

Anger = Murder

Matthew 5:21-26

Series: The Sermon on the Mount – Spring 2021

Preaching Date: January 31, 2021

Worship: Peace in the Storm

Key Sentence: Do you treat anger like you would murder?

Outline:

I. Taking Anger Seriously (Matthew 5:21-22)

II. Taking Reconciliation Seriously (Matthew 5:23-26)

Matthew 5:21–26 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²²But 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.

²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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.

²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Anger = Murder Matthew 5:21-26

As a culture we are incredibly self-centered. As I began to look at the issue of anger I googled “what are the impacts of anger?” I should not have been surprised to find that most of the hits from that search were not about how anger hurts others, but about how my anger impacts my health. It does. A website called “EveryDayHealth” gave a list: 1. An angry outburst puts your heart at great risk. And long term anger increases the risk of all kinds of heart disease. 2. Anger ups your stroke risk. One study found a three times higher risk of a stroke during the two hours after an angry outburst. 3. Anger weakens your immune system. If you're mad all the time, you just might find yourself feeling sick more often. 4. Anger problems can make your anxiety worse. 5. Anger is also linked to depression. 6. Hostility can hurt your lungs. This one surprised me. A study found that men with the highest hostility ratings had significantly worse inflammation and lower lung capacity. 7. Anger can shorten your life.

So, okay, anger is bad for you. But I doubt this is why Jesus spoke so strongly against it. Bad as it might be for you, sinful anger is worse for others. Marriages, families, workplaces, churches, nations and whole cultures are damaged by anger. Before we get into any examples, let me give you a distinction I found helpful. A journal article said “the scientific literature makes distinctions between hostility, anger and aggression. Hostility is typically described as a negative attitude directed toward others, anger as an emotional state that consists of feelings that vary from mild irritation or annoyance to intense fury, and aggressiveness as a verbal or physical behavioral pattern manifest in yelling, intimidation or physical assaults.” I believe that when Jesus addresses anger here in the Sermon on the Mount he’s talking about that whole range.

These things are harmful. Who can catalog the damage caused by hostility, anger and aggression in marriages and families. Intimate Partner Violence, as spousal abuse is formally named, is pandemic in our culture, and made worse by the pandemic we’re all enduring. One Massachusetts hospital reported four times as many serious injuries to wives in the three months following the COVID lockdown as in the same three months a year earlier. How many workplaces are made miserable by that boss, the one with the anger management issues who solves all problems by hostility and aggression? How many community groups and even Christian service organizations have been torn apart when conflict, which is a natural part of working together, was dealt with by hostility, anger and aggression. How many churches have failed or been diminished because we couldn’t hear Jesus on this subject.

And look at the state of our nation and culture. The internet seethes and boils with anger, hatred, insult, and proposed aggression. Do you need examples? I don't think so. I wouldn't want to foul the air of this room with even the bleeped-out curse words that substitute for discussion in much of social media.

So anger is a problem, and I believe a worse problem because it is something we so easily excuse. "Sometimes you just have to get mad to get people's attention," you say. "He never listens to me unless I yell," you say. "I had a right to a little peace and quiet," you say. "If you only knew how provoked I was," you say. "That's the fourth time she's done that," you say. "There is such a thing as righteous indignation," you say. "Sometimes I just can't help myself," you say. "There's only one way to talk to idiots," you say. "They got angry first," you say. "I wasn't about to lie down and roll over," you say. "It's not like I hit him or anything," you say. "I just gave him a piece of my mind," you say. "I only get angry when I know he's going to do something stupid," you say.

Let's read a couple of sentences from the Gospel of Matthew and see how Jesus feels about this. Matthew 5:21-22 *"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'²² 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."*

Last week we studied a key paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Jesus fulfilled Scripture on our behalf, so that when he says "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," we saw this as a call to poverty of spirit, to hunger and thirst after a righteousness only Jesus can give. But we also saw that, standing on the foundation of his righteousness and through the power of the Spirit, we are to live righteously, not through a more perfect rule-keeping than the Pharisees, but through a deeper, heart level righteousness. The rest of Matthew chapter 5 is devoted to a series of contrasts like the one we just read. Each reveals the path of a deeper righteousness not through relaxing the law, but through applying the law at the heart level.

