

The Sermon on the Mount, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 4: Anger, Reconciliation, and the Heart

Matthew 5:21–26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage establishes how God measures sin, and it overturns a shallow, behavior-only understanding of righteousness. The Pharisaic approach could pronounce a man righteous as long as his hands were clean, regardless of what filled his heart. Jesus rejects this. By tracing murder back to anger and contempt, he teaches that God judges the heart, that sin is a matter of the inner person and not only the outward act, and therefore that contempt, hatred, and unresolved bitterness are grave matters before God. This is the first of several places where Jesus shows what the greater righteousness of the previous lesson actually looks like.

There is also a striking truth here about the connection between worship and relationships. Jesus says that a broken relationship with a brother should interrupt our worship until we have sought reconciliation. This cuts against any notion that we can be right with God while content to be wrong with people. Help your class feel the weight of it: God takes our treatment of one another so seriously that he will not happily receive the worship of a heart that refuses to be reconciled.

But the deepest aim of this lesson is formational and pastoral, because everyone in your class is carrying something. Almost every person has an estranged relationship, a nursed grudge, or a simmering resentment they have learned to excuse. Your task is not to leave them feeling vaguely guilty about anger in general, but to help them name the specific person and take a real step toward reconciliation. And it is to point them past mere self-restraint to the gospel, which both exposes the murder hiding in our anger and supplies, in the forgiveness we have received from God, the only power strong enough to forgive and be reconciled to others.

Question 1

Student Question:

Jesus moves from the act of murder to the anger and contempt behind it, saying both make a person “liable to judgment” (v. 21–22). What does this teach us about how God measures sin, and why does he look at the heart and not only at outward actions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by helping students feel the move Jesus makes. He quotes a command everyone agrees with, then drives it inward to a place no one can keep by sheer self-control. The point is not that anger is literally identical to murder in its consequences, but that they share the same root and

that God judges the root. The contemptuous heart and the murderous hand grow from the same soil.

Teach plainly that God measures sin at the level of the heart. Throughout Scripture God looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7), and Jesus consistently locates defilement in what comes out of the heart (Matthew 15:18–19). This is why external righteousness is never enough. A person can keep every visible rule and still be full of the very thing that, given room, would destroy.

Show why this is good news and not merely bad news. If God only measured outward acts, the angry but restrained person could feel secure while their heart rotted, and they would never seek the deeper healing they need. By naming the heart, Jesus refuses to let us settle for managed behavior; he insists on the transformation that actually frees us. He exposes the anger so that he can heal it.

Guard against two distortions. Do not let students conclude that all anger is automatically sin; Scripture allows for righteous anger and even commands us to be angry without sinning (Ephesians 4:26), and God himself is rightly angry at evil. The sin Jesus targets is the self-centered, contemptuous, unresolved anger that despises and dismisses a brother. Help your class distinguish the godly grief over wrong from the corrosive resentment that nurses a grudge.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God judging the heart, not only outward actions (1 Samuel 16:7; Matthew 15:18–19)
- Anger and contempt as sharing the root of murder
- External righteousness as insufficient because God measures the inner person
- The distinction between righteous anger and sinful, contemptuous anger (Ephesians 4:26)
- Exposure of the heart as the path to real healing, not just condemnation

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God look at the heart and not only at our actions?
- How can naming the anger in our hearts actually be good news?
- What is the difference between righteous anger and the anger Jesus condemns here?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about the last time you were genuinely angry with someone. Did you treat that anger as a small thing or as something serious before God? What would change if you took the contempt in your heart as seriously as Jesus does here?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to recall a specific instance of anger and to notice how lightly they treated it. Most of us are expert at excusing our own anger; we call it being frustrated, being honest, being passionate, anything but the sin Jesus names. The first work here is simply to stop minimizing.

Help the class see the difference it would make to take their contempt as seriously as Jesus does. We readily confess the sins the church frowns on publicly, while treating a chronic, simmering resentment as a personality quirk. Jesus puts it in the same paragraph as murder. That should arrest us.

