

Habits of the Heart

(Matthew 5: 21-26)

The rest of chapter five of the Sermon on the Mount is commonly called "the antitheses". An antithesis is a statement that is the direct opposite to the statement that came before it. These are called the "antitheses" because six times we hear similar statements: "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." Jesus' declaration is the antithesis of what has gone before. This has been mistakenly interpreted to mean that Jesus makes his teaching the antithesis of the Old Testament. But if we look closely, we will see that Jesus is contrasting his interpretation of the Old Testament with faulty interpretations and or applications that had been put forward by the scribes and the Pharisees. In each antithesis, Jesus demonstrates how the Old Testament is to be properly interpreted and applied and, thus, how the Law and the Prophets are fulfilled (See 5:17).

The historical level is important to keep before us, Jesus is speaking in a religious context in which the teachers of the law and the Pharisees held sway over the lives of the common people. The Pharisees had mapped out what they considered to be the proper course for attaining righteousness through their interpretation and application of the Old Testament. One facet of this regimen was a tendency to require legalistic, external obedience to the Law without calling attention to an inner obedience from the heart. They were therefore "hypocrites" in their practice of the law and were leading the people into hypocritical practices. But as we saw last week, Jesus is concerned not with the letter of the law only, but more importantly with the Spirit of the law.

So here we see Jesus looking at several examples of how they do this and demonstrates how correct interpretation and application of the law must be based on proper intent and motive. He does not say, "Hear what the Old Testament says", rather, he says, "You have heard it said by those of old." Jesus is not negating the Old Testament but the people's understanding and application of it. He confronts faulty interpretation by giving his authoritative pronouncement, showing the original intention of the law. By living with proper intent and motive, those in the kingdom of heaven will live a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (see 5:20).

Today we are going to look at the first antithesis Murder . . . Nurturing Relationships (5:21-26)

It has been said that "holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."

Jesus begins with the sixth of the Ten Commandments. "You shall not murder" (Ex. 20:13 & Deut. 5:17). We can summarize what Jesus is about to teach in this way. True disciples not only avoid murder but are transformed so that they do not strip away the person hood and identity of others through anger and defamation and they continually produce reconciliation in offended relationships." Jesus' declarative statement "But I tell you," introduces three ways that a person's life is removed besides the physical act of murder. In each case, punishment is due.

The first case is anger ²²"But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. (5:22). Jesus here gets at the

source of murder, which is anger. When we are inappropriately angry with people, we attempt to take their identity and value as God's creature away from them, the ultimate form of which is the physical act of murder. The righteousness expected of God's subjects is not only in avoiding murder but in eliminating anger from our relationships.

And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council.

Calling another disciple "Raca," a transliteration of an Aramaic term implying "empty-headed." Aramaic was the language Jesus spoke. This term of contempt was a personal, public affront. Name-calling was highly insulting in Jewish culture because a person's identity was stripped away and an offensive identity substituted. The significance attached to one's real name is removed from the person.

When anger is allowed to fester we can devalue the person towards whom our contempt is directed. This is accentuated even more in the third example Jesus gives.

Whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

To call someone "You fool", likewise was highly insulting in Jewish culture. The Greek word that is translated by "You fool" is the word "More", which comes from another Greek word "Moros" from which we get the English word "moron", indicating a person who consistently acts like an idiot. To treat one's brother or sister with such contempt was to strip away his personal identity and wrongly make the person into something he or she was not. You will notice that with each deprecatory

exclamation the impending judgment intensifies until we get to hell-fire.

The expression "hell fire" referred to a valley called ben-hinnom. This was a valley west and southwest of Jerusalem. It was the Jerusalem garbage dump where fires were always burning. This constant burning made the valley an appropriate reference to fires of punishment. Jewish writers living a couple of hundred years before Jesus began to call the Valley of Hinnom the entrance to hell or hell itself. By the time of Jesus the term was used to indicate the state of final punishment (cf. Matt. 18:9).

Jesus makes it very clear that causeless anger is an attitude on par with murder and if left smoldering can lead to hell fire. St. John understood this and cautions us in his First letter: ¹⁵Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.” (1 John 3:15) If we harbour anger and hate toward a brother the life of the Spirit, eternal life, cannot find room in our hearts. All of the space is taken up with the anger. When anger is given the run of the house, its influence spreads like dust. If left unattended it covers everything.

Jesus doesn't only tells us the negative effects of anger but he then goes on to give us the positive antidote. Reconciliation with your brother/sister and your adversary.

In the first situation, the expected subject is reversed—the brother has something against you. Here we read ²³“Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴“leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. “

Jesus is dealing with occasions when his disciples have offended another person, not when they have been offended. Reconciliation is the responsibility of the one who has wronged someone else, though a reciprocal attitude is understood. Jesus makes this clear in Mark 11:25 where he teaches us “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” The expression "offering your gift at the altar" assumes a sacrifice being given in the temple at Jerusalem. To leave immediately indicates the importance of reconciliation, because Jesus' audience was from Galilee and the effort to attend the temple sacrifice was significant.

