

Jesus and Anger

Matthew 5:21-26

**A sermon by Dr. Calvin Warpula
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In the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives us the characteristics of his disciples. They are poor in spirit, they mourn over their sins, they are meek, they hunger and thirst after righteousness, they are merciful, they are pure in heart, they are peacemakers, and they will be persecuted for righteousness sake. Jesus tells us that disciples like this are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In vs. 17-20 of Matthew 5 Jesus tells us that he did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them. Jesus was not against God's law. He fully obeyed God in everything. Jesus is never opposed to his heavenly Father. Never. He loves God and obeys his commandments. Jesus fulfills the law and the prophets by superseding them. He is the one they prophesied about and he is the ideal man of God. Jesus came to bring in the kingdom of God that one enters through a spiritual birth of water and the Spirit. Jesus says in v. 20 that our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

The scribes and Pharisees were full-time religious professionals who spent their lives studying the law, interpreting the law, teaching the law and making sure that they obeyed the law in every detail. They also had many traditions that they added to the law and made just as binding as the law of God. The law of God said nothing about washing hands ceremonially but they had all kinds of rules about how to wash your hands and when. They condemned Jesus' disciples for not washing their hands ceremonially before they ate. The law of God said nothing about a Sabbath day's journey, yet they said that a person could not walk more than a thousand yards on the Sabbath day. The law of God said nothing about a required fast except one day a year on the Day of Atonement, yet they fasted twice a week, 100 times

as much as the law required. They condemned Jesus and his disciples for not fasting more. The scribes and Pharisees permitted babies to be circumcised on the Sabbath, priests to kill and offer animal sacrifices on the Sabbath, and for men to lift an ox out of a ditch on the Sabbath, yet they criticized Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath. They had turned the Sabbath into a set of rules without regard to human needs. They made animals and ritual worship more important than hurting human beings.

The Pharisees were super-righteous in their own eyes, arrogant, trusting in their own righteousness, and judgmental of others. In Luke 18, Jesus told the story of a tax collector and a Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee bragged on himself, confessed no sin, and told God how much better he was than the tax collector. The tax collector was so humiliated by his sins that he would not even look up into heaven. He stood in a dark corner and hit his breast several times saying, "God be merciful to me, the sinner." Jesus said that the tax collector went home right with God rather than the Pharisee.

Throughout his ministry in the gospels, Jesus had a constant ruling battle with the Pharisees. In Matthew 23, he pronounced seven woes against them. Hear what Jesus said there: [read vs. 23-28].

Thus the attitudes and actions of the scribes and Pharisees were totally unlike the characteristics of Jesus' disciples as described in the Beatitudes. There is no way that a Pharisee could appreciate or practice the Beatitudes. Jesus is not against disciplines like fasting, prayer, giving to the poor, or in modern times, ceasing smoking, drinking or gambling. But what Jesus wants goes much deeper. He wants our poverty of spirit, our dependence upon God to deepen. He wants our hunger and thirst after righteousness to be greatly increased. No discipline is an end within itself. Preaching and worship are not ends within themselves. The purpose of all that we are teaching and doing today is to come to know and love God better. The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart.

"It Has Been Said to You. . .But I Say unto You"

Now to make his teaching here specific, in vs. 21-48 Jesus gives us six illustrations of where our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. We call these "the six antitheses" because in them Jesus contrasts what "has been said unto them" versus what "I say unto you." The six subjects Jesus discusses are murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, and love for enemies. The fact that Jesus teaches with authority, and not by

quoting a long string of rabbis or the Old Testament shows that Jesus has the direct authority of God to command and authorize. He is God in the flesh speaking to us.

Notice that Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said **to** the people long ago.” He does not say, “the Law says,” or, “God says,” but “it was said to the people long ago.” Jesus is not contrasted himself with what God says in the Scriptures but with what interpretations the scribes and Pharisees gave to the law. Ever since the Babylonian exile some 500 years before, the common people spoke Aramaic. Many did not speak Hebrew, the original mother tongue of the Jews. The Scriptures were written in Hebrew and were not readily available because every copy had to be written by hand. The copies that did exist were very expensive. The common people then went to the synagogue and the scribes and Pharisees read the law of God in the Hebrew and then interpreted it to the people in Aramaic. Of course this transmission allows for the teachers to place any interpretation or emphasis on the Law they choose. It was like during the days before the Protestant Reformation when the Catholic Church had Bibles chained to the pulpit. The Bible was all written in Latin that only the priests understood. The priests would read the Bible, the people would listen but not understand Latin, and then the priests would interpret it for them. Of course, this system was prone to error because Catholicism had many rules and traditions not based on Scripture. The Bible meant whatever the priests wanted it to mean.