Move toward honest ownership rather than vague resolve. Encourage students to name one relationship marked by anger and to bring it to God as sin to be confessed and healed, not as a grievance to be justified. The goal is not to feel worse but to stop pretending that contempt is harmless.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The habit of excusing and renaming our own anger
- Taking contempt as seriously as Jesus does
- Confessing chronic resentment as sin rather than treating it as a quirk
- Honest ownership as the first step toward healing

Discussion Prompts

- How did you treat your anger the last time it flared, as a small thing or a serious one?
- What words do you use to make your anger sound acceptable?
- What relationship marked by anger do you need to bring to God as sin?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus warns against calling a brother “Raca” or “You fool” (v. 22), words of contempt that write a person off as worthless. How does contempt for another person, even unspoken, dishonor the God in whose image they are made?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the words of contempt Jesus names. “Raca” is a term of utter disdain, something like “empty-headed,” and “you fool” writes a person off as worthless. Jesus is not banning a vocabulary list; he is exposing the heart posture of contempt, the inner verdict that another human being is beneath our respect.

Anchor this in the doctrine of the image of God. Every person, including the one who has wronged us, the one we find exasperating, the one we have written off, bears the image of God (Genesis 1:27). James points out the inconsistency of using the same tongue to bless God and

curse people made in his likeness (James 3:9–10). Contempt for a person is, at bottom, an affront to the God whose image they carry.

Help students see that contempt is often the respectable sin of religious people. We would never strike someone, but we will dismiss them, mock them in our minds, roll our eyes, and quietly file them under worthless. Jesus names this as a grave matter, because it assaults the dignity God himself has given.

Apply this against the cultural habit of contempt, which surrounds us. So much of public life now runs on despising the other side, and that posture seeps easily into the church and into our hearts. Call your class to a counter-cultural refusal of contempt, grounded in the worth God has stamped on every person.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contempt as the heart posture beneath words like “Raca” and “fool”
- Every person as an image-bearer of God (Genesis 1:27)
- The inconsistency of blessing God while cursing those made in his image (James 3:9–10)
- Contempt as a respectable but serious sin of religious people
- Resisting the cultural habit of despising those we disagree with

Discussion Prompts

- Why is unspoken contempt for a person an affront to God?
- How does seeing someone as an image-bearer change the way you treat them?
- Where has the culture of contempt crept into your own heart?

Question 4

Student Question:

Be honest about the people you have quietly written off, the ones you consider beneath your respect or beyond your patience. Who comes to mind, and what would it look like to begin seeing them as someone God loves and made in his image?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to name the people they have quietly written off. Almost everyone has a short list: the relative who is impossible, the coworker beneath their respect, the person from their past they have decided is hopeless. The contempt is rarely loud; it lives in the eye-roll and the dismissive thought.

Help the class move from the category to the face. It is easy to repent of contempt in the abstract and impossible to keep avoiding it once a specific person is in view. Encourage them to let one name surface and to hold it honestly before God.

Then point toward the reframe Jesus offers: seeing that person as someone God loves and made in his image. This does not mean approving everything they do or pretending the wrongs away. It means refusing the verdict of worthlessness and beginning, even slightly, to see them as God sees them. Ask what one changed thought or action toward that person might look like this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the specific people we have written off
- Moving from the category of contempt to the actual face
- Refusing the verdict of worthlessness while not excusing real wrong
- Beginning to see others as God sees them

Discussion Prompts

- Who is on your list of people you have quietly written off?
- What makes it easy to hold them in contempt?
- What would it look like to begin seeing them as someone God loves?

Question 5

Student Question:

Jesus says that if you remember your brother has something against you, you should leave your gift at the altar, go be reconciled, and then come and offer it (v. 23–24). What does this teach about the relationship between our worship of God and the state of our relationships with others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus' instruction is startling: interrupt your worship to go be reconciled. The scene is vivid, a worshiper standing at the altar with the gift in hand, suddenly remembering that a brother has something against him, and being told to leave the gift, go, and make peace first. Worship can wait; reconciliation cannot.

Teach the principle this reveals: we cannot wall off our relationship with God from our relationships with people. The New Testament repeats this insistently. We cannot claim to love God whom we have not seen while hating a brother whom we have seen (1 John 4:20). An unforgiving heart imperils our own forgiveness (Matthew 6:14–15). God will not happily receive the worship of a heart that refuses to be reconciled.

Note the direction of the command carefully. Jesus addresses the worshiper who remembers that his brother has something against him, that is, the one who has, or may have, given offense. He does not say wait for the other person to come; he says go. The initiative lies with us, even when we feel we are owed the first move. The reconciling God has reconciling children.

