

You Have Heard it Said

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[0 : 00] It's lovely to have you all here today, and it's encouraging to me to have the opportunity to start a new series. And the series that I want to do, and I'm going to do them on Wednesdays at the Cathedral and on Thursdays here, and since you come before Wednesday, Thursday comes before next Wednesday. I'm going to start here and work through them with you that way. And they are in your Bibles, in Matthew chapter 5, verse 21, and they are all introduced by a formula saying, which, if you can take that one, a formula which says, you have heard it said, but I say to you, you remember that and that's right out of the heart of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5, beginning at verse 21, which in the Blue Bibles is on page four following. So that the passage that we have to deal with today is Matthew chapter 5, verse 21 following, the first of the, you have heard that it was said.

If you look at the text, you will see verse 21 says, you have heard that it was said. Verse 27, you have heard that it was said. Verse 31 is slightly abbreviated and says, again, it was said.

And verse 33, again, you have heard that it was said. And verse 38, you have heard that it was said. So you get that statement going five times. And it's those that I'm going to deal with over the next few weeks, one a week. So that today, we're looking at the passage. You have heard that it was said to the men of old, chapter 5, verse 21. Have you all got it? You've heard that it was said to the men of old, you shall not kill. And whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council. Whoever says, you fool, shall be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gifts. Make friends quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to the court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.

Now let me ask you to bow your heads and pray with me as we look at that passage. Our God and Father, these words are terribly familiar to us. And not only that, they are part of the Sermon on the Mount, which seems so hopelessly idealistic to us, and so remote from the reality of our daily lives. But while we acknowledge the beauty of it, we don't very often glimpse the application of it. And so we ask that as we turn our minds to it, you will show us how it applies in the innermost parts of our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. Now, first thing I want you to be careful to notice. You have heard that it was said to the men of old. The possibility is that he's talking to people in an open area. They haven't got textbooks in front of them. They're not Pharisees. They're not scribes. They're not literate, probably. And so everything they know, they know by having heard it said. That's how they live their lives, by hearing it said. And you know that most of us live on what we heard, what we have heard said. You know, I heard on the radio this morning. I heard when I was down at the Safeway today. I heard when I was talking. I heard on a telephone conversation I had this morning. So that most of us live in terms of what we have heard. And so Jesus picks that up as being the way that they would have come across this, that the general crowd that he was talking to, you have heard that it was said. Now, what they heard then was, you shall not murder, you shall not kill. And of course, what I want you to pause and think about, that's why I put this blood stain on the corner here. So you'll see that this is a murder story that we're dealing with now. And everybody likes a murder story.

[5 : 43] So here you have the blood as the evidence that a murder has taken place. And Jesus is saying that you shall not do it. I read in the Manchester Guardian this week, little facts to enlighten you, that in the United States of America, every year, 24,000 murders are done with handguns. You know, I mean, you walk up to somebody with a handgun, and you shoot them, 24,000 a year. I worked that out in terms of Sunday congregations. And it probably would mean that, let me get it now. It would probably mean that it would require 60 Sundays of shooting everybody in church on a Sunday morning at 10 o'clock to do that, to murder 24,000 people. But that's what happens, and we absorb it into our society. So it's very much a part of our society. Well, then those are just handgun murders. They have nothing to do with traffic fatalities, and they have nothing to do with abortions, and they have nothing to do with wars and revolutions and violence. Killing is very much a part of our way of life. Killing is a necessary part of our way of life. Killing is an expedient that we all resort to. Killing is something that we train people to do. And yet, the commandment which has stood, and which everybody has known about from the beginning, is, thou shalt not kill. Now, I think it's important to realize that, you know, that there are probably no murderers in this room right now. But that killing is a prevalent part of our world. It's what makes the news every morning and every night. It's in every newspaper. Killing goes on and on and on.

So, to say, thou shalt not kill, and then to go on from saying, thou shalt not kill, to saying what it says in the text. Do you see what it says? That if you do, you will be liable to judgment, which means that you yourself will probably be put to death. You will be condemned. And that's the way it works. And that's how we've tried to deal with it. So that the only way that our world knows how to deal with the killer is to kill him. The only antidote for the disease is further disease. You kill because you kill the killer. That's how our society works. And that is a firmly established principle in our society. Everybody acknowledges that that's what happens. That's how our world works. Well, then he goes on to say, I tell you that, but I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. Now, there's a difference here because you know that when you pull out your little purse 45 automatic and shoot the person next to you, then the police will come. You will be handcuffed, taken away and dealt with. You will be judged for what you have done. And that is restraining violence in our society. That's how the law works. It seeks to restrain violence. So that when murder takes place, the reason it doesn't take place is perhaps most of us have been trained in such a way that we respect the law.

