

# “Matthew”

## Fall Series 1

### Lesson 7

## “Matthew 5:27-48”

**Objective:** To understand the message that Matthew meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context, in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis upon application.

**Materials:** I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Matthew, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, various modern translations, and any other sources relevant to the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding, help us make application to our current situation.

#### Procedures

1. We will begin by examining the text from the Greek text.
2. We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural, and social settings, in order to understand the message Matthew intended and that God still intends for us.
3. From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the words of Matthew, for the early disciples, then to our modern contextual framework as disciples of Jesus.
4. We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes and thoughts in order to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

## Lesson

In the second half of chapter 5, Jesus will continue His instructions in the ways of the Kingdom of heaven and contrast those with the ways that people had come to apply the Law, and the ways of the world. In the words of Jesus here, He is not telling them that the Law was wrong, what He was telling them was that they were wrong in their understanding of its message and its intent. Instead of looking for how the Law might transform the hearts of the people they looked to where the boundaries were. Really, the idea seems to be the same for most of human kind; they look for the boundaries and not to the way the Law could transform the heart and soul. They want to know where the boundary is so that they can get as close to it as possible to the boundary without crossing the line. In such instances it is possible to continue to pat oneself on the back and claim to be a good person. The message of Jesus is that this is the wrong approach. He seeks to set out the goal differently, not aiming at what is “good,” but at what is “excellent.” What is the most excellent way? To change your heart and let your heart be formed by what is truly right, and excellent is the way of Jesus.

In this section, Jesus begins by focusing on one of the ten commandments, the command that says, “Do not commit adultery.”<sup>1</sup> He calls for something that is genuine and real and does not just have the appearance of what is right and proper. He calls for a purity and righteousness that is from the heart and is not just something that has the outward appearance of goodness and righteousness. “...the visible and punishable act forbidden by the commandment is only the outward expression of an inward desire which is, in this case, adultery “in the heart” — and presumably therefore liable to the same punishment, though in this case neither the OT quotation nor Jesus’ interpretation refers explicitly to the same punishment, (which in the case of adultery was also death).”<sup>2</sup> Jesus is not saying that the one who commits adultery does not deserve death, He does appear to be saying that the one who lusts after a woman in his heart deserves death as much as the one who actually commits the action. It is not just the action that elicits the sentence of death, but the thoughts of the heart and mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18.

<sup>2</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 204.


I have heard it said that that one cannot control their thoughts. Jesus here is calling for just that. Verses 29 and 30 indicate how serious Jesus sees the issues He addresses here. I have heard many people say that Jesus is using hyperbole here. I think this is totally wrong. Jesus wants people to understand the seriousness with which they should take the commandments of God. They are not trivial, something to be winked at, or something that is incidental, or something that can be just considered status quo for humanity; therefore not crucial. I do not believe that Jesus intends exaggeration, He intends for them to think long and hard about how crucial their decisions are. I truly believe that He intends to convey to His audience that it would indeed be better to enter the reign of heaven maimed than to enter the reign of hell with a fully complete body. "As "removable" parts of the body they serve to make the point that any loss, however painful, is preferable to the total lostness of *geënnā*."<sup>3</sup>

One of the things that needs to be made clear here is that Jesus is not indicating that amputees will be raised in incomplete, or imperfect bodies.<sup>4</sup> That is not something that is in view here at

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<sup>3</sup> R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> R.T. France, The Gospel of Matthew, p. 206.



all. The focus is upon the heart, and the thoughts of our hearts.

This is the intent of the message here and, in truth, has always been the point of the message of God. He does not want people to pretend to be righteous, to pretend to be good people; He wants them to be in reality, righteous, good people. It has always, and it continues to be, about the heart; who a person genuinely is in the depths of their soul.

At 5:31-32, Jesus turns to the matter of divorce. You may wonder why Jesus focuses so much on sexual purity? I think at times we fail to recognize the deeper issue here, relationship. Each of the things that Jesus addresses in this section focuses upon relationships, and the things that break relationships. Adultery destroys trust and therefore it destroys relationship. Divorce marks the point at which people indicate quite clearly and distinctly that the relationship is over. At least one of the issues that we, as modern peoples, have done today with regard to our perceptions of marriage is taken the perspective that marriage is a legal arrangement, sanctioned, regulated, and made legal by the state. Jesus views marriage as something that is sanctioned,

regulated, and made sacred by God.<sup>5</sup> To make the focus here about sex is to remain shallow and to focus on the less significant aspect of the point being made here. The point is about relationship, about unity of purpose, about true unity, about true oneness.

