ‘rightness,’ because ‘righteousness’ can sound like a very religious word, implying individual holiness and making us think of a scorecard. However, this is about what is right in God's sight—right relationships, right choices, right treatment of other people and a life rightly ordered before Him.

Yeshua uses the physical experiences of hunger and thirst because they are difficult to ignore. We can postpone many things, but genuine hunger and thirst eventually demand our attention. Yeshua is not describing someone with a mild interest in rightness. He is describing an appetite for it, a longing to see God's right ways become real in us and around us.

That raises a fairly uncomfortable question: what am I hungry for? We know what it is to hunger for success, recognition, security, possessions and the approval of other people. Those appetites can occupy a considerable amount of our attention. Yeshua says there is blessing in becoming hungry for what God says is right.

And He promises satisfaction. That doesn't mean we will wake tomorrow morning to a world in which everything is finally right. Clearly we won't. But we are hungering for something God Himself desires and something His Kingdom intends ultimately to establish. It is an appetite He means to satisfy.

The Merciful

Matthew 5:7

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (5:7). Mercy belongs deeply within the Jewish understanding of God's character. When God reveals Himself to Moses, He describes Himself as “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in chesed and truth.” (Exodus 34:6). Chesed is larger than our English word mercy—it carries ideas of lovingkindness, steadfast love and covenant faithfulness—but mercy certainly lives in that neighborhood.

Yeshua is not establishing a business arrangement with God: show three units of mercy and receive three units back. We began the Beatitudes poor in spirit, knowing that we come to God with empty hands. Rather, people who know how much mercy they have received should increasingly become merciful people themselves. If I continually appeal to God's mercy for myself while demanding the last ounce of justice from everyone who wrongs me, something is out of balance.

Matthew will return to mercy later, and when he does Yeshua will make the point even more strongly. For now, the King is describing the character of His people. They begin to resemble the God whose mercy they themselves need.

Pure in Heart

Matthew 5:8

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (5:8). We need to hear “heart” biblically. The heart is not simply where we keep our emotions. It involves our thoughts, desires, intentions and decisions—the inner person from which our outward life emerges. Psalm 24 asks who may ascend the hill of the LORD and stand in His holy place. The answer includes the person with “clean hands and a pure heart” (24:3–4).

That pairing is helpful: clean hands and a pure heart. Yeshua will spend much of this chapter refusing to let us separate the two. It is possible to have hands that look clean to everyone watching while our thoughts and desires are somewhere else entirely. Soon He will speak about murder and take us into anger, and about adultery and take us into lust. Kingdom rightness is concerned with what we do, but Yeshua will not allow us to ignore where those actions begin.

And then comes this enormous promise: “they shall see God.” I don't think we need to explain that away. The pure in heart desire God, and Yeshua says that God is what they will receive. Biblically, that kind of personal relationship carries the idea of being “face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:10).

The Peacemakers

Matthew 5:9

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (5:9). Jewish people know the word shalom, but shalom means considerably more than a peace where nobody is fighting at the moment. It carries the idea of wholeness, well-being and things being as they ought to be. A peacemaker is therefore not simply someone who dislikes arguments. Peacemakers work toward shalom. They enter broken situations hoping to make something right.

That does not mean avoiding every disagreement. Sometimes making peace requires confronting something that is wrong. Silence can produce a quiet room without producing shalom. Yeshua Himself will certainly not avoid confrontation throughout Matthew's Gospel. Peacemaking is not peace at any price; it is pursuing right relationships without surrendering truth.

Yeshua says these people “shall be called sons of God.” They bear a family resemblance. The God who seeks reconciliation has children who seek reconciliation. That gives us another uncomfortable measure of ourselves. I can become much more interested in winning an argument than restoring a relationship. It is quite possible to win the point and lose the person.

Persecuted for Rightness

Matthew 5:10–12

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:10). This is an interesting way for Yeshua to complete the Beatitudes. He has described people who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are gentle, merciful, pure in heart and committed to making peace. We might imagine that people like that would be welcomed

everywhere. Yeshua says not necessarily. Living according to God's rightness can put us in conflict with people who do not want that rightness.

