

The Sermon on the Mount

Lesson 4: Anger, Reconciliation, and the Heart -- Matthew 5:21-26

Most of us have never killed anyone, and we are quietly proud of it. We file ourselves comfortably on the right side of the sixth commandment and move on. So when Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder,'" we settle back, expecting a teaching that confirms what good people we already are. And then he keeps going, and the comfort drains right out of the room.

"But I say to you," Jesus continues, "that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment." He takes the commandment we were sure we had kept and traces it back upstream, past the act, past the weapon, all the way to the simmering resentment in the heart. The contempt we mutter under our breath. The grudge we have nursed for years. The name we call someone, if only in our thoughts. Jesus says God sees all of it, and that the same heart that despises a brother is, at its root, kin to the heart that kills.

This is the greater righteousness from the last lesson, no longer in the abstract. Jesus is showing us what it looks like when righteousness reaches the heart. The Pharisee could keep his hands clean of blood while his heart was full of contempt, and call himself righteous. Jesus will not allow it. He drags the hidden things into the light, the anger we excuse, the people we have written off, the relationships we have let quietly die. And he treats reconciliation as so urgent that he says to leave your gift at the altar and go make things right before you come back to worship.

So this lesson is not for murderers. It is for ordinary people who carry ordinary grudges, who have someone they are not speaking to, someone whose name tightens their jaw. It is for you and me. Before you read another line, let one face come to mind, the person you would least like to be reconciled with, and understand that Jesus is about to make this very personal. The good news is that he does not expose the anger in our hearts to condemn us, but to free us from it, and to lead us back into the kind of peace he died to give.

Group Discussion: Jesus traces the command against murder all the way back to anger and contempt in the heart, and treats reconciliation as urgent enough to interrupt worship. Why do you think we are so quick to excuse our anger and so slow to pursue reconciliation, and what does that reveal about how seriously God takes our relationships?

Personal Reflection: Let one specific person come to mind, someone you are angry with, distant from, or quietly unwilling to forgive. What is keeping you from taking a step toward reconciliation with them, and what would Jesus say about the cost of leaving it as it is?

Read Matthew 5:21-26

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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”?
9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Reflect on these passages: Ephesians 4:26–32, being angry yet not sinning, and putting away bitterness in favor of tenderhearted forgiveness; 1 John 3:15, whoever hates his brother is a murderer; Romans 12:17–21, never avenging yourselves but overcoming evil with good; Genesis 4:3–8, Cain’s unchecked anger that ran all the way to murder; Colossians 3:12–14, putting on compassion and forgiving as the Lord forgave you.