In Ephesians 5:31-32, Paul will make reference to this point:

**<sup>31</sup> This is why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two of them will be one body. <sup>32</sup>**

**Marriage is a significant allegory, and I'm applying it to Christ**

**and the church.**<sup>6</sup> The word translated here as “allegory” is the Greek word **μυστήριον** (*mysterion*). There is a mystery here that is to be connected to the relationship that exists between Christ and the assembly of believers. In the midst of this mystery is the idea of relationship, and covenant. Covenant and relationship are intricately bound together throughout Scripture and at its heart, marriage is a covenant, a covenant that is not made by the authority of the State of Texas, or by a mandate from the Federal government that allows for a tax exemption. We have allowed


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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 2:24 **This is the reason that a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife, and they become one flesh.** CEB.

<sup>6</sup> CEB.

things to get all fogged up, clouded over by these confusing matters.

In Ghana, in West Africa there is in some sense less confusion. They recognize 3 different forms of marriage: 1. A legal arrangement performed by an authorized government official. 2. An arrangement of families and an agreement between 2 people performed by the chief or leader of the village or town. 3. Marriage before God that must be performed by a person who represents God and understands that the marriage vows are not just being made between 2 parties, there is a third party, a greater party involved in this covenant, and that is God Himself. This is the understanding of Jesus here as He talks about marriage. This is a covenant made before God. Two people make their vows in His presence as an irrevocable vow. The understanding is that only in death is such a vow broken. In other words, only God has the right to break such a vow. In this understanding, adultery breaks the vows and breaks the covenant made before God and is an act of unfaithfulness to the other person, but also to God. The breaking of the covenant of God then brings the sentence of death.



In the midst of this understanding of marriage is embedded a mystery connected to God and His desired relationship with His people. This is a “mystery” as Paul would indicate to the Ephesians and is still there for us to seek to understand and to live into with an ever-deepening exploration. The words of Jesus here call us into a deeper understanding of the concepts of relationship, covenant, and loyalty. All the words of Jesus are deep and searching words that call us into exploration of the depths of the nature of God and what He values. How difficult it must be for God to communicate with us as creatures that so often exhibit such limited focus and such limited attention span. Were we given all the many years of eternity to explore the nature and concepts of God they would be insufficient for the task.

At 5:33-37, Jesus explores the concept of making pledges. How much effort do we make today in order to insure that people keep the word that they give to others. We today, write long and complex documents not only for clarity of communication, but in order to insure that loopholes are few and difficult to find. Such issues are not unique to modern society and this is not merely a modern problem. Even amongst those that were fiercely religious



and distinctly conscious of the presence of God there was still concern over the making of true pledges. Amongst the ancient peoples as amongst even more modern children ways were devised by which people could say the words without the intent of honoring the words. How many children have crossed their fingers behind their back as they spoke words that they had no intention of honoring.

What may seem to be little more than child's play is in truth quite a serious business, especially when it involves keeping a pledge made to the Lord. In modern court settings there is still the practice of swearing upon the Bible, or upon another religious book. The implication being that because of the person's belief in God, or in some other deity they are more inclined to be truthful. My experience in courtroom settings, on numerous occasions, is that few people are inhibited from telling falsehoods by swearing upon the Bible. On a practical level, truth is an extremely important matter, especially when it comes to matters of relationship. Once again, we come back to the matter of relationship. This is an issue that stands at the core of community, both with God and with one another. It is of significance that it

stands here in the very first message of Jesus as He begins His ministry.

The admonition of Jesus in verse 33 reflects upon the way people in the ancient world would make pledges “solemn” by making them to the Lord. In the second instance referring to this concept, Matthew uses the word that is translated as “vow” (at other times it is translated as “incantation”) in the New Revised Standard version (*ὄρκους* - *horkous*). This is a word that carries with it the idea that, when it is used, that there is the expectation that God will punish the person if they do not follow through with the actions of their words. None of these intricate and complicated procedures, these vows, would be necessary if people just followed through and kept faith with their words. The kingdom of heaven operates on different principles than the kingdom of the world and the kingdoms of men.<sup>7</sup>

Jesus indicates that these complicated and fraught processes are not as things should be. He says one should not participate in such processes, such playing of games, but in verse 37 simply to let your “yes” mean “yes” and your “no” mean “no.”

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<sup>7</sup> R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p. 213.