And the whole, you know, the, when, when we have a big plebiscite on hanging in Canada, we see how many people think, you know, how, how we should enforce the law so people will respect it more deeply. Will we enforce it more by having public hangings, for instance? Well, we voted against that.

We don't want to do that. So we're in the position where killing is very much a part of our world. And, and yet, what can we do about it? All we can do is try and terrify people badly enough that in those moments of passion, when, which, which I think we all come to, I used to think that I would never kill anybody. But since I've been an adult, there have been times when I've been angry enough to murder somebody. I mean, I'm quite serious about that, that you really just feel at the very end that you cannot go on with this situation any longer. And you burst out. I mean, most people who become violent are surprised at the violence that is in them when something precipitates.

You know, they thought, I would never thought I would have done that. But the violence is there. So when Jesus comes along and says, I say to you, then he gives another progression of things that happen.

[11 : 35] Now, these things happen in this way, if you want. Jesus puts them like this. And, and they, they link up. Jesus says, the first thing I want you to be aware of is anger.

Now, while none of us here have committed murder, most of us have experienced anger. And we experience it fairly regularly. And so Jesus says to us about this, I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. So that instead of waiting for the murder to take place, Jesus says, I want to attack it at the level of anger.

Because what happens is that if you judge that, if judgment is for anger, then suddenly, instead of there being an isolated murder that took place over in the east side of Vancouver the night before last, suddenly we recognize that what led to that murder in the east side of Vancouver was anger.

And anger happens in every apartment building in Carisdale, every house in Shaughnessy, every person we know, that this is where it all comes from. This is where it stems from. So Jesus says, my job isn't to be the big policeman and prevent you or punish you for a crime of passion in which you kill somebody.

My job is to help you deal with anger. Because that's the inner condition. And he describes how that inner condition leads on.

[13 : 24] If you look in the passage again, you'll see it goes this way. I say to you, everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.

Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council. Whoever says, you fool, shall be liable to the hell of fire.

So you go from anger to insult. And then from insult, you go to saying, you fool, you know, which is a terrible word.

It's much worse than our English usage of it. And then from there to murder. So Christ says, this is the process. So that what I'm telling you to do is not to murder certainly.

Not even to say to your brother, you fool, which is a verbal expression of murder. It's murder without the gun. Not to insult your brother, which is leading towards murder.

[14 : 27] Not even to be angry. And so he says, this is where the problem has to be dealt with. Well, how is it going to be dealt with? Well, that one of the key expressions here is that the person you're dealing with is your brother.

I don't want to be sexist, but it's too confusing to try and translate that in the universal language.

You can put sister if you like. But this is, you say you're angry with your brother, you insult your brother, you call your brother a fool. And finally, you murder your brother.

And they see this as people in having a relationship to one another. Now, that's somewhat different than our world, because what we, of course, do in order to justify our right to murder is to dissociate from people and say, it's all right to murder people because you have no relationship to them and no responsibility to them.

And what we do in time of war, for instance, is we take young men and teach them to kill. And in order to teach them to kill, we deprecate the enemy.

[15 : 52] We insult the enemy. We stir up people's anger. Then having stirred their anger up sufficiently, we give them a gun and send them off to kill.

We use this process in order to affect the murders that we want affected. So Christ says, if you want to change that process, you've got to go back to here.

Back to the fact that the man whom you murder is your brother. And of course, the first great murder in the whole of Scripture is a brother murdering his brother.

A crime of hate and passion and jealousy. Stirred up so that you get, you know, Cain slaying Abel in Genesis chapter 4.

So Jesus says, this is what has to happen. You have to trace the thing to its origin and deal with it there. So then he says, how do you deal with it there?

[16 : 56] Well, then look at the text again, and let's see. You see, suddenly he seems to switch gears and says, if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go and first be reconciled to your brother, then come and make your offering.

Well, now, presumably what happens here is somewhat different. I mean, what you've got here is you've got an altar where a sacrifice is being made.

It's a kind of primitive picture, but the purpose of a sacrifice is reconciliation with God, isn't it? I mean, that's what we're doing in church Sunday by Sunday, is seeking to come to a place of reconciliation with God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

So I think he's putting all that in the picture here and saying, that's how reconciliation is affected. And one of the things that is at the center of our life is this reality of reconciliation.

So he says, if you're seeking reconciliation with God, and remember that out here is your brother with whom you are not reconciled, then go and see him first.

[18 : 30] And effect some kind of reconciliation on that level. He says, if you are offering your gift at the altar, remember that you have something against your brother.

Go and be reconciled to your brother. And then come and make your offering to God. So that you have here, you have a different process.

Instead of the process that leads to murder, you have a different process here that leads to reconciliation. And reconciliation with God is based on the reality of reconciliation to your brother.

So that that's what you're looking for. That's what you're seeking in the community in which you live. To open your heart to your brother and to seek reconciliation with him.

