

"Anger"

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- [0:00] Good morning, church. Would you turn with me to Matthew chapter 5? Matthew chapter 5. As we continue our series in the Sermon on the Mount, we're looking at Matthew 5, verses 21 through 26.
- Let me pray for us, and then I'll read our passage. Father in heaven, we have just sung a prayer of how great we need you.
- Lord, we acknowledge that even knowing you and hearing your word is something that we don't have the capacity in and of ourselves to do, that you must grant us in your grace.
- Faith. And ears to hear. And hearts to receive. So we pray that you do that now. Do that because you're faithful to your promise.
- Do that because your character is consistent with what we see in our Lord Jesus Christ. That you are good in all your ways. We pray this in his mighty name.
- [1:17] Amen. All right, Matthew 5, 21 through 26. Jesus says this, You've heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.
- But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council.
- And whoever says, You fool, will 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 gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to 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 until you have paid the last penny. So remember where we are in the Sermon on the Mount.
- [2:35] Now, Jesus has just made the stunning claim that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and to inaugurate the kingdom of God.
- And Jesus has said to his followers that participating in this kingdom will mean living out a righteousness that exceeds even the righteousness of the Pharisees.
- What an incredible claim. The Pharisees were the extra, super, holy people.
- They were serious about religion. They were serious about dotting their I's and crossing their T's. How could anyone have a righteousness greater than theirs? But you see, the righteousness of the Pharisees was wide, but it wasn't deep.
- They covered everything with a religious rule or a pious principle, but it didn't penetrate to the heart. They had all the right words, all the right external actions, but it didn't go deep.
- [3:41] And Jesus says to his followers and to us, I'm calling you to a greater righteousness than that, a righteousness that's deeper, a righteousness that goes down through your whole person, a whole life, a whole heart righteousness.

This isn't going to be like adding more religious stickers to the outside of a shirt to make it look nice. This is going to be like dyeing the whole fabric, changing the whole color through and through from the inside to the outside.

And isn't that what we're really longing for? That whole life, whole heart righteousness.

Isn't that what we're longing for in ourselves, in our leaders, in our relationships? Not just external rectitude or propriety, but whole heart character.

And this greater righteousness is what Jesus begins to explain in our passage. In fact, that's going to be the theme of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount. But in the rest of chapter 5, if you scan over that chapter, you see that he gives us six illustrations or examples of what he means, of the sort of life he's calling us to live.

[5 : 09] And the first illustration or example of this whole life righteousness has to do with anger, with contempt.

Let's look again at verses 21 and 22. You've heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council. And whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire. So if we're going to live into this greater righteousness, here's the first point.

That you must confront your anger and not excuse it. Confront your anger. Don't excuse it. Jesus begins by quoting the sixth commandment.

You shall not murder. And it would be easy, wouldn't it, to look at your life to look at my life and say, well, I haven't murdered anyone recently, so I guess I'm good.

[6 : 18] I guess I'm living the life God intends me to live. Don't murder. Check. Righteousness achieved. But is that all God intended in this commandment?

Jesus helps us to see otherwise. You have heard it said, but I say to you. What stunning words.

Jesus has come with utter authority over the law to interpret it and apply it perfectly. You see, every other human being is rightly under God's law.

Jesus is not. He stands over God's law. You have heard it said, but I say to you.

How could that be? How could he be over God's law? Well, friends, there's only one who is over God's law. There's only one who commands God's law, and that one is God himself.

[7 : 26] You see, Jesus is not just a new Moses delivering a fresh law from God. Jesus is God in the flesh before our eyes explaining and applying and delivering God's law in its purest form and interpretation.

And he's telling us here that merely avoiding murder isn't the sort of righteousness God intends for us as image bearers. It goes so much deeper.

It's about our whole regard, our whole disposition to our brother or sister, to our neighbor. Okay, you haven't taken their life. That's good.

But do you harbor anger against them? Do you insult them? Do you hold them in contempt? Are you willing to confront not just murder but even your anger?

It's easier to excuse it, isn't it? In fact, we're very good at excusing our anger. We might begin by remembering rightly that anger itself isn't necessarily bad.

[8 : 42] In fact, God himself expresses anger at sin. So yes, there is righteous anger. And yes, we too can share God's proper opposition to sin and wrong.

We can, as the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians, be angry and sin not. Yes! But look at our hearts.