He indicates that the impetus to do more than this comes from “the evil one.” It is the case that Matthew refers to Satan, or the Devil, more than does any other evangelist, or any other book of the Bible with the exception of 1 John.<sup>8</sup> I am not sure many of us consider the full implications of this failing to honor our words of pledge to others. In John’s Gospel, the implications are brought out more fully than here in Matthew. John wrote, **“You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”**<sup>9</sup>

Once again there is a connection made here that contrasts the kingdom of heaven with the kingdom of this world. The kingdom of heaven is ruled by different principles, different concepts of what is acceptable and proper than is the kingdom of Satan, the kingdom of this world. Here, at the beginning of His ministry, Jesus lays out these differences along with the challenge

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<sup>8</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Vol. 33A, in the Word Biblical Commentary series (Dallas TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1993), p. 128.

<sup>9</sup> CEB.

for His followers to begin living by the principles and ways of the kingdom of heaven now, because that kingdom comes with the coming of the Messiah. The challenge is set before the people. The challenge still sets before us today. Will we choose to live by the standards and ways of the kingdom of heaven, or will we instead live by the standards of this world that is, in truth, passing away and will, in time pass from existence? Will we live by ways and values that are temporary and fleeting, or will we live by values and in ways that proclaim our faith and trust in God and in His eternal kingdom?


Next, in verses 38-42 Jesus will deal with issues of retaliation, or what some might call retributive justice. He begins by quoting a well known principle of retribution that is found repeatedly in the Torah.<sup>10</sup> Once again, Jesus will make a contrast, this time with the formula “You have heard that it was said,” and then the formulaic saying, *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. This time Jesus does not cast what He says under the umbrella of the kingdom of heaven, He simply says, “But I say ....” The shift is

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus 21:24 **an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot**, CEB. Leviticus 24:20 **...broken bone for broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The same injury the person inflicted on the other will be inflicted on them**. CEB. Deuteronomy 19:21 **Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot**. CEB.


noticeable and stark. This begins to set the stage for what will be revealed as we move deeper into Matthew's Gospel. His words are not anything other than revolutionary and shocking. The King of kings and the Lord of lords speaks in the words passed onto us here by Matthew. In verse 39, Jesus says, "do not oppose, or resist (ἀντιστῆναι - *antistnai*) an evildoer (πονηρῶ - *ponero*)." These are perhaps words that could easily roll off of the tongue, but how tremendously difficult to follow when one feels that they have been treated to injustice at the hands of another.

Those that proclaim the Gospel have had tremendous difficulty applying the words of Jesus in real-world situations. I am reminded of a story I heard about a Methodist minister who came in the nineteenth century to the little village of Oxclose, in what is today, Washington, England. As he was preaching, he publicly rebuked a man for abusing his wife. The man took great exception to the airing of his private matters in public and confronted the preacher, in public, at one of his meetings. It is said that the brute, who had beaten his wife struck the preacher in the face and the preacher got up and walked up to the man and turned the other cheek. The brutish man then struck him again. Once



again the preacher came and faced the man and this time as he drew back to strike him again it is said that he punched him with such force that he knocked him unconscious. When the man was revived he is said to have commented, to the preacher, Jesus said to turn the other cheek. To which the preacher responded, I was fresh out of cheeks to turn.

He is then said to have rebuked the gentleman again and told them that if it came to his attention that he was being abusive to his wife again he would return and repeat his education and stop his brutish ways. As amusing as this story may sound it clearly does not live within the spirit of the words of Jesus. It is true that it may live up to the letter of what Jesus says, but it certainly does not apply the spirit of His words. The words of Jesus have very often not been applied by Christians, but Mahatma Gandhi a Hindu man said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Some would even say that he applied the words of Jesus in his nonviolent rebellion against the British Empire that broke their will to rule India. Gandhi believed in the power of nonviolent resistance against the forces of evil without having a belief in the kingdom of heaven, or in God, in the way Christians



believe. Despite this, he used this methodology to shame the British Empire into submission and to honor his demands.

