

## Three Rules for Interpreting the Law

Matthew 5:21-32

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Have you ever looked at the Ten Commandments and thought to yourself, “Wow, I am doing really well at obeying at least some of these. I can definitely check off the 'do not murder' commandment, as well as the 'do not steal' commandment”? We want to think of ourselves as good people. We do not like it when anyone shows us that we are not as good as we think we are. Yes, we believe that there are bad people out there, but that is precisely the point, isn't it? Those people are *out there!* Bad people are not inside us. We are not bad, surely? The Bible says otherwise. We are not good people. God can change us, and thank the Lord for that! God can change us once for all, and God can change us over time so that we look more and more like Jesus. However, we need to know the depth of our own sin, lest the Gospel seem cheap to us, or even unnecessary. To enable us to have a proper view of our own sin (and thus to value the Gospel so much more!), it is crucial that we interpret the law correctly and fully. To that end, we will look once more at some basic rules for how we read the law. These rules are directly from the mouth of Jesus, and so they are not man-made rules, but are rules that God has revealed to us. When we understand these rules, we will see that the Ten Commandments actually cover everything that we do in life. There is not a single aspect of our lives that is not addressed in one or another of the Ten Commandments. I realize that some of us may be a bit skeptical about that claim. It might take some proving. Let's examine Jesus' teaching on the law, and see whether it is so.

As we look at the passage in Matthew, it is important to realize that Jesus was not in fact adding anything new to the law here. These principles for interpreting the law are present in the Old Testament as well as here. For our purposes, though, Jesus says it so clearly that we cannot do better than follow His lead.

The first rule for interpreting the law that we find here is what we might call the “inner-outer” rule. What we mean by that is that the law applies not only to our outward actions and words, but also to what goes on inside us. What are we thinking, and what do we desire? Jesus makes this quite plain in the two examples He brings before us. In the first example, Jesus tells us that the sixth commandment (“You shall not murder”) is not just about murder, which is an outward action, obviously. The commandment also forbids the inward emotion of unrighteous anger. Anger is an inward thing. So the commandment about murder is not just about outward actions, but also about inward feelings and emotions.

Similarly, when Jesus talks about the seventh commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”), He says that there is not only an outward form of adultery, but also an inward form of adultery. Jesus says, “But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” There is an adultery of the heart, which is also forbidden under the seventh commandment. The inner-outer rule applies here. Nine of the Ten Commandments are given to us in a primarily outward form. The exception is the tenth commandment, concerning coveting, which is certainly an inward thing. But the inward tenth commandment would also forbid any outward expression of coveting. So, any of the Ten Commandments that are phrased in a way that directly addresses outward behavior are also concerned with our thought life, what goes on in our hearts.

This rule alone ought to convince us that the Ten Commandments have a far greater reach than we might have thought. After all, Jesus means for us to interpret all the Ten Commandments in a similar way. Even though Jesus only specifically mentions the sixth and seventh commandments here, Jesus is really using them as examples for how we should read all the other commandments as well. To sum up this first rule of interpretation: the Ten Commandments govern not only our outward actions and words, but also everything that goes on inside us. This is the inner-outer rule.

The second rule for interpreting the Ten Commandments is what we might call the rule of opposites. This rule says that if one of the Ten Commandments forbids something, then that Commandment also commands us to do the opposite. And if one of the Ten Commandments commands us to do something, then it also forbids the opposite. We have to go out of the Sermon on the Mount to find this principle at work. One

excellent place to find this is Matthew 15: 4, where Jesus says that God commanded us to honor your father and your mother, and that a person who curses his father or mother should be put to death. These two commands, when put side by side, show us the rule of opposites. Honoring father and mother means that we will not curse them. Another passage where we find this principle at work is in the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4. After Satan tempts Jesus to worship him, Jesus says that the law states (and here is a direct quotation from Deuteronomy), “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.” This verse is a positively phrased version of the first commandment. The first commandment, if you recall, states that we shall have no other gods before the one true God. In other words, don't worship any false gods. Deuteronomy 6 interprets that in a positive direction: *do* worship the one true God.

A couple of further examples will make this point clear. The sixth commandment tells us that we shall not murder. That means that the same commandment is also telling us to do the opposite of murder. In other words, it is telling us to preserve life, and to be careful about life. The seventh commandment tells us not to commit adultery. That also means that we should do everything we can to promote strong healthy marriages. If the ninth commandment forbids us to lie, then it is telling us to love and promote the truth. If the fifth commandment tells us to honor our father and mother, then we should do everything possible to avoid dishonoring them. If the fourth commandment tells us to remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, then we should avoid desecrating the Sabbath day. The rule of opposites means that the Ten Commandments are not simply a list of don'ts. It is not merely a negative list of things that are forbidden. It is also a positive list of things that are commanded. I am harping on this because many people think of the Ten Commandments as a straight-jacket. As we have seen before, however, the heart of the law is love. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself. Is love a straight-jacket? Of course not! Then neither is the law. And by the way, this also means that the Ten Commandments are not the great cosmic killjoy that many people think they are. Actually, they are the opposite. If people were to love one another such that they never murdered each other, wouldn't that actually help people to be happier? If people preserved marriage and enjoyed that promoted that relationship such that people did not commit adultery, then wouldn't people be happier with their marital relationships? The Ten Commandments are actually God's way of telling us how to be happy in life. Happiness in life comes with holiness, not with sin.

