

## **The Way of Jesus: Anger's Acid** **Matthew 5:21-26**

### **Introduction – Hollow Faith**

It wasn't but a few weeks ago that we had Easter. Pardon me for being just a little bit secular here, but I've always had a strong affection for Easter candy. We don't have kids at home anymore so I don't have to buy it before Easter. Usually, I wait until after the big day and buy the candy when it's at least half off. This year was no different. I overdid it with the robin's eggs. The one thing that I did miss out on, however, was the chocolate Easter bunnies. They're always a disappointment. You bite the tip of the ear of the toe and you're hopeful that it is going to be a satisfying experience. But by the second bite you realize that the thing is just a hollow shell. What looked like a nice hunk of chocolate could be reduced to a simple Hershey bar and not nearly as good. Should have bought the Cadbury egg. So much for the chocolate Easter bunny. Looks good on the outside but nothing on the inside.

A lot of people are like that. If we're honest, most of us are like that at times. It's a quality that we pick up as children. How many times were we forced to do something when inside, we were rebelling. It's like the kid who's forced to sit down but on the inside he's standing up. My son was good at that and we didn't even know it. When he was in his upper elementary years, we would send him into the bathroom to take a bath and just assumed that he was doing it. We heard the tub filling. We heard splashing water. But when Diane and I took an extended mission trip one year, her mother found her beloved grandson sitting on the side of the tub swishing the water with his hand. He was "sitting down on the outside but standing up on the inside."

It gets worse if we carry this habit of right action with rotten heart into marriage. "Sure, Honey, I'll go shopping with you!" All the while we'd rather be home watching the game. So we grouse and complain and make a general nuisance of ourselves while walking the aisles with our beloved. What a joy we are! We did what we were expected to do but, all the while, we were rebelling on the inside.

As Sarah Palin would say, "How's that workin' for you, fellas?"

It doesn't.

In relationships, our heart has to match our actions or the other person can sense it like my dog knows the smell of cheddar cheese. You can't fake it.

You can't fake it with God, either. The psalmist wrote, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being" (Psalm 51:6). God can see right through our heartless and hypocritical actions. When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount it wasn't a sentimental, feel-good sermon. It was demanding – far more than what the people had seen in their religious experts, the scribes and Pharisees. No, Jesus set himself apart from the hollow hypocrisy of contemporary religion and went straight to the heart.

**Text: 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.' 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. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come 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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**Prayer**

**Forbidden Anger**

Last week, Pastor Dave tackled the critical preceding passage in which Jesus said that he did not come to "abolish the Law or the Prophets" but rather to fulfill them. He also did a great job in calling us to observe "a Sabbath" sometime in our week. Though I don't always get a Sabbath day of rest, I know it when I don't. Stress levels rise, my attitude goes down, and my body gets easily fatigued. God designed us in such a way to be healthy only when we incorporate a Sabbath margin into our life and I'm grateful for Pastor Dave's heartfelt challenge to each of us.

I trust you are fulfilling the commitment that many of you made last week. (Anyone want to testify?)

In the Sermon on the Mount and with unparalleled authority, Jesus made himself the centerpiece of all history. I can't overstate how radical Jesus was. For two thousand years, the Jews had the Law which had come through Moses. Their spiritual leaders had written about it and made traditions to explain how people were expected to fulfill the Law through their actions. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus day were particularly finicky in what they prescribed for duties required to fulfill the Law. They had an explanation for everything. On the surface, their motivation was to keep the people from ever falling back into the kind of rebellion that had brought destruction upon them in past. In their nit-picking over this detail and that, they completely missed the intention of the Law that God had given them as a blessing and gift. Jesus' assessment of their rules was stinging: "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matthew 23:24) In the passages that follow in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cites six examples where the self-righteous actions of a hollow faith fail to meet the measure of righteousness that a Christian should possess.

Jesus said, "“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’” It is the sixth commandment. Reminds me of the children in Sunday School who were learning the Ten Commandments. When the teacher presented the fifth commandment – honor your father and your mother – one of the younger kids asked if there was a commandment for his brother and sister. At that, one of the other kids said, “Oh yeah; it’s the next one: Thou shalt not kill.”

The prohibition is against murder rather than “killing” as some translations put it. In the Bible, killing was sometimes justified in the name of God’s holiness or justice. But murder is personal and altogether different, as we shall see. The commandment is very simple. The problem that Jesus is addressing is the addition that the religious leaders made, “and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” If you murder, then you’ll stand before the judge in court. So just don’t do the deed. But in adding the extra phrase, the scribes and Pharisees focused only on the outward

deed. But Jesus goes deeper. He does not, as he said, abolish the law. He fulfills the spirit and the intention of the Law.

You see, the religious leaders of the day were not addressing the heart attitude of the people. Just as long as you do the outward action, you're OK.

- Go into the bathroom, open the faucet and swish the water. You've done your duty but you still stink.
- Go shopping with your wife and drag your feet the whole way. Your wife will resent your hypocrisy.

The religious leaders were only intent on fulfilling the letter of the law – the outside. But on the inside, you could be rotten and putrid. Didn't matter. Just as long as the outside looked right. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence." (Matthew 23:25)

As a master teacher and with unquestionable authority, Jesus teaches his followers what is at the heart of murder. "But I say to you (notice his assertion of authority) 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."