For four weeks we will explore these contrasts in detail. I call it raising the bar or upping the ante on righteousness. Raising the bar is what you do with the high jump. Everybody can jump over a bar one inch off the ground, but few people can if it's set at four feet, and only trained and talented Olympic athletes can clear the bar at seven or more feet. But Jesus raises the bar on righteousness to heights that only Holy Spirit trained believers can consistently approach.

The other phrase I use is upping the ante. I'm afraid this comes from my poker-playing childhood, where many of the poker hands were preceded by placing an agreed-on amount, the ante, in the pot. Every player would then have a stake in the game even if they folded before bidding. "Upping the ante," meant that the initial amount each player had to meet was set higher. Jesus ups the ante on righteousness. To even get in the game your righteousness must exceed the standards the scribes and Pharisees had set for themselves.

So in this first section Jesus ups the ante and raises the bar on anger, raising it to the place where it carries the same weight as murder. When the heart is examined, anger comes from the same root as murder. Anger is unsuccessful murder. If that sounds bad, it's because Jesus wants it to sound bad, to shock us from our passive acceptance of anger as inevitable, as "just who I am," and out of our camouflage substitutes "frustration," "irritation" and at times even "concern."

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder.'" That's the sixth commandment. And many of the Mosaic laws deal with how one who murders is held liable to judgment. But Jesus says that the one who is angry is held to the same standard. Anger is murder-not-yet-committed. One of the best examples of this is the early story of Cain and Abel, Adam's sons. Both made offerings but God accepted Abel's sacrifice of a slain animal and rejected Cain's plant offering. It seems clear Cain knew he was offering the wrong sacrifice at that moment, but through arrogance, pride or jealousy, he became very angry when it was rejected. God confronts his anger before it can become actual murder. "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it." But Cain's anger overmastered him and became murder. The command against murder carries in it the command to master one's sinful anger.

To drive this home, Jesus raises the bar "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." These are strong words. Jesus wants us to know that hostility, anger and aggression are not sins to be taken lightly or excused. He's treating anger as if it was already murder, liable to the same judgment and the same penalties.

Jesus uses three different words for the offense in view. The first, anger, is the more general term and means "to be full of anger, to be furious." Almost any of us can relate to that. When you are angry it feels like it fills you up and overflows into the situation and toward others. That's especially true of what we call hot anger, the kind that leads to aggression, to verbal and physical abuse.

But cold anger can be just as deadly, and just as overflowing, as it leads to bitterness, malice, revenge or distancing. This anger, says Jesus, is a murder equivalent and also subject to judgment. The next two words are a little harder to pin down. Jesus warns us against calling our brother either *raca*, apparently meaning “empty,” or *mōre*, the Greek word for a fool. It appears that “*raca*” is an insult to a person’s intelligence, calling him “empty-headed,” and commentators vie with one another in proposing English parallels like “nitwit,” “blockhead,” or “numskull.” The word “*mōre*,” can hardly be used here in its ordinary sense, for Jesus himself called the Pharisees and his disciples “fools.” “So,” Stott says, “we need to remember that the word had acquired religious and moral overtones, being applied in the Old Testament to those who denied God’s existence and as a result plunged into reckless evil.”

What we can say with certainty is that both these terms of abuse were derisive and insulting. A. B. Bruce probably preserves the major difference between the words when he writes: “*Raca* expresses contempt for a man’s head (you stupid!); *mōre* expresses contempt for his heart and character (you scoundrel!)” These angry thoughts and insulting words may never lead to the ultimate act of murder. Yet they are tantamount to murder in God’s sight. As John was later to write: “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer.”

So if anger is so bad, we obviously need ways to deal with it, and with the temptation to it. Jesus is about to describe one of the things we can do. But before we go on, let’s analyze anger just a little bit more. First, is there any one cause of anger? I don’t want to be simplistic about this, but as I’ve thought about it for many years I’ve never heard a simpler or more far-reaching explanation than thwarted expectations. Most anger comes when my expectations are not met. These may have been godly expectations or they may have been selfish expectations, but the thwarting of these expectations fuels or ignites my anger.

