

Matthew 5:21-26 – September 12, 2021

“First Be Reconciled”

6:00pm Evening Service

Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 5:21-26.

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.’ ²² 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. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.

Introduction

Parents correcting siblings

Anyone who has had siblings or been around siblings knows that you will often find them picking on each other. The pushing, shoving, punching, or poking starts off as good fun until it is taken too far and one of the siblings is in tears. Parents quickly get involved and the kids are told “do not even so much as touch each other one more time.”

If you grew up in a household like mine, you know that instruction will mean that the peace will be short-lived. Soon, one sibling will be doing everything they can to frustrate the other without *actually* touching them. Putting their finger a half-inch from their eye, or face, and not actually touching them, but doing everything but that.

Technically, they were obeying their parent's instructions. They were not touching each other. But the parent's instructions were not to be read as bumpers for obedience. The parents primary concern was not that they would not actually physically touch each other, but rather that they would not annoy and bother each other.

The children kept the rules, but they also broke the rules.

In the passage we read this evening, it is easy to see that Jesus has perceived a similar

problem. People had been taking the commandment “do not murder” only in its most literal sense.

And Jesus’ message is a rebuke against this strictly literal interpretation. One commentator notes that the literal interpretation of the commandment “do not murder” “indicates an **apparent willingness** to obey what God has said” but in fact so limits the commandment as to leave space for all sorts of ungodly behavior. [Morris, 112-113]

Jesus was teaching that “Do not murder” is **just the beginning** of the commandment, not the end.

See, Jesus goes beyond the behavior that could be specifically punished by law, to the real issue. To the “kind of heart that generates such behavior” – an angry heart that, would murder if unimpeded.

God isn’t concerned with our outward display of obedience as much as he is concerned with our hearts valuing what he values. He wants us to be holy as he is holy. [Keener, 183]

See, God isn’t OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration). These aren’t the 10 BEST practices on how to run our lives more efficiently. God is training us to love what he loves and to care about what he cares about, not just be good at following rules.

He is training us up in the way we should go. We too train up the little ones in our congregation, not because we want some robotic muscle-memory Christians who always do the right thing. We train up our little ones so that they love what we love, so that they long for God’s law and love his precepts. So that they seek life, rather than death.

A few years ago, when I began to teach Bible class for elementary students, I was relieved to hear that the principal of the school was more concerned with me teaching the students to love God than to know Bible statistics. Now, knowing God and loving God, do go hand in hand, but I deeply appreciated the emphasis. Her desire was inwardly focused, rather than outwardly focused.

And God’s laws have this same focus. While the two are intertwined, the holiness that God sought, was not primarily outward, but inward. As commentator R.T. France writes,

God’s law “promotes an inward concern with motive and attitude above the ‘outward’ focus on the visible and quantifiable observance of regulations. It goes behind specific rules to look for the more far-reaching principles which should govern the conduct of the people of God. It is concerned not so much with the negative goal of the avoidance of specific sin but with the far more demanding positive goal of discovering and following what is really the will of God for his people.” [197]

In essence, God’s commandments offer us more than specific rules. They offer us far more demanding principles.

We are to live our lives in such a way that, the very thought of murdering someone is so distant from us, that it is not even a struggle to obey the commandment.

So much so that, as one commentator writes, we can almost bypass the commandment, and instead of simply avoiding the breaking of the law, we pursue the more radical ethic which Jesus fleshes out in this passage. [France, 198] We focus not only on the activity that is forbidden, but on the counterpart that is also commanded [Ferguson, 116]

This is why Jesus says, “you have heard it said...but I tell you....” Because he is explaining that it isn’t just murder that we need to be concerned about.

That had been how people previously interpreted the commandment. Now he expands our understanding and interpretation and lets us know that the commandment actually calls us to be concerned with everything that leads up to murder as well. All the sin and building blocks of murder. The anger, that if left unbridled, would lead to murderous results.

Anger and Specifically Our Anger is Not that Bad

The problem is that even though this all might make sense logically; it is possible that we have a really hard time believing that our anger is all that bad. After all, we are the kings of excuses and know how to cover our tracks. We talk about our anger being justified, or we somehow think our anger is righteous anger. In the same vein we downplay the overall gravity of anger. Does it really matter that much if no one even knows I’m angry?

But Jesus doesn’t just say that anger is unfortunate or bad. Jesus compares it with murder. He says, if you think those who murder are liable to judgment, ***let me tell you***, those who are angry with their brother will also be liable to judgment. See, Jesus is not only expanding the law, but he is making it more intense and radical.

