

5:21 *You have heard*- Jesus was addressing the illiterate poor. Elsewhere, to the educated and literate, He says that they are aware that "It is *written*". Here He quotes both one of the ten commandments and also the tradition of the elders. We need to reflect upon the implications of the fact that the vast majority of the early Christians were illiterate. Literacy levels in first century Palestine were only 10% at the highest estimate. Some estimate that the literacy level in the Roman empire was a maximum of 10%, and literacy levels in Palestine were at most 3%. Most of the literate people in Palestine would have been either the wealthy or the Jewish scribes. And yet it was to the poor that the Gospel was preached, and even in Corinth there were not many educated or "mighty" in this world within the ecclesia. Notice how the Lord said to the Pharisees: "Have you not *read*?" (Mk. 2:25; Mt. 12:5; 19:4), whilst He says to those who responded to Him: "You have *heard*" (Mt. 5:21,27,33). His followers were largely the illiterate. As the ecclesial world developed, Paul wrote inspired letters to the ecclesias. Those letters would have been *read* to the brethren and sisters. Hence the great importance of 'teachers' in the early churches, those who could faithfully read and transmit to others what had been written.

5:21-24 We are all brothers and sisters, each of us adopted into the Divine family, each of us freed slaves, rejoicing in that pure grace. Most times the NT speaks of 'brothers', it is in the context of tensions between people (see Mt. 5:21-24, 43-48; 7:1-5; 18:15-35). We can't separate ourselves from our brethren any more than we can from our natural families. Once a brother, we are always a brother. No matter what disappointments and disagreements we may have, we are baptized into not only the Lord Jesus personally, but also into a never ending relationship with each other. We cannot walk away from it.

5:22 *But I say...* Having quoted one of the ten commandments, Jesus implies that His teaching now supersedes them. See on 5:1.

*Without a cause*- the Greek is always translated elsewhere 'vainly', the idea being 'in vain', 'without an effect'. Anger which doesn't achieve anything positive is wrong. God's anger is creative- e.g. the 'anger' of His judgment through the flood brought about the salvation of the faithful. Anger therefore is not in itself wrong. The motives are all important.

*Raca*- One of the major themes of the Lord's teaching in the sermon on the mount was the need to respect others; to see the value and meaning of persons. Indeed, it can rightly be said that all sin depersonalizes another person. Sin is almost always against persons. Relentlessly, ruthlessly, the Lord drives deeper, and yet deeper, into the very texture of human personality in demanding that, e.g., we are not even angry with others, lest we effectively murder them. To say "Raca" to your brother was to commit sin worthy of serious judgment, He taught (Mt. 5:22). "Ra-ca" was the sound made when a man cleared his throat to spit, and it was a term of abuse in earlier

Semitic languages. To despise your brother, to disregard his importance as a person, was to be seen as an ultimate sin. In this light we should seek to avoid the many terms of abuse which are so common today: "a right idiot" etc. The Law taught that one should not curse a deaf person. Think what this really means. Surely the essence of it is that we should never be abusive, in any form, to or about anyone, even if it is sure that they will never know or feel our abuse.

Every word will be judged (Mt. 12:36), and in some cases by words we will be justified and by our speech we will be condemned. So we must speak as those who will be judged for what we speak (James 2:12). The man who *says* to his brother 'Raca' or 'Thou fool' is in real danger of hell fire (Mt. 5:22). The tongue has the power to cast a man into hell fire (James 3:5,6)- some may be condemned for what they have said, perhaps connecting with how the beast is thrown into the fire of destruction because of his words (Dan. 7:11,12). Thus there is a link between the judgment of the unworthy and that of the world. The process of condemnation will remind the wicked of all their hard words and hard deeds (Jude 15). Yet now, we can speak words all too easily. Yet we talk and speak as those whose words will be taken into account at the last day. This little selection of passages is powerful- or ought to be. There is reason to think that specific record is kept of incidents, and in some form there will be a 'going through' of them. Thus when self-righteous Jews told their brethren "Stand by yourself, come not near me, for I am holier than you", God comments that "This is written before me... I will recompense" (Is. 65:5,6).

