

Dealing With Anger

Matthew 5:21-26

- Rawle Trotman, 21, of Simcoe, Ontario, was charged with stabbing a fellow fisherman in an argument... over a worm.
- Brian Hertzog, 18, of Reading, Pa., was charged with shooting his sister (leaving her paralyzed below the waist)... because she beat him in a wrestling match.
- Deena Murdoch, 52, a teacher in Carrollton, Texas, was charged with choking a fourth-grade boy... because he sneaked a peek at her grade book.
- A Milwaukee woman killed her friend over an argument about a dress. I wonder if the argument was about whether the dress was black and blue or white and gold.
- William Fagyas, 82, of Crown Point, IN, was charged with stabbing his wife, Eleanor, 84, ... because, according to police, she “was not in the Christmas spirit.”

Authorities across the nation are concerned over the increase in murders due to rage over the smallest and silliest things. Some people point to the pandemic which has us on edge over things that used to seem trivial. Others point to big city leaders who have been implementing soft on crime policies. Whatever the cause, there have been a steadily growing increase in murders between friends, siblings, coworkers, relatives, and even spouses. The media loves to focus on the mass shootings, but I saw one statistic that showed that 48% of all murders list “argument” as the primary motive for murder.

America’s boundless optimism has given way to an addiction to anger. We are a nation of rage. We have road rage, air rage, office rage, teenage rage, computer rage, maternal rage, just to name a few. We are on edge. We have lost control of our tempers. We seem to be on a constant simmer, ready to boil at the slightest increase in temperature.

Jesus apparently knew exactly what he was talking about when he says in the Sermon on the Mount, *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago. ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. (Mt. 5:21-22a)”*

Last week we saw how Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the law of God, but he came to fulfill it. While the Pharisees incessantly quibbled about every outward application of the law, Jesus looked beyond the letter of the law to the heart. Instead of reducing God’s law to a list of dos and don’ts, Jesus journeys to their heart. Jesus goes beyond what we do to why we do what we do.

I. Going Deeper - Sin and Righteousness Begin in the Heart

Throughout the rest of Matthew 5, Jesus quotes six points of Old Testament law, and he adjusts the focus knob on our theological lens to look at the heart. As if to underscore his point, Jesus begins with the one law that most people feel the most confident that they have never broken,

"You shall not murder." Okay, I've never done that. All clear there. I'm in good shape. Move on. Next.

But Jesus says, "Whoa, not so quick. Look a little deeper. Sure you've never actually murdered anyone, but what about in your heart? Have you ever harbored a resentful anger at someone? Do you ever become bitter and despise someone?"

Oh, well, I uh, um... well that's different... I mean...sure... I'm only human... we all get a little ticked off... and did you see what they did to me... You've got to understand...

No Dan, It's not different. It's the same. Where do you think murder comes from? I want you to look where sin and righteousness begin. People pull the trigger with their finger, because they've already pulled the trigger in their hearts. How can you love and serve me, while at the same time being angry and hating the very people I created and loved and died for. I gave my life for them. When you hate them, you hate what I love.

This is how Jesus refocuses everything we think about murder and anger. If you murder someone, you will find yourself hauled before a human court. But harboring selfish anger in your heart will have you before a much, much higher court. There is no human court capable of discerning and judging the human heart. However, there is a divine Supreme Court that is capable of weighing our hearts. Jer. 17:10 tells us that God can search the heart and examine the mind. It's this judgment that matters most. God isn't just concerned with the act of murder. He is concerned with murderous hearts. 1 John 3:15 puts it quite clearly, *"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him."*

In West Memphis, Arkansas not long ago three young men were charged with murder. In court, the father of one of the victims suddenly rushed at the men screaming, "I'll chase you all the way to hell." One writer observed, "I understand the father's fierce anger, but there is something almost prophetic about his words. If we allow our hatred for those who have wronged us to go unchecked, it will eventually destroy us. We will follow our bitterness 'all the way to hell.'"

II. Sticks and Stones - Words Really Can Hurt

Jesus continues to probe deeper, as he goes from addressing our attitudes to our words. We might not look at our words as deadly weapons, but Jesus does *"Again, anyone who says to his brother, Raca, is answerable to the Sanhedrin, but anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."* Scholars have been debating these sentences for centuries. They involve words that are very difficult to translate into English, in fact the word 'Raca' is in the text because we really don't have a word for it.