Jesus is teaching this because it is easy for Christians not to take this commandment very seriously. We have allowed anger to fester and grow in our lives (or perhaps in our private lives) largely unrestrained.

Sinclair Ferguson says that we treat the damage we do “....very lightly because we do not see the corpses we leave behind. That is why our Lord invades our moral slumber by telling us how serious this is in....[his sight].” [116]

We don’t see what our anger does to other people, and so we downplay its importance. And Jesus wakes us from our moral slumber.

John Stott explains that Jesus was issuing a solemn warning of divine judgment....he was “extending the nature of the penalty as well as of the crime. Not only are anger and insult equivalent to murder...but the punishment... is nothing less than the divine judgment of hell.” [Stott, 85]

This is evident because Jesus goes from the more general plural teaching “everyone who is

angry is in danger”, to the singular, and more direct laser focus, saying “so then YOU.” **If you** find yourself offering your gifts to God, and there remember that your brother has something against you, STOP. Hold it right there.

Stop the act. Drop your gift right there and don’t even think about dishonoring God’s holy name by going through the motions. You have an issue with someone in the church, with someone who Christ died for, and you are acting like everything is fine?

You (singular) leave your gift, and FIRST, BE RECONCILED.

I don’t know about you, but I would think that rationally it seems to make more sense to be at the temple, or at church and to be with God, and then during the week find a space to reconcile and fix things.

But God shuts that down.

He says, don’t even think about it. Don’t come into my house....the house of the all-knowing God and offer your gifts as though you were right with God, when clearly you are not.

I don’t want your gifts, I want obedience.

“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...” [1 Samuel 15:22]

No. Jesus says, leave your gift. Note, he doesn’t say, “take your gift home.” He says leave your gift there.... the implication seems to be, “you are not free from what you came for. You still need to give your gift. You don’t just get to take it home; you still need to offer your gift. **But first**, be reconciled. First repent and fix things with your brother in Christ. Then come back, your gift will be waiting for you here, and then you can present your gift.”

What Jesus is saying here is intentionally strongly worded. One commentator writes, “Leave your gift is a sharp command....The interruption of so solemn an act emphasizes the overriding importance of reconciliation.” [Morris, 116]

Can you picture a scenario in which Jesus says to stop offering our worship to him? It is shocking, and it is meant to shock us. To wake us from our moral slumber.

Jesus will not allow us to live as Pharisees. We simply cannot act as though everything is fine on the outside as we sing hymns of God’s forgiveness, mercy, and grace while we refuse to offer that same forgiveness, mercy, and grace to others within the body of Christ. That is the epitome of hypocrisy. Jesus will have none of it.

Commentator Leon Morris explains that Jesus clearly put an order here. He puts our reconciliation of first importance. See,

“‘First’ has a time reference: “in the first place, before doing anything else.” It is

important that the worshiper gets his priorities right, and the first thing to do is to effect reconciliation. He must take whatever steps are needed to restore harmony, and only when this is done may he come back and resume his offering.” [116]

Can that be any more in our face? It is like a celestial time out. God is making us sit out on worshipping him until we make things right with our brothers and sisters.

Of course, even here he is gracious. He will take us back, he tells us to leave the gift, and even says, *but first, (implying there is a second) we must reconcile*. There is no suggestion here. It is a command.

Biblical theologians explain that because Jesus was teaching in Galilee, and these types of gifts took place in Jerusalem, the severity of what Jesus was saying was even greater than what we might imagine. They would have to travel 80 miles, from Galilee to Jerusalem, which would be a week’s journey, only to then leave their gift at the temple to make a week’s journey back again in order to reconcile. [France, 203]

And this is consistent with Scripture elsewhere. According to the Apostle John, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” [1 John 4:20-21]

Loving God and loving the brotherhood is intertwined. This is so important, that it is worth the trip and the haste. It is so important that it cannot wait.

In verse 25 Jesus mentions the timing again, “come to term quickly with your accuser.” Do not wait!

Sinclair Ferguson writes, “Animosity is a time bomb; we do not know when it will “go off.” We must deal with it quickly, before the consequences of our bitterness get completely out of control. Most human relationships that are destroyed could have been preserved if there had been communication and action at the right time. Jesus says that the right time is as soon as we are conscious that we are at enmity with our brother.” [Ferguson, 118]

We all know Paul’s well-known verse, “...do not let the sun go down on your anger,²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.” [Ephesians 4:26-27] Some people even include it in their wedding vows. Why?

