



Murder in the Heart

St. Matthew 5:21-26

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I want you to open your Bibles this morning to Matthew 7:28-29. That's the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. And there at the end St. Matthew tells us about the response that the people had to his sermon. He says they "were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (NIV). Jesus not only condemned the self-righteousness and self-satisfaction of the scribes and Pharisees – the teachers of the Law – but what he taught himself was completely different from what they taught. What was amazing to the people who heard him preach was not only how different his message was, but the great authority with which he spoke it. Anyone who was there and who took Jesus seriously had to be reeling with the realisation that if all of this was true, they'd been on the wrong track their whole lives. It ought to do the same for us. If you can listen to the Sermon on the Mount and just sit there and say, "Oh, isn't that nice," you're not getting the gravity of Jesus' message. Just like us, the people who lived in Judea two thousand years ago were concerned mostly about external righteousness or goodness. And now in stark contrast to that, Jesus teaches them that the only righteousness that God accepts is a divine righteousness that ultimately brings about a full transformation of the person – not just as outward show, but inwardly too.

Jesus explained real Christian character in the Beatitudes, but now he gives us some practical examples of how that sort of character looks in real life – and it's very different from what these people knew.

You see, for a couple of centuries the scribes and Pharisees had been teaching the people what it meant to keep the Law. Jesus singles out a few examples of their teachings to show just how different his teaching his. The Pharisees were worried about externals, but Jesus says, "If you really want to keep God's commandments,

you need to worry more about the internals."

The scribes and Pharisees taught that it was easy to avoid murder: just keep the sixth commandment. And yet Jesus says that we break the commandment not to commit murder every time we become angry with another person or call someone a fool. The scribes and Pharisees taught that it was easy to avoid adultery: just don't sleep with another man's wife or another woman's husband. But Jesus says that we violate the seventh commandment even if adultery exists as a thought in our heart. He tells us that our word has to be kept in spirit, not just in letter. He tells us that charity has to go beyond just the call of duty. He tells us that it's not enough to love our friends and neighbours – we have to love our enemies too!

The rest of Chapter 5 is a series of six examples that Jesus gives us to show us how to keep the Law according to his standard. Jesus' examples show us in *general* terms that God is less concerned with our externals, than with the *internals* of our religion – that anyone can keep the letter of the Law – he wants us to keep the spirit of it. You see, the Pharisees were hung up on the letter of the Law – on the externals. They looked at the Law as, "What am I required to do." Jesus says, "No, it's what *can* I do? In what ways do I have the privilege of serving God?" That's what inner righteousness is about. If you're concerned with the spirit, you'll understand that conformity to God's Law isn't just about your actions – it's about your desires and motives. You'll understand that the point of keeping the Law isn't just to do or not do this thing or that thing – it's ultimately to grow closer to God. The Pharisees said, "Harbour the most murderous grudge you want, just don't actually kill your enemy." Jesus says, "No. Not only refrain from actual murder, but love your enemy and be restored to right relationship with him." The Pharisee said, "Feel free to take a second or third look, just don't sleep with her." Jesus says, "If you even lust after her at the first look, you're guilty of adultery."

In each of these six examples Jesus begins his statement with something like, "You have heard it said to those of old...buy I say to you...." Some people have said that in these verses Jesus is deliberately contradicting the Law – what had been taught before – despite the fact that he's

already told us that his teaching isn't new. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "It is *written*...., but I say to you..." That would be the formula he'd use – and he uses it elsewhere – if he were talking about the Law. No, when he says, "You have *heard it said*..." he's talking about what *men* have taught – how they've added to or twisted what God caused to be written as Scripture. Jesus is actually taking the people back to Scripture – back to what God had caused to be *written*.

And so Jesus starts with a very profound example. He says,

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.
(Matthew 5:21-22)

The sixth commandment ("Thou shalt do no murder.") had been around since God gave it through Moses. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to know what that meant, so asked, "What constitutes murder?" and they did this: [open dictionary and read] "*n.* the unlawful premeditated killing of a human being by another.... *v.tr.* kill (a human being) unlawfully, esp. wickedly or inhumanely." Now for the Pharisees the dictionary definition came from Numbers 35:30, which demands death for anyone who unlawfully takes innocent life. The bottom line was that they concluded that the sixth commandment referred to nothing more or less than this *act*.

