

Sermon 15, Thou Shalt Not Kill, Matthew 5:21-26

Closing hymn #551, How Blest Is He; #305, Arise, My Soul, Arise

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 - a) Reconciliation Is Possible
 - b) Reconciliation Is the Solution to Murderous Hearts

Proposition: Jesus fulfills the law against murder by teaching that it forbids anger and harsh words and requires reconciliation.

Manuscript

I daresay that no one in here has ever intentionally caused the death of another human being. Or, perhaps, if you did so, it was only of your unborn child, and at the time you thought you didn't know any better. Regardless, we can all agree that outward abstinence from murder is relatively easy — much easier, say, than outward abstinence from sexual misconduct. (Don't worry, we'll talk about that next week!) But Jesus, in the passage before us this morning, explains that a Pharisee-style refraining from murdering anyone is not enough. We must go above and beyond; we must not have anything in our hearts that moves towards murder — no anger, no harsh words, no verbal abuse. These things are totally off-limits for the Christian.

Why should you listen to this sermon? I'll tell you why. You should listen because you're the person Jesus described here. You've yelled at your children, or your parents. You've had a bout of road rage. You've left a relationship unreconciled, maybe for 20 years now. Yes, you've done all these things. So what? Doesn't everybody? Well, Jesus doesn't answer that question. Instead, He does something much different. He clarifies the law so that you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt that these things are wrong. The sixth commandment isn't just about not murdering anyone; the sixth commandment is about how you treat everyone you come in contact

with. It means that harsh words, anger, verbal abuse, any failure to reconcile, are all alike condemned by the searching law of God. In other words, the point of this sermon is that you're not off the hook just because your life externally looks pretty good. You are quite firmly hooked. You should listen, then, because this message is directed at you.

I. The Law: Don't Murder, or You Will Be Judged, v. 21

The elders, the Jewish rabbis who had lived hundreds of years before Jesus, had taught about the sixth commandment strictly with regard to its civil penalty. If you murder someone, look out — you could get the death penalty. You will at least have to go to court and suffer through a trial before you can get off on the defense that you were temporarily insane. (Kidding! Temporary insanity is a ludicrous defense that should never have been allowed in courts of justice.)

Now, is there anything wrong with this advice? Well, not in one sense. Of course you shouldn't murder because murder brings stiff civil penalties. But in another sense, this is all wrong. It's like saying, "Don't beat your wife because you won't like having your wages garnished for child support when she divorces you." Well, yes. But! There are many better reasons not to beat your wife. Same thing here. Yes, murder could land you in the lethal injection booth. But that's not the main reason to abstain from murder.

II. Jesus' "Yes, And:" Don't Murder, Don't Get Angry; Be Reconciled!, vv. 22-26

Every major English translation (plus the Latin ones too) has a "but I" at the beginning of verse 22. That almost makes it sound like Jesus is saying, "The OT said one thing, but I'm saying something different." One of my New England friends used to say that "but" means "disregard everything I just said." "You're a great person, but. . ." And indeed, if Jesus was talking like that, then it sure sounds like He's contradicting Himself. A few verses ago, He said that He did not come to destroy the law. Well, then, here He is saying, "The law says x, but [translation: disregard everything I just said] it should have said y." And thus, I would submit that it's more accurate to understand the Greek word here (which means "and," "also," "but," and "even") as "and." Yes, murder can land you in the electric chair. And, it's morally wrong to do anything that even tends toward murder.

A. Anger and Harsh Words Are Against the Law, v. 22

That's what Jesus explains in vs. 22. Anything that tends toward making you want to murder is morally wrong and subject to the same penalties as full-on murder.

1. Anger Renders You Liable to Judgment, v. 22a

The scribes and Pharisees emphasized the death penalty deterrent. Jesus emphasized that anger was just as deadly. Any punishment that murder can bring, anger can bring too. Yes, it is odd to imagine being hauled into court on a charge of anger. But nonetheless, in the sight of God, anger is wrong just like murder is. Anger can get you in big trouble, just like murder can. Anger makes you liable to the judgment of God, if not to the judgment of the state. Anger is morally wrong. It is against the law.

Now this brings up a sticky question for all of us. How many times did you get angry this past week? How often did you feel your temper flare and your passions rise? What really got

your goat this past week? And if nothing did, I have a couple of questions. Who do you live with? No, seriously. No one can provoke you like your own family. If you're living alone, or with non-relatives, you may not have gotten angry this week. But that doesn't mean that you live up to this standard. You just didn't have an opportunity to really blow your stack. But understand that if you got angry or wanted to get angry when that light turned red, when someone said something to you or about you, when your spouse did that annoying thing she always does that absolutely drives you up the wall—when any of that happened, it was a sin. It was a sin just like murder is a sin. The law obliges you, for conscience' sake, to obey. The law says, "Do not be angry."

