FIRST ANTITHESIS

Having given the proper interpretation of the Old Testament teachings summed up in the *"Beatitudes"*, having spoken to his disciples of their need to be *"salt and light"* in the world, then having stated that he did not come to abolish the law or to transform Torah but rather that he came to fulfill them, Jesus now begins to teach what we can call the *"six antitheses."*

In these antitheses he contrasts what is taught and understood of the interpretation of the law against its proper meaning. In this way, Jesus acts as the authoritative interpreter of Torah and his manner of teaching reveals him to be so.

The first of these antitheses addresses a basic commandment whose meaning would seem hardly to be debatable.

> *"You have heard that it was said to the ancients, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to the judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is filled with wrath against his brother <u>without cause</u> will be guilty in the judgment. And whoever says to his brother 'Raka,' shall be liable to the <u>ruling council of</u> the Sanhedrin. And whoever says 'Fool,' shall be liable to fiery Gehenna."*
> *Matthew 5:21-22*

This first antithesis involves one of the ten commandments.

> *"You shall not murder."*
> *Exodus 20:13*

> *"You shall not murder."*
> *Deuteronomy 5:17*

Jesus' interpretation of the command is broadened to include a heart touched with wrath against another.

Here, as elsewhere, Jesus' interpretation deepens the commandment, making the demand greater than it was *usually understood to be*. Important to note here is that the usual understanding was a shallow interpretation given its external and therefore, limited focus.

As this antithesis finds no parallel in the Gospels, Matthew draws this from his own source rather than from Mark or Q.

Orderly as always, Matthew divides this pericope into three parts:

1) the antithesis proper – *you have heard it said . . . you shall not murder.*
2) a specific illustration involving your brother – *is filled with wrath against his brother; says to his brother Raka; says to his brother Fool.*
3) a specific illustration involving "your adversary" – *be well disposed to your adversary while you are still on the way with him.*

These illustrations clarify the radical nature of the antithesis and the extent to which it involves departure from the common understanding of the law.

That *what was spoken to the ancients* probably refers to the original recipients of the Mosaic Law.

This phrase regarding the ancients does not occur in four other of the antitheses, we should presuppose its place there as well given the repeated phrase *"you have heard it said"* or *"it was said."*

This includes not only those commandments that are drawn verbatim from the Old Testament, but also those that involve interpretation or inference going beyond the letter of the Old Testament.

Thus, this interpretation and inferred understanding of the law is also regarded as ancient tradition. It is not distinct or differentiated from the actual content of the law itself.

"You have heard" is a formula employed in five of the six antitheses: not present in the third but assumed. What this formula could be translated as is *"you have received as tradition."*

The words *"you shall not murder"* are of course, verbatim from the Old Testament texts listed above, but the words that follow are not part of the original commandment but do reflect other statements in the Mosaic law.

"Shall be liable to the judgment" also occurs identically in v.22.

Two other occurrences of *"shall be liable to"* are linked with *"the Sanhedrin"* and *"to fiery Gehenna."*

The question that could be asked is are these references intended to be synonymous or to be differentiated with progressively higher penalties in mind meaning we move through three different courts, the local, the Sanhedrin, and the divine.

It could also be that the passage simply contains three expressions for the death penalty in a kind of escalating progression.

The penalty for murder was death.

Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.
Leviticus 24:17

Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.
Exodus 21:12

But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer.
The murderer shall be put to death.
Numbers 35:16

In Jerusalem the Sanhedrin was the highest court composed of seventy-one members. They would be obligated to uphold the canonical law.

Finally, the reference to *fiery Gehenna* could be viewed as eschatological thus, subjecting the one who murders to eternal judgment.

Perhaps what Matthew has in mind is that the judgments of the local and high court of the Sanhedrin anticipate the final judgment.

The point being made, however, in all these cases, is that anger, as a root of murder, deserves the same penalty in principle.

By phrasing the list as *"shall be liable to"* 1) *the judgment*, 2) *the Sanhedrin*, and 3) *fiery Gehenna*, Jesus creates an irony whereby any evasiveness or sophistry in trying to minimize the liability for murder in any case and in any court would be difficult.

> *But I say to you that everyone who is filled with wrath against his brother without cause will be guilty in the judgment. And whoever says to his brother 'Raka,' shall be liable to the ruling council of the Sanhedrin. And whoever says 'Fool,' shall be liable to fiery Gehenna."*
> *Matthew 5:21-22*

This verse begins with the statement: *"But I say to you,"* which follows up on the opening words *"you have heard that it was said,"* and reveals the unparalleled authority of Jesus.

According to the authority of Jesus, anger alone – the murdering of your brother in your heart – is a violation of God's law, placing a person in danger of judgment.

> *Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.*
> *1 John 3:15*

For Jesus, the inner attitude of a person is of supreme importance and the underlying principle guiding this antithesis is the sanctity of life sanctioned by God himself.

