

Kingdom Relationships Part One: *Dealing with Anger*

Let's turn together to Matt. 5 as we continue our study of the sermon on the mount. We're going to read vv. 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. (Matthew 5:21-26 ESV)

Patrick Combs received an advertisement in the mail about how he could make big money working out of his home. It was classic junk mail, but attached to the letter was a fake check for \$95,000 made out in Patrick Comb's name. In the corner the words, "non-negotiable" were clearly written, but just to see what would happen, Combs deposited the check into his bank account and was surprised the next day to see that his bank account had increased by \$95,000. He expected the bank to see their error and quickly take it back but weeks later the money was still there. So Combs began to withdraw some of the cash, and it was at that point, when the bank was no longer just dealing with zero's on a screen but real money that they realized their mistake. Here's the problem: a technicality in the law said that simply writing "non-negotiable" in the corner wasn't enough to render a check null and void and at that point the window for the bank to withdraw the money had closed. Through a crazy legal loophole, the check was valid and the bank had no legal grounds to get the money back. All they could do was try to persuade and pressure Combs to give back what was now legally his. It wasn't ethically his, it wasn't morally his, but because of a loophole it was legally his. Finally, after months of the bank appealing to his conscience and trying to convince him that the words "non-negotiable" really meant the check was invalid, Combs finally paid the money back by writing a check for the full amount. For his own amusement, Combs wrote the words "non-negotiable" in the corner of the check, but the bank didn't hesitate to honor his check as valid.

People can be very creative at discovering loopholes. Loopholes are ways of getting around laws or rules without totally *defying* or technically breaking the law or rule. Jesus recognized that the religious leaders of his day had become masters at finding loopholes that enabled them to *appear* righteous without actually *being* righteous. They had created loopholes in their religious system that enabled them to perfect outward righteousness while their hearts were filled with unrighteousness. They were cashing fake righteousness checks!

And so from verse 21 to the end of chapter 5, we might think that Jesus is contrasting what he says with what the OT Law says: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...* but I don't think that's exactly what is going on here. Jesus is confronting a man-made, loop-hole filled religious system that the Pharisees and scribes had constructed around God's law. Notice that whenever Jesus quotes the OT, he always begins with the words, "It is written", but he doesn't say that here; instead he says, "you have heard that it was said..." Jesus is quoting man-made traditions that were built around the law. The clearest example of this

is found in verse 43: *You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'* The law does command us to love our neighbor, but nowhere does it command us to hate our enemy. That was added on later. The differences were subtle, but the net effect was that the religious leaders had found a way to focus the law on the outward and ignore the inward, the heart. And so Jesus will clarify what God meant all along by connecting the law to the heart.

And he begins with murder. The 5th commandment was: *you shall not murder.* That's a pretty straightforward command and probably one of the easier commands for us to obey. Most of us really aren't tempted to kill anyone - most days at least. So as long as the religious leaders didn't physically murder anyone, they thought they were keeping the 5th commandment and their righteousness account was in the black . But look at what Jesus says in verse 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. Vs. 22

Talk about a game-changer! Jesus is saying that being angry with a brother, insulting a brother, and calling a brother names makes someone as guilty of breaking the 5th commandment and liable to judgment as actually murdering someone. We need to understand what Jesus is really saying here because on the face of it, that just doesn't seem right. We all get angry sometimes. Who here has never gotten angry at someone at some point? Is Jesus saying that anger is always bad and always tantamount to murder?

The answer is no, we will see in a minute that Jesus is talking about a very specific type of anger. God gave us our emotions, and anger is one of those emotions. It can be a powder keg that can do a lot of damage, but not all anger is bad, in fact there are times when anger is good and necessary. Jesus got angry more than once in his earthly ministry. God has a deep and furious anger against things like injustice and oppression and abuse. Anger is a God-given emotion and God meant it for a productive and helpful purpose.