Apply this concretely to the life of the church. It is possible to be diligent in attendance, giving, and outward worship while harboring an unreconciled relationship with a brother or sister in the very same congregation. Jesus says that is intolerable. Help your class see that the health of their worship and the health of their relationships are bound together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The inseparable link between worship of God and reconciliation with people (1 John 4:20)
- Reconciliation as urgent enough to interrupt worship
- Taking the initiative even when we feel we are owed the first move
- Unforgiveness as a barrier to our own forgiveness (Matthew 6:14–15)
- The danger of faithful outward worship alongside unreconciled relationships

Discussion Prompts

- Why would God have us interrupt worship to seek reconciliation?
- Why does Jesus tell us to go, even when the other person has something against us?
- How can a broken relationship affect the worship we offer God?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there someone right now who has something against you, a person you know you have wronged or wounded? What is keeping you from going to them, and what would obedience to Jesus look like this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the previous truth into action by asking students to consider whether someone has something against them. Notice that it requires a humbling shift of perspective: not who has wronged me, but whom have I wronged. Most of us track the first ledger carefully and ignore the second.

Help students overcome the usual excuses: it was long ago, it was not that bad, they have probably forgotten, it would be awkward to bring it up. Jesus brushes all of these aside with a single word, go. The discomfort of seeking reconciliation is precisely the cost he calls us to pay.

Aim for one concrete act of initiative this week, an apology, a conversation, a humble acknowledgment of wrong. Encourage students to be specific about the person and the step. Reconciliation almost never happens by good intentions; it happens when someone finally goes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Considering whom we have wronged, not only who has wronged us
- Overcoming the excuses that keep us from initiating

- The cost and discomfort of going as part of obedience
- Concrete initiative as the substance of reconciliation

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone who has something against you because of how you treated them?
- What excuse have you been using to avoid going to them?
- What would obedience to “go and be reconciled” look like this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus urges, “Come to terms quickly with your accuser” before the matter ends in judgment (v. 25–26). Why does Jesus press such urgency about reconciliation, and what happens in our hearts and our relationships when we let conflict sit unresolved?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus uses the picture of a debtor on the way to court who had better settle quickly before judgment falls. The urgency is the point. Reconciliation is not something to schedule for someday; delay has a way of hardening into permanence, and unresolved conflict tends to compound rather than dissolve on its own.

Teach what unresolved anger does inwardly. Bitterness, left untended, takes root and defiles, spreading its poison through a life and beyond it (Hebrews 12:15). Paul warns that letting the sun go down on our anger gives the devil an opportunity (Ephesians 4:26–27). Time does not heal an unaddressed grudge; it entrenches it.

Show what delay does to relationships as well. The longer a breach sits, the larger it grows in our imagination, the more the offense is rehearsed, and the harder the first step becomes. What might have been mended with a quick, humble conversation can calcify into years of estrangement. Jesus’ urgency is mercy; he is sparing us the long, slow damage of letting it sit.

Apply this with realism and grace. Some reconciliations are genuinely complicated, and not every relationship can be safely or fully restored in this life, especially where there has been serious harm. But even there, the call is to do our part promptly, to put away our own bitterness and pursue peace “so far as it depends on you” (Romans 12:18), rather than nursing the wound indefinitely.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The urgency of reconciliation before conflict hardens
- Bitterness taking root and defiling when left unaddressed (Hebrews 12:15)
- Anger giving the devil an opportunity when we let it linger (Ephesians 4:26–27)
- Delay enlarging offenses and entrenching estrangement

- Doing our part promptly even when full reconciliation is complicated (Romans 12:18)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Jesus press such urgency about settling conflict?
- What does unresolved anger do to you over time?
- Where have you been telling yourself you will deal with a conflict later?

Question 8

Student Question:

Think about a conflict you have been letting sit, telling yourself you will deal with it later. What is the unresolved anger actually doing to you, and what is the first step you could take to “come to terms quickly”?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to identify a specific conflict they have been postponing and to face what the delay is costing them. The aim is to break the comfortable fiction that an avoided conflict is a managed conflict. Usually it is quietly draining us.

Help students name the actual toll: the mental rehearsing, the tension that surfaces whenever the person’s name comes up, the joy leaking out of a relationship that should be life-giving, the low-grade guilt of knowing something is wrong. Unresolved anger is rarely as dormant as we pretend.

