

3. Reigning Over Your Soul The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-30)

In our third study of the Sermon on the Mount, we come to one of the most useful portions of Scripture in the New Testament. Jesus gives practical instructions on how we should not only conduct ourselves but also how we should think and where our behavior truly starts. The Lord gets to the heart of the matter by focusing on the actual change that must first take place in a person's heart. This is where God meets us. The child of God needs to learn how to align our hearts with the heart of the Father. The Book of Proverbs tells us, “**Keep your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life**” (Proverbs 4:23 ESV). The springs of our lives begin in the decision center and thoughts. In the Old Testament, the word heart (*levav*) is used consistently wherever thought and intent are implied. The Hebrew word for soul (*nephesh*—literally, *to breathe*) is used for the whole being, both the body and thought. Many Scriptures show that heart, mind, and thought are linked to the soul, and in some places, they are used interchangeably.

What is the Soul?

Growing up as a child in England, I used to get some picture comics each week. My favorites were *Beano* and *Dandy*. When Dennis the Menace, one of the characters in the comic, had a decision to make as to being good or doing bad, he would have a comic demon show up alongside him with horns on his head, cloven feet, and carrying a pitchfork. He would always be pictured as saying something to try to coerce Dennis the Menace to do something bad, while there would always be a saintly figure on the other side of him in a white cloak with a ring above his head, reminding him that he must forgive and do good. These comics illustrate the battle that goes on in our minds and inner beings as to who we will listen to and obey while we live in this sinful world.

This inner part of us, the immaterial part of man, our minds, will, emotions, and conscience, is what Scripture refers to as the soul of man. If we listen to the dark thoughts, our souls will be shaped and conformed to dark spirits that operate in the invisible realm. This is what King David referred to in his famous Shepherd Psalm 23: “**He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake**” (Psalm 23:3, ESV, Emphasis added). Perhaps you have been through dark times when you had no peace, and your thoughts were constantly under the oppression of the evil one. I trust that you have begun to walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, for there is no one who can restore your soul, mind, will, and emotions like the Lord Jesus. How does the Lord Jesus bring peace to a troubled soul? First of all, we totally abandon ourselves to the Lord Jesus, and then He begins the process of restoration and transformation. The Sermon on the Mount is about learning to walk with Christ and not grieving the Holy Spirit of God, who comes to live within the believer. The Lord Jesus goes beyond the outside sins to the roots of where the sin starts. He talks about the kind of anger that demeans another's character:

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that **everyone who is angry** with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the

council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny (Matthew 5:21-26; Emphasis added).

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day buttressed the things they taught by quoting different rabbis, but Jesus spoke under His own authority, saying, “I say to you.” This speaking under His own authority so angered the Jewish teachers that at one point, they responded to the Lord, saying, “Are you greater than our father, Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?” If Jesus were not God in the flesh, this speaking under His own authority would have been blasphemous to the Jews.

The Anger that Leads to Murder

The Lord had a way of getting beyond surface issues to getting to the root of problems that affect us at the core of our being. It was a terrible thing to commit the sin of murder, but the Lord Jesus condemned even mulling over or thinking of violence to another. Sinful acts are first committed in the mind and heart of the individual. It is there that choices are weighed, and a decision is made whether the thought is to be acted upon. William Barclay, in his commentary, describes this spiritual battle in this way:

Plato likened the soul to a charioteer whose task it was to drive two horses. The one horse was gentle and biddable and obedient to the reins and to the word of command; the other horse was wild, untamed, and rebellious. The name of the one horse was reason; the name of the other was passion. Life is always a conflict between the demands of the passions and the control of the reason. The reason is the leash that keeps the passions in check. But *a leash may snap at any time*. Self-control may be for a moment off its guard—and then what may happen? So long as there is this inner tension, this internal conflict, life must be insecure. In such circumstances there can be no such thing as safety. The only way to safety, Jesus said, is to eradicate the desire for the forbidden thing for ever. Then and then alone life is safe.¹

There is a common ideology today, which is to “*Follow your heart.*” As a Christian, can you see pitfalls to that approach in life?

