

Everyday Murder

Matthew 5:21-26

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Last week, just prior to our text, we saw Jesus say that he came not to abolish, but to fulfill, the law. *He even said one's standing in the kingdom is tied to whether one keeps and teaches even the least of the commandments.* And then, provocatively, he says: For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of God. And we mentioned that unpacking that fully, would require looking at the next six chunks of teaching that follow.

These are often called the antitheses. Because....Six times in this chapter, Jesus says: "you have heard it said" or "you have heard it said of old." Then, he says, with divine authority: But I say to you. No citing of the scribes and rabbis. No reference to the scholarly consensus. *Just serene sovereign majesty as the Lord and goal of the Torah. You have heard it said – BUT I say to you.*

Thus, there is a contrast, an antithesis between what was heard – or at least between the current interpretation of what was heard – and Jesus' own words. His point is that as the law's fulfiller, He is its sovereign interpreter. The one who corrects misunderstanding, the one who shows what the law pointed to in all its depth and riches. He comes to bring the law to its full completion, and he expects us to keep the law *as he himself taught*, and as he himself did. So we will make two points here: Anger in verses 21 and 22, and reconciliation in verses 23 through 26. Anger and reconciliation.

I. Anger

First, then, anger. The first antithesis begins in v.21: You have heard that it was said to the people long ago: You shall not murder. He cites the 6th commandment. The law forbids criminal or UNJUST killing. It does not forbid the death penalty, or just wars, or self-defense. The sixth commandment is about UNJUST, unauthorized taking of human life. Which is why: Thou shalt not kill is a mistranslation. It's thou shall not murder. But Jesus' citation of what was heard of old is not complete. It continues: and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. The law contained sanctions, judgments, namely the death penalty, for murder.

So it is not correct to say that Jesus is, in this instance, correcting a misinterpretation or a perversion of the law. He is referring to the judicial statutes of the law itself. Rooted in the fact of man being a bearer of God's image, we are told: Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. Murder – an assault on God's image – is taken with utmost seriousness. Numbers 35:16-18 says:

¹⁶ If anyone strikes someone a fatal blow with an iron object, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. ¹⁷ Or if anyone is holding a stone and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death. ¹⁸ Or if anyone is holding a wooden object and strikes someone a fatal blow with it, that person is a murderer; the murderer is to be put to death.

Now, there were exceptions: Cain, Moses, and David – all committed murder and escaped justice. But the point here is – this is a capital offense. And the judgment Jesus refers to is dreadful and final.

Now, we might – as the first hearers surely would have – we might be thinking: That's all well and good, but what does murder have to do with me? Or my friends. This is a sin for really bad folks, not good people like our-selves. Of course, this is, Jesus thinks very much about us. What he is doing, beginning in v.23, with his "but I tell you," is pointing us to the searching depth and fullness of the law as fulfilled in him. But I tell you, that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Jesus is NOT adding to or reinterpreting the law here either.

Leviticus 19 says: ¹⁷ *Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart.* ¹⁸ *“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*

The prohibition against anger, hatred, and revenge, is found in the Old Testament. What Jesus is doing is going to the root, the source of murder, which is found in anger. But just what does Jesus mean by anger? Well, we can see that in how it is exhibited. It is the type of anger which says to a brother or sister, Raca, which means something like empty-headed, stupid, or idiotic. Or, it calls someone a "fool," the Greek word is the word we get moron from. But it probably has overtones of something like apostate, reprobate, or damned. Now these are not curse words, and they are not even, in some contexts, inappropriate.

So, here we must take some care. Jesus demonstrates anger in the gospels – in cleansing the temple, for instance. He calls the Pharisees fools, he calls his disciples foolish, Paul calls the Galatian Christians foolish, the prophets, the psalms, and the proverbs all speak of, and condemn, fools. So, when Jesus speaks of anger here, and the words which flow it, he means *unjust* anger. Some translations add the words "without cause" after "whoever is angry with a brother

or a sister.” While those words are probably not original, they surely convey the sense. What is in view is NOT righteous indignation, such as Jesus, or Paul, or the Prophets expressed, but malicious, self-avenging, retaliatory, petty anger (expressed verbally).

The unrighteous anger of man, which James says, cannot achieve the righteousness of God. And Holy Scripture is ferociously concerned with our anger and its consequences. Listen to just a small sampling. This is God’s word:

Ps. 37:8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil.

Prov 14:29: Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly.

Prov. 15:1 A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Prov. 15:18 A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.

Prov. 22:24 Do not make friends with a hot-tempered person, do not associate with one easily angered.

Prov. 29:11 Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end.

Eccl 7:9 Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools.

Col. 3:8 But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Eph 4:26-27 “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

And this sort of anger, which is just hatred, is the STUFF of murder. As John says: anyone who HATES his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. It is the essence of murder to bear this sort of anger toward another (in the church here, but surely the principle applies more broadly).

And – now this is shocking – but we must hear it. The stuff of murder is IN US. At the first sleight, the first provocation, the first wrong – the first criticism – we bristle. We react. Instinctively, the heat, the instinct of murder, rises up in us. It seems automatic. Like some natural defense mechanism. It’s almost bio-chemical. Out of the heart comes the anger, the murder, the speech which defile a man.