Satan's greatest lie of all is related to this: he has deceived most of the world's population into thinking that happiness cannot be obtained by doing it God's way. Satan says that happiness can only be obtained by doing it your way, which is really Satan's way, of course. Rules are meant to be broken, he says. The Ten Commandments are a straight-jacket. God doesn't want you to be happy, Satan says. It is all a lie. And it is the oldest lie, too, because it was the lie that Satan gave to Adam and Eve at the very beginning. Satan implied that God was jealous and didn't want anyone to be like Him. That, of course, is rubbish. God wants us to be as much like Him as we can possibly be! To put it mildly, God doesn't feel threatened when we become like Him. This is exactly what God wants for us! These are some of the practical applications of the opposites rule. Remember that every prohibition implies the opposite command, and that every command implies the opposite prohibition. Remember also that God most definitely intended the law to be the way in which we love God and love each other. The law promotes happiness. It does not hinder it.

The third rule of interpreting the law is what we might call the rule of class. In every class of sin or virtue, all the sins or virtues of the same class are included under each one of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments always states the worst possible sin, or the greatest possible virtue of each category. Murder, for instance, is obviously the greatest possible violation of the sixth commandment. However, every lesser form of murder is included underneath it. If a person is careless about safety, and someone dies as a result, that is also a violation of the sixth commandment, even though murder was not the intention of the careless person. Being careless of safety is thus also a violation of the sixth commandment. Anger is a lesser form of murder, but is included also under the sixth commandment. Similarly, with the ninth commandment, lying under oath, thus bearing false testimony against your neighbor is the most extreme form of breaking the ninth commandment. The consequences are the most severe. However, any form of lying is also included under this commandment, even the so-called “little white lies,” which are not little, and certainly not white! When we combine this rule

with the second rule, then we come to realize that all the lesser forms of promoting the opposite of the sin are also included. In the case of murder, we must preserve life, and that means all the various, small safety concerns that might arise. They might be small, but they are still included under the sixth commandment.

Another important aspect of this rule of interpreting is that circumstances that promote sin are also to be avoided. This might make for differences among people. One person might be able to go to a particular bookstore and not be tempted by sin, whereas another might not. One person might be able to get a drink at a bar, while another might not. Thus, it is important to know what circumstances will create a temptation for you. You need to avoid the circumstances that create temptation. This is why drunkenness is a violation of the seventh commandment for some people, and not just a violation of the sixth commandment. Drunkenness, obviously, does not preserve life, and instead endangers life. But in many cases, drunkenness also creates circumstances where temptations to adultery might be present. Therefore, it is important not only to avoid the circumstances where we might be tempted to a certain sin, but also we must encourage those practices which help us to do the opposite.

By now, it should become obvious to all of us that the Ten Commandments reach far further than we might previously have thought. Cheer up, your sin is a lot worse than you think it is! Why do I say “cheer up” while I deliver the worst possible news? Because the blood of Christ is much more powerful than you can imagine to take away these sins. Remember the reasons why God gave us the law? God gave us the law to drive us to Christ. It is most effective at doing that when we realize just how pervasive the Ten Commandments are. They cover all of life. There is nothing that we do or refrain from doing which is not covered under one or the other of the Ten Commandments. This means that our sin is far greater than we can imagine in the guilt that we therefore hold. However, this shows us the infinite power and goodness of Jesus Christ, whose blood takes away all our guilt.

Therefore, there are two main applications for us of these rules of interpreting the law. The first main application is to unbelievers, and it is what we have just been saying. Our sin is far worse than we might have thought. Therefore, our need of Jesus is so much greater than we might have thought. God's grace is so much greater than we might have thought. God's forgiveness in Christ is so much greater than we might have thought. Let the tendrils of the law extend into every part of your life and shine light on the rottenness that lies within, precisely so that you will recognize your need of Jesus. And then fly to Jesus with all possible speed! Do not delay one moment in coming to Jesus. He will cleanse away your rottenness.

For believers, know this about the law, which no longer condemns us, and is now our friend and guide. Know that the law extends itself to every part of what we do, say, and think. As we come to understand more and more about the law, what we need to recognize is that our conscience will grow more and more sensitive to sin. The progress of the Christian's life is one where things that didn't use to bother us now bother us. We might be tempted to think that we are becoming worse and worse Christians, when what is actually happening is that you are becoming more and more aware of your sin. This is the nature of the Holy Spirit's work in us. He deals with the big things first, and then works on smaller and smaller things. Yes, we might be uncomfortable in realizing the full depth of our sin. Yet we must realize that the Holy Spirit is working in all of this. Do not despair, therefore. Instead, repent continually of those sins, and strive against sin with the help of all the grace that is present with you. This will be a great encouragement to us all, to know that God is working in us.