When a person receives the gift of new life in Christ, the Spirit of God enters their life and begins a process of transformation of their inner man, their character. I have found that the Holy Spirit, in His molding and shaping ministry within us, will often put His finger on certain aspects of our character. Let me give you an example by being transparent about my early life as a young believer in Christ. When I came to Christ at the age of 23, I was a commercial fisherman working with my father on his boat off the coast of Harwich, England. When a man is away from

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Matthew, Vol 1*. Printed by Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. Page 136-137.

women and children, and among other men of the world, often the worst from within is given full vent. Commercial fishing was a hazardous and high-stress job, and many things could happen that would cause friction between co-workers. The foul language was often thick, and tempers would fray easily. I remember one time when my brother, a year older than me and working with us, was known by many to be a bully; he was using my shoulder as a punchbag, practicing his boxing skills. I cannot remember if I was a Christian at the time, but I do remember being so angry with him that I charged at him and tried to throw him off the boat into the River Deben near Felixstowe, Suffolk. The River Deben is well known as one of the fastest rivers in England, especially at the river entrance. If I had succeeded in throwing him overboard, the fast-flowing river would have sucked him under and killed him.

Whenever I am tempted to allow my anger to arise, I think of that day when I could have thrown my brother over the side of the boat. Several years ago, I visited a friend of mine who had a hole in the wall of his living room. When I asked him why he didn't fill it in and paint over it, he replied that he kept the hole there to remind him of the time he got so angry with his wife that he threw a knife at her, missed, and the blade stuck in the wall. He needed the reminder that his anger must be held in check. He wasn't married for long. His wife soon left him, with all the hurt and baggage that came with losing his family.

Is it Sinful to be Angry?

It is not wrong to be angry. There is a righteous anger that the people of God should experience. The Apostle Paul wrote, "**In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry**" (Ephesians 4:26). What Paul was saying is that it is acceptable to be angry at the injustices that go on, but do not let your anger become something that stays with you any length of time. There should be righteous indignation in us when we see the rights of the poor trampled on and when we see or read about innocent children and the weak being hurt and taken advantage of. Jesus was angry at the abuse of the sick by the religious elite and their hardness of heart:

He entered again into a synagogue; and a man was there whose hand was withered. They were watching Him to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse Him. He said to the man with the withered hand, "Get up and come forward!" And He said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?" But they kept silent. After looking around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched it out, and his hand was restored (Mark 3:1-5, Emphasis added).

What was it about this situation that made Jesus angry?

When Jesus came into the temple at Jerusalem and saw the Court of the Gentiles made into a marketplace for selling sheep and doves and His people being extorted to pay vast sums of money to buy an acceptable lamb for the Passover supper, He wasn't furious or enraged at what He witnessed, but His anger was controlled as He took time to make a whip from some ropes and use it to chase the sellers of merchandise out of the temple, and overturning their tables, saying,

“Get these things out of here. Stop turning my Father’s house into a marketplace” (John 2:13-16).

The kind of anger that is sinful is that which is uncontrolled and causes one to brood and seethe over the sense of being slighted or one’s pride being hurt, the kind of anger that took control of me to desire to throw my brother over the side of my father's fishing boat. Suppose continual thoughts of anger are not let go. In that case, they can become a root of bitterness that will grow up and defile many (Hebrews 12:15). One who cannot control his anger will grieve the Holy Spirit, and His precious presence and anointing will lift as it did when Samson had his hair cut (Judges 16:16-21). Thank God, though, He will never withdraw His Spirit from us, but we can lose that closeness to God that the psalmist spoke of: **“Hide not your face from your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to answer me”** (Psalm 69:17). The prophet Isaiah also spoke of Israel losing the special presence of God in this way, **“...you have hidden your face from us, and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities”** (Isaiah 64:7).

At the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord shared the inner be-attitudes of the man who walks with God. At the end of His opening statements, Jesus warned that if His disciples truly lived in the way of the beatitudes, they would be persecuted, as He was persecuted. The enemy of our souls, the evil one, would like to see us consumed with hatred, bitterness, and anger toward those who attack us. Many times, those who persecute the people of God do not understand why they are doing it. It could be that even during the attacks, God is convicting them. It would be easy to allow our anger to arise against those persecutors, but this is not the way of the Lord; we are to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). We never know when God will take an enemy like Saul, who persecuted Stephen to death and make them into a leader of the church, such as the change that came when he repented and became the apostle Paul (Acts 7:55-58). We will gain a reward if we can have an attitude of meekness when we are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. When Jesus was attacked and beaten, He turned the other cheek and did not retaliate (Luke 22:63-65).