Again, people have said that Jesus is here using hyperbole. In my opinion, that is reasoning that is meant to provide a loophole for those who do not wish to hear the heart of the message of Jesus. If the kingdom of heaven rules apply, violence as a form of retribution is not allowed by kingdom of heaven people. In the kingdom of heaven violence will not be permitted, nor will there be any need for it, because God will be the arbiter of justice. The challenge for us, as followers of Christ, is still very much alive. Are we going to be those who are peacemakers, or are we going to be purveyors of violence? Are we going to continue to use the tools of the enemy? How often has it been the case that people claiming to be Christians have perpetrated violence against others in the name of Christ? The crusades, the violence in Northern Ireland, and countless other acts where those who have been treated unjustly respond in violence in a way that is very much like and eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Jesus does not stop with the injustice of retributive violence alone, but with incidents of people taking others to court and

using force to illicit actions from them. The response of Jesus is to give them what they desire and to not refuse those who wish to borrow from you. Life in the kingdom of heaven is very different from life in the kingdom of this world. The call for this way of life challenges those of us who are familiar with its ways. The challenge is, will we trust God, or will we trust what we believe to be correct in our own eyes and in our wisdom. Does the dilemma sound familiar?<sup>11</sup> We each face our Garden of Eden moments. The question is, can we learn to make a better choice, can we learn to trust in God? That is the challenge that Jesus brought with His ministry, that is still the challenge that Jesus brings to us today. Through His grace, through His words, and through His continued intervention through the Holy Spirit, we continue to live in hope. Kingdom people, and kingdom living, is to be different from the way of living espoused by this world.

In verses 43 to 48, Jesus continues His teaching, this time He addresses them regarding the saying, “You must love your neighbor,<sup>12</sup> and hate your enemy.” “The latter, though not taught

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<sup>11</sup> Genesis 3:1-6.

<sup>12</sup> Leviticus 19:18 - **You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.** NRSV.




in the OT, is an inference that was commonly drawn, for example, from such passages as Pss 139:21-22; 26:5; or Deut. 7:2; 30:7. On the basis of such passages, the Qumranites explicitly taught hatred of those regarded as enemies (1QS 1:4, 10-11; 9:21-26)."<sup>13</sup> Again we find what is written in the text and what the readers considered to be a necessary inference. Jesus makes it clear that is not to be the way of those that follow Him. Instead, Jesus calls them to be like their "Father who is in heaven." He blesses both His enemies as well as those who love Him. He sends rain on both.

Jesus says at verses 46 and 47 His followers are to be different from those of the world and uses as examples some of the most-hated people in the world, tax-collectors. He also

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<sup>13</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, p. 134. cf. Psalm 139:21-22 **Don't I hate everyone who hates you? Don't I despise those who attack you? 22 Yes, I hate them—through and through! They've become my enemies too.** CEB. Deuteronomy 7:2 **once the LORD your God lays them before you, you must strike them down, placing them under the ban.g Don't make any covenants with them, and don't be merciful to them.** CEB. Deuteronomy 30:7 **The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you and chase you.** CEB. 1QS 1:4, "all that He has chosen and hate all that he has rejected; that they may abstain from all evil and" 10-11 according to his lot in God's design, and hate all the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt 11. in God's vengeance. All those who freely devote themselves to His truth shall bring all their knowledge, powers,... 9:21-26 are the rules of conduct for the Master in those times with respect to his loving and hating Everlasting hatred in a spirit of secrecy. 22. for the men of perdition! He shall leave to them wealth and earnings like a slave to his lord and like a poor man to his master.23. He shall be a man zealous for the Precept whose time is for the Day of Revenge. He shall perform the will of God in all his deeds, 24. and in all his dominion as He has commanded. He shall freely delight 25. in all that befalls him and nothing shall please him save God's will. He shall delight in all the words of His mouth and shall desire nothing except His command. He shall watch always [for] the judgement of God, 26. and shall bless his Maker [for all His goodness] and declare [His mercies] in all that befalls. He shall bless Him [with the offering] of the lips .... Translated by Geza Vermes, *The Community Rule* - <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/gopher/other/courses/rels/225/Texts/1QS>



indicates that this is the way of the nations, the Gentiles. Instead He challenges those who would follow Him to be like their heavenly Father who in His perfect nature bestows love and blessings on even those who are His enemies. How hard is that? It amazes me that there is anyone left to hear the words of Jesus after just these few words and yet, here, almost two-thousand years later, these words are still ringing in the ears of those that desire to be a part of the kingdom of heaven and leave behind the world and its ways. These words continue to challenge, at times confound, and to inspire, those seeking to walk the path of Jesus.


How different are the ways of those to called to walk this path than are those who walk the path of their own wisdom and the wisdom of the world. These words continue to convict, challenge, and inspire us to do better, to do more, to confess our need for God more passionately up to this very moment in time. The question for us today is will we truly follow Jesus or will we look for the boundaries, the loopholes that leave us unchanged and unfit for the kingdom of heaven?