Notice the qualification. Yeshua says they are persecuted “for the sake of righteousness.” Opposition by itself does not prove that we are faithful. Sometimes people oppose us because we have been obnoxious, insensitive or simply wrong. Peter will later make much the same distinction, warning believers not to suffer as murderers, thieves, evildoers or troublesome meddlers (1 Peter 4:15–16). There is no particular blessing in behaving badly and then announcing that we are being persecuted. Yeshua is speaking about the cost that may come because someone has chosen to live according to God's right way.

Then the language changes. “Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me” (5:11). Until this point Yeshua has been speaking about “those” and “they.” Now He looks, as it were, at the talmidim sitting in front of Him and says “you.” This is no longer a description of some other group of faithful people. His disciples themselves should expect that following Him may cost them something.

There is another significant change. Verse 10 speaks of persecution “for the sake of righteousness.” Verse 11 says “because of Me.” Yeshua places loyalty to Himself alongside loyalty to God's rightness. That is quite a statement for a Jewish teacher to make. He is not simply telling the disciples to remain faithful to a set of principles. Their response to Him personally has become part of what faithfulness to God looks like.

“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:12). Yeshua places His disciples in the story of Israel's prophets. The prophets were not usually persecuted because they told people what they wanted to hear. They spoke God's truth when that truth was inconvenient, unpopular and sometimes threatening. Yeshua is warning His followers very early that following the King will not necessarily bring public approval.

Looking Back at the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes are not eight steps for getting into the Kingdom, and they

are not eight different kinds of Christians. Together they describe people living under the rule of the King. They know their need of God, grieve what is wrong, exercise strength with gentleness, hunger for rightness, show mercy, seek purity of heart and work for shalom. And they remain faithful when doing those things becomes costly.

The first and last Beatitudes also share the same promise: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3, 10). That forms something of a frame around the whole section. Yeshua began His public proclamation with “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (4:17). Now He is showing us the character of the people who belong to that Kingdom.

Some misunderstand the Beatitudes as a list of virtues to earn blessing, rather than a proclamation of grace. That can lead to a works-based mindset and spiritual frustration. Those who are ashrei are already poor in spirit and meek, and thus are in that state of flourishing no matter what others may say about them.

Salt of the Earth

Matthew 5:13

“You are the salt of the earth” (5:13). We are so familiar with that expression that it can sound like Yeshua is simply paying His disciples a compliment. Salt, however, was valuable in the ancient world. It seasoned food and helped preserve it, but it also carried biblical associations. Torah required salt with the grain offerings: “With all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Leviticus 2:13). Numbers speaks of a “covenant of salt” (Numbers 18:19), and that expression appears later in connection with David's kingship (2 Chronicles 13:5).

I don't think we have to decide that salt means only one of those things. The simpler point is that salt has a function because it is salt. If it loses the quality that makes it distinctive, what good is it? Yeshua has just described His disciples in the Beatitudes, and now He tells those same people that their lives are supposed to make a difference in the world around them.

Notice also what He does not say. Yeshua does not tell them, “Try very hard to become the salt of the earth.” He says, “You are the salt of the earth.” Their identity comes before their activity. They belong to the King, and therefore their presence in the world should have an effect. The warning about salt becoming tasteless has some bite to it. If the values of the Kingdom can no longer be detected in us, we have lost something essential about why the King has placed us where we are.

Light of the World

Matthew 5:14–16

“You are the light of the world” (5:14). That is an astonishing statement to make to a group of talmidim sitting on a Galilean hillside. These are not people who control governments, armies or great institutions. Some of them were fishing for a living when this story began. Yet Yeshua tells them that they are the light of the world.

Light has a long biblical history. Isaiah speaks of Israel as a light to the nations so that God's salvation might reach “to the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6). And Matthew has just quoted Isaiah to describe Yeshua: “The people who were sitting in darkness saw a great Light” (4:16; Isaiah 9:2). Now the people following that Light are told that they too are to shine. Yeshua is not calling His Jewish disciples away from Israel's calling. He is showing them how that calling is lived under the King.

“A city set on a hill cannot be hidden,” and nobody lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket (5:14–15). Light is meant to be visible. That creates an interesting tension with the next chapter, where Yeshua will warn His disciples not to practice their righteousness in front of people “to be noticed by them” (6:1). Here He tells them to let people see their good works. The difference is not visibility. It is motive and destination.