Because anyone who has ignored Paul’s instructions here knows that going to bed angry or letting anger fester, nearly always makes things worse. It often creates opportunities for the devil to do his best work, to cause people to sin, or to be tempted into sin in life-altering ways.

The Consequences of Anger

While God seeks to bring reconciliation and unity, sin and anger have the goal of separating and dividing us. To separate us from God and from those we love.

We've probably all seen it before. How many relationships have been destroyed simply because of an insignificant and foolish argument or misunderstanding? Anger leads to offended parties. Pride and sin lead to further distance and when no one wants to make the first step toward reconciliation, anger reigns.

Anger blinds our judgment. We only see the speck in our brother's eye and cannot see the log in our own eye – or at least we downplay its size and consider it miniscule in comparison to the other person's issues.

We think our anger is justified, that we have ***the right to be angry***. When people wrong us, our rage can make quick arguments in our heads that seem perfectly reasonable.

I heard a teacher explain the problem with arguments he made within his head. He explained, "I win 100% of the arguments I have in my head. I always have sound arguments that make perfect sense....until I say them out loud to other people. Then, they are almost immediately proven wrong." We deceive ourselves – we think we are the only people who see things clearly. Jesus says, no – you are living in sin!

One of the other consequences of anger is that we become lonely people. Perhaps we are not lonely yet, or perhaps we are in denial that we are already lonely, but as we allow anger to be a part of our lives, we will face the consequence of a lonely life. Or at least a life with friendships that aren't really friendships but rather groups of people who share similar disgust over the same people or kinds of people.

While we were travelling a few weeks ago, we worshipped at a PCA church in California and the pastor was preaching on forgiveness and reconciliation. He talked about this very issue and also the issue of avoiding reconciliation by instead talking to everyone but the person we have issue with. These words are particularly pertinent to our message today. Here is what he said:

We talk about the wrong done to us to everyone but the person who did it. It feels good to build an alliance...to recruit a team of commiserators... Someone tells your secret or is two-faced with you or betrays you. You don't talk to the person; you talk with others who will share in your anger and resentment. It happens around issues of race. Somebody says something racially insensitive and hurtful. You don't talk to that person; you talk to other people who you know will affirm you in your hurt and will share in your disgust. And pretty soon you begin to discover that so many of your friendships have formed around a shared irritation or dislike of a person or group of people. And that does nothing to heal anything. We need to hear Jesus' words. Because one of the things he says [is]...pay attention to yourselves. He says you need to speak to the person, not about the person to others." [David Jones] First, go and be reconciled.

This pastor highlights that one of the consequences of anger and pride is that our friendships can become gossip circles or groups of shared irritation. It feels good to feel validated, but we are only deceiving ourselves, and surrounding ourselves by people who

will agree with what we have said or done. And slowly we fall into greater and greater loneliness.

The consequences of anger go on and on. It costs us our health, it can cost us our relationships with our children, our siblings, or our parents. It can cost us our jobs, our friendships. It can get us on the no-fly list, banned from businesses and it can get us tossed into jail.

Anger has tremendous consequences, not to mention the fact that it stands directly against all the fruits of the spirit. Anger is not loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, or self-controlled.

And anger also stands directly against love. For “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; [1 Corinthians 13:4-5]

Do you exhibit these traits? Perhaps if you ask yourself, you won’t get a straight answer. But if you ask someone who can lovingly tell you the truth, what would they say? Would they say you are impatient? Would they say you are kind? Would they say you can be arrogant and rude, insisting on your own way and be pretty irritable and resentful?

If so, that might be a pretty clear sign that Jesus knows this about you. That he knows that about each and every one of us.

And I think it is important that we all admit that we all need to work on this. I have yet to meet someone who doesn’t struggle with anger or resentment. Even those innocent little babies out there in the nursery or in the narthex. Ask their parents if they are always that innocent, or if they are angry. And if they are angry, were they taught that, or did they know that since they were born?

This is not to generalize or downplay the importance of this teaching against anger, but rather the opposite, to say that Jesus is confronting each and every one of us. We each need to mature in this area. We all have anger issues. Hidden or for all to see, but we all have work to do.

What was that? Did someone say to themselves, “yeah, but not like so and so?” Hold on a minute. God doesn’t compare our sin with other people. He compares us against his standard of holiness, and you and I are found guilty.

Anger, however it manifests itself, is still anger. Perhaps some of you are aggressive and in people’s faces. Others might be passive aggressive and cold. Some might be masters of the cold shoulder or avoidance. Some might be pros at withdrawing friendship or kindness, being abrupt, unkind, but not “technically” mean.

