

Matthew 5:21-26 - Abolishing All Anger

Well we are beginning to get into a section on the Sermon that is probably more familiar to us. This is the section where Jesus takes the OT Law and he essentially amplifies it for his followers. "You have heard it said you shall not murder, but I say to you you shall not even be angry." "You have heard it said you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you you shall not even lust in your heart." We are familiar with these passages, they are often convicting - and should be - because we know that to follow Jesus is to know that he requires more than simple outward obedience to his commands. He desires our hearts be pure in his sight.

So we feel the weight of that. How in the world can we never be angry with our brother? Can I suggest something to you? I think what Jesus is calling us to is even more radical than not being angry with our brother in our heart. As I've read through this over and over I think he's saying something even bigger and more radical than that. And we'll look at what that is in a little bit.

Before we dive in here, let me give two quick observations on this section.

1) Jesus is actually not calling his people to anything new. Jesus will quote the OT then say "but I say to you." But we have to understand he's not contradicting the OT. You've heard it said "You shall not murder, but I say to you 'murder all you want.'" No, he's getting to the heart of the issue. But what we need to understand carefully is that this is what God wanted in the OT as well.

It wasn't as explicit in the Law but God never wanted just outward devotion in the OT.

Lev. 19:17: You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

Deut. 6:5: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Deut 8:17: God hates pride in the heart.

Deut 15:19: God hates greed and stinginess in the heart.

Prov. 6:25: warns us against lust in our heart.

So Jesus is not commanding something different than what God had commanded in the OT. What's he doing then? He's just making explicit what has always been implicit. He's making it crystal clear that following him is not just outward behavior. It's very explicitly inward *and* outward. It's a pure heart, a meek heart, a heart that thirsts for righteousness and mercy. And a heart that takes God's Law and internalizes it.

That's the NC, by the way. **Jer. 31:31-34** God says he will write his law where? On our heart. So this is not new, but it is explicit.

2) There's a common misconception that Jesus is making all sins equal in every way. We've probably all heard - or even said - something to the effect that "all sin is the same," "sin is sin." "Anger is the exact same as murder. Lust is the exact same as adultery."

Part of the reason we as Protestants say that is to push back against the distinction the Catholic Church makes between venial sins and mortal sins. According to the Catholic Church, venial sins are sins that are pardonable, mortal sins are sins that send you to hell. So there's this distinction they make. And while we reject that because there's no basis for that in Scripture. We also need to reject the idea that all sins are exactly equal.

Let me ask you: Would you rather me be angry at your husband or murder your husband? I mean if they're all the same... Would you rather your husband actually commit adultery or in a moment of weakness look on someone with lust? I think the answer to those is we'd rather not any of them, but I think we'd agree that the physical act *is* worse than the heart.

Also, especially in the OT, there is a distinction God makes over and over between unintentional sins and high-handed sins, sins that are premeditated or done with full knowledge. Did you know that the whole sacrificial system was designed only for unintentional sins? There were no sacrifices a person could offer for intentional sins. That's why in **Psalm 51:16** when David is talking about his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba he says: "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering." You know what he's saying? He's saying that there was no sacrifice he could offer because it was high-handed, premeditated. All David could do was beg for the mercy of God because God made a distinction between sins. So sins are not equal in every way.

What's Jesus doing then if he's not making all sins equal? Well, he's not minimizing the physical act. What he's doing is making it clear that we are accountable to God for even what goes on in our hearts. Our hearts and thoughts are not some sort of judgment-free safe space where God won't judge us because "Hey, at least we didn't commit the real act." That's what the Pharisees and scribes thought. No, Jesus makes it clear that we will also be judged by God for what goes on in our hearts.

So here's the big picture idea for our passage: That God has always been against murder, but through Jesus his mission is to completely abolish all anger.

1) Jesus upholds the OT Command: Read 21

So this is one of the oldest commands we have on record - one of the 10 commandments: thou shall not murder. Here's what's neat: In the original language "you shall not murder" is so strong it's actually not even technically a command. It's actually an indicative. Literally: you will not murder. You will not do it. It will not happen for it is impossible for you to do so.

If your kid fails his big test early in the week, you tell him: You aren't going out with your friends on Friday. That's not actually a command, is it? It's a statement of fact. That's what God does here with his people: You aren't murdering, you're not lying, you're not stealing, committing adultery, you're not worshipping other gods...