(Next Slide) It would be a mistake though to focus our discussion on the specific words that Jesus uses. His intention was not to give us a list of words or phrases that are wrong for

Christians to use in anger. If we wanted to list all words that could be spoken angrily and hatefully, he would need the rest of the book of Matthew. Focusing on the specific words would be to fall into the same trap as the Pharisees. To say, you can't say the words, "You fool!" because Jesus said so, but you can call them moron, imbecile, stupid idiot, or whatever is to miss Jesus point entirely. The fact is Jesus, himself used these words to describe others, and so did Paul, and so did James. The specific word is not the point.

Jesus is dealing with the hateful attitudes that drive all of our hateful speech. Jesus gives a couple of examples here. The words "Raca," and the Greek for "fool" referred to a deep seated anger. It is to harbor contempt and resentment. When you cling to this sort of anger, you can't keep it hidden. It will boil over, and usually it takes the form of hateful speech. Words that are sharpened like daggers and used like weapons. They are intended to hurt, and they do.

The old saying says, "Sticks and Stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." That sounds nice, but it isn't true. Words do hurt and they can hurt badly. Some of us here this morning are carrying some very deep wounds left by someone's hateful, hurtful words. The saying should go, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can really hurt me." They hurt where it matters most.

Dr. Larry Calvin tells a story in his book *The Power Zone* about a 25 year old lady who came to his counseling center for help. She was 5'2" and weighed 90 pounds. She wanted help losing weight. She described herself as fat, obese, heavy, and overweight. Her daily diet consisted of three grapes, and a teaspoon full of Grape Nuts, and that even made her feel bloated.

While treating this young lady, Dr. Calvin learned of all the verbal abuse that was heaped on her as a child, but one particular incident had been deeply etched on her soul. When she was eleven, she snuck off to the mall to meet a boy. They had a Coke, walked around the mall holding hands, and looking in store windows.

Her brother ratted on her, and so when she got home her dad started yelling at her. One sentence, though scarred her for life, "I don't see what the boys see in you anyway as fat as you are." From then on, every time she looked in the mirror, she heard that sentence and saw a fat nobody.

Words do murder. They kill the heart. They suck the life out of the soul. They strangle the human spirit. They stab hopes and dreams. A bullet or a knife takes life quickly, but angry, hateful words take it slowly, one syllable at a time. Some of you here this morning have been deeply wounded by words. You carry in your scars of wounding words. This is what Jesus is trying to heal here.

III. More than Worship - God Desires Forgiveness and Reconciliation More than Worship and Service

Instead of selfish anger, instead of hateful words, Jesus points us in a different direction. He points us to reconciliation and forgiveness. He wants us to lay aside our right to get even, our right to hold a grudge and seek to restore broken relationships. Anger wants to enslave you, but forgiveness and reconciliation set you free. This is something easier seen than explained.

There's an old story about a little boy visiting his grandparents and he was given his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit his target. As he came back to Grandma's back yard, he spied her pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck fell dead.

The boy panicked. Desperately he hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "Remember the duck." Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he could stand it no longer. He confessed to Grandma that he had killed the duck. "I know Johnny," she said, giving him a hug. "I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

Jesus says, "Forget the duck, the relationship is more important." Forgiveness and Reconciliation can cure an angry heart. They stop murder before the hate even starts. And forgiveness and reconciliation are what God desires most of us.

Matt 5:23-24

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Do you see what Jesus is saying here? He says that it's more important that you be reconciled to your brother than it is that you worship. Now he's speaking to Jews living under the Old covenant of temple worship here, and so he's saying you've got no business going to the temple and giving offerings to God when you know that there's something between you and your brother. If he was speaking directly to us he would say, "Before you go to church and sing songs, pray prayers, take communion, you better first settle matters between you and whomever is upset at you." Don't allow anger to create a wedge in those relationships.

I have heard it said many times that worship is the highest calling of people. The greatest thing we can do is to worship God. But Jesus says here that there is something more important, and that is to heal broken relationships.

IV. Take the First Step - Don't wait for the other person

Jesus' words in this verse also point us to what we can do to start healing the broken relationship, and that is take the first step. Be willing to make the first move. Don't wait on the other person. You do it. You take the initiative.

So many relationships are never healed and grow more distant and broken over the years because neither party is willing to make the first step. One of the hardest things to do can be to say, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I hurt you, and I'm very sorry. Will you forgive me?" We allow pride and anger to keep us trapped in our isolation and brokenness. Many times all that is needed to start the healing process, is for someone to make the first move. Jesus doesn't say wait until they come to you, wait until they say something. Jesus says, before you do anything else, even before you worship me, go and be reconciled. Don't just take care of it with God. Take care of it with them.