Then ask for the first step, not the whole solution. Reconciliation can feel overwhelming when we imagine the entire conversation at once. Encourage one concrete, doable move, a message sent, a prayer prayed for the person, a time set to talk. The command is to come to terms quickly, and quickly starts with a first step.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Facing the real cost of a postponed conflict
- Naming the inward toll of unresolved anger
- Breaking the fiction that avoidance is the same as resolution
- Identifying one concrete first step rather than the whole solution

Discussion Prompts

- What conflict have you been letting sit, promising to deal with it later?
- What is that unresolved anger actually doing to you?
- What is one first step you could take this week toward coming to terms?

Question 9

Student Question:

Jesus places anger, contempt, and broken relationships under the same heading as murder because all of them assault the life and dignity of someone made in God's image. How does the gospel both expose the seriousness of our anger and provide the power to forgive and be reconciled, in a way mere self-restraint never could?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it lifts the passage from moral exhortation to gospel. Jesus has placed anger, contempt, and broken relationships under the same heading as murder because all of them assault the life and dignity of a person made in God's image. That diagnosis is devastating if we are left only with our own willpower to fix it. Mere self-restraint can keep the hands from violence, but it cannot cleanse the heart of contempt or manufacture genuine forgiveness.

Show why the gospel does what self-restraint cannot. The reason a Christian can forgive is that the Christian has first been forgiven, at infinite cost, by God. Paul roots all our forgiving in this: "forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13). We extend mercy not by working up warm feelings but by remembering the mercy we ourselves received when we deserved judgment.

Press the searching parable of Matthew 18:21–35. The servant forgiven an unpayable debt who then seizes a fellow servant by the throat over a trivial one is a portrait of the unforgiving Christian, and Jesus' warning is sober. The one who has truly grasped the immensity of God's forgiveness cannot easily hold a grudge; to refuse to forgive is to forget what we have been forgiven.

Teach that this changes the very ground on which we approach our enemies. Self-help says, forgive because it is good for you, or because the other person deserves a second chance. The gospel says, forgive because you have been forgiven a debt you could never repay, by a God who reconciled you while you were still his enemy (Romans 5:8, 10). That is a far deeper and more durable foundation than gritted teeth.

Bring it home with both honesty and hope. Forgiveness is often hard, slow work, and the gospel does not pretend otherwise. But it supplies what nothing else can: a heart that has tasted mercy and can therefore extend it, and a Savior who not only commands reconciliation but accomplished it, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20). The same Christ who exposes the anger in us is the one who died to free us from it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel exposing anger and contempt as assaults on the image of God
- The insufficiency of mere self-restraint to cleanse the heart or create forgiveness

- Forgiving others because we have first been forgiven by God (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13)
- The warning of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35)
- Christ making peace by the blood of his cross as the ground and power of our reconciling (Colossians 1:20; Romans 5:8–10)

Discussion Prompts

- Why can mere self-restraint never produce true forgiveness?
- How does remembering God's forgiveness of you change your power to forgive others?
- What does the parable of the unforgiving servant reveal about a grudge held by a forgiven person?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Jesus has reached past your hands into your heart, naming the anger and the broken relationships you would rather leave alone. Where is he putting his finger most directly, and what is one specific act of reconciliation he is inviting you to pursue this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone asks students to identify where Jesus is putting his finger most directly and to name one specific act of reconciliation to pursue this week. After a lesson that has named anger, contempt, and broken relationships, this question keeps the truth from staying theoretical.

Help students resist the urge to generalize. The temptation is to leave resolving to be a more forgiving person in general, which costs nothing and changes no one. Press for the single person and the single step. Reconciliation is always particular.

Close by anchoring the step in grace. They do not go to make peace in their own strength or to earn anything; they go as people who have been reconciled to God at great cost, extending to another a measure of the mercy they have received. Send them home with one face in mind, one step to take, and the assurance that the God of peace goes with them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the specific point where the passage convicts
- Naming one particular act of reconciliation rather than a general resolve
- Acting out of received mercy, not to earn anything
- Pursuing peace in the strength God supplies

Discussion Prompts

- Where is Jesus putting his finger most directly in this passage?
- What one act of reconciliation is he inviting you to pursue this week?
- How does going as one already reconciled to God change the way you go?