God phrases the command as an absolutely unthinkable impossibility - we would never do such a thing! It will never happen among us. Now, does it happen? Sadly, yes. But the point is that from God's perspective it is unthinkable that we should ever do such a thing.

What is murder? Murder is the wrongful taking of human life. And because it is the wrongful taking of human life God demands that it be judged. Those who murder, Jesus says, are liable to judgment. What judgment? They are liable to physical death - what we would call the death penalty or capital punishment.

Gen. 9:5-6: And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.

So murder is wrong because we are made in the image of God and when a person or even an animal destroys the image of God, that person or animal is to be destroyed.

The Bible even makes a distinction between murder and manslaughter. In the OT there were 6 cities called cities of refuge where if someone **accidentally** killed someone else they could run there and get protection from an angry family member who wanted revenge.

Maybe they accidentally dropped something off the roof and killed their friend. They accidentally fired an arrow and it struck someone and they died. They had no ill feelings, they weren't trying to kill the person but the person died anyway, they could run there and find safety from people who might seek his life. But if it was found out that the person did it intentionally or with malice:

"But if anyone hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him and attacks him and strikes him fatally so that he dies, and he flees into one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there, and hand

him over to the avenger of blood, so that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall purge the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, so that it may be well with you.

Romans 13:1-7 says clearly that the state - the government - has the God given right to pour out wrath on evildoers.

So those who murder are liable to physical death by the governing authorities. But we also know that they are also liable to eternal judgment from God in hell.

Rev. 21:8: the eternal destination of murderers is the lake that burns with fire and sulphur.

So it's the wrongful taking of human life that results in physical and eternal punishment.

And we shouldn't have to say it, but we might need to: Euthanizing your pet is not murder. Cutting down a tree is not murder. That's not human life.

Lethal injection for someone found guilty of premeditated murder is not itself murder because it is not the **wrongful** taking of life. The electric chair for mass murderers or the firing squad for gang members guilty of drive by shootings is not murder. Why? Because they took human life.

This might be very basic for us, but I'll tell you our world fights back against every bit of this. Cutting down trees is murder, but killing unborn babies is not. A man can murder dozens of people in cold blood, but heaven forbid he should ever get the death penalty because that would be cruel and unusual. The Bible is not silent on these issues. The Bible is perfectly clear and Jesus upholds the command.

2) Followers of Jesus are also liable for angry hearts. Read 22

So here's where we tackle some familiar, and likely convicting, territory. Yes, murder is sin and deserving of judgment. But what goes on in our hearts and what comes out of our mouths can also be sinful and deserving of judgment.

Remember that for Jesus, a true follower is one whose life is wholly devoted to God. Not just on the outside, but on the inside as well. So a hypocrite is not someone who says murder is wrong, and then goes and secretly murders his neighbor. That **would** be a hypocrite, of course. But what Jesus is getting at is that a hypocrite is someone who says that murder is wrong and at the same time hates his brother and calls him names. For Jesus, hypocrisy is when the inside and outside are not lined up. When the outside looks good, but the inside is a mess. That's how the scribes and the Pharisees lived. Jesus's followers are to have a righteousness greater than that.

Now, some people have tried to figure out if there is a pattern in **Vs. 22** or a progression. Is anger a small thing, insults like Raca a little worse, and saying to someone "you fool" really bad? I'm not convinced. **Read 22**

When you drill down into the Greek to understand what all those terms mean, honestly, it seems like a little bit of a stretch to say that there is progression. That the first punishment of "judgement" is worse than the last. Or that saying "raca" - emptyhead! - is all that worse than "you fool." I don't think the point is progression anyway. I think the point is simply that all people are liable for what goes on with our heart and mouth.

Look over at Matt. 12:33-37. Here Jesus is finishing up talking about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. The blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is when someone sees a miraculous work of the Spirit - like healing a person of illness - and says that Satan did it rather than the Holy Spirit. Their heart is so hard that they will never come to faith in Christ. Sometimes Christians worry that they've committed the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit - sometimes called the unpardonable sin. But just the fact that you're worried about it means you most likely have not committed it - so you're good.

