

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, March 13, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:21-26

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #12 JESUS ON RELATIONSHIPS

Several years ago my son Chris and I were driving on the Crosstown and I found myself in a situation where I couldn't move over to the lane that I needed to be in for my exit that was coming. My signal was on, but no one wanted to let me in. Finally, I found a slim opening and kind of forced my way into the lane. The woman behind me was not very happy about me butting into her lane. She immediately sped up and began tailgating me. I could tell that she was saying all sorts of interesting words and making all sorts of interesting gestures and the road rage that was coming off of her was like nothing I had ever experienced. She genuinely scared me. I decided that I would exit onto Highway 100 North, even though I needed to get to Highway 169 South, because I got the distinct impression that she was determined to follow me until I got out of my car and give me a piece of her mind. She followed me, screaming obscenities the entire time. I was beginning to get concerned. I sped up, and she sped up right with me. I got off at the next exit. She followed me. I turned onto Highway 100 South. She stayed with me. I was now very concerned. I got back onto the Crosstown heading west. She followed. I needed to lose this person. I was beginning to think she might have a gun. I was literally freaked out. I looked at Chris and said, we're going to wait until the last second and then take 169 South. Maybe we can lose her. She was on my tail. I put a left turn signal on, and then went right onto 169 South. It fooled her, and we lost her, but Chris and I were both shaken.

Anger can cause us to do incredibly stupid things. Over the years my anger has resulted in broken items, hurtful words, wounded feelings, fractured relationships. It's truly

embarrassing what uncontrolled anger can bring about. Hollywood has produced films about anger management, the number one application for the iPod and iPad is called *Angry Birds*, we experience anger on a regular basis in relationships. Anger is all around. Pastor Matthew Rogers writes, "Have you ever noticed how when people are angry, things tend to get broken.

As a teenager, my brother once stormed out of the house in an angry huff, slamming a door so hard that a window broke.

Once when playing racquetball, I got angry over making a bad shot and slammed my racket against the wall; harder than I meant to, because my graphite racket broke.

A college friend of mine got into an angry disagreement with his girlfriend one night. In the morning he learned that after the fight she had gone into her room and broken a framed picture of him, by slamming it against her desk. (They're happily married now, however most of their pictures are kept in rubber frames!)

Someone throws a punch and a nose gets broken.

In anger one nation lashes out against another and a pact or a treaty gets broken.

Express too much anger when disciplining a child, and trust gets broken.

Use angry words and perhaps a heart gets broken...

...Church unity gets broken...

...Relationships get broken.

As a matter of fact, angry outbursts ruin many relationships."¹

Maybe you've been there too. My dad sent me this video several years ago that perfectly captures just how stupid we can look when we let anger get the best of us (SHOW VIDEO: ANGRY DRIVERS – 2:37)

We laugh when we see it happen to someone else, but we can all relate to the feelings of frustration that the women in the video displayed. Jesus knew just how much anger influences human relationships. We've been studying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount these past twelve weeks, we have begun to see what the person who lives as citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven must strive for. Last week, we saw Jesus talk about a radical righteousness. If we are going to be the kind of people that God is pleased with, it means that we must have hearts that have been changed by Him. All the external indicators of godliness in the world can't make up for a heart that hasn't been captured by God. So,

¹ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=45372, p. 1.

now Jesus begins His next section of teaching in this great sermon with the first of six examples of the person whose heart has been truly changed by God.

If you have your Bibles, turn to Matthew 5:21-22, where we see the serious and devastating results of unchecked anger.

I. The Serious and Devastating Results of Unchecked Anger (vs. 21-22)

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus begins this section of teaching with the sixth commandment from Exodus 20:13. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder.’” He continues with these words, “and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” What Jesus is doing here is not only stating the sixth commandment, but the interpretation of the Law itself. The Pharisees taught that anyone who murdered would be subject to judgment. It was a correct interpretation of the law, but it didn’t go far enough. And now Jesus would do something for the first time here, that he would repeat five more times in the verses that follows. He would bring the complete picture to bear on the minds of His Jewish listeners.

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Listen folks, it’s not just the murderers who are in trouble, it’s any of us who treat our brothers and sisters with contempt. Throughout the ages the vast majority of people have considered themselves to be good. “Hey, I may not be perfect, but at least I’m no murderer.” It’s as if we are saying, “The person who is ultimately evil is the one who takes the life of another. If I haven’t done that, then I’m alright.”

It certainly was the way the Pharisees lived. No self-righteous Pharisee would think of murdering another human being (until they made the plan to murder Jesus). To murder would be a direct violation of the sixth commandment. But, Jesus is saying something altogether different. He uses two terms that we probably need to understand if we are going to be able to understand what this text means.