Jesus Goes to the Root of Murder: Anger in the Heart

The Pharisees read God’s law in the Ten Commandments forbidding murder and that is all that they forbade. Murder is the deliberate taking of human life without judicial cause by someone who is not authorized to act as a governmental representative. The scribes and Pharisees thought that as long as you don’t murder someone you have obeyed the law. They might have hatred, resentment, ill-will, revenge in their hearts and say all sorts of resentful, spiteful things against another person, but as long as they did not physically take someone’s life, they had not violated the commandment. Their understanding then was all physical, outward, active murder.

This is where Jesus goes much deeper into the thoughts and attitudes of the heart that precipitate murder. Jesus shows a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because he goes into the motives, emotions, and words that excite and ignite the action. Jesus probes the heart in contrast to the Pharisees who just looked at the act itself.

The Pharisees were like our criminal justice system in this regard. The law today can prosecute you for murder only if you have physically taken someone's life. The police cannot arrest you for hating someone, for saying hateful things about them, or for praying and wishing that the persons were dead. In our country, under our legal system, you can harbor all the hatred in the world in your heart and still not be guilty of murder.

On the other hand, Jesus went into the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter is a matter of the heart. Listen to what Jesus says, [read Matthew 15:18-20].

The Pharisees condemned the **fruit** of murder but Jesus went to the **root** of murder. He says, "Whoever is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment." Ninety per cent of all murders are committed by people who know their victims. One of the biggest causes of murder is anger. Husbands get angry and shoot their wives. Children get angry and kill their parents. Wives get angry and kill their babies. Friends get angry and stab and shoot each other. Anger is murder in the heart before it reaches the hand. Jesus condemned selfish, vengeful, resentful anger that often leads to the physical act.

Jesus Forbids Words That Assassinate Persons

Jesus then goes further and teaches that to say "*Raca*" or "You Fool" puts us in danger. "*Raca*" is an Aramaic word that sounds like a person is clearing his throat to spit. Spitting on someone was a severe insult. The word means "a worthless person, no good, not fit to live." The word "fool" here is from the Greek word "*mora*" from which we get the word "moron." The word here is not about a person's academic abilities or a mistake they have made, i.e., they acted foolishly, but it is about their worth as a human being. Some examples of the type of words Jesus would be condemning are those like "idiot, dumb wit, stupid nincompoop, dummy, I wish you were dead, blockhead," or "I could kill you."

Every person is made in the image of God whether they are acting like it or not. Every person is an eternal soul that will spend eternity with God or without God. No human being is worthless or valueless. We may not agree with a person's lifestyle or their actions but we must still love the person, even while we detest the evils he or she has done.

Does Jesus mean that we are never to get angry, that we can never call a person "a fool"? No. Why? Because anger is an emotion, a feeling, a legitimate feeling under some circumstances. This is why some unknown

scribe added the words “without cause” so that Jesus is made to say, “Whoever is angry with his brother *without a cause* will be subject to judgment.” The words “without cause” soften what Jesus is saying and they are not in our oldest and best manuscripts so they were probably not originally in the text, though they may correctly interpret what Jesus meant.

Righteous Anger Versus Selfish, Vindictive Anger

Jesus got angry. His spirit boiled within him at the unjust treatment of the poor from the rich and powerful (Mk. 3:5). Jesus got angry at the abuses toward the worshipers at the temple and overthrew the money changers tables and drove out the animals (Matt. 21:12-14). Jesus also called people “fools” (Matt. 23:17). Jesus is not inconsistent. He did not command us not to do something and then do it himself. Jesus’ anger is directed toward injustices, ungodly and unholy practices. It is all right to have righteous indignation. Moses came down from the mountain and saw the people worshipping a golden calf and frolicking in reveling and fornication and he got so angry he threw down the Ten Commandment tablets and they broke in pieces. It is not wrong to get angry at sin. God hates sin. God’s wrath (or righteous anger) is one of the attributes of his divine person.

Jesus did not get angry at those who insulted or abused him. He did not take personal revenge. Instead, when his accusers laughed at him, spit on him, mocked him, slapped him, and lied about him, and even killed him, he did not get angry at them. Instead, the Bible says this, [I Peter. 2:23].

When Jesus called a person a “fool” he meant that person was acting foolishly. He was not pronouncing a value of that person before God but only judging his unwise action of forgetting God. We can say the same about people today but we will not devalue them personally. Their actions may be foolish and they be acting like fools, and it is acceptable to say that, but we do not say they are worthless and valueless before God.

So, have we committed murder? By the definition of Jesus, we have. We have lost our tempers. We have harbored grudges. We have gossiped. We have killed by neglect, spite, and jealousy. Sometimes things like this are termed “character assassination.” That’s a good word for it because we destroy a person by our words. Jesus says that we are not to act that way as believers.