Here Jesus is using exaggeration to make his point. If you are in Jerusalem and you remember that a brother back in Galilee, some 70 kilometres away, has something against you are you to go back immediately and be reconciled. Whatever our gift to God, its acceptance is conditional upon honest repentance concerning the ways in which we have injured our neighbours. Jesus is saying in effect, God can wait. God and be reconciled with your brother. Again 1 John speaks to this when the apostle says in no uncertain terms: ²⁰If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (1 John 4:20)

The second scene is on the way to court, where a litigant is taking a disciple, apparently over some dispute about money. “Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶“Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”

Before the legal process is put into action, Jesus' disciples are to "settle matters quickly" (lit., "to make friends quickly") with one's adversary. More than simply discharging legal affairs, Jesus' disciples are to seek a kind of reconciliation that creates friendships out of adversarial relationships.

Jesus uses this scenario to return to the seriousness of the problem of anger. Unreconciled anger is the inner equivalency of murder, which is impossible to repay. To leave problems unreconciled is to allow the sin that has been created to continue to destroy relationships between people.

Fulfilling the law's command "Do not murder" is not accomplished simply by avoiding legal homicide. Jesus reveals that the intent of the law is to nurture relationships. Jesus' disciples must have a daily urgency about maintaining the healthy life of their relationships, both with other disciples and with non-disciples. Anything we do that strips away the personal distinctiveness of a brother or sister is sin, and it is our responsibility to become reconciled.

So what is the application of this first antitheses?

Its striking feature is its emphasis on the dignity of the human being created in the image of God. Not only are we not to take the physical life of a human, but we are not to do anything that demeans a person's dignity. C. S. Lewis referred to this as the "weight of glory" in one of his most profound sermons. He called for us to pattern our

lives so that we promote our neighbor's glory. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken."

Another important feature of the first antithesis is our responsibility to be ministers of reconciliation so that human relationships reflect the glory of God. Jesus' illustration of hurrying to make reconciliation even if the disciple is offering a sacrifice accentuates the urgency of maintaining healthy relationships. Religious activity that attempts to appease our relationship with God is meaningless if it is not based on purity in our human relationships. We are not to come to worship with the knowledge that we have treated someone wrongly.

This matter, Jesus tells us, is so important, that, even if I find myself at the altar with a gift I am going to offer to God, and there suddenly remember something I have said or done, something which is causing another person to stumble or go wrong somehow; if I find that I am harbouring unkind and unworthy thoughts about him or in any way hindering his life, then our Lord tells us be reconciled. We must get right with our brother or sister and then come back and offer the gift. In the sight of God there is no value whatsoever in an act of worship if we harbour a known sin.

If I, in the presence of God, and while trying to worship God actively, know there is sin in my heart which I have not dealt with and confessed, my worship is useless. There is no value in it at all. If you are in a state of conscious enmity against another, if you are not speaking to another person, or if you are harbouring these unkind thoughts and are a hindrance and an obstacle to that other person, God's Word assures you that there is no value in your attempted act of worship. Take that statement which we read in 1

John 3:20: "If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts and knows all things". There is no value or purpose in praying to God if you know in your own heart that you are not right with your brother or sister. It is impossible for God to have any dealings with sin and iniquity. He is of such a pure countenance that He cannot even look upon it. According to our Lord the matter is so vital that you must even interrupt your prayer, you must, as it were, even keep God waiting. Go and put it right, He says; you cannot be right with God until you put yourself right with your brother or sister.

As ministers of reconciliation, however, there are limits to what we can accomplish. We cannot force another person to forgive us. Sometimes it takes time for another person to trust us after we have hurt them. The obligation still remains for us to pursue reconciliation, but it may not be according to our timetable. That is why we should be so careful with our words and actions. We can never take back a word uttered, and a hurt inflicted often leaves lasting scars.

Jesus' sayings require us to think carefully about what he is not saying. It is possible to be angry and not to sin (Eph. 4:26). Throughout Scripture we see evidence of righteous indignation against sin, which is called anger. Jesus demonstrated this in the cleansing of the temple (21:12-17), and in his parables God displays anger and wrath (18:34; 22:7). In the invectives against the religious leadership during his final fateful week in Jerusalem, Jesus referred to the teachers of the law and Pharisees as "blind fools" (23:17), using a related term to what he prohibits in 5:22. But this was not flippant name-calling. They really were fools, because they were blindly allowing their religious practices to distort their lives with God.

In this first antitheses Jesus is asking us to be aware of the habits of the heart we are cultivating in relation to this powerful emotion, called anger. True disciples not only avoid murder but are transformed so that they do not strip away the person hood and identity of others through anger and defamation and they continually produce reconciliation in offended relationships