Now, virtually all manuscripts of the NT have "without cause." In other words, some anger is justified. God is angry. Jesus was angry at certain sins. That doesn't give you an excuse to be angry; it only goes to show that anger is, per se, neutral. Anger is a response to injustice that God has hard-wired into you. If you never get angry, you're not a healthy human being. Anger is God's gift to help us respond rightly to sin. But anger should be directed against sin, not used as a relational tool. The point Jesus is making here is that if you are angry at your brother then you are well on your way to murdering him. That anger is unrighteous anger.

So what about when your brother sins? Anger at him is not the solution. Be angry at the sin. Stop the sin. But do not take personal pleasure in displaying anger against that brother. Think about it this way: unrighteous anger is any anger that would motivate you to do something wrong. I heard recently about a lady cop whose daughter was shot and killed on the street in front of 150 witnesses. This woman was so angry that she was caught more than once trying to sneak a gun into the courtroom so she could shoot the perpetrator at his trial. Now, is murder a crime worth getting angry about? Yes. But again, any anger that would motivate you to do something unlawful is unrighteous anger. The cause might be sufficient, but that doesn't mean anything and everything you do in anger is OK. Far from it. Rather, if something makes you angry, know for sure that your anger is righteous only if it makes you want to do the right thing. Is it right to punish the wicked? It's right for God to do so. It's right for the state to do so. It's not right for you to do so. If your anger leads you take revenge, it's unrighteous anger. If it leads you to care not about yourself and your own comfort, but only about the vindication of God, His law, and His kingdom, then (and only then) is it righteous anger.

That sounds weird, even to me. Righteous anger is so far outside the experience of most of us that it doesn't even sound possible. But it is. Jesus was righteously angry when He cleansed the Temple. His goal there was to vindicate His Father and clean His house. And, you'll notice, He did only what was perfectly right and lawful for Him to do, even while under the powerful influence of anger. So again, you may tell me that you're angry with your brother because he just egregiously violated God's law. But though that is a lawful cause, your anger itself is not righteous unless it only motivates you to do righteous things.

2. Insulting Your Brother Renders You Liable to Church Discipline, v. 22b

Well, what's the deal here? Why does Jesus go on to say that calling your brother "Raca" makes you liable to the Sanhedrin? Well, Raca means "empty," or "vain." The idea is that you're insulting the intelligence of your brother. You're calling him a blockhead. Still thinking in terms of the prohibition of anger, we could read this as Jesus saying that the law forbids doing anything that would provoke your brother to anger. Thinking in terms of the prohibition of murder, it makes sense to read this as Jesus telling us that the law forbids insulting your brother. It is contrary to God's law to insult your brother. It's not just not nice; it's not just rude; it's a sin.

Where does that leave you? Often, of course, your biggest temptation will be to insult your biological brother. But even within the church, we can be guilty of name-calling. Maybe not blockhead. But "idiot," "dummy," "stupid," and of course the four-letter words that we know are vulgar and wicked—all of these, from time to time, can come out of our mouths. Jesus says that's a sin. It is against the law in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is never right for you to insult a Christian brother, no matter how provoking he's being.

Now, this does not mean that it's never right for you to say something hard to your brother. Christians are not called to be nice. What it means is that any feeling of contempt, or any showing of contempt, is on the same spectrum as murder. It is wrong, just like murder is. You may have to tell your brother, "Brother, you're acting like a blockhead." But if you say it with the intention of hurting him, then you've just broken this commandment. I know that "doing it for his own good" is a reason that can be and has been gravely abused. But nonetheless, it is the only reason for saying something insulting that even might be valid.

Now, what was the Sanhedrin? It was the supreme court of ancient Palestine, the highest court in Judaism. While it was clothed with some civil power too, it was chiefly a religious court. What Christ is saying here is that insulting your brother's intelligence is a crime worthy of church discipline. It's on a par with adultery or war crimes or theft.

Think about that for a second. We tend to think that church discipline is for really big sins. Surely I can't be excommunicated for stealing two pens from the office, or looking out the window for ten minutes on company time. Right? But Jesus insists here that calling your brother a blockhead is worthy of church discipline. In our denomination, we would say that it's a matter for the General Assembly.

Can you imagine going before the general assembly of almost 2000 pastors and elders from PCA churches all over the country and saying, "Brother Todd here insulted me on October 27th of last year," and all the commissioners gravely nodding their heads and suspending Brother Todd from the Lord's Supper for 6 months? The picture is a bit ludicrous. It's Jesus' way of exaggerating to make a point. Don't think that this is a small sin. Don't think that it doesn't hurt anything for you to say to someone in this room, "To be perfectly honest, I think your brain is the size of a blueberry." That kind of comment is wicked enough to deserve the time and attention of a church court, and even of the most important church court. In this age, it's not going to get it.