Well now, what happens then in the passage? You go and be reconciled. Then come and offer your gift.

[19 : 40] You see, what Jesus is teaching here is that anger which leads to murder is the way the world works.

And the law tries to restrain it and to hold it in check so that though there is an abundance, a superabundance of anger, there isn't a superabundance of murder.

You know, that not everybody murders everybody every time they're angry at them. Because there is the restraint of the law. But Jesus is saying there's got to be another kind of restraint.

And this is that if you are really seeking ultimate reconciliation with God, then that reconciliation with God will express itself in terms of your relationship to your brother.

Now, if you think of all the instances in our world where there is a lack of reconciliation, you know, where two brothers cannot be reconciled, two business partners cannot be reconciled, husband and wife cannot be reconciled, people who have met each other in business cannot be reconciled.

[20 : 58] And we in our society accept that as the way things are, that reconciliation is impossible. But what Jesus is saying is that if reconciliation with your brother is impossible, then what hope is there of reconciliation with God?

How will you find a reconciler? If this can't happen, do you think this can happen? And Jesus says, no, they're both part of the same thing.

And so that instead of the process of anger leading to murder, you have the process of reconciliation with God leading to reconciliation in terms of human relationships.

Then he goes on to verse 25 and he gives another picture. We've moved from a church where you're, I mean, a temple where an altar is and where you're seeking reconciliation with God.

You now are moving to a courthouse where a judge is sitting. And Jesus says, make friends quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to the court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and the guard puts you in prison.

[22 : 31] And I tell you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny. Now, this is the third process.

I should have tried to get them all on one page. But here you have the judge sitting at the court, you know, with his... And here you have the people coming to appear before him here.

And what he's saying to them is, what you're facing here now is judgment. And with that judgment, you see, that's what happened in the first place.

You shall not kill. Whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. So it says when you're facing your accuser and your accuser tells you, you know, the thing that you're to do with your accuser is to come to terms with him.

In other words, to face the reality of the judgment right now. Don't delay it. Now, most of us think that what we're to do is to delay judgment indefinitely until someday we will have acquired enough gold stars to be able to stand before our judge and say, you know, I am...

[24 : 00] I've done pretty well, haven't I? And so we delay and we argue and we bicker and we justify and we do everything that it's possible to do in order to delay judgment.

But what Jesus says is don't delay it. Face the reality of your own heart's condition right now.

Recognize that because of anger in your heart, you are liable to murder and murder leads to judgment. So he says, don't delay confronting the judgment of God.

Now, face it right now. And in facing it right now, you discover the reality of who God is. Now, what I want to tell you about this is that it's all very good advice, isn't it?

But standing at the center and teaching this is the person of Jesus Christ. You see, nobody else can say this kind of thing to you.

[25 : 09] I tell you, don't be angry. Because nobody else knows what's going on in your heart. Nobody else knows the reality of your heart except Jesus Christ.

And it's he who says, I say to you, do not be angry with your brother. Because he says, he knows what's there and he knows what would happen if instead of acknowledging that if we came before the judge, we would be condemned.

In the same way, we would go from our accuser to the judge, from the judge to the guard, from the guard to the prison, from the prison to despair because we would never be able to pay our indebtedness.

And so what's happening here is that Jesus is saying to us, I want you to seek reconciliation with your brother as an expression of the hope you have of reconciliation with God.

I want you to face the reality of your condemnation in order that you might know the forgiveness of God. And that you're not supposed to live all your life thinking that when you finally get to court that you're going to be able to defeat your accuser.

[26 : 32] He's saying, don't do that. Acknowledge that you have in you that which is worthy of condemnation. And therefore, you have to face the fact of your own condemnation.

And in facing the fact of your own condemnation, you discover the reality of God's free, sovereign grace in forgiving you.

That you're forgiven. God doesn't desire the death of a sinner. But rather that he should turn from his wickedness and live.

And so Jesus takes this little story and puts it all together in such a way that he brings you to the point of whether he who came to reconcile us to God, whether he whom God has appointed to be the judge of all the earth, whether we accept the reconciliation which he has established for us, and whether we face the judgment which he brings in the knowledge of his forgiveness and his love and his sovereign grace.

So you see how Jesus takes this, you've all heard it said, you shall not kill. But behind that, there is a divine purpose of God, which is not fulfilled by you going out and murdering your brother to get him out of your way, but is fulfilled by you coming to a place of reconciliation with your brother and a place of judgment before God and finding God's grace and forgiveness.

[28 : 26] That, Jesus says, is what I tell you. If you want to just live within the limits of the restraining power of the law, that's one thing.

I'm telling you there's something different. And that's the story of Matthew 5.21. Thank you very much.

We'll go on next week with, you have heard that it was said unto you, thou shalt not. What are you not to do next week?

Your homework. Okay. There it is. Thank you. Now, I'm having to run off today, but...