The first is translated in our English Bibles as “Raca.” What does that mean? It literally means “empty-headed.” It’s an Aramaic word. Matthew Rogers writes, “The word may have originated from the sound a person makes in clearing the throat in preparation to spit. Rrraaaacah! That’s what I think of you!

Jesus said this is a greater evil than just anger. In anger, we want to hurt someone. In contempt, we don't care if that someone gets hurt or not.

Instead of *Raca*, today we might use dork, nerd, bonehead or something worse – perhaps a sexual, racial or cultural term. But the intent is always the same. It's meant to cast someone aside – like spitting on them – and saying you don't belong. Sometimes these words hurt so bad that murder would almost be a mercy.”²

Have you ever been wounded by words so much that murder would have felt like mercy? Unfortunately, I've seen the results of hurtful words all too often. Another teenager in the Twin Cities took his life this week because of bullying. More teenagers have committed suicide in the past two school years around the Twin Cities than in any other two years that we have record of. Bullying is often times the cause of that suicide. Our words matter.

Kent Hughes writes, “*Raca* used in deadly earnest demotes another person to the level of a nothing, a nobody. It is an utterly contemptuous word.”³

Think about that for a minute. Whether we want to admit it or not, most of us have had times in our lives where we have wounded others by our words or our deeds, placing ourselves and just about anybody or anything else above another human being. Jesus values relationship. When He is Lord, it impacts how we think about and treat others. Disciples of Jesus recognize that they are no more important than anyone else. The high priority that Christ placed on our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ gives us great insight in how to treat one another.

The second term that Jesus uses is one that we are well familiar with today. Jesus said, “But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Hughes writes, “The term ‘fool’ is a translation of the Greek word *moros*, from which we derive *moron*. But its meaning did not involve judgment of one's IQ but rather one's moral condition. It was applied to those who denied God's existence and as a result fell to further evil. The psalmist's phrase, ‘The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’ (Psalm 14:1) bears this idea. A.B. Bruce perfectly summarizes the two words: ‘*Raca* expresses contempt for a man's head = you stupid! *More* expresses contempt for his heart and character = you scoundrel!’ . . . Jesus here condemns angry contempt and all its cousins – animosity, malice, hostility, malevolence, wrath. He is not suggesting a ladder of offenses that result in progressively sterner judgments, as if ‘anger’ gets a minor judgment, ‘*raca*’ a stiffer penalty and ‘fool’ Hell. He is simply multiplying examples to make His point And the point is, all such animosity can land one in Hell.”⁴

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 101.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

So, is it ever okay to be angry with someone? Yes.

Jesus Himself demonstrated anger at the money changers in the temple in John 2:13-22. He was angry with those who hurled insults at Him for healing on the Sabbath in Mark 3:5. There are those skeptics to Christianity who accuse Jesus of saying one thing and practicing another calling the Pharisees “blind fools” in Matthew 23:17. Jesus anger showed itself when sin, injustice, and hypocrisy raise their ugly heads.

How often is our anger the type of anger that Jesus displayed, and how often is it something else?

Matthew Rogers writes, “Some might think at this point, ‘So, I’m going to go to Hell for calling someone a nerd?’ No. Jesus isn’t saying that. He’s illustrating the fact that the Kingdom heart is a heart of love. A heart that values relationships, and doesn’t just want to get by with the rules, and say, ‘Well, at least I’ve never killed anyone.’

That kind of heart values other people.

From Jesus’ perspective, we can see why this is so serious. As He’s saying these words, He already knows what kind of death awaits him at the cross. So reading between the lines we can hear him say, ‘Hey, you people who cut others down with your words. I’m here to give my life for them and for you. That guy you just called an idiot? I love him. He’s so valuable to me that even if he was the only person in the world, I’d still die for him. And you’re making him sound worthless and insignificant? What’s that say about my mission to die for him? How dare you? That’s not the kind of heart inside a person who is truly good – inside a person who follows me.”⁵

He then shares a great story.

“There was once a famous snake charmer. His trick was that he taught his giant snake to wrap around him and retreat. He’d say, ‘COIL!’ The snake would wrap around, and around his body all the way up to his face where it would HISSSS! Then the snake charmer would say, ‘RETREAT!’ And on command the snake would uncoil and slither across the floor. This became such a great trick that he went on tour. One night he and the snake went on stage in front of the biggest crowd ever. Like always he said, ‘COIL!’ and the snake coiled around him. Everyone gasped. Then he said ‘RETREAT!’ Nothing happened. Again he said, ‘RETREAT!’ Still nothing. ‘RETREAT, RETREAT!’ And there in front of that crowd the snake began to squeeze on the snake charmer tighter and tighter until the man died.