The rabbis taught that if you murdered someone, you would be liable for judgment, but Jesus went further, saying that anger and insulting behavior toward our fellow man will endanger the inner man, our soul. There is an anger that can take hold of a man and progress to hatred, bitterness, resentment, and, yes, even murder. The actress Carrie Fisher is credited as saying, “Resentment is like swallowing deadly poison and expecting the other person to die.” The enemy of our soul gains an advantage over us when our anger and resentment overcome us to the point where we cannot control the bitterness of our soul we begin to experience. If you are a believer, the Holy Spirit within us will be faithful to warn us of rising anger. We call it becoming hot under the collar, and possibly the hair on the back of our head begins to give us a warning bell. There will always be a choice of response at that time, whether we will respond like Jesus modeled to us or whether we will give ourselves to the anger and be overcome by it.

The Lord then focused on what to do when the enemy has put distance between brothers and sisters in the Lord. We must remember that we are in a spiritual war, and our enemy will try to bring disunity to a body of believers to weaken the power of the church. If we are angry with our brother for any reason, we are not to sweep it under the carpet as if it didn’t happen, but before we even go to the Lord in worship, we are to humble ourselves and go to our brother and get it

right with him, then come back to the place of worship: **leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:24).**

Satan, the accuser of the brethren, will enjoy the disunity between believers in a church. He cannot stand it when we agree with the accuser and humble ourselves, repent, and ask for forgiveness of our brother. Some of my best times of knowing that I have pleased the Lord have been times when I have got something right in a relationship. Humility is good for the soul.

The Lord also talked about character assassination, **“whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (v. 22).** Sometimes, when we are angry, words that demean another's character can be spoken. The Greek word *móros* is translated into English as “fool,” but it can also mean dull, stupid, and foolish. It was a word used to criticize a person’s mental ability, as well as his character. We have a saying in England, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” That is such a lie. Words can be like barbs stuck in us from our childhood, attacking our character from influential people we looked up to that have wounded us within. Jesus said these kinds of words that hurt our spirit are liable to judgment by God. What are examples today of words that have wounded us? "You'll never amount to anything!" "You're just like your father!" "You're an idiot!" "The apple never falls far from the tree!" If you have heard words such as these or similar words spoken to you, I'd suggest a time of prayer to break the spiritual power of words that have wounded you at the level of your inner man, your spirit.

What are the warning signs for you when you feel anger is rising in you, and what strategies do you employ to overcome anger?

Jesus clarifies what it means to walk by the Spirit and not the letter of the law. At the beginning of His sermon, the Lord talked about the be-attitudes that will enable us to walk in close relationships and not grieve the Holy Spirit or quench His fire. The Pharisees thought of themselves as righteous and going to heaven, but in His extraordinary grace, the Lord began to point out a higher standard of righteousness than what the Pharisees held to. It was probably shocking to the crowd that day on the hillside to hear the Lord talk about the scribes and Pharisees, warning them that outward righteousness was not enough. Jesus said, **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).** If we want to walk with Christ and not grieve the Holy Spirit, we must go further than the outward act, and examine the root of murder at the thought level before it is conceived. What grieves the Holy Spirit is brooding over anger and thoughts of hate toward another.

The Lord now took it a step further, bringing out into the open the thoughts that cause adultery, a sin punishable in Israel with stoning to death:

Living Pure in an Age of Sensuality

With the crowds listening to His every word, Jesus now turns to clarify the Beatitude on purity: **“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (v. 8).** The world system we live in assaults our inner thought life daily. This is not just our carnal world at work against us; it is a demonic strategy. The enemy knows that we will find it difficult to walk in obedience to the Spirit when

we have images of infidelity and lust finding a home in our inner man. Nothing happens in the physical realm without it being first conceived in the imagination/vision centers of the inner man, the mind. God has created us with the ability to “see” things before we construct something new.

What architect hasn't first seen the building with his mind's eye before he puts pen to paper? Don't you think the Wright brothers first “saw” in their mind's eye what their airplane would look like flying through the air? The evil demonic spirits that seek to manipulate minds want to pollute the soul of a person by emptying their garbage within us. We are naïve to think that the accumulation of evil thoughts and pictures makes no difference to our character. The more a person gives themselves to sinful images and thoughts, the worse the pollution of their character becomes. The act of adultery gives in to a lifetime of regret and guilt and empowers demonic spirits to influence our inner man.