*Fool*- His standards were sometimes unbelievably high. Whoever called his brother a fool (Gk. *more*-a moron, but implying a rebel, an apostate- Ps. 78:8; Jer. 5:23 LXX) was liable to eternal condemnation by Him. John Stott claims that the Greek may directly transliterate the Hebrew word *mara* (a rebel or apostate) (6). The fact that calling our brother a 'fool' warrants definite condemnation surely implies of itself that the term meant that the fool would be condemned at judgment day. If we condemn others, even if they are to be condemned, then we shall be condemned. That is the Lord's message. We must remember that in Hebrew thought, to pronounce a curse upon a person was seen as highly meaningful and likely to come about. To declare someone as condemned at the future judgment seat would therefore have had a huge psychological effect upon the person. They would have felt that they really would be condemned. The evil practice of disfellowshipping individuals, implying implicitly and at times explicitly that they have no place in the body of Christ, can have the same effect.

When the Lord spoke about calling your brother a fool being the same as murdering him (Mt. 5:22; 1 Jn. 3:15), He may well have been thinking of the passage in Leviticus 19:16-18: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people... thou shalt not hate thy neighbour in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise (frankly, NIV) rebuke thy neighbour... thou shalt not avenge nor bear any grudge... but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself". The fact this passage is expanded upon so many times in Proverbs would indicate that gossip was as major a problem among the old Israel as it is among the new. But notice the fine psychology of the Spirit here: gossip in the church is related to having a grudge, to hating your neighbour in your heart, to not loving your neighbour as you love yourself (and we are *very* conservative about our own

failings). To hate your brother in your heart, to gossip about him, was and is as bad as murdering him. And this same connection between gossip and murder is made in the prophets (Ez. 22:9 cp. Prov. 26:22). But the Law provided a way out. If you had something against your brother, frankly tell him about his failure, *so that* you would not hate him in your heart. If we don't do this, or try to get someone else to do it, we will end up hating our brother in our heart and we will gossip about him.

*In danger of-* The Greek doesn't imply a mere possibility, but rather, that such a person will receive the threatened judgment.

*The judgment... the council... hell fire-* "The council" refers to the Sanhedrin; but you didn't come before them for muttering 'Raca'. The Lord surely meant that such would come before the Heavenly council, of Angels. For this was a well-known, Old Testament based idea- that there is a Heavenly council of Angels. And Christ will come with the Angels with Him to judge us. So the rejected will first come before the Lord, then the Angelic council, and then condemnation. It could be argued that calling a brother 'Raca' and being angry at him without a cause would lead to discussion about this at the day of judgment; but not condemnation ['hell fire', Gehenna]. Only pronouncing a brother a 'fool' , i.e. positively condemned and not to enter God's Kingdom, would lead to that condemnation. There appears to be a three stage progression here from judgment / discussion to council (Gk. *sanhedrin*), to condemnation in Gehenna. It could be that the three ideas are all parallel. But it's tempting to see them rather as a progression, and to note the similarity with the three stage progression of Mt. 18:15-17, where in case of interpersonal conflict there was firstly a private reasoning with the brother, then bringing the church together to discuss the case (cp. the Sanhedrin), and then treating the person as a sinner. However, the surrounding context of Mt. 18:15-17 suggests to me that the Lord spoke all that tongue in cheek and did not intend it to be obeyed literally. For the question of the context is 'If my brother sins against me'. The Lord outlines the three step scenario- and then says that if your brother sins against you, forgive him 70 x 7, that is, even if his repentance seems less than credible, without seeking to test the legitimacy of his repentance. The three stage process was well known in Judaism, and the connection with Mt. 5:22 shows that in the Lord's thinking, it was an attempt to reflect the judgment and condemnation of God in the community of believers today. And that is precisely what the Lord implores us *not* to do (especially in Mt. 7:1). *We* are not to attempt to mimic Heaven's judgment and condemnation in our encounter with our brethren in this life. There are churches and groups who seek to follow Mt. 18:15-17 to the letter, claiming they are being Biblical in their approach. But some more research would indicate that perhaps by doing so they are doing exactly what the Lord did not want us to do, and by doing so may be placing themselves in danger of condemnation.

*5:23 Therefore-* The link with :22 is not immediately apparent. The idea seems to be that we should reconcile with our brother in order to avoid the temptation to unwarranted anger with our brother, muttering 'raca' about him, or pronouncing him a condemned fool. If we are unreconciled, even if the situation is our brother's fault because *he* has something against *us*, then

we are liable to the temptation to become wrongly aggressive and condemnatory towards him. And this is a significant part of spiritual life- getting ourselves into an environment of thought and situation with others where temptation will not press so strongly upon us. It's easy to leave situations unreconciled, but time does not actually heal them, and the situations lead to temptations towards aggression and judgmental attitudes which may lead to our condemnation.