Is it not true that our anger is much too often directed not at wrongdoing but at the wrongdoer?

If we truly shared the heart of God, we would be opposed to wrongdoing but have hearts of mercy toward wrongdoers.

In fact, part of our opposition to wrongdoing would be for the sake of the wrongdoers, longing for their repentance and healing and restoration.

[9 : 46] But sadly, the anger in our own hearts is not so. Anger too quickly becomes almost immediately animosity and contempt toward those who have wronged us or hurt us or disappointed us, toward those who have stood in our way or made our life difficult.

So that's one way we try to excuse our anger by saying, well, all anger isn't bad. It's very hard to excuse our anger that way.

How else do we try to excuse our anger and contempt? Well, we try by comparison, don't we? We tell ourselves, well, we're not as bad as so-and-so. This is just a trifle compared to what they're guilty of.

Or we tell ourselves that, well, our situation's different. Ours is the exception to the rule. If you only knew how terrible so-and-so treated me, you would realize how justified I am in my anger of them and my hatred of them.

But friends, rather than excuse our anger, Jesus invites us to take a look at it, to confront it, to acknowledge it, to bring it out into the open, to see it for what it is.

[11 : 08] First thing we see here is we see that anger grows. Look at how anger grows. We get angry with a brother or sister in Christ.

They've hurt us. They've disappointed us. They've wronged us. But the anger doesn't stay there. It grows. Notice the progression of verse 22. The animosity in the heart becomes an insult in the mouth.

It bubbles up. It blurts out. The Greek there says, you say *raka* to your brother, right, which is sort of this term of derision that just sort of comes out.

We might even surprise ourselves at what comes bubbling up. But it doesn't even stop there. From anger to insult into a settled contempt.

In our eyes, as our anger grows, that person has become nothing but a fool. Not worthy of our attention. Not worthy of God's attention.

[12 : 10] Nothing to do with them. They've become worthless to us. You can see now why the apostle John says, everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.

1 John 3, 15. In your mind, in your heart, you have consigned them to death. This is how anger grows.

But Jesus also shows us here where anger goes. What does it lead to? And here Jesus is again very clear. Anger and contempt, these things are not mere trifles.

Rather, they make us liable to God's judgment. Confronting our anger means realizing that it's far more serious and more grave than we'd like to admit.

It's not a thing to be played with. Too often, we kind of nurse animosity in our hearts, thinking that no one sees, thinking that it does no harm.

[13 : 15] But God sees, and His judgment is just. One commentator translates the end of verse 22 like this, the man who tells his brother that he is doomed to hell is in danger of hell himself.

Friends, Jesus doesn't put it this way lightly. He wants us to see the seriousness of our sinful contempt. Anger is like a fire that grows.

It starts small but left unaddressed. It turns into a massive blaze, and suddenly we're thinking and saying and believing things that put us at odds not just with that person but with God Himself.

So we must confront our anger, not excuse it. But Jesus doesn't just want us to see how dangerous anger can be.

The greater righteousness that Jesus is calling us to doesn't merely stop there. It's not as if Jesus is simply saying, well, yes, you should avoid murder but I'm going to add to that, you should avoid hatred too. You see, it's not just about not doing something.

[14:31] There's a positive response we're to take. Yes, we can respond to anger destructively. We see that in verse 21 and 22. It grows like a fire into contempt and hatred but we can respond to anger constructively as well.

The greater righteousness, the kingdom righteousness of Jesus isn't merely about anger management. No, it's actually something radically different. So how do we respond to growing animosity in the heart toward a brother or sister?

If there's a destructive pattern, what's the constructive approach? Well, Jesus lays it out for us in verses 23 through 26. Rather than letting anger grow, he says, go and be reconciled.

Repair the relationship. Pursue eager reconciliation. So if the first point of our passage is that you must confront your anger, the second point is you must pursue your accuser and be reconciled.

Let's read again verses 23 through 26. So if you're 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 gift.

[15:48] Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're going with him to 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'll never get out until you've paid the last penny.

Eager reconciliation. That's what Jesus is calling us to. Leave your gift at the altar and go. In other words, even external acts of worship, even those external acts prescribed by God, those external acts that are good for our souls, those are not more important or urgent than pursuing reconciliation.

So rather than letting wrongs and hurts and disappointments grow into anger and animosity and contempt, Jesus says, go. Go deal with the wrong.