I heard Chip Ingram say that God gave us anger to drive us to action. When we see an injustice or an evil or harm being done to someone, we should get angry, we're supposed to get angry. Getting angry at the horrors of sex trafficking, or child abuse, or abortion, can motivate us to work to end these terrible things. At the very least it can drive us to our knees in prayer for God to move and eradicate these crimes and the suffering they cause.

Even in smaller, day to day things, anger can be a good thing if instead of driving us to do or say damaging things, it motivates us to make bold, constructive, changes. Anger can give us the courage or resolve to draw lines in relationships that need to be drawn. The mom who is being disrespected by her kid, suddenly finds a holy fire rise up in her that says, "that's enough, young man/woman. You will speak to me with respect." And hopefully, when dad gets home, he also adds a little warmth to the discussion. I'm not talking about out-of-control anger. Certainly not talking about abuse! But anger that draws a line in the relationship and says, that's not acceptable.

Sometimes anger can put needed steel in our backbone. After Janice and I had been dating a few months, there came a point when she began to have doubts about the relationship and she began to pull back some. That caused my insecurities to kick in and I began to smother her in the effort to silence

those insecurities and reassure myself that everything was ok. That had the opposite effect: I think it made her want to pull away even more.

We were both attending and living at a Bible college, and one afternoon we had about a half hour after classes before I had to drive her to work. Oh how I was looking forward to those 30 minutes! But Janice spent almost the whole time up in the dorm talking to a girlfriend. By the time she came down, we had just enough time for me to drive her to work. And I was angry. Not furious, not raging, not out of control. Just fed up. Something rose up inside of me (fueled by anger) and I drew a line. I remember saying to her, "I don't know what you're trying to prove, but you just proved it." And I initiated our breaking up until she worked through whatever she was working through. Anger drew a line, not with hurtful words or damaging accusations - just a line that said, here's the boundary for our relationship - you decide what you want to do, but until then our relationship is off. It was hard, but it was healthy. And really it was anger that helped put that resolve in me. Thankfully Janice worked through it in just a couple weeks and we got back together!

My point is that anger is a legitimate emotion and when properly controlled and directed can help to motivate us to action, to right wrongs, or to give us resolve to draw important relational lines. It can be constructive, not destructive. But that's not the kind of anger that Jesus is talking about here.

There are two words for anger in the Greek. Thymos means to flare up in anger. That's not the word Jesus used. Jesus used the Greek word orge, which means a settled and hostile anger. He's talking about the kind of anger that lodges deep in the heart and settles there. He's talking about when we harbor anger in our hearts - feeding it, nurturing it, fueling it so that it smolders beneath the surface in our heart. That kind of anger can eventually lead to murder. But even if it doesn't lead us to actually murder someone, it is still related to murder in this way: murder is the fruit; this settled, smoldering anger is the root. Jesus is saying that God is just as concerned with the root as He is with the fruit.

Often this kind of smoldering, angry heart will spill over into hurtful, insulting words: raca meant something equivalent to "I spit on you" or "knucklehead". Fool is an even stronger word - more than calling someone stupid, it's to accuse them of having no moral character - a pretty serious charge to make against a brother or sister. Jesus is talking about character assassination - killing someone's reputation with our words.

Jesus goes to the heart of the matter and warns that the courts may not see or convict for the kind of anger that bubbles and churns in the heart, but God does. As disciples of Christ we need to deal with the anger, not by denying it's there or acting like it isn't real. We need to be real with God and admit that it's there. And we need to do what we can to resolve it quickly. Jesus says if you're about to give an offering to God, drop your offering - don't try to spiritualize it - and go reconcile with your brother. There's a kind of spiritualization that uses a lot of God-talk but doesn't deal with the junk in the heart. That's fake righteousness; it won't cash with God. Jesus isn't saying we shouldn't pray to God or approach God until we make it right - it's not that God wants nothing to do with us until we've done our best to reconcile. As children of God, we can go to God to ask His help, to confess our anger, and to ask for direction to deal with it. Jesus is warning us not to get religious with it, not to try to spiritualize our sin with a lot of God-talk. That is non-negotiable with God. The gift God is looking for is for us to seek reconciliation - then we can come back and worship and give our gift to God.