This explains all kinds of anger, from the simplest road rage to the most violent aggression to the deepest revenge filled bitterness. In road rage, for example, your expectation of an easy drive is frustrated when you’re cut off by the guy who passes you and almost causes an accident. So you yell. In marriage, your expectation that your spouse will be your helper is frustrated when he comes home each day and collapses on the couch, paying no attention while dinner burns and the kids scream. Or any of a hundred other unmet expectations in marriage. In parenting, your expectation that your kids will turn out perfect is frustrated when they begin to deal poorly with the lies the culture tells them. So your pride is hurt. And often the expectations that are being thwarted are just purely selfish and we respond with sinful anger. I expected to buy myself a new game console, but my car broke down and needed another \$500 repair.

I expected a nice meal at a restaurant, but they didn't have my favorite. I expected a big thank you for my help, but all I got was a distracted nod. I expected buy-in with my idea but I got push back. I expected a clean kitchen, but it was overflowing with dishes and pans. Big things, small things. Thwarted expectations. This isn't the only explanation, but it's a powerful one.

Second, I want to address the idea of righteous indignation or righteous anger. Is this a real thing? Yes. God has righteous anger toward sin and rebellion and the hurt people cause one another. Jesus had righteous anger toward the Pharisees and hypocrites who tithed mint and dill but had no compassion or integrity. And we can have righteous anger. When the needy are exploited or women are trafficked or the innocent are killed, we can have righteous anger. This anger is thwarted expectations. We expect justice, we expect kindness, we expect integrity, and when those are scorned, we can respond with righteous anger. But as I've said often, we usually don't. Or if we do it's a mixture. Yeah we want the best for someone and hate to see them blowing it, for their sake, so our anger is righteous. But it's mixed. Because my counsel has been ignored and my pride has been hurt and I've been inconvenienced. So my anger is not fully righteous. Even if it started that way, I can so easily express righteous anger unrighteously, with hurt and malice and even aggression.

I suspect, if you think back over a time, even this week, when you were frustrated or irritated or even angry or aggressive, you'll find that your expectations for how the situation should have gone were thwarted. And unless you're very different than I am, you'll find that your anger was way less than 100 percent righteous and way more than 0 percent selfish and sinful.

Before talking about dealing with anger, let's listen to Jesus' illustrations showing how seriously we need to take it. Verses 23-26: *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."*

Jesus wants us to recognize that if anger and insult are so serious and so dangerous, we must avoid them like the plague and take action as speedily as possible. His first illustration is taken from going to the temple to offer sacrifice to God and the second from going to court to answer the charges of an accuser. Remarkably neither illustration deals directly with "your" anger but with "your" offense that has prompted the brother's or the adversary's anger.

It's very possible, of course, that the thing your brother has against is your anger. Your brother, you family member, your fellow believer may have been deeply hurt when your sin of anger struck him. As Carson says, "the connection with verses 21–22 is powerful. If we are truly concerned about our anger and hate we shall be no less concerned when we engender them in others."

These two illustrations are set in the cultural terms of Jesus' own day, in which the temple still stood and its sacrifices were still being offered. Stott says "Perhaps it would be legitimate to translate his illustrations into slightly more modern dress. 'If you are in church, in the middle of a service of worship, and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave church at once and put it right. Do not wait till the service has ended. Seek out your brother and ask his forgiveness. First go, then come. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your worship to God.'"

Again, "If you have an unpaid debt, and your creditor takes you to court to get his money back, come to terms with him quickly. Make a settlement out of court. Even while you are on your way to court, pay your debt. Otherwise, once you reach the court, it will be too late. Your accuser will sue you before the judge and the judge will hand you over to the police, and you will find yourself in jail." The pictures are different: one is taken from church, the other from the law court. One concerns a 'brother' and the other an enemy. But the basic situation is the same: somebody has a grievance against us. And the basic lesson is the same: the need for immediate, urgent action. In the very act of worship, if we remember the grievance, we are to break off and go put it right. In the very act of going to court, on our way there, we are to settle our debt.

Yet how seldom do we heed Christ's call for immediacy of action? If murder is a horrible crime, malicious anger and insult are horrible too. So is every deed, word, look or thought by which we hurt or offend a fellow human being. This truth should compel us to address conflict quickly, before it grows. Paul, of course, famously said "Don't let the sun go down while you're still angry." We will be far better off if we address these things as soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship. We will not always and often not long have the opportunity to take the initiative, to apologize for the grievance we have caused, to pay the debt we have left unpaid, to make amends. This urgent response, Jesus, is the implication of seeing anger as well as physical murder in the sixth commandment. If we take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all people, we avoid committing murder in God's sight.