Go deal with the broken relationship before it grows and consumes both you and them. Verses 23 and 24 don't just make the point that we ought to be urgent about this.

Leave your gift at the altar and go. But they also tell us that there's no substitute for this. You see, we often think that if we do some good things over here, it'll make up for the bad things over there, right?

[17:10] We think, well, if I say a harsh word or if I wrong a Christian brother or sister over here, well, I can make it up to God by serving more or reading more or praying more. But those extra acts, as good as they may be in themselves, aren't going to change the fact that the relationship needs to be repaired.

Reconciliation needs to happen. You need to admit where you were wrong and ask for forgiveness. Of course, in this passage, it sort of sounds easy, doesn't it?

Go and be reconciled, then come on back. And you know, the truth is, if we are eager to do the work of reconciliation early and often, it is much easier.

It's much easier to sort of stamp out a couple coals that spit out of the fireplace, right? Than to stop a blaze in the whole house.

It's when we let these things grow and fester that they become so much harder to untangle and address. And that will often happen. So the truth is, the process of reconciliation may take time and effort and help.

[18:31] It may take the help of a mutual friend. It may necessitate the help of an older, trustworthy Christian, like an elder or a pastor or maybe a small group leader.

and you know, sadly, in this fallen world, the truth is, not every relationship will be reconciled. We may go as far as we can but find that the other person simply doesn't want to be reconciled.

what do we do then? Well, friends, we forgive the other person. We pray for their good.

We entrust them to the Lord's care. We vow not to speak evil of them to others. We tend our own heart from the seeds of bitterness through ongoing prayer and forgiveness.

And then, if the opportunity does arise in God's grace, in God's timing, then we will be ready to complete the reconciliation when the time comes.

[19:44] Of course, one of the things that makes reconciliation hard is that it's rarely ever a one-way street, is it? Often, there has been mutual hurt, mutual disappointment, mutual wrongs, mutual animosity.

And our hearts can often recoil at this call to eager reconciliation because we think that the other person has more to apologize for than we do.

And you know what? That may be true. Perhaps they did have a bigger part to play in the wrong. But still, you must own your part.

You must obey your Lord regardless of what the other person has done or not done. Consider the illustration that Jesus uses to close this section. On the one hand, it's another illustration that encourages us to be eager in our pursuit of reconciliation.

Jesus is saying, look, you wouldn't let a lawsuit get all the way to court, all the way to conviction if you could help it, right? No, you'd be eager to settle and find a solution before you're standing in front of the judge.

[20:55] Better to work hard at a settlement out of court than to end up in debtor's prison. In the same way, Jesus is saying, be eager to pursue reconciliation with your brother or sister. But you know, it's more than just an illustration encouraging us to be eager and quick to reconcile.

It's also a reminder that we're all debtors of one sort or another. So if you owe anything, even the smallest amount, pay it.

Perhaps in a broken relationship, you think you didn't have the greater part to play, but friend, figuring out who has the greater share of the blame shouldn't be your concern. Do you owe something?

Then make it right. Did you say a harsh word? Did you give a cold shoulder? Did you fail to give credit when due? Did you offend or ignore?

Then make it right. Perhaps in your view, they did ten times the offense, but that, friend, is between them and God. You must obey what God is calling you to do.

[22:11] Settle quickly before you get to court. Everything you owe, you will have to pay. So pay it. Don't make the mistake of holding on to your debt, because you think the other person owes more.

What will happen in that case? You will still be the one in prison. Your soul will still be locked behind the bars of anger and animosity. You will still owe a debt to them and to God.

So settle quickly, no matter what you owe, no matter how big or small in comparison. don't delay. Don't delay. So here is the greater righteousness to which Jesus is calling us, his first sort of example of this greater righteousness.

It means not just avoiding murder, but addressing the anger and contempt in our hearts through concrete practices of reconciliation. reconciliation. But where, oh where, do we get the strength for this?

If we're going to confront anger in our own hearts and not excuse it, if we're going to pursue our accusers and not avoid them, how will we get the power to do that? Because if you think about it, it's easy on some level to practice the righteousness of the Pharisees.

[23 : 35] I'm guessing few of us have literally committed murder in this room. Most people can meet that mark in their own strength. But if we're really going to live the way God intends us to live, it's going to take strength from outside of us.