Let me throw a little extra freebie in here as well. We should take the initiative no matter what side of the wrong we are on. Whether we are the perpetrator or the victim we are called to take the first step. In these verses right here Jesus calls the perpetrator to make the first step. But if you go to Matthew 18:15 He calls the victim to make the first step. *"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you."* The point of showing him his fault is not to put them in their place, to prove yourself right, but forgiveness and reconciliation.

Jesus isn't confused, nor is he contradicting himself. What he is saying is that no matter what, I want you to be willing to take the first step at healing the relationship. You said something stupid and hurt someone, then go and apologize and ask forgiveness. Heal the relationship. Someone hurt you. Let them know. Go with forgiveness on your heart. Heal the relationship.

Don't wait on the other person. You do it.

V. Act Quickly - Don't let anger fester

But not only should we be willing to take the first step, Jesus says we should do it quickly. Jesus says this is an important matter of urgency. Do it now. Do it fast.

Matt 5:25-26

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

(Next Slide) Jesus wants us to start healing the relationship as quickly as possible, because the longer we allow deep-seated anger to fester, the more it can grow and the more dangerous it can become. People will carry around this deep-seated anger long after they have forgotten what made them mad in the first place.

The famous Hatfield-McCoy family feud left twelve dead over twelve years and to this day there is great disagreement about what originally caused the dispute. The longer we let anger go, the harder it is to heal the relationship. This is why Jesus says, *"Settle matters quickly."* It only gets worse from here.

B.R. Holt tells a story about an interesting incident of road rage. This occurred one morning during rush hour traffic in Washington DC. A young lady shot out from a side street into the stream of traffic immediately in front of a driver forcing him to brake sharply. He avoided hitting her by inches and was obviously furious. Within seconds, traffic stopped at a red light, and the man leapt from his car, and strode angrily toward hers. At the very least, he intended to chew her up one side and down the other. Seeing him coming, the very attractive young lady jumped from her car and ran to meet him--a big smile on her face! Before he could say one word or know what was happening, she had thrown her arms around him, hugged him tightly, and planted a passionate kiss on his lips! Then she was back in her car and driving away, leaving her antagonist standing in the middle of the street still speechless and looking somewhat confused and embarrassed--but no longer angry! She acted quickly.

Now I'm not saying you should passionately kiss everyone who's angry with you, but there is an important principle here. Paul said it this way in Eph. 4:26-27, *"Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,"* Like Jesus said, settle matters quickly, but Paul goes on and says, *"and do not give the devil a foothold."* If you don't move quickly to resolve the anger and heal the relationship, the devil gets a foothold. How many footholds does he have here this morning?

As we draw toward a close here this morning, let me ask you some personal questions. Do you have any unreconciled anger? Do you have any bitterness you're carrying around with you? Aren't you ready to let go of that heavy baggage? It's time. It's time to forgive and move on.

Quit waiting for them to make the first move. Quit waiting for them to apologize. Maybe they're not even sorry. But your anger has become this heavy burden that you have to carry around. You don't have to carry it anymore. You can hand it over to God. Let Him take care of it in his perfect time and in his perfect way.

Quit being too embarrassed to go apologize yourself. You make the first move. Before the sun sets today, you will decide what that first move will be. Maybe you'll even make that move. Take care of it before you come back to worship next week. Either you heal a broken relationship or you give something over to God, you don't have to carry around.

Let me leave you with the story of Amy Biehl. It was 1993 in South Africa. These were the tumultuous years as apartheid was coming to its bitter but inevitable end. South Africa was less than one year away from its first democratic election in which black people had the right to vote.

Amy was an American student working with a local university to help register blacks for their first ever registration. On the afternoon of August 25, 1993 a mob of young black men leaving an anti-apartheid rally came upon this defenseless white girl. They took out all of their rage at years of oppression on this young lady who had nothing to do with it, who was only there to help them find freedom. They stoned and stabbed Amy Biehl to death.

But this is not the tragic end to a tragic story. It is only the first chapter. Weeks later, Amy's parents travelled to South Africa, not to seek revenge or even justice, but to pursue the dream of their daughter. They established the Amy Biehl foundation to develop black youth in the townships, and to build peace and reconciliation between the races.

Upon their release in 1998, two of Amy's killers began working with the foundation, and grew very close to Amy's mother. Today they help build the dream of the young woman they had killed.

Amy's mother, Linda says, "I've grown fond of these young men. They're like me own kids. It may sound strange, but I tend to think there's a little bit of Amy's spirit in them. Some people think we are supporting criminals, but the Foundation that we started in her name is all about preventing crime among youth. It's what Desmond Tutu calls "Ubuntu" to choose to forgive rather than demand retribution, a belief that my humanity is inextricably caught up in yours."