*Something against you-* I'd always read this, or perhaps glanced over it, as saying that I shouldn't offer my gift on the altar if *I* had something against my brother, but I should reconcile with him; but seeing *I* have nothing against anyone, well I can just go on in serving the Lord. There may be others who have a problem with me, but then, that is for them to sort out with me. But no. The Lord is saying: 'If your brother has something *against you*; if the fault is *his*... then *you* take the initiative and try to reconcile it, before doing anything else'.

5:24 *Leave there your gift-* The only Old Testament case of an interrupted sacrifice was Cain and Abel. Yahweh told Cain that if he would 'do well', then his sacrifice would be accepted, and Yahweh appears to suggest an animal for Cain to offer (Gen. 4:7)- on this basis I would suggest that the sacrificial meeting was interrupted by Cain murdering Abel. The Lord also may have in view the way that a thief or deceiver could repent by putting things right with his brother *and then* offering a sacrifice (Lev. 6:4-6). The Lord is assuming that we are guilty- and this is part of the hyperbole. If you have a relationship breakdown with your brother, then you are guilty. That's the hyperbole; we are not always guilty, but the Lord is making the point that we simply must do all within our power to reconcile, with a sense of pounding urgency. Refusal to talk to our brethren is absolutely not the right way. The Lord also surely has in mind the teaching that the sacrifice of the wicked is unacceptable (Prov. 15:8; 21:27). Again the hyperbolic point is that we should act as if we are the guilty party in the case of relationship breakdown, and act with urgency to put things right. For time never heals in these cases- the longer the situation continues, the harder it is to ever resolve. Perhaps in turn Paul alludes to these things by urging us to examine ourselves (and his context is to examine our attitude to our brother) before we make the sacrifice at the Lord's table in the breaking of bread (1 Cor. 11:27,28)- 'the Lord's table' was another way of speaking about the altar, thus making the breaking of bread meeting the equivalent of offering sacrifice under the Old Covenant.

*Reconciled to your brother-* Particularly in that watershed night of wrestling, Jacob was our example. The Lord taught that we must all first be reconciled with our brother before we meet with God with our sacrifices (Mt. 5:24)- an obvious allusion to Jacob's reconciliation with Esau in his heart, and then meeting with God. We really must *all* go through that process, whether in one night or a longer period. Reconciliation with our brother is required before acceptably meeting God. And yet many if not most die unreconciled with someone. This is one window onto the necessity of the judgment seat- it is for our benefit rather than the Lord's. There we will become reconciled to our brethren as we observe their judgments, realizing why they were as

they were, and perceiving our own desperate need for grace. The tough alternative to this suggestion is that those who refuse to reconcile with their brethren in this life shall not therefore meet the Lord acceptably. Now we perhaps understand better what Paul meant when he urged us "as much as lies in *you*" to live at peace with all men (Rom. 12:18). Given that Christ can come at any moment, or our lives end, there is an urgency in all this. Which lead the Lord to urge us to reconcile "quickly" with our brother at any cost (:25). See on :25 *lest at any time*.

*5:25 Adversary*- The context of the preceding verses imply this is our brother. The Lord recognized there would be satans and personal adversaries within His ecclesia.

*Quickly*- We must agree with our adversary quickly, for we are on our way to judgment (Mt. 5:25). The call of the Gospel is effectively a call to go to judgment. If we truly perceive this, and our coming need for the utmost grace, we will settle our differences with our brethren- "quickly". The whole Kingdom of God is likened to the parable of the virgins about the judgment (Mt. 25:1). We are *speeding* towards judgment, therefore we should watch with urgency what manner of people we are (2 Pet. 3:11,12). This urgency of our approach to preaching is in harmony with the generally urgent call to spiritual life which there is everywhere in the Lord's teaching. He gives the impression that we are living life on a knife edge. He saw men as rushing to their destruction. We are the accused man on the steps of the court, whose case is hopeless. Now is the very last moment for him to settle up with his brother (Mt. 5:25 cp. Lk. 12:58). We're like the unjust steward, with a knife at our throat because all our deceptions have been busted. *Everything* is at risk for the guy. Life in prison, goodbye to wife and kids, poverty... stretch out before him. He *must* get right with his brethren by forgiving them their debts. We can't come before God with our offering, i.e. our request for forgiveness, if our brother has any complaint against us regarding unforgiveness (Mt. 5:23). Forgiving each other is as important as that. As we judge, so we will be judged. Our attitude to the least of the Lord's brethren is our attitude to Him. There are likely no readers who don't need this exhortation- to ensure that they have genuinely forgiven all their brethren, and that so far as lies within them, they are at peace with all men. At any moment the bridegroom may return... so have your lamp burning well, i.e. be spiritually aware and filled with the Spirit. Put on your wedding garment, the righteousness of Jesus, before it's too late (Mt. 22:11-13). He's just about to come. The judge stands before our door, as James puts it.

