

“From Murderers to Reconcilers”

The Way of Jesus

Downtown & Lexington

September 13, 2020

If you've got a Bible, grab it and flip open to Matthew 5:21-26.

Today we're turning the corner in our series *The Way of Jesus* where we're looking at Jesus' most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount.

The first four weeks we've been looking at Jesus' set up for the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

- Week 1 - we looked at Jesus talking about His Kingdom
- Week 2 - we saw Jesus walk through His upside-down values called the Beatitudes.
- Week 3 - Jesus talked about His desire for the church to be a salt and light community.
- And last week, we saw Jesus unpack His view of God's Word.
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For the next five weeks, we'll see Jesus apply something He talked about last week: How the letter of the law and the spirit of God's law relate. In each section, Jesus will take 1-2 laws and press down into God's heart in that law. He'll say "You've heard it said _____" fill in the blank with a law or cultural norm. "But I tell you _____" and He'll unpack the real heart of the law.

Today we're looking at the command "Do not murder." I'll go ahead and give away the ending. The way Jesus unpacks this, He's going to say building community and preventing relational breakdown is the real heart behind this law. We'll look at it in two chunks.

In the first two verses, Jesus makes his argument, and in the last four verses, he teaches us how to apply this to our lives.

Matthew 5:21-26

You have heard that it was said to those of old, "You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." But 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.

Ok, do you see the argument Jesus just made? It's absolutely fascinating.

He starts with the external law, '*You shall not murder;*' and then he takes it internal right away. "You've heard it said, don't murder. But I want to talk about your anger." He moves immediately internal to the heart.

Now the law He's dealing with here: "*Do not murder.*" That's a pretty big one, right? That's the sixth of The Ten Commandments. Literally one of the worst crimes you can commit. About the only way to make it worse is to murder multiple people or commit other crimes while also murdering.

And Jesus tells his audience, when it comes to murder, you know *whoever murders will be liable to judgment*. Can be translated liable to the court. If you murder, there will an arrest and a judge and a courtroom and prison time. But Jesus continues...

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be.” Uh-oh... exact same words: *“...liable to judgment.”* Wait... No... Jesus, was that a verbal typo? Jesus, did you just equate anger and murder? ... And if so, WHY? ... Before I answer that, let me make sure half of us don't zone out thinking “I'm not really an angry person. This doesn't apply to me.”

When we talk about anger, there are two equal and almost opposite groups of people... or two ways people have and deal with anger.

Group 1.) Rage out. When you are mad, everyone knows. You speak your anger. You show it on your face. Get red. I have one friend, when he's mad, the red slowly creeps up the side of his neck.

- Some of you, this is you. And it's causing destruction. Breakdown in your family, your close friends, negatively affecting your career or physical health. If that's you, you're not going to *love* what Jesus has to say here, but at least you'll know He's talking to you. The second group might be in even more danger:

Group 2.) Rage in. When you are mad, nobody knows. Oftentimes, not even you. Because you rage in, not out. You take your anger and push it down... You camouflage your anger toward others with insecurity and self-doubt or self-hatred. You stuff it and stuff it so it can fester and transform into bitterness and resentment. Goody.

- Some of you think that being a mature Christian means you're never allowed to be angry, or admit you're angry. That's not true. And it's not possible. There is a Biblical category for righteous anger and a righteous way to deal with our anger. But the answer isn't hiding it. God already knows. I'll get into this more on the Midweek podcast.

But Jesus says, whichever way you go with it... Whether your anger spews out of you like a volcano or grows deep inside of you like a cancerous mold. Either way, the long term result is the same. The breakdown of relationships and community.

See, murder is the most immediate and extreme form that relational breakdown can take. But anger and resentment lead to tiny little relationship murders every day. We just don't see it.

The longer I watch humans walk together in community, the more I realize how hard it is for us, especially for the long haul. Little things build up over time. Anger grows. Wounds happen and we don't know how to articulate it well, or lack the courage to say the awkward thing that needs to be said. Or we make small things into big things and refuse to forgive and just let things go.

All kinds of relationships get murdered without anyone ever dying. Marriages, parent-child relationships, LifeGroups. People leave churches sometimes because of a small thing that happened years ago but was never resolved.

And we know this is part of what Jesus is saying because He doesn't stop with anger toward your brother.

He keeps digging deeper:

“Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council;”

“Whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

These are both seemingly very small offenses. The Greek word for insulting your brother is *“rhaka.”* It's the equivalent to calling your brother a “feather brain” or “good for nothing.”

The Greek word for fool is *“moros.”* It's the root that eventually gave us our English word moron.