But it would be fitting for it to do so. Remember, the Constitution says that civil courts can only deal with matters of more than \$20. But Jesus says that matters of even the smallest penny (see v. 26) are worthy of the discipline of the church. He's pointing to the moral quality of the offense, rather than describing the duties of the church. So the point stands: you may not, under any circumstances, say something designed to tear down your brother and make him suffer.

3. Verbally Degrading Your Brother Renders You Liable to Hellfire, v. 22c

Well, okay, Jesus, I'm starting to get it! But Jesus just keeps going. Here He describes another sin, another way of deeply hurting one's brother. This sin is the sin of calling your brother a fool. And it is a sin that deserves hellfire.

Why is this sin so bad? Well, the point here is not that it's worse to say "fool" than to say "Raca," and worse to say "Raca" than to hate in your heart. The point rather is that every sin deserves God's wrath and curse. I believe that judgment in v. 22a refers to the judgment of God on sin, the kind of judgment that issues in hellfire. Jesus isn't saying that each of these sins is worse than the one before; rather, He's presenting three examples of the kind of sins that you must avoid if you would be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees. He's saying that outward abstinence from murder is not enough. The law of God requires that you not even hate your brother, that you not insult his intelligence, or, in this clause, that you not insult his morals.

A fool is an atheist, a wicked person, a person far from God. Calling your brother a fool indicates that you think he's a low-down, no-good, double-crossing sinner. So Jesus represents God as saying to the rich man who only cared about his material wealth and had no thought for his soul, "Thou fool! This night thy soul shall be required of thee." That man was a fool, and it was appropriate for God to call him so. The Galatians, in deserting the gospel, were acting like fools, and it was appropriate for Paul to call them "foolish." Again, the idea is not that Jesus is banning a particular word but that he's banning a particular attitude. Paul didn't call the Galatians fools so that they could know how superior he was to them. He didn't do it to tear them down; he did it to warn them of their spiritual condition. Again, the point here is that God's law is spiritual and reaches to the depths of the heart. Doing or not doing certain things is not sufficient; God takes into account *why* you're doing them. If you call your brother a fool, thus insulting his spirituality with the intention of wounding and hurting him, then that sin deserves hellfire. It's not a minor sin. It's not a venial sin (there are no venial sins). It is a gross and heinous sin, and one that God does not take lightly.

The idea, of course, is broader than the just the term fool. Jesus is talking about any kind of verbal abuse, any kind of contemptuous attitude, any kind of hatred and desire to tear down in your heart. These things are all directly contrary to God's law. You may not do them. You must not do them. If you have done them—I mean, *since* you have done them—you must repent. You must go back to Jesus and ask for the strength to be well-disposed to your brother, even when you desperately want to hurt him with your words.

B. God's Law Commands Reconciliation, vv. 23-26

Jesus doesn't just leave us hanging, though. Since this sermon condemns you, as it condemns me, what do we do? Where do we go from here? Well, Jesus goes on to the positive parts of the commandment. What does it require? Well, just as the prohibition of murder condemns hate, so it commands reconciliation. Jesus describes reconciliation in two powerful ways.

1. Reconciliation Is a Higher Priority than Corporate Worship, vv. 23-24

Envisioning the OT administration of God's covenant, Jesus describes worshipping God in the temple. You would travel to Jerusalem and present a sacrifice there. Now, in some ways the distances within Israel seem small to us Wyomingites. Campbell County is 4800 square miles, while Israel is only 8500. Nonetheless, in an age before rapid transit, going to Jerusalem would take days. But Jesus says that once you're there, approaching the altar, if your brother has something against you, abandon your worship and go make it right with him. Again, if the brother has something against you—that is, if you have offended him in some way, or even if he thinks you have offended him, you must go make it right.

Now, why is this shocking? Not just the time and effort to get to Jerusalem, though that was part of it. Jesus' teaching is not just that reconciliation is more important than saving time and travel expenses. No, His teaching says that reconciliation, by law, is more important than corporate worship! In the OT era, you came before God with a sacrifice. Today, we come before God just like this, as a body gathered together on Sunday morning.

Corporate worship is the goal of our existence. Why are we here? To glorify and enjoy God. Where do we do that supremely? In corporate worship! Think about it this way. In heaven, as far as we know, what are people doing? They are worshipping God together! In the Psalms, what does the Psalmist consistently express as his ambition? To be in God's house, praising God in the assembly of His people! Psalm 22:22, for example, expresses the desire of Christ's heart. What is it? To be united with God's people for worship!

As an aside, I ask you this morning whether this is your heartbeat. Are you zealous to worship God in the midst of the great congregation? Or is any excuse a good enough excuse to miss church? From another angle, what's more important? Your private devotions, or your presence here in the assembly of God's people? God says it's the latter. Public worship is a higher priority than private worship. Being here, with the saints, praising God, is the most important thing you can do!