“Let your light shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). Chapter 6 will address religious behavior designed to make people notice us. Chapter 5 calls for a visible life that makes people notice God. The good works are seen, but the Father receives the glory.

A key point lies in the dual language here. Your light and your works are two different things. Normally, people who see the good works you perform might glorify you as a result. But Yeshua says that we should also “let [our] light shine” in such a way that when they see our good works,

they instead glorify the Father. For that to happen, my light—my testimony both in words and the life that accompanies them—must reflect whose we are and whose life we represent.

Life Application

Salt left permanently in the saltshaker does very little good, and a lamp

hidden under a basket may remain perfectly safe while illuminating nothing. Yeshua does not call His followers to disappear from the world in order to remain faithful. He expects us to live among people in such a way that the values of His Kingdom can actually be seen.

There is also a useful question about motive here. When people see what I do, where does their attention finally land? It is possible to do something good and make myself the hero of the story. Yeshua wants something different. Our lives should point beyond ourselves to the Father.

Torah: Abolished or Fulfilled?

Matthew 5:17–20

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). We have reached one of the most important passages in Matthew for understanding Yeshua as a Jewish teacher. “The Law or the Prophets” means Torah and the Prophets, in other words, Israel's Scriptures. And before Yeshua begins the series of “You have heard... But I say to you” teachings, He makes something unmistakably clear: do not think that He has come to abolish them.

The word “fulfill” has sometimes been made to do strange work here. We can hear an argument something like this: Yeshua fulfilled Torah, and therefore Torah can now be put aside. But that would make His sentence mean something close to, “I did not come to abolish Torah; I came to fulfill it so that it could be abolished.” That cannot be the force of what Yeshua is saying, particularly in light of the sentences that follow.

“Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (5:18). A ‘jot’ is the smallest Hebrew letter in the alphabet. A ‘tittle’ is a small stroke that distinguishes one letter from another. In English, think of the lower curve added to a capital ‘P’ that turns it into a ‘B.’ Yeshua then warns against setting aside even one of the least commandments and teaching others to do the same (5:19). Whatever else we say about “fulfill,” this is not the language of someone who thinks Torah was a mistake that He has come to correct. He is affirming it and bringing its meaning and demands into clearer focus.

This is where the direction of the whole chapter becomes particularly important. The King is elevating Torah, clarifying its demands and synthesizing its teachings as He calls His followers above and beyond mere outward obedience. “You shall not murder” will reach into anger and contempt. Adultery will reach into what we cultivate in our thoughts. Love of neighbor will extend even to the enemy. Yeshua is not lowering the standard. He is showing how far God's rightness reaches.

Then comes the startling statement: “Unless your righteousness far surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). These are people known for taking Torah seriously. If Yeshua means only, “Keep more rules than they do,” His talmidim have been given an almost impossible competition.

But the rest of Matthew 5 shows us what He means by this greater rightness. It is possible to avoid murder while nurturing contempt, avoid adultery while feeding lust, and make carefully worded promises while manipulating the truth. Yeshua will not allow obedience to remain on the surface. God's rightness reaches into the heart.

Anger, Contempt and Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21–26

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be answerable to the court’” (5:21). Yeshua begins with what is often labelled the Sixth Commandment of the Ten. Everyone listening knows that murder is wrong. But if our response is simply, “I've never killed anyone, so I'm doing well on that commandment,” we have not yet understood where Yeshua is taking us.

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be answerable to the court” (5:22). Yeshua is not saying that every experience of anger is the same thing as murder. There is such a thing as righteous anger, and Yeshua Himself will demonstrate it. The problem is anger that we hold onto and cultivate until it becomes contempt. Yeshua illustrates that with insulting words such as “Raca” and “You fool.” We may never physically harm someone and yet tear that person apart in our thoughts and words.

This is Torah above and beyond minimum compliance. “You shall not murder” remains completely intact, but Yeshua will not allow us to congratulate ourselves merely because we have avoided the final act. What is going on inside me? What do I call someone when that person is not in the room? What conversations do I replay in my head? Contempt can reduce another person to something less than the human being made in God's image who is standing in front of me.

Yeshua then moves from anger to reconciliation. “If you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (5:23–24). His Galilean listeners would have understood the geography. The altar was in Jerusalem. Imagine making that journey, arriving at the Temple with your offering and then remembering that there is a broken relationship back home. Yeshua says that relationship matters enough to do something about it.

