

Sermon on the mount If looks could kill
Matthew 5:21–26

“You are an idiot!” “I wish you were dead!” “You’re so stupid!” “You’re worthless!” “I wish I had never married you” “I wish we never had you!” “I wish you weren’t my parents!” “I hate you”

Have you ever uttered any of these statements? If we’re honest, at one moment or another we have all spoken hurtful and hateful words, if not these statements, certainly others with similar power.

I can’t remember how it came about but with our kids we ended up with rule ‘don’t use the word hate’. For me hate is a very strong word and should be used sparingly. And our kids were using it way too often. I hate broccoli, I hate going to bed, I hate so and so, I hate you. Saying I don’t like something was ok, but hate, that is huge, there is emotion and power attached to the word and it becomes hurtful.

Read passage

²¹ “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ ²² But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

²³ “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

²⁵ “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.

Today we’re continuing our series on the Sermon on the Mount. We have called it *Counter Culture – a life of faith in an upside down world*. The Sermon on the Mount, Chapters 5-7, is pretty significant, it is a kind of handbook for the kingdom of God.

In it, Jesus tells his followers that being forgiven from breaking all those rules that David talked about last week, doesn't mean we can live a life of lawlessness. In fact, as the King of the Kingdom, Jesus enhances the requirements of the law. He tells us what the law really means: not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law, the law's intent.

The passage that David spoke on last week finished with Jesus' statement that "*your righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees*", the Pharisees being the most carefully righteous people of Jesus' day. How was it possible to be more righteous than the Pharisees. But what Jesus meant was that although the Pharisees were very concerned with obeying the external requirements of the code, they followed it in a very legalistic, wooden, joyless way. Jesus called them "hypocrites" or "actors". They cared very little about whether they were doing what God wanted. They only cared that they did exactly what God told them to do, to the letter. In fact, they had even added a few extra rules (613 of them).

The kingdom Code

And so, Jesus spends some time teaching his disciples that the true meaning of the law, the Kingdom Code, is to honour God not just with your actions, but also with your thoughts, your motives and your attitudes. The Kingdom Code is deeper and more personal than the law of any country. It delves into the innermost parts of a man that no other man can judge and only God can know.

In the verses from Matthew 5:21 to the end of the chapter there are six comparisons between external performance of the law and internal obedience to the law. Each comparison starts off "you have heard it said" or something similar. Jesus deals with anger, lust, divorce, lying, revenge, and hatred. In each case, he calls us, his followers, to commit ourselves not just to obeying the external requirements of the law, but also to allowing the 'Kingdom Code' to govern our thoughts, our motives and our attitudes.

Today we start with the first of these six contrasts as Jesus teaches us about anger. Let have a closer look.

Unresolved Anger is Sin

²¹ “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’

The first part ‘Do not murder’ is referring to the Old Testament, the second part was what the rabbis taught and the judgment here is the death penalty.

²² But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment!

Jesus is saying sure murder is wrong but so is Anger (internal heart!). It brings God’s judgment.

There are a couple of misunderstandings about this verse:

It is NOT saying that anger is the same as murder or just as bad as murder. (Just for the record, I would much rather you were angry with me than...)

It is NOT saying that anger itself is sin. From other passages, we know that Jesus himself was sometimes angry and that we can be angry without sinning. (We’ll see that in a minute.)

Anger is **initially** an emotion, a response, not a choice. We probably respond with anger so often because we’re fallen—so in that sense even that initial anger might be considered sinful. But it’s not a sin in the sense of a choice I make to disobey God. When it first strikes, I think anger is more of a temptation than a sin. It’s what we choose to do with anger and what we choose to do because of anger that is a sin. As we’ll see from later verses, it’s unresolved anger that is sinful and one of the main reasons is because it leads to sinful action.

Jesus continues:

If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Or as some translations read...

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.

Raca and fool are insults. (Raca is derived from a root meaning "to spit." and means “empty head”.) Fool is Greek for “moron”. Some translation say when you call someone worthless. Each culture can probably come up with its own

set of insults but the point I think Jesus is trying to make is when we're angry, and we really want to say something nasty to the people who make us angry. Jesus says, that's sin.

Jesus referral to the Fires of Hell is a place just outside of the city called Gehenna. A rubbish dump where they dumped everything including the bodies of criminals. Always burning. This place came to symbolize hell. Jesus doesn't mean that if you call someone a fool that you're going to hell. He means that is a sin and sin deserves hell. If Jesus hadn't paid for your sin, that's what you would deserve—not just for murder, but even for speaking insults.

God takes it seriously. Why? In our anger, we lose sight of the person that God loves.

Reconciliation is Important

²³ “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

This verse shows the importance of reconciliation. It's important enough to interrupt worshipping God.

Something to take note of here is in most translations, instead of the word 'someone' is the word 'brother'. The word brother is generally accepted as another name for Jesus' disciples. The term was also used in the previous verse when calling “brothers” idiots. The term Brother was used because the culture that Matthew was writing in had a somewhat male bias however we can easily replace with the term 'brother or sister' without too many issues. But what about those outside the disciples, can we call them all sorts of names without the threat of the fires of hell, or worrying about reconciliation. This is where taking just one passage and drawing conclusions without considering the whole bible story is misleading. So no we can't, it's not about all the legalistic rights and wrongs of who does or doesn't include, it is about attitudes and relationship with God and others

So notice here also that reconciliation is the initiative of the one who has sinned against someone else. The guilty party should take initiative to resolve the conflict with his brother, sister, or whoever. (This is interesting because it's

the other person who is probably angry.) Don't even stop to worship when you know that your sin has caused someone to be angry. Seek them out. Apologize. Ask for their forgiveness. Seek to reconcile your relationship.