# Synopsis

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In this section of Jesus great sermon on the mount, He will challenge His listeners to see, and to begin to follow, the ways of the kingdom of heaven. He begins by challenging one of the most difficult and fraught topics to face humanity, the issue of adultery. The real matter is relationship and marriage, as one of the most sacred of all relationships stands as a beacon demonstrating the faithfulness that should be exhibited in all relationships, but especially those that are made before God. Jesus warns here of the dangers of failing to honor the terms of our agreements made before God.

Jesus continues in His diatribe against broken relationships by talking about divorce. How fraught a topic this still is to this day. It will illicit a panoply of responses. Jesus wants to make it clear that there is only one way that divorce is sanctioned by God. Marriage is to be a solemn and holy relationship that stands as an example of the relationship that exists between Jesus and believers. Jesus continues in His diatribe against people not keeping pledges. He challenges people to not make elaborate



pledges, but to simply let their “yes” mean “yes,” and their “no” mean “no.”

As if Jesus had not said enough to cause offense and raise controversy He continues by addressing the matter of retributive justice that called for like punishment for like offense. Jesus sets out another way that will not bring justice, but will seek peace even at the cost of justice. Is this not what God does for us in the sending of Jesus?

Finally, in this section, Jesus calls for the listeners to lay aside the hatred of enemies and to love others the way God loves people. He challenges them to treat everyone with dignity and respect and to even pray for those that harass and persecute them. Jesus calls for them to begin now to live as kingdom of heaven people.

# Main Points

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- Jesus raises the standards of what is considered sin to the thoughts of the heart.
- Jesus warns of the dangers of hell.
- Jesus teaches them that divorce is not what God wants and that faithfulness in relationship is crucial.
- Jesus teaches them that according to kingdom of heaven values there is no need for pledges or solemn agreements. “Yes” should be “yes” and “no” should be “no.”
- Jesus teaches His followers to not seek retribution from those who have wronged them.
- Jesus teaches His followers to love their enemies.

# Questions

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1. Why do you think Jesus focuses upon the issue of adultery?
2. How do you think lust is related to adultery?
3. Why do you think people consider many of the words of Jesus to be hyperbole?
4. Why do you think Jesus preaches so often about the dangers of hell?
5. How is marriage seen in our world today? As a legal contractual arrangement, or as a covenant before God? Explain.
6. How is covenant related to trust in a relationship?
7. How important for relationship is it for people to be honest and trustworthy?
8. What are some ways that people have devised to release themselves from the responsibility of keeping their word?
9. Why do you think Jesus saw it as important to speak to people regarding the way they kept their word?
10. Why do you think people want retribution?
11. Why do you think Jesus says to turn the other cheek?
12. How hard is it for you to walk away from a fight? Why?
13. What are some objections to following the words of Jesus in 5:38-42? Do you think Jesus had considered these things?
14. What are some feelings that you have about people that are your enemies?

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15. How difficult do you find it to love your enemies?
  16. What do you think the words of Jesus regarding loving enemies teaches us about God?
  17. What are some ways that living life according to kingdom of heaven values is challenging for the followers of Christ?
  18. What is the most important lesson that you can learn from Jesus in this section?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important for us to understand that relationship is a critical thing that God seeks with His children. He seeks to have relationship with them and for them to understand its importance. There is a great deal in the Bible that seeks to teach us lessons that enable true relationship. One of the closest and most sacred relationships in all of Scripture is that between a man and a woman as husband and wife. Why do you think Jesus chooses adultery, which shatters the marriage covenant, in order to teach His audience about kingdom of heaven life?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in these words expressing the desire of His heart and His desire for relationship with His children. Much of the focus of the sermon on the mount will deal with relationships between people, but there is certainly a connection between the relationship of people and their relationship with God. How do you think the words of Jesus regarding divorce relate in some way to life in the kingdom of heaven?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

Many times as people read the words of the Bible people can choose to accept some things while ignoring others. Emphasis of some things as important while considering others as less important is one way that people pick and choose what they will follow and what they will reject. It has forever been the case that this has been so. What are some ways that we can insure that we do justice to the emphasis that we should have when we read the word of God?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

The word of God is calling the people who would listen to begin to live life as kingdom of heaven people. Jesus lays out the startling differences in values and ways that exist between life in the kingdom of heaven and life in the kingdom of this world. A part of the teachings of Jesus reflects on the concept of hell. Jesus speaks about hell more than anyone else in all of Scripture. Why do you think Jesus warns His audience regarding hell so often?