> *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God makes man in his own image.*
> *Genesis 9:6*

The beginning of sin has its origins in the heart. And even as that inner attitude expresses itself in trivial acts of unkindness, such as referring to one's brother as a *"Fool"*, already reveals that to God, this is a movement headed down the wrong path of condemnation.

"You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."
Matthew 12:34

Since the word *brother* is used, one may be led to believe that this is reserved for the community of faith alone. Given, however, that Jesus also says to *love one's enemies,* the antithesis should be broadened outward to all humanity.

The ethical injunction against anger may be directed to those who receive the kingdom but is also presented to those who receive the kingdom in their relations will all other human beings.

"Raka" is an Aramaic word which was used as an insult in rabbinic literature, carrying the connotation of someone being an idiot or empty-headed. Though tame by our standards, this word carried a much more objectionable insult at the time. Name calling in 1st Century Palestine was a much more serious affair due to the importance attached to names.

"Fool" could also be a transliteration of Aramaic *mora* or the Hebrew word *moreh* meaning rebel or even heretic. Its origin is possibly the Greek *moros* which means foolishness.

In any case, this is much more insulting than it seems to our hearing.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good.
Psalm 14:1 and 53:1

"Gehenna's fire" – Matthew refers to Gehenna seven times, twice as often as any other evangelist. This expression is used only by Matthew, occurring here and in 19:18. It derives from the Aramaic word *ge hinnam"* or the *Valley of Hinnom.*

And he (Josiah) defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech.
2 Kings 23:10

This was a despised place at the southwest of Jerusalem where at one time human sacrifices were offered to the god Molech and where in the later times the city's refuse was burned. The constant burning there made the valley a strong metaphor for eternal punishment.

Then the place of torment shall appear and over against it the place of rest; the furnace of hell shall be displayed, and on the opposite side, the paradise of delight.
4 Ezra 7:36

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come offer your gift.
Matthew 5:23-24

The pronoun now shifts from *"whoever"* to *"you"* which could reveal the personal nature of the accountability and application.

> *So important is the issue of anger toward a member of the community and so urgent is the need for reconciliation before one's offering to God can be acceptable that one is to interrupt the act, "leave the gift there before the altar," and immediately seek reconciliation.*
> *Hagner – Matthew, page 117*

We might expect the phrase *"your brother has something against you"* to read *"you have something against your brother."* Thus, the wording by Jesus suggests that the person offering the gift harbors some degree of anger as well.

Regardless, the point here is *be reconciled.* When reconciliation has been made, then the gift may be offered and then by implication, God will accept it.

In Judaism, reconciliation was required before an acceptable sacrifice.

> *The Most High is not pleased with the offerings of the ungodly, nor for a multitude of sacrifices does he forgive sins.*
> *Sirach 34:23*

> *With one who says: "I will sin and the I will repent, I will sin and I will repent, Heaven does not provide him the opportunity to repent, and he will remain a sinner all his days. Furthermore, for transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; however, for transgressions between a person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.*
> *Mishna Yoma 8:9*

> *and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*
> *Matthew 6:12, 14-15*

> *"Be well disposed to your adversary, and do so quickly, while you are still with that one on the road, lest your adversary hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. I say to you, emphatically, you will never get out from there until you have paid the last penny."*
> *Matthew 5:25-26*

This connects back to the idea found in v.22 *"But I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to the judgment."* Each contains the reconciliation theme.

The idea here is that one should *make friends* with their adversary. In this illustration the adversary is some kind of opponent to whom money is owed which permits him to take legal action.

Being *"on the road"* conveys the urgency of the matter and without reconciliation, the process of court proceedings will commence, and the judge will pass sentence.

The background here suggests a non-Jewish nature since Jews did not imprison for debt.

I say to you emphasizes the full punishment being handed out.

Perhaps Matthew, being a tax collector, used this illustration to appropriate his argument against anger.

Regardless of illustration, what is central here to the Gospel message is that the effect of anger requires a certain urgency.

> *In his exegesis of the truest meaning of the Mosaic commandment – and presentation of the level of righteousness required by the kingdom – Jesus goes far beyond the letter of the text (where some may have been inclined to stop). By his explication of "though shalt not murder," Jesus penetrates to the spirit of the commandment. Since the spring of a person's conduct is the heart, or inner person, the transforming power of the kingdom must be especially experienced there. Anger and insults spoken from anger are evil and corrupting, and they therefore call forth God's judgment, just as the act of murder itself does. Accordingly, the worship and service of God cannot be performed as long as anger infects the soul. Thus, the recipient of the grace of the kingdom is one who initiates and seeks reconciliation, both with members of the community of faith and with adversaries. The underlying and key message of these astonishingly authoritative words is that a person is held accountable for his or her angry thoughts, not merely for external acts of violence against others. While they are meant to be taken seriously, calling attention to the relation between the root of a tree and its fruit (to use other Matthean metaphors), they, like the antitheses that follow, function more as exhortations to a life that perfectly reflects the reality of the kingdom.*
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> *Hagner – Matthew, page 118*