Worship of God and our treatment of people cannot be separated. Israel's prophets had already made that point. Religious activity does not compensate for injustice, hostility or relationships we refuse to put right. Yeshua is not diminishing the importance of the offering. He is elevating the importance of reconciliation.

Life Application

Notice the wording: “your brother has something against you.” Yeshua does

not say, “If you have something against your brother.” That would be easier. I could decide whether I was sufficiently offended to do something about it. Here I remember that someone else has something against me. Perhaps I said something, did something or failed to do something, and I know the relationship is damaged. Yeshua tells me to take initiative.

Of course, reconciliation requires two willing people. I cannot force someone to forgive me or restore a relationship. *I must take care of my side of the street.* I can own my part. I can apologize without adding a paragraph explaining why it was really the other person's fault. I can make restitution where that is appropriate. I can do what depends on me.

Yeshua then speaks about settling matters with an opponent before the dispute reaches the judge and the consequences move beyond our control (5:25–26). The practical wisdom is straightforward: don't allow conflict to keep growing when there is an opportunity to turn the temperature down. Kingdom rightness is interested not merely in whether I can prove that I am right, but in whether I am willing to pursue what is right.

Adultery Begins Before the Act

Matthew 5:27–30

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery’” (5:27). Yeshua moves from the sixth commandment to the seventh. As with murder, the command itself is not being replaced or corrected. Instead Yeshua asks what obedience looks like when Torah reaches beyond observable behavior and into our thoughts.

“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:28). Yeshua is not saying that noticing an attractive person is adultery, nor is every unwanted thought that passes through the mind an act of unfaithfulness. The issue is the cultivated look—the decision to keep looking for the purpose of feeding desire. The physical act may never take place, but something is already being developed in the heart.

This is an important distinction because it would be very easy to turn Yeshua's words into another set of external rules: How long can I look? Which images are permitted? Where exactly is the line? If that becomes our concern, we have taken a teaching about the heart and turned it straight back into external compliance. Yeshua's question is deeper: What am I allowing myself to desire and cultivate when nobody else knows about it?

Then comes some deliberately extreme language. “If your right eye is causing you to sin, tear it out and throw it away from you,” and likewise with the right hand (5:29–30). Yeshua is not advocating self-mutilation. Removing an eye does not remove lust, because He has already told us where the problem resides: in the heart. His language tells us to take sin seriously. If something repeatedly feeds what is wrong in us, we should not keep making excuses for keeping it around. Be ruthless with the things which seek to ruin our relationship with God or others.

Life Application

This teaching may be even more confronting in our world than it was when

Yeshua first spoke it. Images that once required considerable effort to find can now appear on a screen in seconds. We cannot always control what appears in front of us, but we have considerably more control over whether we linger, return, search and feed the appetite of lust.

There is also another person involved. The person being looked at is not an object supplied for my imagination. He or she is a human being made in the image of God. Kingdom rightness asks more than whether I have technically avoided adultery. It asks how I am learning to see people.

Marriage and Divorce

Matthew 5:31–32

“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’” (5:31). Yeshua is drawing from Deuteronomy 24:1, but the Torah passage is not actually a command to divorce. It regulates a situation in which divorce has taken place. By Yeshua's day there was considerable discussion among Jewish teachers about what constituted legitimate grounds for divorce. Matthew will return to that debate in chapter 19, where we can explore it more fully.

For now, Yeshua's point fits the movement of this chapter. A certificate may make a divorce legally recognizable, but the existence of paperwork does not settle the question of faithfulness. A person can satisfy a legal requirement and still fail another person badly. In that society, a man could put his wife in an especially vulnerable position by divorcing her, and Yeshua will not allow a legal mechanism to become an easy way around covenant responsibility.

This is not the place to answer every question about divorce and remarriage. Matthew himself will give us more material later. Here the King is exposing the inadequacy of asking only, “What am I legally permitted to do?” Kingdom rightness asks a different question: “What does faithfulness require?”

Let Your Yes Be Yes

Matthew 5:33–37

Yeshua next turns to vows and oaths. Torah took our words seriously. Leviticus warns against swearing falsely by God's name (Leviticus 19:12), while Numbers says that when someone makes a vow to the LORD, “he shall not violate his word” (Numbers 30:2). If you say you will do something, do it.