Passive aggression is still aggression. It is just passive in nature.

Perhaps you are a grumbler or complainer. Perhaps you like to vent out your anger on others. Maybe you are only angry when you are at home with your kids, or with your loved one. Maybe you get angry in your heart.

You see, we all deal with anger in different ways. No one is exempt.

So, what do we do? How can we stop anger from controlling our lives, destroying our friendships, family, and church?

Blessed are the peacemakers.

The call in this passage is clear. We are to seek peace. God calls us to be peacemakers.

One clarification before we get to this point:

Peacemaking does not mean you allow someone to abuse you. If you are being bullied or physically or verbally abused, while anger is not the correct response, neither is lying down and enabling the abuse. Please see me, one of the elders or pastors if this is you, we would like to help you. Abuse is not ok. Neither is bullying. We will seek to help you.

This needs to be highlighted because anger often manifests itself in control and/or abuse.

When people feel like they are not getting something they want, one way of getting what they want is by threatening anger. Everyone does this to some degree, so we do need to be careful to ***not call everything abuse*** or accuse each other of abuse hastily. If you have questions about this and are concerned, let's talk about it or get you talking to someone who can help.

See, anger often forces a result a person wants through the threat of anger. The threat could be that the person will explode yelling and make a scene (kids and adults throw tantrums), or it could be that the person will retreat to their room – avoidance (think slamming the door or one-word answers or sulking around). The threat of becoming violent or becoming passive, can both become a controlling mechanism and at their extremes can be abusive.

We all have problems, we all have some of this in us, and it is very likely that we do not see how we ourselves are guilty of the very things we see in others. We all need help.

So, what can we do? Well, one of the first things we can do, is not worry about other people's anger. We are called to deal with our anger. We have enough here to deal with. We don't need other people's problems on top of our own!

As you hear this message, how often has your mind and heart thought of ways to justify your anger or your broken relationships? How fast is your brain working right now at trying to free you from reconciling with someone?

Is your anger blocking you and blinding you from healing? What are you going to do about the anger in your heart right now? Let your guard come down, stop thinking of someone

else's anger. Deal with your anger. Ask someone for help.

Jesus directs this passage to us as individuals. He calls us to own the responsibility of peacemaking. He gives us no excuse. Paul says, "If possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." [Romans 12:18] As far as it depends on *you*. You can't control the response someone gives you, but you can take the first step.

So, if we are 1% guilty and the other party is 99% at fault, you still have the responsibility and call from Jesus to repair that relationship. To do everything in your power to pursue peace. Make haste to repair things...even if it has been a long time. If you need help, talk to us, that is what we are here for. At the very least we can pray together.

Who are the people you avoid at church? That you don't talk to because of some issue?

God has called us to love and to reconcile. Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. First and greatest commandment and the second.

We are called to love and to be peacemakers. This is what Jesus came for. To reconcile us with God and to reconcile us to one another. Love God and love your brother and sister. Take the first step this evening. Do not wait any longer, do not let Satan continue to have a foothold. Talk to that person, call them, visit them, and honor Jesus as you do so. For as you do, you will bring glory to God and unity in Christ's body.

Conclusion:

As I conclude, I want to share a story. When I was 18, my parents gave me an opportunity to serve in the Washington DC area. I lived in a house with about 16 other guys in this special Christian program. And one of the house rules that stuck with me to this day was one of their unbending rules. The rule was, that if you were upset with someone, you either had to deal with it with them before going to bed, or you had to sleep outside. The idea was that they didn't want to harbor sin in that home. I thought it was a great rule until one day one of the leaders really angered me. I tried to shrug it off and got in bed, but I could not sleep. I had to follow the house rules. So, I got up and slept outside. Just kidding. I got up, woke the leader up, confessed my anger and talked to him and we worked it out.

It was inconvenient, awkward, embarrassing and intimidating. But it pleased the Lord and made our relationship stronger. It prevented division in the home and brought deeper unity in Christ through reconciliation.

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we are given the call to fight the anger that lives in us (in all its forms) and to seek reconciliation with anyone we have issues with. We are to hurry and to seek reconciliation, to not let the sun go down in our anger. And we are to be peacemakers who, as far as it depends on us, seek peace with all men.

May we be men and women of God who respond to this call, strengthened by the same love and forgiveness that brought us our reconciliation with God. Amen.

This sermon series draws on material from:

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T: God calls us to live lives of reconciliation.