*While you are in the way*- The Lord seems to have in mind Joseph's admonition to his brothers to not fall out whilst in the way together, but to abide under the deep impression of his grace towards them (Gen. 45:24).

*Lest at any time*- The idea seems to be 'In case he...', or even perhaps stronger, implying 'because he will...'. Surveying the NT usage of the term, it generally seems to imply that 'this will be the case'. The idea is that if you have an adversary and do not reconcile with him, then you will be

found guilty. The facts of the case don't come into it- if you are unreconciled, then you are guilty. Thus hyperbole is to reinforce the point made in :24- that reconciliation is so vital. There is of course the unspoken rider, that we must be reconciled "as much as lies in you" (Rom. 12:18). Paul died apparently unreconciled to many brethren- they in Asia had turned away from him personally (note the irony, that they 'turned away; (2 Tim. 1:15) from the one who had 'turned them away' from idols (Acts 19:26)), although some of the believers in Asia are addressed positively by the Lord Jesus in the letters of Rev. 2 and 3. But the point of the Lord's hyperbole is that those unreconciled to their brethren will be tempted to get into aggressive and condemnatory attitudes which may well lead to their exclusion from the Kingdom. And therefore He uses this hyperbole- that the unreconciled will be certainly found guilty and condemned, simply because they are unreconciled and have adversaries amongst their brethren.

*Deliver you-* The implication is that our brother has the power to deliver us to judgment, or not. Again we see how reconciliation is a choice; it is in our power to bring our brother to judgment for certain things, and that process might even lead to his condemnation. But, the metaphor implies, we can *not* be adversarial, reconcile, and therefore our brother will not come to judgment for being unreconciled with us.

*The judge-* The synagogue official. Luke seems to translate the Palestinian style of things into terms which were understandable by a Roman audience. Thus Lk. 6:47; 11:33 speak of houses with cellars, which were uncommon in Palestine; and in Lk. 8:16; 11:33 of houses with an entrance passage from which the light shines out. The synagogue official of Mt. 5:25 becomes the "bailiff" in Lk. 12:58. In Palestine, the cultivation of mustard in garden beds was forbidden, whereas Lk. 13:19 speaks of mustard sown in a garden, which would have been understandable only to a Roman audience. It seems in these cases that inspiration caused Luke to dynamically translate the essence of the Lord's teaching into terms understandable to a non-Palestinian audience. Even in Mt. 5:25 we read of going to prison for non-payment of debts, which was not the standard Jewish practice. Imprisonment was unknown in Jewish law. The point of all this is to show that we must match our terms and language to our audience.

*Judge... officer... prison-* There will be degrees of punishment. For some, the judge will pass them to the officer, who will cast them into prison (i.e. condemnation). For others, the judgment will pass them to the council and from there to hell fire (Mt. 5:21-25). Although the wages of sin will still be death at the judgment, it will be a "sorcer punishment" for those under the New Covenant than those under the Old. Because there are, in some way, degrees of sin, there must also be degrees of punishment (2 Chron. 28:13,22; 1 Cor. 6:18; Lev. 5:18 note "according to thy estimation"; Judas had a "greater sin" than Pilate, Jn. 19:11). The punishment of the wicked at judgment will somehow take this into account. If the rejected are destroyed together (Mt. 13:30) and yet there are varying degrees of punishment, it follows that the punishment must be on a mental level; and "gnashing of teeth" certainly fits in with this suggestion. The progression judge-officer-prison is similar to judgment-council-Gehenna condemnation in :22. I suggested that this may refer to the stages of the judgment process for the condemned at the last day, with

unresolved sin being passed further on to others [Angels?] to consider. I suggested also that perhaps judgment and council may refer to unresolved sins being referred to more serious processes of judgment, out of which we may still emerge 'saved', but have eternally learnt our lesson. The same idea may be here- and even the final 'prison' can be exited, although at great cost to us (although on the other hand, a similar metaphor is used in Mt. 18:34 for the unforgiving debtor who is cast into prison and tormented "until he should pay all that was due". This could be speaking of condemnation). These metaphors may all be speaking about the learning process through which the unreconciled may have to pass at judgment day.