Positive Actions of Reconciliation

Jesus has told us how we are not to think or speak toward another person. But Jesus goes further. He now gives us two illustrations of how to act toward people. These are positive actions we can take.

First, Jesus says [read 5:23-24].

The Necessity of Reconciliation

This is a picture of a person coming to worship God at the temple and bringing a sacrifice to offer. As that person is waiting in line to give his animal or grain offering to the priest and to confess his sins to God and pray for forgiveness or to thankfully praise God for his gifts, he remembers that there is a disciple brother that is offended by the person. This brother “has something against you.” It is not that the person remembers that he has something against a brother, but that he remembers that a brother has something against him. This worshiper does not rationalize, “Well, I’m sorry he feels that way. I have done nothing wrong. He should grow up and not be so easily offended. After all, this is just a personal matter. It’s just a misunderstanding or lack of communication.” No, this brother in line to worship God does not make excuses. It is possible that no matter what you have done to make excuses. We all are masters of justifying ourselves.

This man leaves his gift at the altar. It is all right, Jesus says, to keep God waiting. A person cannot worship God acceptably if he or she has is in a hostile or adversarial relationship with his or her brothers or sisters in the Lord. There is something that must be done before we can worship acceptably, and that is, making peace and settling accounts with those we have wronged.

This applies to us when we come to church. Sometimes a man fights with his wife on the way to church, and then he comes into the church building, smiles at everyone and says, “I’m fine. God bless you,” to everyone. He sings, “Oh, How I Love Jesus,” takes the bread and the wine representing the body and blood of Jesus, gives his money, listens to a sermon, and maybe even in a case like me, preaches one. He then leaves in an hour and continues the fight with his wife on the way home. Have we really worshiped God or have we just gone through the motions? What is the difference in that and what the Pharisees were doing? Neither worship was very personal, sin-confessing, or God-seeking. Ceremony, even worship, is not more important than integrity, purity and love.

The church at Corinth had problems in the congregation. The rich would not share with the poor. The “haves” begrudged the “have nots” and refused to share their love feast with them. Then they would take the bread

and wine in remembrance of Jesus. Is that the Lord's Supper—a supper of communion, fellowship and love? Absolutely not. Because of that Paul wrote that judgment was on the church and some of them were sick and had even died (I Corinthians 11:17-32).

We cannot get along with God if we are not getting along with one another. When we do not get along with each other, our worship is hindered. Peter wrote about this when he spoke about husbands and wives in I Peter, chapter 3. Hear what he said to the husbands: [I Peter. 3:7]. Their prayers were hindered. If we are not loving and forgiving and considerate with our wives, then we don't pray and when we do, God doesn't listen. The Bible says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psa. 66:18).

The Immediacy of Reconciliation

The next illustration Jesus used meant that we ought to reconcile quickly and immediately or we could find ourselves in deeper and deeper problems. Hear Jesus {read 5:25-26}.

In the time of Jesus, there was such a thing as "citizen's arrest." If a person felt wronged by someone, the person who has been wronged can take that person directly to a judge for a verdict. The judge would hear the case and decide what to do. Sometimes the judge would side with the offended party and the offender would be thrown into prison and could not come out until the debt or fine was paid. Now there is very little a person in prison can do to earn money to pay a fine. Friends and family would have to raise the money to pay the courts the amount owed so that the prisoner could be released. If the money was not raised, then the person just stayed in prison.

Jesus' point here is that we should not delay getting right with people. If there is a problem do something to reconcile now, not later. The Bible says, "Do not let the sun go down on your wrath" (Eph. 4:26). Things may get worse later. This is why the Bible says, "Follow peace with all men, and holiness. . .lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and by it many be defiled" (Heb. 12:14, 15). Jesus says to reconcile now, immediately, while we can.

So here Jesus teaches us against anger that is the root cause of murder. He teaches us against saying words that devalue other human beings made in the image of God. He teaches us positively to seek reconciliation with our brothers because that is a prerequisite to acceptable worship. He teaches us to make things right quickly or immediately lest we get into more and more

problems. Relationships can deteriorate quickly unless we do all we can to stop the hemorrhaging. Jesus says, “Do right, and do it now.”

A Righteous Life Begins with a Transformed Heart

We cannot do right unless we allow God to transform our hearts. We love the Lord, we seek his will, and we repent before him of our sins. Our hearts are transformed by the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit. We present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. So when someone does evil to us, what do we do? Do we fight back and give them what they deserve? Do we fight fire with fire? No. Here’s how God wants us to handle the situation: [read Romans 12:17-21]. “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

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