What was going on is that people were blaspheming the Holy Spirit because Jesus had healed a man who was possessed with demons. And since they hated Jesus they said he did it by the power of Beelzebuul - satan.

Jesus says that's absurd and goes on to say that they say that kind of thing because they speak out of their evil nature. They speak evil things because they are evil. **Read 33-37**

So I don't want to get too bogged down here. Jesus says a person is either a good tree with good fruit or a bad tree with bad fruit. They're either saved or not. How do you tell? Listen to their words. Just listen to what a person says. Why's that? Because where do a person's words come from? Their heart. That's why Jesus says with our words we will be justified and with our words we will be condemned. Our words are the means by which we'll be judged because they are directly linked to our heart.

And **Vs. 36**, far from being a throwaway verse, is super clear: every word is on the table on judgment day. **Read**

So we will give an account of every worthless word when we stand before Jesus. In fact, it's those careless words that we say so flippantly that might actually be the evidence that we're not saved because we think the small things don't matter.

Google has this fascinating feature. If you want to look up a word, it will define it for you, but it will also give you a chart of how often the word has been used over time. So ironically, I googled the word "Google" and it was almost never used until about 2000. And then it spikes through the roof. I also looked up the word yuppie - a young professional with a good paying job. That was really a popular term in the 80's but then in about 2000 you notice this sharp downturn in the graph. And people are saying it less and less.

Imagine standing before Jesus and he's got all the words we've ever said catalogued on a time line. Where would you hope there would be a change in the flow of some of the words we use? At the moment of salvation. At the moment God took out our heart of flesh and put in a heart of stone.

When I was 14 I had a filthy mouth - I said every 4 letter word you can imagine and I said it all the time. And then God changed my heart when I heard the gospel and he saved me. Imagine Jesus at the computer on judgment day and he types in "Jason swear words." Search. There will be a stark change in the graph starting in July of 1996. The graph will go down. There will be some bumps along the way, and if I'm honest there are still some blips on the graph. But for most part things have changed.

And if he typed in "Jason thankfulness." Search. Hopefully there would be a sudden rise in July of 1996. Would I be justified because of my word count? No. I'd be justified because of a heart that had been changed because of faith in Jesus dying for my sin that was evidenced by words. What if the word count from my mouth went down but in my heart it doubled? That's what Jesus is getting at.

So when Jesus says we are liable for anger and insults and calling people fool he means that our hearts are judged as well as our actions.

Turn back to **Matt. 5**. I want to make a couple more observations before we move on.

First is that anger is not necessarily sin and calling someone a fool is not necessarily sin. **Read 22**

Both the KJV and NKJV add the words "without cause" - if you say these things without cause. Why add that? Because there is a category of righteous anger. God gets angry, doesn't he? And Jesus himself called people fools. He used the very word used here. Well, is he in sin? Of course not. There is a time to call a person a fool. You know when it is? It's when they're being foolish. There is a time to be angry. You know when it is? When someone is in sin. We have to be careful though. Even righteous anger and honest words can turn into sin if we're not careful.

So Jesus upholds the OT command. The followers of Jesus are liable for angry hearts.

3) This is where I think Jesus ratchets up the demand even more than what we usually understand: The followers of Jesus are liable for other peoples' anger.

Follow this for a second, I'll clarify some things in a few minutes:

- 1 - We are liable if we murder.
- 2 - We are liable if we are angry and insulting.
- 3 - We are liable if our brother is angry with us and we don't do anything to try to reconcile.

Just to be clear: I think what Jesus is getting at is that following him is so radical that we are responsible not just for our actions and our heart, but we are responsible for our brother's actions and heart if somehow we are contributing to their anger. You say: Now I'm responsible for someone else's anger!? My answer is: yes. At least sometimes. That's why I said that the theme of this passage is that God's goal in Christ is to abolish all anger. Listen carefully to what Jesus says here. **Read 23-24**

In those 2 verses, who is the angry person? Your brother. And the implication is that our brother is angry for good reason. So what Jesus says is that if we know they are angry with us because we've done something wrong it is our obligation to go to them and do whatever we need to do to reconcile. In fact we do that before we come and offer our gift on the altar.