And if you are thinking of a situation where you have been on the receiving end and feeling smug that the other person needs to seek reconciliation, the responsibility to seek reconciliation does not rest with only the offending party. Later in Matthew, Jesus gives instructions to the party that has been offended (and is probably angry).

Matthew 18:15-17 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.

Really, both parties are responsible to come together and patch things up. As far as possible, to be able to agree on what was done, what was wrong and for each side to take responsibility for whatever they contributed to the conflict.

This is usually the last thing we want to do. And it's hard work. But it is very important. More important, says Jesus, than getting to the worship service on time. (that must be why half of you arrive to church late each Sunday, you are busy reconciling – what a godly group we have here.) Not only is reconciliation important, it's also urgent.

Reconciliation is Urgent

In this last section, Jesus gives us a mini-parable to teach us that the business of reconciliation is urgent.

²⁵ "When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ And if that happens, you surely won't be free again until you have paid the last penny.

Surely this story extends beyond just the situation of two blokes going to court.

Jesus is using this example to illustrate a broader principle.

If you continue to hold anger in your heart or if you have sinned against someone and never tried to patch things up, then you are asking for trouble. There are consequences for leaving these things unresolved. Reconciliation is urgent so that you can avoid those consequences.

If you are in sin against someone, God will not send you to hell for it - that's not what this means, but he may lovingly capture your attention and bring you to repentance (Godward) and reconciliation (manward).

Some Practical Advice about Anger...

I'd like to close today with some practical advice about anger. These are not explicitly from the Bible. But here are some practical things I have gleaned along the way about trying not to sin when angry and can I put in a rider that while I might know these things, I don't necessarily get it right.

ANGER IS AN ALARM.

A warning light. Treat it as such. Find out what's setting off the alarm. Especially if it is a regular occurrence

Something is wrong—maybe in someone else's actions, maybe in your expectations.

Maybe some sort of injustice, or a personal attack

Like all warning systems, you can have false alarms. You can be angry even if you haven't been wronged. Something is amiss in me. Assumptions, inconvenience, all these things can trigger the response of anger

DON'T LET ANGER ACT.

Commit yourself to not allow anger to either act or speak. Story about the house that keeps on being burgled - burglar trap, shotgun at the front door. You want an alarm with less dire consequences. Maybe a normal house alarm.

In anger we say things and do things that we wouldn't say or do if we were sober. Don't let anger control you. Exercise self-control.

WAIT, BREATH DEEPLY.

I find this hard. I am an excitable sort of chap, so when I'm passionate, excited, angry, that's a bad time to try to deal with a problem. Anger passes away. So why not wait a little. Let your emotions calm down. Take a few deep breaths. Get some perspective. Let the emotional part of your anger dispel so that you can think about both the situation and your response more objectively and rationally.

CAN YOU PUT IT AWAY?

I think that sometimes, things that bother me are best left ignored.

If you bring up every little thing that bothers you or makes you angry, then you will constantly have some conflict to resolve. And life has got to more than conflict resolution.

If you're married, you have either discovered this principle, or you are constantly living in conflict. Opposites attract and that means that usually your husband or your wife is basically designed by God to drive you crazy. So rather than bring up every little thing that bothers you, I think that sometimes you can apply "automatic forgiveness" and just live with it.

I do this with Gay – but very rarely because she is such a good woman!!!. I just figure, "that's the woman I married. That's the way she is. I may not like it, but I love her, just like the way she is."

And I am pretty sure that Gay has to do that same thing with me, plus some.

So when you find yourself angry, ask yourself, "Can I just overlook this?" If you can, put it in the "grace box" and put it away. Don't let it rip apart your relationship.

STILL BOTHERS YOU? TALK TO THEM! NOW.

But sometimes anger is too big to fit in the grace box. And sometimes, even though we fit it inside and put the box away, the lid keeps popping off and there's our anger again, right in the middle of the living room floor.

What I'm talking about is that sometimes our efforts to overlook an offense and "let go" of anger—sometimes that doesn't work too well. If you find you're still angry or angry again, then it probably means that it's time to take action. No, I don't mean kill the other person. I mean talk to them. Take the initiative and speak with them. And do it now. If the anger is popping back out, then you need to deal with it. Nicely, calmly

FORGIVENESS IS VITAL.

There's always a chance that they will not listen to you or will not respond in a good way. But whether they respond in repentance or whether they respond in stubbornly doing the same thing again, there is only one healthy thing you can do: forgive them.

A lot of times we think of forgiveness as what we are supposed to do when someone apologizes. But the truth is that forgiveness is actually a solo

transaction. Even if someone is blatantly and stubbornly sinning against you, the very best thing you can do about it is to forgive them.

Somehow we get it in our heads that if we withhold our forgiveness, then we're really going to let them have it. We'll make them suffer, We won't forgive them. That'll teach them.

But in reality, when we do that, it doesn't hurt the other person at all. We only hurt ourselves. The more we indulge our anger, the more it consumes us, distorts our perspective on all of life, ruins our other relationships, eats away at our health, and turns us into bitter old men and women.

Unresolved anger is a sin. And like all sins, it destroys us. The reason God tells us to stay away from sin is because he knows what is best for us, he doesn't want us to get hurt.

These verses are not saying if you are a follower of Jesus you should eliminate anger from your life, or that anger is wrong. Very often you can't help anger. But it's what you do next that really matters. These verse are about dealing with anger, because whenever you hold on to anger, whenever you refuse to forgive or refuse to reconcile, the life that's really in danger is yours.