There was a Christian book written many years ago. It had a great title. In fact, some people even made bumper stickers of it and put it on their car. "God is my co-pilot." Whether we admit it or not, it is true for every believer. That truth has brought me to a terrible realization. I'm an intense guy, especially when I'm behind the wheel. Seems like I'm always in hurry. It's no virtue. How many times have I gotten angry with the way a person drives in front of me? How many times have I yelled out – because my windows were up – "You fool!" I know. It's pretty ugly. I stand condemned right here. In a moment, in a flash, I have murdered that person in my heart according to Jesus.

But “wait a minute, Pastor” you might be saying. “I know Jesus got angry and the Bible says to be angry and do not sin. Isn’t there a place for righteous anger? And anyway, my translation says ‘angry with his brother *without a cause*.’ Seems like if the car in front of you is not moving out into the intersection when they’re going to turn left is a good cause for anger.” First of all, the phrase, “without a cause” was added later. Jesus most likely did not say it. “Without cause” is not in the earliest and best manuscripts. But the more important point is righteous anger is not personal. It is always against sin or injustice. Martin Luther put it this way, “Righteous anger is friendly to the person but hostile to the sin.” The anger that Jesus is referring to is always personal. The Apostle John wrote, “Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer” (I John 3:15).

And so, Jesus said if you are angry with your brother, you are just as guilty as the person who murdered someone. If you insult someone, you share the same guilt. And if you call someone a fool – a stupid idiot – or some other term of utter derision, you are guilty enough to burn in hell. Jesus is getting at the root cause of murder: utter disregard for another human being. Because we are somehow offended by them, we de-personalize them. We make them out to be of less value than we are. Anger against another human being is the root of murder and Jesus doesn’t give us a pass.

Let’s be honest. Road rage is one thing, and I confess my guilt before you. I’m certain I’m not the only one. The Holy Spirit lives in me and convicts me of my sin. I’m own it and have taken steps to curb my anger. But let me meddle a little deeper.

We all get angry at times. It is the natural reaction that boils up inside of us when expectations aren’t met. That’s completely normal and in and of itself, those feelings of anger are not a sin. When we lose self-control, then it becomes sin. But what Jesus is talking about is a whole lot worse. It’s when the anger we feel gets directed towards someone and we begin to vilify that person and consider them less yourself. A lot of you harbor deep and sustained anger against someone. And it’s making you sick. Jesus said, in God’s eyes, you’re no different than a murderer. But we’re like the Pharisees. You’ve never killed anyone. There’s no blood on your hands. According to the law of the land, you are completely innocent. But it’s a hollow

innocence. It's a sham. Deep inside, anger, resentment and bitterness burns against the person that you hate. Jesus says, "You're guilty of murder."

Shocking.

### **The Priority of Reconciliation**

Jesus said, "in light of this reality, if you've gone to the place of worship and you remember that someone has something against you, leave your seat and go be reconciled to that person." This is really astounding. Jesus is saying it is more important to be reconciled to your brothers and sisters – that is, people you are supposed to be in a relationship with – than it is to worship God. Really? You see, if we are not reconciled to each other, our worship is not acceptable to God. John, the Apostle, was present when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. It made a profound impression on him. He would write years later,

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

I John 4:20-21

I can't help but wonder what it would be like if we as the people of this church would truly follow Jesus in this area. We are so prone to holding grudges and withholding forgiveness. I can tell you this: revival, the powerful moving of God's Spirit, begins with reconciliation with one another. I saw it first hand in 1969 at the beginning of the Jesus People Movement. God moved so mightily at the summer camp that I attended that week that the speaker could not even finish his message – the conviction of sin fell so heavy on those who were present at the meeting. What was God doing? Hours later, when we gathered to share what was happening, student, after student, after student would get up, confess their unforgiveness, and reconcile with each other. That reconciliation, bathed in an ocean of tears went on for hours until the leaders finally told us to go to bed.

God will not move. God will not bless when we harbor hateful attitudes towards one another. Reconciliation is more important than worship. Jesus is saying you cannot connect with God in worship until you are reconciled with your brother.

Jesus says, “Do it, now! Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court...” If we are going to follow Jesus, we need to pursue reconciliation whenever we have a problem with our brother or sister. It is urgent, Jesus is saying, and His followers will not allow grudges and bad feelings to fester into resentment and hatred.

### **Guilty**

I don't know how you feel about this message. If you've been tracking, I suspect you feel like me: *guilty*. The Sermon on the Mount is like that. If we hear Jesus' words, they penetrate to our soul and we know we don't measure up. That's why we need a Savior – someone who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. (Vamp on invitation for Salvation.)

But Jesus' words were given to be heeded. We can't just brush them away and say, “Well, there's no way I can do that, so the blood of Jesus will just have to cover my sin.” No. The Sermon on the Mount is the way those who would follow Jesus will order their lives. Some of you, like me, struggle with anger. When your anger gets focused on a person where you insult them or call them names, even if it is to yourself, you've crossed the line into a murderous heart. If you get there, confess your sin to God and repent from your rotten attitude. Figure out what triggers your angry reactions and try to address or avoid them. For example, sometimes I get real frustrated with people who drive too slowly in my neighborhood. I remember following one guy who was doing 15 in a 25 zone for over a mile. I was embarrassed by my awful attitude. Now, when that happens, I pull over to the side of the road, cool my jets and wait. I'm trying to grow up. Find a way to avoid the triggers that set you off.

But some of you need to reconcile with those people who have offended you or whom you have offended. It's pointless to come to worship when you harbor resentment in your heart for another person. Go and be reconciled. And if someone comes to you for reconciliation, offer

forgiveness freely without looking down on them, embrace them (seriously – that’s from a non-huggy person) and pray with them.

This is the way of Jesus.

This is the way of life.

“Beloved, let us love one another.” I John 4:7