After the show, backstage, a man told a newspaper reporter, ‘I remember when he got the snake. It was just a baby. So small he could have crushed it in his hand. But he played with it and let it grow. It finally crushed him.’”

⁵ Rogers, p. 4.

Don't go the route of anger. Don't embrace it. Don't harbor it. Don't nurse it. Don't befriend it. Don't play with it in your mind. Crush it while you still can. It's so serious it can cut you off from God. So dangerous it can crush you.

Christian author Dallas Willard says in *The Divine Conspiracy*, 'To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.'⁶

Anger destroys. It destroys the bond between families. It destroys the bond between friends. It destroys the bond between brothers and sisters in Christ. It destroys the bond between parents and children. Unrighteous anger brings the opposite of what Christ has promised to bring. Jesus said in John 10:10, "10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

II. The Serious Need To Deal With Anger Immediately (vs. 23-26)

Jesus used verses 23-26 to tell us about the serious need to deal with anger immediately. And, He used two examples to make his point. Example number one is found in verses 23-24.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

We've got to remember the time in which Christ was speaking to grasp the gravity of His words. These were first century Jewish men and women. To offer their gift at the altar would mean that they had made their way to Jerusalem, to Herod's Temple. With offering in hand, a faithful Jew would walk up the stairs of ascent, singing the Psalms of Ascent as they made their way the Court of the Gentiles. The worshipper would then move to the Court of Women and then the Court of Men. Finally, the worshipper would arrive at the entrance to the Court of Priests, where only a priest could enter. The offering would be given to the priest, who would sacrifice it on the altar. The sins of the people would be forgiven through the mercy of God and by the blood of the sacrifice.

Jesus was saying, "I am more concerned about your relationship with your brother or sister than I am your offering."

Jesus words would have reminded the Jewish people of 1 Samuel 15:22, where Samuel spoke to the people of Israel, 22 But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience to God means that we obey the Great Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

⁶ Rogers, p. 5.

It may be, that some of you will need to leave here today and make things right with someone in your life. You've been angry too long. You've allowed your "right" to be angry to get in the way of God's desire for you to live in a healthy relationship with another.

In 1 John 4:20-21, the Apostle John wrote, "20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister."

It's imperative that if we are holding bitterness and malice in our hearts toward someone else, that we get it right. If we don't, we can't truly worship God with pure hearts.

Jesus gave a second example of living the seriousness of dealing with anger immediately. Look at verses 25-26:

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

The example loses some of its punch in our culture. We don't have debtor's prison in the United States. Jesus used the illustration of a courtroom to show how important it is to deal with our adversaries. A judgment that went against someone who owed a debt would result in a person being thrown into a debtor's prison. The only way out of that prison was for someone else to pay the debt for you, because if you were in prison, you couldn't work.

Hughes writes, "Jesus' advice is to do what you can to make amends, and do it quickly. If you do not, an inevitable process (like the legal process) will catch up with you, and you will have to pay the maximum penalty. Personal conflicts can often be resolved if dealt with quickly. However, if one puts off dealing with them, you and everyone else will have to pay. We dare not ignore Jesus' advice."⁷

So, what is today's big idea?

If you are experiencing conflict with others, Jesus desires for you to make things right.

Let me give you a few practical steps to take this week.

1) I want you to take a moment of honest reflection. What do your relationships with other people look like? Do you have an unusual amount of conflict in your life? If so, I want you to take some time to pray and ask God to reveal if there is something in you that is bringing so much conflict to your life? After prayer, ask someone who knows you well, if there is something that you are not seeing in your life that is causing conflict.

⁷ Hughes, p. 104.

Sometimes we need other people in life to show us what we can't see in ourselves.

It may be that you have a person or persons in your life that you have tried to reconcile with. You might be wondering, "What am I supposed to do? Do I quit going to church because someone is in conflict with me?" No, that's not the answer.

2) Second thing I want you to do this week is to take a look at the relationships in your life where conflict currently exist and ask yourself these questions. I got these from Matthew Rogers' sermon and I think they are really good:

- Does my heart long for reconciliation?
- Have I done all that I can? (Honestly)
- Do I act lovingly toward the person or persons with whom I have conflict?
- Do I mourn for the harm that the person's anger is doing toward his or her own soul, to us, and to the others around us?
- What do I need to do in response to Jesus' words?

Here are four possible responses.

- Leave now and settle a dispute
- Ask for God's forgiveness for the anger you have shown towards others
- Let go of your anger, and turn it over to Jesus
- Ask Jesus to change your heart

May God bring healing, hope, and restoration beyond your wildest dreams to you as you seek to honor Him.