John Calvin raises an interesting question in his commentary: isn't it odd that reconciliation with our brother is more important than offering sacrifice? You'd think Jesus would have said: "Offer your sacrifice to God (because that is more important) and then quickly go to your brother (who is important too)." No, Calvin says "If you go to the altar claiming to worship God but you know you've offended your brother and your brother is still angry, your profession of worship is empty. It is worthless." Calvin: "So long as a difference with our neighbor is kept up by our fault, we have no access to God. (Note on vs. 23).

So if you're doing something to intentionally annoy your neighbor or co-worker - no offering, which means no access to God. If you're doing something to purposefully irritate your sister or brother or husband - no access to God. It's like if your kid shoves his sister and then comes to you and says "Can you come outside to play with me?" "Uh, no. We're going to deal with the shoving first." That's what God says, too.

If we are the cause of our brother's anger then we have guilt. And if we're not doing anything to resolve it, we have guilt. I know that sometimes we sin in ways that take other people a long time to forgive us and move past what we've done. So sometimes reconciliation is just leaving them alone. But we need to do everything in our power to resolve the conflict as best we can.

By the way, there's an interesting backdrop to all of this that I think is important. There are a lot of commentaries that talk about how radical this would be. Jesus is probably preaching up in Galilee, for someone to go offer a sacrifice in Jerusalem would be an 80 mile walk south. For them to get there and remember they offended their brother would be an extra 80 miles each way to seek forgiveness and then come back to offer the sacrifice. So they would say we need to go to radical lengths to seek reconciliation. And I agree with that. We do need to go to radical lengths. But I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at here.

It's odd that Jesus talks about this in terms of altars and sacrifices when he knew the Temple would be torn down in a matter of 40 years. Why set up the example in that way? Well, let me ask you: Is there another story in the Bible you can think of that revolves around anger and murder and brothers offering sacrifices at an altar? Maybe one where there was no reconciliation? **Turn to Gen 4**. This is the story of Cain and Abel. Where Cain goes to the altar, God rebukes him, he hates his brother, and then murders him. Interestingly, the words that Jesus use parallel this story almost identically. **Read 1-8**

So here is Cain who offered a sacrifice to God at an altar. His offering was rejected. As a result, Cain became angry and out of his anger he murdered his brother. I think Jesus is establishing a connection that all murder on the outside starts with anger on the inside. And the end result of unchecked anger - if you don't rule over it, as God says - is murder.

And I think what Jesus is saying: what I'm here to do is reverse not just the curse of murder, but to reverse the curse of anger. And look at Cain's initial response when God calls him on this. **Read 9**

What's the answer to that question, by the way? It's Yes! I am my brother's keeper. Jesus is calling people to be the exact opposite of Cain. People who not only don't murder and hate their brothers, but people who are their brother's keeper, so much so that if our brother is angry with us, we do everything in our power to reconcile before coming to God.

In the gospel, Jesus is not just doing away with murder and anger, he is calling us to be peacemakers who are so sensitive to our brothers' situation that we would pause our individual worship to ensure that we are reconciled to our brother. That's pretty radical.

4) This is an urgent command. Read 25-26

In ancient times there was a debtor's prison. Debtor's prison was for those who failed to pay their lenders. Their lender could petition that the person be put in jail until their loan was paid off, which usually meant they never got out.

I think Jesus is making 2 points here. First, if our accuser really has something against us, if we really are guilty of something, then not only do we need to go, we need to go quickly. Once the judge put someone in debtor's prison, it was too late. There was no going back. So if you knew someone was about to throw you in prison you would go quickly and plead with them all the way to the judge's bench, if necessary, to settle the case. Waste no time in doing this.

Secondly, I think there's an eschatological element here as well. A reminder that there's actually a judge who we really need to be concerned about: God himself. And because of the things we've done and said we are liable to him on the day of judgment. And just like the debtor never got out of debtor's prison, people don't get out of hell either. How do we keep from being put into the eternal prison of hell? Repent from our sin and trust that the Lord Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose three days later to pay our fine so that we could go free. And our motivation for reconciling with our brother is that God reconciled us to himself.

Can you imagine a family or a church where not only were we not murdering each other. And not only were we not harboring grudges and ill will towards each other. But that if we detected even a hint that our brother or sister was angry at us we dropped everything we were doing, went to them directly, and did everything in our power to reconcile? That's what Jesus is calling his followers to. And by his grace we can.

Pray