People, however, have an extraordinary ability to find loopholes. Distinctions could be made between different kinds of oaths and which ones were truly binding. Yeshua refuses to enter that game. Don't swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem or even your own head (5:34–36). Changing the wording does not change our responsibility to tell the truth.

“Make sure your statement is, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no’” (5:37). That is wonderfully uncomplicated. A truthful person should not need a hierarchy of words in which some statements are more reliable than others. If my ordinary yes cannot be trusted, adding “I swear to God” does not solve the problem.

Life Application

We have our own ways of doing this. “To tell you the truth...” is an

interesting way to begin a sentence. What was I doing before that? “I give you my word” raises much the same question. Yeshua's standard is simpler: tell the truth, keep your commitments, and become the kind of person whose word does not require extra guarantees.

An Eye for an Eye

Matthew 5:38–42

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’” (5:38). This language comes directly from Torah (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). It is sometimes presented

as though the Tanach encouraged revenge: hurt me and I am entitled to hurt you back. In fact, the principle placed a limit on retaliation. Justice was to be proportionate. If someone injured your eye, you could not kill him, destroy his family or take everything he owned in response. Torah restrained the human tendency to escalate.

Yeshua takes His talmidim beyond asking how much retaliation is permitted. “But I say to you, do not show opposition against an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other toward him also” (5:39). The right cheek may be significant. For a right-handed person to strike another person's right cheek would normally involve a backhanded slap, an act intended to insult or humiliate. Yeshua's disciple does not have to answer every insult with another insult or defend personal honor every time someone tries to diminish it.

The examples that follow keep moving in that direction. If someone wants to sue for your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go two (5:40–41). That second illustration would have been particularly pointed in a land under Roman occupation. A Roman soldier could compel a civilian to carry something for him. The first mile was imposed upon you; the second was your choice. The soldier could command your service, but he did not have to control your response.

Yeshua is not instructing victims of violence to remain in danger, nor is He telling someone to cooperate with abuse. He is addressing our desire to retaliate. Someone else's wrongdoing does not have to determine what kind of person I become in response. I don't have to return insult for insult, hostility for hostility or injury for injury.

“Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you” (5:42). Yeshua is not eliminating wisdom or requiring us to finance every request regardless of its purpose. He is confronting the instinct to clutch our possessions and rights simply because they are ours. The King is forming generous people who are less consumed with defending what belongs to them.

Life Application

Most of us will never be ordered by a Roman soldier to carry his

equipment for a mile, but we understand the first mile. It is the thing someone requires of us, the obligation we would rather not have, the situation in which someone else appears to hold the power. The second mile changes the relationship. I am no longer doing only what you forced me to do. I am choosing my response, and it can involve generosity.

That does not make injustice right. It means injustice does not get to dictate my character. There is considerable freedom in refusing to allow someone else's behavior to decide mine.

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:43–48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (5:43). The first part comes directly from Torah: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). The second part does not. Nowhere does Torah command, “hate your enemy.” That is important because Yeshua is not correcting Moses. He is challenging the conclusion people can easily draw: if

Torah commands me to love my neighbor, surely someone I regard as my enemy is outside that obligation.

“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44). That is considerably more demanding than simply refraining from revenge. Yeshua does not say, “Don't hate them quite so much.” He tells His followers to seek the good of people who may be actively seeking their harm. And He tells them to pray for those people.

Love here cannot depend upon warm feelings. We may never feel affection for someone who has treated us terribly. Biblical love is expressed in what we choose to do. We can refuse revenge. We can pray. We can seek another person's good without pretending that what the person did was good. Forgiveness, love and trust are not identical things, and loving an enemy does not require us to call evil good.

Yeshua grounds this remarkable command in the character of God. The Father “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (5:45). In an agricultural society, sunshine and rain meant crops, food and life. God gives these gifts to people who honor Him and to people who do not. If we are His children, Yeshua says, there should be something of the Father's character visible in the way we treat people who have done nothing to deserve our kindness.

“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do the same, do they not?” (5:46). Loving people who love us is good, but there is nothing particularly unusual about it. Tax collectors have friends. The people we consider thoroughly ungodly know how to care about people in their own circle. Kingdom love becomes distinctive when it crosses the boundary toward someone who does not love us back.