So Jesus weighs in here and asks, "Is that all murder is – the act itself? Is there no guilt for the man who attempts a murder, but fails or is interrupted in the act? Is there no guilt for the man who sincerely desires to kill another, but doesn't do it because he's too much of a coward?" When it comes to the coward, lots of people might actually say, "Good for him. Because of his cowardliness, he's not guilty of doing anything wrong." But Jesus warns us: "God is concerned with what's in our heart; he's just as concerned with our anger as he is with the actual shedding of blood.

And, Jesus says, it's not just our anger that God forbids, but also our insults. In the

first example, some of your Bibles might say, “Anyone who says to his brother, “*raca*.” That literally means “empty.” Jesus is talking about when we call someone an idiot or a bonehead. In the second case he’s talking about calling someone a fool, which is an insult against someone’s moral reputation. If you do either of these things, you’re guilty of murder by God’s standard.

So, have you ever committed murder? By Jesus definition, we’re all guilty. We lose our temper. We harbour grudges. We gossip. We kill by neglect, spite, and jealousy. If only we could see our hearts as God sees them, we’d see even worse than all that, I’m sure. Think about our own language; we talk about things like “character *assassination*” and destroying a person by words. It’s literally true and we do it all too often. We are all murderers and Jesus says that Christians are not to be like that.

So what do we do about it? Jesus gives us the solution starting in verse 23:

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. (Matthew 5:23-24)

The first step is to see, to recognise, and to acknowledge where we’re guilty of this anger – or for that matter any sin that separates us from a brother or sister. You’d think that this would be easy, but isn’t. We rationalise so often and so much that we no longer see our actions as sin, but as things that we *had* to do.

One of the best examples I can think is a gangster known as “Two Gun” Crowley. He was arrested in 1931 and had been the most dangerous criminal New York had ever seen. He killed at the drop of a hat. He got his nickname when he shot a policeman through the door of his car, then as the officer lay on the ground dying, he took the man’s own gun and shot him fatally again. He was eventually captured at his girlfriend’s apartment, after an hours-long gun battle involving hundreds of police. The police found a bloody note in which Crowley had written, “Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one – one that would do nobody

any harm.” When he was taken to the electric chair, he didn’t say, “This is what I get for killing policemen.” No, he said, “This is what I get for defending myself.” In the end he didn’t blame himself for anything. He didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. And if “Two Gun” Crowley could commit multiple murders and feel no guilt, how much more can we commit murder in our hearts and fool ourselves into thinking we’ve done nothing wrong?

The first step is to acknowledge our sin. If we can’t see it ourselves, we need to ask God to work in us by his Spirit to open our eyes to our sin.

The second step in overcoming our anger is to correct the injustice we’ve done. It doesn’t matter what caused the anger. When relationships break down it’s almost never just one person’s fault. Every one of us needs to take responsibility when a relationship falls apart. Jesus says, “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.”

Why do we need to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters before coming to God? Think about King David. He was a man redeemed by faith in the promise of the Messiah, but when he wrote about his daily relationship with God and of his sin he wrote, “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, *the Lord would not have listened*” (Psalm 66:18). Do you feel hesitant to come before God in prayer? When you do come before God in prayer, do you feel like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling – that they’re going nowhere? That’s what David’s talking about. *Sin separates us from God*. Before we come to him, we need to deal with our sin, and when our sin involves another person, you cannot expect to come to God with it until you have first made it right with that other person. As long you harbour anger, resentment, or bitterness against your brother or sister in your heart, *your relationship with God will stagnate and wither*.

This is a big problem for us. Our natural tendency is to try to take the easy way out. Instead of dealing with our sins and making it right with our brother or sister,

we substitute a pure heart with externals. We sin against someone else and ignore it, while coming to Church, making our tithes and offerings, singing, and praying, all in the hope that God will just forgive us. All our sins are forgiven through Christ, right? Yes, they are. If you fail to reconcile with your brother or sister, you husband or wife, God isn’t going to lock you out of heaven. That’s not the issue. But how can we fail to forgive and reconcile with someone else if we have any understanding of the forgiveness and mercy God has shown us. Yes, God forgives, but he also requires us to right our wrongs as much as it is within our power to do so. A refusal to right your wrongs or to forgive and reconcile with those who have wronged you is the evidence that you might not actually be the Christian you claim to be. At the very least it shows that you have no concept of just how great an offence your sin is against God, and no concept of the great price that God has paid to cover your sin by sending his Son to die in *your* place.