So how do we deal with anger? Let me give five practical steps that have been important to me and to people I've know. These are ways to anticipate anger, and to deal with it when it's coming on, or when it has already come.

First, pray for awareness. Often we don't know we're becoming angry until it's too late: we've already exploded or we've already mocked or we've already belittled or we've already got such a tone in our voice that though our words may seem reasonable, they are said in a way that communicates nothing but irritation. Pray that God's Holy Spirit would sensitize you like a Geiger counter to the first signs of radioactive decay in your heart, mind and Spirit.

Second, when you detect the beginning of anger, drive a wedge between the things that cause anger and the anger itself. Sinful anger, especially hot anger but even cold anger, can burst out in a moment. That leaves you only a moment to do something. What do you do? The old fashioned phrase "count to ten" is actually good advice. Take a step back. Take a deep breath. Bite your tongue. Go look out a window. Do something other than expressing the anger. One of the resources I looked at in researching this was a sermon by Steven J. Cole, who said quite simply "you can control your anger," and the author offered two proofs. One was that God never commands us to do what we cannot do by the power of his Spirit. Controlling your anger is commanded. Colossians 3:8 "But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, and malice." God can strengthen you to do what he commands as you trust and depend on him.

I found Cole's second proof intriguing. He says "Your own experience proves that you can control your anger if you want to do so. Every one of us has controlled our anger, instantly turned it off, when we wanted to. For example, you're having a heated argument with your spouse when the phone rings. You pick it up and hear your pastor on the other end. "Oh, pastor! How nice of you to call!" What are you doing? Yes, you're being a hypocrite! But, also, you're controlling your anger! Or, your boss does something that makes your blood boil, but you know that if you explode at him, it will cost you your job. So you keep a lid on it. You're controlling your anger." Do something to drive a wedge between the thwarted expectation and the sinful response of anger.

Third, once that wedge is in place, examine your anger and confess it. Deal with it before God. Ask yourself my favorite question "What is going on here? What is happening in my heart and circumstances to fire this spark of anger?" You may find the anger has a core of righteous indignation, that the thwarted expectation is a result of seeing injustice or self-destructive behavior in others. If that's true, you can simply pray that God would give you self-controlled and self-forgetful ways to actually care for the injured person.

But often you will find that you're becoming angry because you're not getting your way, or because your pride is being hurt, or because you're being selfish, or only because the other person is angry, or uncaring or hurtful or selfish. In that case the prayer becomes confession, turning from sinful expectations to godly responses. Laying down your rights and trusting God to be the source of all your provision and the balm of comfort to your soul, and the one who really knows what your need even when you'd expect something else.

Fourth, respond to your anger not just before God but toward others. This is what Jesus was talking about in the last four verses. Deal with it. Don't persuade yourself that it's nothing, or that it's better left unaddressed or especially that it was fully justified. This is hard. Humbling yourself to seek reconciliation is hard. And I won't tell you it always works. But remember we're talking about an upside-down kingdom here, and a countercultural way of doing things. I confess that in thirty years of ministry I have not humbled myself to seek reconciliation as much as I should. And when I have, reconciliation has not always proved possible. But I've always gained peace from even the attempt. When you are angry, deal with it before God and with others. I'm not counseling that you do this in the heat of the anger, but deal with it quickly.

Finally, fifth, allow things that normally cause anger to make you sad rather than mad. I've said this several times over the last few years. I've not found this advice in any of the anger management materials, but I see it in the life of Jesus. He wept over the sins of Jerusalem. He wept in the Garden. He was saddened when the rich young ruler went away. Though he had the right and the ability to express righteous anger, he mourned over sin. I think this is a great lesson to us. Rather than hurting people by anger and aggression, by yelling or abusing, by bitterness and malice, let your anger be turned to mourning, to grieving over the damage done by sin, to sadness and to prayer. In the years I've been working on this it has done more to reduce my anger and increase my prayers than anything else I can remember.

So what have we said? We need to take anger seriously. Jesus elevates anger to the level of the ten commandments. "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'²² 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."