“And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Even the Gentiles do the same, do they not?” (5:47). A Gentile is simply a non-Jew. Every community knows how to greet its own people. Yeshua is asking His Jewish talmidim to move beyond the normal boundaries by which human beings decide who belongs inside the circle of our concern.

Above and Beyond

Matthew 5:48

“Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). If we hear “perfect” as “never make another mistake,” the command would sound impossible before we have even begun. The Greek word teleios can carry the idea of completeness or maturity, of reaching the intended goal. And the immediate context matters. Yeshua has just spoken about the Father giving sun and rain to the righteous and unrighteous alike. His love is not restricted to people who have earned it.

This is where the whole chapter comes together. Yeshua has taken His disciples from murder to anger and reconciliation, from adultery to the desires of the heart, from legal permission to covenant faithfulness, from carefully constructed oaths to simple truthfulness, from limited retaliation to relinquishing revenge, and from love of neighbor to love of enemy. He has not dismantled Torah. He has shown how demanding Torah becomes when God's rightness reaches the heart.

This is the above and beyond to which the King calls His followers. It is not enough merely to ask, “Have I technically broken the commandment?” Yeshua asks what kind of person I am becoming. Do my thoughts, desires, words and treatment of other people increasingly reflect the character of my Father?

“Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The standard is not the person sitting next to me. It is not the scribes or Pharisees, and it is certainly not whether I am doing a little better than somebody else. Yeshua points His talmidim toward the Father. And those who are meek and poor in spirit are already living in this blessedness and newness of life.

Takeaways

Yeshua in Matthew 5 does not give us a softer Torah. If anything, He

makes obedience more demanding because He will not allow us to measure rightness only by what other people can see. Murder takes us to anger and contempt. Adultery takes us to the desires we cultivate. Divorce raises the question of covenant faithfulness. Oaths become simple truthfulness. Retaliation gives way to generosity, and love of neighbor stretches all the way to love of enemy.

The Beatitudes show us the character of people living under the rule of the King. They know their need of God, mourn what is wrong, exercise gentleness, hunger for rightness, show mercy, seek purity of heart and make shalom. Yeshua then sends those same people *communally into the world as salt and light.

And right in the middle of the chapter, Yeshua makes His relationship to Torah clear: “I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (5:17). He elevates Torah, clarifies its demands and takes His talmidim* above and beyond minimum compliance. The question is no longer simply, “Did I break the rule?” The King asks what is happening in my heart and what kind of person I am becoming.

Perhaps the most challenging standard comes at the end: “Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (5:48). Yeshua points beyond comparison with other people and toward the character of our Father. We will never finish that journey by checking enough boxes. We follow the King, allowing His words to keep shaping us from the inside out.

Memory Verse

“Let your light shine before people in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”
(Matthew 5:16)

What’s Next?

Yeshua has taken us into the heart. In

Matthew 6, He turns toward some of the most recognizably religious activities of His Jewish world: giving to the poor, prayer and fasting. And notice the assumption: His talmidim *will practice their righteousness. Yeshua says, “when you give,” “when you pray” and “when you fast,” not “if.” The

question is not whether Kingdom people will do these things, but why we do them and whose attention we are seeking.

That raises a fascinating question. Yeshua has just told us, “Let your light shine before people” so that they see our good works and glorify our Father (5:16). Yet He will now warn us not to practice our righteousness in front of people “to be noticed by them” (6:1). There is no contradiction. In one case people see what we do and God gets the glory. In the other, we make sure people see what we do because we want the glory.

And Yeshua's warning is almost painfully straightforward. If human applause is what we are after, we may very well get it. People may notice our generosity, admire our prayers and be impressed by our spirituality. But Yeshua says, in effect, that's all we will get. “They have their reward in full.” We aimed for the applause of people, received it, and there is nothing more coming.

Matthew 6 will also give us what Christians commonly call the Lord’s Prayer, although it is really the prayer Yeshua teaches His talmidim to pray. We will hear deeply Jewish themes in it: the holiness of God's name, His Kingdom, daily provision, forgiveness and deliverance. Then Yeshua will turn to treasure, money, worry and trust.

Matthew 5 has asked, What does Kingdom rightness look like?* Matthew 6 will push the question further: For whom am I doing all that rightness?