And this is where we need to zoom out from the Sermon on the Mount and put this passage in the context of the whole gospel. Because in order to live the Sermon on the Mount, you need to look to your Savior, not to yourself.

Specifically, you need to look at what Jesus has done for you. That's the only thing that will really enable us to turn from anger and hatred and pursue reconciliation. That's the only thing that will really enable us to settle quickly with our accusers, even if we owe so much less in comparison, we think.

Because before the cross of Christ, we realize that there is no comparison. At the cross, we see that our debt was infinite. That the Son of God left heaven to pursue reconciliation with me, his enemy.

And he paid the debt that I owed. My debt was paid by another. So now, the debts that others owe me?

[25 : 02] How could I possibly treat them with contempt? Have they hurt me? Have they wronged me? Yes, but there is a Savior who covered my every wrong, who mended my every hurt, who took my place in love so that I could walk out of the prison of my sin and judgment free of charge.

How could I not now treat others with the mercy and patience that I have received? But you know, in the gospel, we receive not just this sort of new status, this new freedom from our debt of sin that is life-changing.

We receive not just a new status, but we receive a new heart. Through faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us a new disposition.

Our old disposition, what does it want? It wants only my rights. But the new disposition wants something greater.

It longs for God's glory. It longs for the beauty of the Savior to be magnified. And what will display the glory of Christ more than the radical act of forgiveness, of reconciliation.

[26 : 24] And this new disposition that loves not just God's glory, but it also has a genuine love for our fellow brother and sister in Christ.

The Holy Spirit enables us to see past the wrongs someone has done, past the hurt they caused, so that we might see them in their humanity. That even though they are a sinner, even though they may have sinned against me, I can still view them as a creature made in God's image.

And if a Christian, then a child of God, and yes, a brother, a sister in Christ, we can love them in this new disposition we have through the Spirit. For Jesus' sake and for their own sake.

So in Christ, we are given a new status and a new heart, but also a new hope. There is a day coming when every wrong will be made right, when every broken relationship will be healed, when every hurt will be mended, when every tear will be wiped away, when every loss will be returned.

And because of the resurrection of Christ, this hope is not some wish or some dream. It is as solid and secure as an anchor rooted to the ocean floor.

[27:53] In the hope of the gospel, you and I are completely safe, completely secure. You need not fear.

Will it be costly to pursue reconciliation? Will it be hard work? Will it require sacrifice and time and energy? Of course. But you have nothing to fear.

Your future is secure. The end of your road is determined. Your destination has already been won. He's gone to prepare a place for you. There's no need to hold so tightly to your rights, to your wrongs.

Why would you sit in the prison of anger and bitterness all the days of your life when the doors of heaven have been flung open for you?

Why demand payment from those who wronged you when the treasures of heaven have been opened for you? Even the great losses of this life, the deep hurts, are nothing compared to what God has prepared for you.

[29:09] So open your hands. Settle quickly with your accuser. Live in light of the hope you have.

Christ is risen. Christ has reconciled you to God. You will enjoy his peace now and forevermore. So let go of your anger.

Go. Be reconciled. And then Jesus says, come and live. Because, friends, this truly is the way of life.

The way of greater righteousness that only the gospel brings. This is the way of salt and light. Henry Nouwen once wrote, and we'll close with this, he said, so much of our energy and time and money goes into maintaining our distance from one another.

Many, if not most, of the resources of the world are used to defend ourselves against one another, to maintain or increase our power and to safeguard our own privileged position.

[30:24] Imagine. Imagine all that effort being put into the service of peace and reconciliation. Would there be any poverty?

Would there be crimes and wars? Just imagine that there's no longer fear among people, no longer rivalry, hostility, bitterness, or revenge.

We say, I can't imagine. But God says, that's what I imagine. A whole world not only created, but living in my image.

Let's pray. Father, by your spirit, make us a people who turn away from our animosity and contempt and who pursue your way of peace and reconciliation.

We know all too well how hard this is, but you have not left us to do it alone. You have canceled the debt we owe at the cross.

[31:44] Now make us those who are eager to cancel debts and be reconciled, eager to admit where we have been wrong and to seek forgiveness. And would our life as a church and our life together be a sign of that coming day when your peace will reign over all the earth.

In Jesus' name we pray, our reconciler, our redeemer. Amen.