These are not huge crimes like murder. They're small, barely noticed, fleeting thoughts. Words that fall off our lips without a second thought.

But Jesus is telling us that they actually expose a massive heart issue.

And He says this heart issue has huge repercussions. For insulting your brother, he says you'll be liable to the council. It's a reference to the Jewish Sanhedrin. The equivalent to their Supreme Court. And then even worse, for calling someone a fool you'll be liable to the hell of fire.

It's like a hyperbolic inversion. Where the crimes are getting smaller and smaller from murder to anger, to insulting your brother, to calling someone a moron.

But the punishments are going up and up from normal court to the Supreme Court to the final court of God's judgment with an eternity of hell as a possible sentence.

Why is Jesus so adamant here about some things that don't seem like a very big deal to us at all?

1.) Jesus never forgets that we are image-bearers.

The Biblical view from Genesis 1 is that humans have built-in dignity and worth and value because we're made in God's image.

And when it comes to image-bearers, Jesus has a very clear and very high view on how they should be treated, even with our words and thoughts. So when we nonchalantly think, "Man, he's such an idiot!" When the fleeting thought barely crosses your mind, "She's such a mess."

Jesus is standing there going, "No. No. No. They're image-bearers. Just like you."

Jesus is saying here that none of our dismissive, insulting, idle thoughts or talk are benign. Because the person you called an idiot? That's an image-bearer. The person you hold sinful anger toward, that's an image-bearer of the King. And you don't talk about the King's image in that way.

2.) Jesus never forgets the danger of self-righteousness.

One of the ways sin has twisted our human hearts is we tend to spotlight other people's failures and downplay ours.

When I struggle, "Well you gotta understand my heart. That wasn't my intention. I just misspoke... it's how my parents raised me. These were the circumstances..." But when you struggle, "What is wrong with you?! How immature. What kind of moron... You have got to figure that out."

What happens when we let anger fester and grow in our hearts, and we don't watch for it and deal with it, is we start to become experts in other people's weaknesses and blind to their strengths. We start saying things like, "You always," or "You never."

That's a guarantee that we're not seeing clearly. And then we take our strengths and lay out our strengths against their weaknesses. We make an internal case for our anger. Because I'm pretty awesome at this and they are really bad at that... Pretty soon, everywhere you look, you start to find evidence to justify and fuel your rage. "Well I clean up after myself... she never cleans up her socks... I make dinner every night, I don't know why he can't just help out this one time."

Psychologists and ethicists call this Fundamental Attribution Error. A cognitive distortion where we attribute blame and over personalize others' weaknesses, but biasedly downplay our own.

And Jesus is saying this self-righteousness is one of sin's sneakiest, most pervasive ways to break down our human relationships. Which leads us to #3:

3.) Jesus never forgets who the real judge is.

Part of why Jesus reminds us with each of these infractions that we will face a court and a judge is because in each of these acts we are wrongly and sinfully, in our self-righteousness, setting ourselves up as the judge.

- Murder is an ultimate act of judgment on human existence. You no longer deserve to live. That is a judgment that is reserved for God and the highest courts.
- But in the same way when we call someone a fool, when we let anger in our hearts grow toward someone, we are over and over again saying, in small little ways I sit in judgment over you. That's what Jesus is saying when we insult our brother and call them a fool. We're judging their value as less as than ours.

But that seat isn't ours. When it comes to someone's value and worth as an image-bearer, that job is reserved for God alone and He isn't looking for a consultation on who matters and who doesn't... certainly not from fallible, self-righteous, biased sinners like us.

4.) Jesus values relationships and community more than we do.

God's heart behind the command to not murder is not limited to the prohibitive "Do not" portion of it. The heart behind this law is so much "do" for God's people.

- DO reflect God's perfect triune loving relationships He has lived in for all eternity.
- DO love each other with a love that is surprising and shines like light in the darkness.
- DO walk in long-term, committed, deeply known and loving relationships.
- DO bear with each other no matter what the circumstances are.
- DO humbly own your sin so that your relationships won't break down.
- DO be so wary of your own self-righteousness that even little insults get repented of.

All of this is a difficult uphill climb for us as modern westerners. We don't really do long-term, brotherly affection, deep friendships very well. We love our freedom and individualism so much that the necessary restrictions of deep meaningful friendships feel like a straight jacket.

So for a lot of us, the "friendships" that we have are pretty surface-level and are therefore pretty easy to replicate. This means if we have something against someone, we can just move on and go find a new friend that we don't have anything against.