Except that Jesus commands something even more important. More important than being here worshipping God is being reconciled to your brother. If he has something against you, you need to get up, walk out the back door, and call him. At the very least, you must resolve in your heart that you will make things right at the first opportunity. You must give up any intention of holding on to your grievances. You must abandon any thought of making him apologize to you. No, Jesus puts the onus on you to make it right. The ball's in your court; be reconciled! This is so extremely important that God won't accept your worship if you're out of accord with your brother through some fault of your own. Whoever does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

Once you're reconciled, return to worship. Don't neglect it. But don't neglect reconciliation for the sake of worship!

2. Failure to Reconcile Speedily Renders You Liable to Eternal Punishment, vv. 25-26

Second, Jesus adds that you must agree with your adversary. Not only is reconciliation necessary; it is urgent. Without it, you can go to hell. Remember, the problem was anger, contempt, abusive language. The solution is reconciliation, which you must pursue speedily. Get reconciled as soon as possible. Are you hearing echoes of "blessed are the peacemakers"? They are here.

This little anecdote is not an allegory; the adversary does not represent some particular person, and the idea that you won't get out until you've paid everything means that until you've made every offense right, you will continue to suffer. But of course, though you can repay people for financial crimes, you can't repay them for other crimes. You can't restore someone's life that you took away; you can't heal someone's wounded spirit no matter how much you suffer. The point of this illustration is that hell awaits you if you won't be reconciled. If you insist on holding on to your own rights, if you insist that you were right all along and that person has no right to be offended with you when he's such a sniveling little scumball, then you will face God's judgment of hellfire. You'll be there until you've made it right. And since you can't make it right, you'll be there forever.

3. Jesus' Two Presuppositions:

This should scare the tar out of all of us today. Harsh thoughts are sin. Harsh words deserve church discipline and hellfire. Who can stand?

But Jesus doesn't leave it there. His teaching presupposes two things, as you may have already noticed.

a) Reconciliation Is Possible

First, reconciliation is possible. Jesus presupposes that you can heal broken relationships, that you can find forgiveness, that you and your adversary can find peace with one another.

I was in Japan a few years on a short mission trip, and while there I had the chance for some good conversations with longtime OPC missionary Calvin Cummings Jr. Cal told me that in Japan, forgiveness practically doesn't exist. If someone hurts you, you either sweep it under the rug, or you cut that person off. Buddhism and Shintoism as practiced on those islands simply have no category for forgiveness. You don't absorb the pain into yourself; you destroy any relationship that costs too much. But Jesus' teaching doesn't work that way. Jesus presupposes that even a very damaged relationship can be put back together. Yes, it is a sin to hate your brother and verbally abuse him; but there is a solution. That solution is reconciliation.

What I want to emphasize here is simply this: that when Jesus presupposes the possibility of reconciliation, He is first and foremost indicating that one can be reconciled with *Him*! Your adversary can agree with you. Your brother can forgive you. Your God can be reconciled to you. Your criminal record in the sight of heaven can be blotted out.

b) Reconciliation Is the Solution to Murderous Hearts

Do you see it, then? Jesus' second solution to the problem of murderous hearts is reconciliation, first between you and Him, and then between you and your adversary. No, He doesn't mention being reconciled with Him here. But He implies that reconciliation is the solution to the problem of hatred. You can be forgiven. Your relationship can be healed. You can get along with that person you thought you had permanently alienated. What an amazing blessing!

As we leave here this morning, we know that we are all guilty in God's sight. We are all deserving of hellfire, if only for the things we've felt in our hearts and the words that have crossed our lips. But we also know that reconciliation with one another is possible because reconciliation with God is possible. Because Christ forgave us, we can forgive one another. We can be united to Him in faith and to one another in love. Seek reconciliation, first with Jesus, and then with anyone else whom you have offended. Only then, with a heart that's at peace, will you be able to find the strength to speak gently and feel rightly toward your Christian brothers. Only then will your anger always be righteous. Once again, the only way to obey the commands of the Sermon on the Mount is to know Jesus, spending time with Him and becoming like Him. Do that, in private and in corporate worship. Then, and only then, will you stop being angry and start being well-disposed, agreed with your adversary, reconciled with God and with your brother. What a glorious thing that will be! Because Christ has opened the way of reconciliation, we can be reconciled and start to really keep this law against murder. We can be peacemakers, if we humble ourselves to be poor in spirit, giving up our own rights for the sake of honoring Jesus and finding peace with Him. If you're not at peace with Him, come talk to me. I'd love to help you be reconciled to Jesus. If you are at peace with Him, then let that peace flow out into your other relationships. The benefits will remain with you eternally. Amen.