The rejected amongst the people of God will in some ways share the condemnation of the world which they loved. It may be that there will be different geographical areas of punishment; some are cast into fire, others into outer darkness, into prison (Mt. 5:25)... or are these simply saying that there will be different kinds of punishment? Or are they different figures for the same thing? Whatever, the sense that the day is drawing near should find expression in the love and care we show towards our brethren. The Lord exhorts to agree with our adversary quickly, whilst we are on the way to judgment- and He says this in the context of warning us to be reconciled with our brother (Mt. 5:23,25). In the light of approaching judgment there is an urgency about our need for reconciliation both with our brother and thereby with God (is He the "adversary" in the parable?). All this talk about reconciliation is placed in the Lord's opening manifesto of His fundamental values and beliefs. It should have the same prominence in our thinking and action.

*5:27 Said by them of old time-* The Lord seems to avoid saying 'By Moses'. He seems to be stressing that the ten commandments had come down to them in oral form; and He was standing before them actually telling them new commandments. The contrast is 'They said... but I say', rather than 'Moses wrote, but I write...!'

*5:28 Looks upon a woman-* Bathsheba was "very beautiful to *look upon*" (2 Sam. 11:2). And David did just that. Our Lord surely had his eye on that passage when he spoke about him that "*looketh on* a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already" (Mt. 5:28). Jubilees 4:15,22, a commonly known book in Judaism at the Lord's time, claimed that the sons of God of Gen 6.2 were Angels who fell because they lusted with their eyes after "the daughters of men". As so often in the Bible, wrong ideas are alluded to and corrected. It was not that Angels sinned by lustful looks leading to adultery- this language is reapplied to us as humans. Looking on a woman lustfully is also the language of Job 31:1: "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?". Job recognized that if he did so, this would be the same as actually committing the deed. He says he will not look lustfully on a maid because "Is not destruction to the wicked? and a strange punishment to the *workers* of iniquity?" (Job 31:3).

Thus Job's understanding that a lustful look in the heart was working iniquity was at the basis of Christ's teaching.

*To lust-* Gk. 'to set the heart upon'. The Lord is not speaking about involuntary turning of the eyes to simply look at a woman.

*Already-* Gk. 'even now'. The suggestion is that the adultery is going to happen in real physical terms, but it happened before God at the time of fantasizing it. It seems to me that the sense of the Greek here implies that an act of actually physically committed fornication will always begin with lust for the act in the heart. This is not to say that sexual fantasy is OK and only actually performing it is sinful. But the sense of 'even now' would appear to mean that this is not what the Lord is teaching here. He is saying that acts of fornication are actually committed ahead of the act- within the human heart. Sexual fantasy about forbidden partners would surely be outlawed by the many NT commands about spiritual mindedness- e.g. "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

*5:29 Offend-* To make to stumble, not to give umbrage. The eye must surely be understood in the context of :28. It could be that the Lord specifically has sexual sin in mind. It is His form of "Flee fornication". Paul saw Mt. 5:29, 30 in a sexual context (= Col. 3:5); which fits the context of Mt. 5:28.

*Pluck it out-* The Greek word is every other time translated to save or deliver.

*Cast it -* The Lord taught that we should cut off those parts of our lives that offend us, and "cast it [away] from you"- because in the end, the whole body of the wicked person will be "cast [away] into hell" (Mt. 5:29- the same Greek word is used in both places in this same verse). What He's saying surely is that we must recognize those parts of our lives which are worthy of condemnation, and *we* must condemn them now in this life, dissociating our spiritual self from our carnal self as Paul does in Rom. 7- for this is the meaning of the figure of 'casting away'. He has just used the term in 5:13,25, and it is so often used to mean 'cast to condemnation' elsewhere too (Mt. 3:10; 7:19; 13:42,50; 18:30; Lk. 12:49; Jn. 15:6). We are to "cast out" the parts of our lives which offend us, and if we don't, we will be "cast" into condemnation at the last day (Mt. 5:29,30). The word play on "cast" is obviously intentional; the Lord clearly has the idea that we are to self-condemn those things in our lives which are sinful and worthy of condemnation. If we don't, then we will be 'cast out' in our entirety at judgment day. Sin is to be condemned; we either condemn ourselves for it now, or we will be condemned for it then.

*Perish-* The idea of self-condemnation is continued here. If we literally cut off part of our body, it perishes. If we do not, then the whole body will perish in Gehenna, the condemnation of the



last day. For God is able to destroy [s.w. to perish] the body in Gehenna (Mt. 10:28). So we are to make perish those parts of our lives which make us sin- i.e. we are to condemn them.