If most of your friendships involve seeing people about every three weeks when you go to a brewery together, you can just find new folks to go with if those friendships aren't working. But that's not what Jesus is after. Jesus is after knitting us together as a people for the long haul. He's looking to build us in such a way that we love each other and need each other and can weather storms and arguments. He's looking to grow in us such a love for people that we don't constantly and nonchalantly insult and dismiss each other in our thoughts and words.

So I'll use my kids as a microcosm picture of this. Parents you'll likely relate to this. We have five kids. It's almost a daily occurrence that I have to step in and referee my kids while they are being monsters to each other. "Hey! Stop it. Don't talk to each other like that." "Yeah but she was annoying first." "Yeah but you said 'she's an idiot just like her mother.'" That ain't gonna fly.

And honestly, it's not really the content of what they say most of the time. It's the tone. It's grating whiny and hate-filled. You know, normal sibling stuff. And sometimes, a little exasperated, I'll look at whichever one I'm refereeing and I'll take their face in my hands, lock eyes with them, and I'll say, "Stop. Look at her. Do you hate her or do you love her?" Every time. Eyes roll. "I love her." "And who is she?" "My sister." Yeah exactly. SO WHY ARE YOU TALKING TO HER LIKE THAT?

That's a bit of what Jesus is doing here. Grabbing us by the face. "Child. Look at her. Look at him. Whoever you're angry with. Whoever you're insulting. Are they an image-bearer of God? THEN why are

you thinking about her like that? Why are you talking about him like that?" "Is that your brother or sister in my adopted family?" "Then why are you murdering them in your heart?"

And part of how we know that's what Jesus is thinking about here is the application points He makes as He's wrapping up this passage:

Matthew 5:23-24

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 and offer your gift.

Application #1: Always be reconciling. Catch that. Jesus says if you're worshipping God, and you remember that your brother has something against you... You've sinned against them. You've hurt them. What does he say?

Leave your gift there before the altar and go. Stop the worship ceremony and go be reconciled. Go humble yourself and apologize. Go own your sin. Go make it right.

Think about how opposite of a reaction that is compared to the anger and dismissive breakdown we are so prone to. I'm not going to write you off. I'm not going to justify myself and fuel my rage that you're an idiot... I'm coming to you humbly. I'm listening. I'm apologizing. I'm owning my sin and fighting for our relationship.

Jesus takes this so seriously. There are many things we do in life that you may think, 'Yeah, God might look at me in that moment and say "STOP!"... Cheating on my taxes... whatever... But out of all the things you could ever do, picture yourself at church... passionately worshipping God. What would make Him want you to stop that? What could possibly be that serious? Us. This. Family.

If you've been listening to this sermon and God's Spirit keeps bringing someone to mind, as soon as this sermon is over go talk to them. Call them. Don't put it off or wait a single second.

--> That's the first one. Always be reconciling. Don't let it linger. It's vital.

Matthew 5:25-26

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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Application #2: Pursue Peace Quickly.

So Jesus starts with a really broad application of, anytime you realize that someone is mad at you, cause you've wronged them, go talk to them. And then He turns to a much more specific and serious situation where you have an accuser taking you to court. And He says come to terms. Make peace. Resolve this situation as soon as possible. Otherwise, it's going to cost you.

It reminds me of college sports. I'm a big fan of college sports. And particularly college football. When colleges get accused of recruiting violations that happen all the time, they generally have two options. They can be honest, own it, and give themselves their own repercussions in order to make the situation right. Or they can try to hide it, downplay it, and dodge. Almost every time, the schools that own it and make it right end up in a better situation than the ones who try to dodge.

That's kind of what Jesus is saying to us here. Don't give in to your self-assured, self-righteous, angry heart. Humble yourself. Own your sin. Go to your accuser and do whatever you can to make it right and live at peace. He's unpacking His beatitude - "*Blessed are the peacemakers.*"

Romans 12:18

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

It's not always possible. And sometimes you've done everything you can possibly do. But Jesus' command here is that we should fight to bend towards peacemaking whenever possible. We should be suspicious of our anger. We should be prayerful towards peace.

There's a good chance you're thinking right now, "But you don't understand my situation. My anger is warranted. My case is too complicated for reconciliation to happen."

I get it. I do the same thing. Here's how I'd encourage you. Shift your perspective and consider God's case for anger against you. God's case to not be reconciled to you. How many times have you kept sinning against Him? How much would it cost Him to make sure that your relationship with Him could be restored and last for the long haul? It cost Him the cross! It cost Him His Son! And yet, He did it willingly. With joy in his heart. Celebrating that another lost son or daughter could be returned to Him. His radical counter conditional love is the foundation for our relationships and our community.