We have to fight NOT to respond in kind. It's a sign of just how deep, how entrenched, how entwined and entangled with our psycho-somatic existence the stuff of murder is in us. And from THIS anger flows speech, which is not simply an uncalled-for insult — it is that — but this speech is also a hateful condemnation of one's brother or sister. Speech which treats them as sub-human, which forgets their status as image-bearers of God. Speech which implies perhaps that they are cut off, immoral, apostates, worthy of damnation. Speech which comes from a heart which, in truth, wishes the other person were dead. And that is, in fact, what is often in our heart when we seethe with hate and anger at a brother or sister. Just everyday murder.

Now, I want to interject something important here. The actual words Jesus singles out. Raca and Fool – are common words. They are not some herculean super-curse words that you bring out for the really bad guys like Hitler. These are words the common people used all the time. That's which makes Jesus' teaching here so shocking, so radical – no one is immune to the condemnation. This is just how people speak. And we too, live in a culture, an atmosphere of fuming, of grievance, fear, mockery. Hip: biting and snarky. Where it is just normal for us to be angry – to go around saying: He's a jerk, she's a moron, they are idiots. This is everyday "murder."

Now, yes, these things can be said justly, but we must be on our guard. Because we now resort to this stuff like breathing. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me – is a lie. Words hurt others terribly. But here we learn that our unrighteous words hurt us most of all. Far more than sticks and stones. For *this* speech – directed at a sister/brother - subjects one to judgment and the fire of hell (No one talked about this more than Jesus. Ge-henna: Valley of Hinnom smoldering garbage dump south of Jerusalem at which, centuries earlier, ancient Molech worship, child sacrifice, was practiced. Metaphor for the fire of divine judgment) Anger and its associated insults may escape a human court, but they shall not escape the Judge of all the earth. And what the death penalty pointed to – he exacts in the fire of hell itself.

Now, this anger and speech is NOT equal/identical to murder, Jesus does not say that-- but it is the root of murder. It is the stuff of violence. And it justly places one, our Lord says, in danger of hell itself. Who among us wants to stand up now, and say this text does not apply to them? And Jesus wants us to deal with this anger radically – at its root - as those whose righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

II. Reconciliation

Thus, we come to our second point, reconciliation. Here, we get two examples, one from the temple, and one from civic life, one dealing with a fellow Christian,

and one with an adversary, showing how to break the cycle that leads from anger to action. Verse 23: Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you.

Notice something here, and it is true in the next example as well. Jesus shifts from talking about OUR anger, to the anger our actions produce in others. We always remember and churn over their hostility and offenses against us. Jesus says remember what your unjust behavior has done, remember the offenses YOU have caused. There are people who are oblivious to the effect their temperament, their words, their demeanor, have on others. They go through life with no clue that they are offending people; or that people are maneuvering around them. We are not to be among them.

So, you are at the altar. That is, you are in the temple offering a gift or a sacrifice. You are in church and the liturgy has already begun. You remember someone has something against you. The situation envisioned here is that this is a just claim. Something you did that provoked their anger/offense. Jesus calls for immediate action. Leave your gift at the altar (Jerusalem altar, feast, miles from home – absurdity point to the seriousness of dealing with this stuff early). Don't wait for the service to be over. First things first. You did the wrong, you initiate the reconciliation. First, go. Be reconciled to them.

They may not desire reconciliation. But you don't know until you go. As far as it depends on us, we are to be at peace with all. It's humbling, it's difficult, our whole fallen selves rebel against it. But it is what peacemaking entails. This is the way of the cross. And it's a command. Go. Be reconciled. Then, come and offer your gift. Cut off, not simply your own, but their simmering anger. Make their peace and well-being your primary concern.

The second example starts in v.25. Settle matters quickly – even with adversary taking you to court. We should not press the details here. It a sort of mini-parable and Jesus is really making one simple point. Move swiftly, now, sooner, not later, to seek reconciliation. Do it while you are still on the way. You might end up being thrown into debtor's prison where, in the ancient world, you would remain until you paid off your debt.

Notice that, with this second example, the anger we have caused, can have large ramifications. Like a lawsuit that's not settled beforehand. The damage done by our anger is like an unpaid debt, and it exposes us to the wrath of the judge. And this brings us back to Jesus' original point. This sort of anger is the stuff of murder, and while no human court can legislate against anger, where this hatred exists, and where it verbally assaults our brethren, we are in danger of the fiery judgment of God.

God takes what is in our hearts with utmost seriousness. There are no sins, no crimes, not matter how grievous, that do not start there. For out of the heart

flows murder. Not just some hearts, but potentially any human heart. And the things which come out of the mouth also proceed from the heart. Thus God takes our speech with utmost seriousness.

Let us, by the Spirit and free grace of God, purify our hearts of unjust anger. Let us not nurse or coddle grudges or bitterness. Let us go to war with them radically and continually. And early, in their embryonic form. Let us not let the sun go down on our anger, for it gives Satan, a murderer from the beginning, a foothold. And we must not be everyday murderers. Let us not be content to keep the commands only outwardly, but in their full beautiful, cutting depth, as revealed by Jesus, the fulfiller of the Law. For unless our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of full reconciliation, of glorious harmony, and of blessed peace. Amen.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).