27“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ 28But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell (Matthew 5:27-30).

The Lord encourages us to close all the gates that we open to attacks by demonic spirits. If your “eyegate” has been used to put images of lust in your imagination, then cut the root of those images by repentance. Make a covenant with God not to go to the places where you have fallen into sin. There are three sources of temptation: our desires (the flesh), worldly influences, and demonic deception and temptation. From the book of James, we are warned:

...But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:13-15.)

Jesus' instruction to tear out your eye or cut off your hand if it causes you to sin is a deliberate exaggeration called hyperbole—his hyperbolic figure of speech points to severe, uncompromising self-control and self-denial. Lust begins first with the eyes but then is nurtured in the imagination center of the mind, and our lower nature, the carnal mind, takes over and stimulates us to progress to sin.

Indeed, for most people, Television, with its programming, can be significantly used by the enemy to desensitize us and corrupt the vision center of the inner self. Be sensitive to the responses of the body to things that are seen via the programming. For instance, if your heart begins to race when a horror program comes on, be aware and respond accordingly to the prompting of the Holy Spirit warning you of danger to your soul, not to allow it to settle and find a home. If you are stimulated by seeing a person of the opposite sex on Television, respond appropriately to the Spirit's warning. Be careful to keep the vision center of your heart free from the programming by the evil one. Author John Stott writes:

What does this involve in practice? Let me elaborate and so interpret Jesus' teaching: "If your eye causes you to sin because temptation comes to you through your eyes (objects you see), then pluck out your eyes. That is, don't look! Behave as if you had actually plucked out your eyes and flung them away and were now blind and so could not see the objects which previously caused you to sin. Again, if your hand or foot causes you to sin, because temptation comes to you through your hands (things you do) or your feet (places you visit), then cut them off. That is: don't do it! Don't go! Behave as if you had actually cut off your hands and feet, and had flung them away, and were now crippled, and so could not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin. That is the meaning of mortification. Behave as if you actually cut off your hands and feet, and flung them away, and were crippled, and so could not do the things or visit the places which previously caused you to sin. That is the meaning of "mortification."²

Of course, we must recognize the absolute necessity of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to help us reign over the desires of our souls. Our sanctification is the job of the Holy Spirit, but we decide who to yield to. These little decisions, day by day, moment by moment, define our thoughts, our intentions, our will, and ultimately, our acts.

Our role is not simply passive. One of the hardest things to do is to "not think about something." Have you ever tried to do this? Instead, replace unwanted thoughts with good ones; think about what inspires and lifts you. Be filled with the Word of God and the Spirit. When you do the simple revealed will of God as put forth in Scripture, God will continue to lead you and reveal His will more specifically. If you are faithful in the small things, He will continue to show you more.

Let me ask you, is there anyone you have wronged that you need to seek forgiveness from? Is there anyone who has wronged you, and you have nursed that hurt, allowing a root of bitterness to grow? Jesus is very clear in the verses we have read (Matt. 5:23-36) that if we have a wall of separation due to an offense, we need to go to that person and seek forgiveness. We also need to forgive others and let God deal with any roots of bitterness in our hearts. This does not always require us to go to the other person. In fact, many people who offend us in some way may not even be aware of the offense. Our forgiveness can be a simple act of prayer and letting go as well as we are able. Make this decision with your will and trust God to do the rest. Some emotional pain only goes away with time, but in our thought life, we can still choose to honor God and forgive. This can be a painful process, for we will not always get an apology from the one who has injured us. But if you want to experience more of God, more of His presence and reality in your life, more of His peace and joy, you must remove bitterness from your heart.

Our vertical relationship with God will not be as it should be if our horizontal relationship with others is not as it should be. We can try and ignore it, but sooner or later, we must deal with it if we want to move on in our Christian journey. I encourage you today to take some time and ask the Holy Spirit if there is anyone you need to forgive or seek restoration with.

² John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 89.

There is no grudge, no opinion, no justification that is worth sacrificing your inheritance in Christ. That is, do not let something such as a root of bitterness affect your life to the point where you miss out on all that God wants to give you and all that He wants to do through your life. Let grace win! The choice is ours.

I would encourage all of us to always keep the end in view—live life so that when you come to your death bed, there will be no regrets. Jesus offers us a break from the way we have always done things, and the day to change your thinking and actions can start today. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com