

Anger

Matthew 5:21-26

Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill every jot and tittle. The blessed members of His kingdom are to be the salt of the earth, stand like a city on a hill, and shine as the light of the world in love and good works. Now He gets specific about what this means in everyday life, beginning with the sixth commandment. After the fall, murder was the foundational sin of our race. And it is the fruition of anger. If we are going to come to Christ and thrive in His kingdom, we have to deal with our anger at its root.

But I Say to You

Jesus uses an ancient method of commenting on the law that began with “You have heard that it was said” and then followed with an explanation of how to understand the issue. Sometimes He quotes the Old Testament directly, and other times distortions of it (“hate your enemy” 5:44), but He always explains how the true commandment is broken, and how to keep it, even if one has already failed. This is why the Sermon on the Mount is so life and world-transforming. Jesus meets us sinners right where we are and shows us how to take responsibility, make it right, and play a little part in bringing His kingdom from heaven to earth. In Him is found all treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and now He walks us into His vault. He quotes from the Ten Commandments, “You shall not murder”, and includes the danger of judgement for doing so, which was to be put to death (Ex. 21:12). The phrase He uses, “But I say to you”, parallels “You have heard it was said”, and it was God who said in the first place. “But I say to you” and the content that follows shows us that Jesus is the Lord. He speaks with His own authority, and not as the scribes (Matt. 7:29). To hear and recognize His teaching is the gift of God.

Escalating Anger

“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (v. 22). It’s important to note that anger itself is not the problem, but anger *without a cause*. Jesus gets angry with those who oppose healing the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Mk. 3:5). Twice He makes a whip and drives out the money changers from the temple. He pronounces “Woe to you” over and over to the scribes and Pharisees, and calls them “fools” repeatedly (Matt. 23:17, 19). When Jesus gets angry, people get healed and recover a place to worship. But when we get angry and give way to it, it escalates into violence. You might not think you are an angry person because you don’t yell at the neighbors or get in bar fights, but most anger happens at home, behind closed doors. Notice the object of anger named by Jesus: “your brother.” It’s those we are closest to—siblings, spouses, parents, children, other Christians—that we are most likely to sin against with anger. When people or things don’t go the way we want, we get angry, often in an effort to control. When someone’s volume level goes up and up, you can tell how bad they want something to change. This is where the idol of self makes a bold appearance and uses some measure of power to squash the opposition. The fundamental claim of anger is *I am in charge; my will be done*. If we allow this sin to dwell within, it will surface in unlikely places: “Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?” (Jon. 4:9). Jonah was mad at God for showing mercy to Nineveh, and it came out when the plant died with such force that he hoped to die (4:8). No doubt Jonah would say, “I didn’t really mean that”, but he did or else he wouldn’t say it. Just because you won’t follow through with what you said doesn’t mean it you didn’t mean it. Unrighteous anger is the seed of murder, best uprooted early. Jesus describes how anger and its consequences escalate: the one who is angry without a cause is in danger of judgement in the local court. Whoever calls his brother “Raca”,

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meaning “empty” or “stupid”, may end up before the Sanhedrin. And whoever says “You fool” is in danger of hell fire (v. 22). Think of this as anger that lands you before the local judge, anger that makes you famous, and anger that consumes and leads you to hell where you curse God and people for eternity. None of us is without the sin of anger. If left unchecked, this seed grows into a complete and murderous hatred. Few people are willing to risk the consequences of taking another’s life, but how many relationships are completely destroyed because of anger? The goal of the law is not simply to keep your hands from getting dirty, but to deal with your heart which is dirty already. The Lord convicts us so we would confess and be reconciled.

Be Reconciled

Jesus knows His disciples will discover sin in their lives. He says if you are in the middle of tithing—actually at the altar giving your gift—and remember your brother has something against you, leave, go be reconciled to him, and then come back (vv. 23-24). It’s interesting in the example that the worshipper is convicted as He is giving to the Lord. You can’t give yourself to God while being angry against your brother (cf. 1 Jn. 4:20). Don’t excuse what you did because of what he did, don’t put it off, and don’t finish what you are doing before making it right. We need to stop in our tracks, be ashamed of what we’ve done, and take action. This radical obedience transforms relationships. When we seek forgiveness, broken relationships are mended. Marriages endure. Children forgive their parents and parents their children. People can work together. The first example Jesus gives occurs at the temple, the second one in the civil realm. He says to agree with your adversary quickly while you are “on the way with him”, before he takes you before a judge, the judge hands you over to the officer, and the officer locks you up: “Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny” (vv. 25-26). This is really practical. Just because someone is your adversary doesn’t mean you should be ruled by anger, trying to fight him for every last cent. Angry people are beset by conflicts and spend endless hours and dollars dealing with them. This anger may be renamed as high standards, justice, the principle of the thing, but it’s a fool’s errand that will devour your time, money, energy, and possibly your soul. Jesus does not say “After you deal with the guy, make sure to vent your anger somewhere else.” He shows how irrational, unwise, disobedient, and dangerous anger is. We have to be very careful with it: “Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil” (Eph. 4:26-27). Even righteous anger must not be kept past sundown or else the devil is welcome. But most of our anger is unrighteous, and Jesus came to die for it and all the self-righteousness behind it. He left heaven in order to reconcile us to Himself. Jesus committed no sin but exposed our sins, so we murdered Him. In His death He bore the righteous anger of God against us for our unrighteous anger against Him. He rose from the dead and delivers this good news: all of our red hot sins of anger are forgiven, so we can put them to death and walk in the love of God.