King Saul went out at God’s command to fight the Amalekites. God had told him that every person was to be put to the sword and everything and every animal destroyed. God didn’t want his people contaminated with paganism. But Saul didn’t destroy everything and everyone – he kept some of the livestock. When Samuel, the priest, came Saul happily told him, “I’ve done everything the Lord commanded.” But Samuel heard the animals bleating and asked, “If you’ve done everything the Lord commanded, what’s with the animals I hear.” And Saul, I think backpedalling, said, “Oh, well we destroyed everything else, but we kept the best of the sheep and oxen...um...to sacrifice to God.” Saul hadn’t kept God’s clear command, and it’s here that we read Samuel’s well-known words, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

We do the same thing today. It’s easier to substitute ceremonial – the externals of religion – for the demands of a clear conscience before God. The externals are right in and of themselves. We should do them. But God tells us that they are worthless in his sight as long as there is

unconfessed sin in our lives and failure on our part to make that sin right. First John 3:18, 20 says, “Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth...for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.” We have an obligation to confess our sins against our brothers and sisters and to make them right to every extent that we can.

The third step in Jesus’ cure for anger is to do whatever it takes to make things right and to do it *immediately*. This is the point of verses 25 and 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. (Matthew 5:25-26)

In Jesus’ day a man could be sent to debtor’s prison if he couldn’t or wouldn’t pay his debts. That’s the point here. Jesus is saying, “If you owe a debt and are being taken to court over it. Settle it. Now! If you don’t, you’ll have to live with the consequences – probably for the rest of your life.” You see, if you went to debtor’s prison, you were stuck there until your debt was paid in full. And since you couldn’t earn any money there, the only way to pay the debt was to get your family members to do it for you – and that didn’t happen often.

So Jesus is warning us of the immediacy of our need to reconcile with our brothers and sisters. Not only does a lack of reconciliation hinder the growth of our relationship with God – it can also lead to other consequences. St. Paul tells us, “Be angry, but sin not. Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” In saying that he makes the same point. If we don’t reconcile with a brother or sister *now*, the problem will only fester and grow. Deal with it before it blows up. The longer you wait, the harder it will be to deal with it. A friendship might be lost, a marriage might eventually break up, a family might be torn apart, and it’s not unheard of for these interpersonal problems to explode into the Body of Christ and tear churches apart. Animosity between brothers and sisters is like a time bomb. You don’t know when it’s going to blow, so you

need to deal with it quickly, before the consequences of bitterness and resentment grow out of control. The fact is that most of our relationships that end up destroyed could have been saved if action had been taken at the right time. Jesus says that the right time is *right now* – as soon as you’re conscious that you are at enmity with your brother or sister.

It’s no small thing. Even the Prayer Book addresses this in the instructions it gives me as your minister. It instructs that the bread and wine are not to be given to, as it says, “any...open and notorious evil liver” or to anyone who has done “any wrong to his neighbours by word or deed, so that the Congregation be thereby offended.” It also says:

“The same order shall the Minister use with those, betwixt whom he perceiveth malice and hatred to reign; not suffering them to be partakers of the Lord’s Table, until he know them to be reconciled.”

You see, it’s not enough just to *not* murder someone. Jesus’ standard – and the real standard of God’s Law – is that we actually seek the opposite. It’s not enough to just hold back on acting out your hatred and anger. Forgive and put the anger behind you, then seek reconciliation with your brother or sister.

You might ask, “But I can’t forgive so-and-so!” or “You don’t know what so-and-so did to me!” If that’s the case, then you need to remember the sin that you have committed against the holiness and glory of Almighty God. No sin between human beings can compare with the gravity of even the slightest offence against God. And we can take comfort in the fact that he promises, by his grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, to regenerate our hearts and renew our minds. Remember that if you are truly following Christ, the evidence is a love for his commandments – which means a love for others.

St. Paul says in Romans 12:21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” That’s often a hard statement for us to accept. Really, it’s an impossible statement, if your heart isn’t being regenerated by God. But God will change your heart if you also surrender your life to the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me: Our Father, we are so often guilty of trying to cover what is in our hearts by showing a false external piety. Forgive us, we ask, and so renew our hearts and minds that we will have an overwhelming desire to please you in heart and mind – in deed and in motive. Cleanse our hearts, we pray, that what is inside will motivate what we do on the outside – and let both be pleasing to you. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.