If someone is accusing you of wrongdoing, and there are grounds for their accusation, don't lawyer up. Try to settle it. Humble yourself if you've done wrong. Admit it. It may not go well with you if you go to trial with it. The point here is to avoid festering anger and broken relationships as much as is in our power to do so. Jesus isn't binding us to the results - there were many people who hated Jesus and Paul and Peter and all the disciples - but they never allowed the murderous root of anger to grow. When Peter and John were beaten for preaching in Jesus' name, it doesn't say they left fuming for having been wronged and mistreated. It says they left rejoicing that they were counted worthy of the honor of suffering for Jesus' name. No anger, just joy in Christ!

I believe the Holy Spirit wants to work on some hearts this morning in this area. As I close by sharing two brief suggestions, if this is an issue in your life, I pray that you let the Holy Spirit shine His light in your heart - just between you and God. Be real about what's in there, and resolve to take action. God is ready to help you.

a. Let anger motivate you to take action, but don't let anger take root in your heart

Anger can be a really good motivating emotion. Anger isn't always bad - God gave us anger as a part of our emotional toolbox. Let it give you resolve to deal with a wrong, or to draw a healthy relational boundary, or to work to fight abuse or suffering in some way. This kind of anger is like a fire in a fireplace - it's controlled and safe.

If there's anger smoldering in your heart - don't deny it. Let the Spirit show you - do you simply need to repent of it? Maybe you've become an angry person because you've allowed anger to take root and now you get angry at people easily. Maybe someone really hurt you, and that hurt has settled into a deep bitterness (anger and hurt that has aged with time). That will eat you up from the inside out - confess it to God. If you need to go to someone and ask their forgiveness for words or actions, do it! Right now, before God, resolve to take action, and resolve not to let anger have its roots in your heart anymore. The Spirit of God is here to set you free.

b. Don't be easily angered

Little pots soon boil over; and I have known some professing Christians, who are such very little pots, that the smallest fire has made them boil over. When you never meant anything to hurt their feelings, they have been terribly hurt. The simplest remark has been taken as an insult... and they make their brethren offenders for a word, or for half a word, aye, and even for not saying a word. ~ Charles Spurgeon

Did you ever meet someone who is just so easily offended, so easily angered? You feel like you have to walk on eggshells with them, you have to be so careful with what you say. Don't be that person. If it's easy for you to be offended or outraged by what people say and you're racking up offenses, God's answer is for you to grow. Be a bigger pot, be a bigger person, let God grow you into a bigger Christian.

*He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,
And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city. Prov. 16:32*

I want to close with a time of prayer and ministry. Jesus says that if you don't settle the anger issue, the judge may put you in prison, and you won't get out until you have paid the last penny. When anger

lodges inside it becomes a prison to our souls. We are the ones tormented. At first anger towards someone or someones who hurt us might feel good, but after a while that anger becomes a lock and chain that keeps us from loving or caring or being compassionate. Eventually it will cause us to become cynical and suspicious and quick to get angry, quick to get offended. We become an angry person, we start looking for offenses, we are sure they are coming. But it doesn't feel that way to us - it just feels like people keep doing things to make us angry. It's a prison of torment. If that's you, God wants to set you free. Confess to God that you're angry. Tell Him why. If you need to, write out the offense or the thing that has made you so angry and process it with God. Then ask God to help you to forgive. Forgiveness sets the forgiver free more than it sets the offender free. Ask God to help you forgive and set you free from anger and the effects of anger. If there are steps you can take to make it right or reconcile with someone, take those steps.

Jesus looked down on his killers and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." His heart was free to love even his executioners with their hatred and mockery. God wants to put a supernatural love in our hearts - something beyond what we can do or manufacture on our own. Let God do that in your heart now as we pray.

***Closing thought: as I went to print this message out, I got a message: *printer has a problem and needs your intervention*. Anger can build up so much it clogs up our lives and makes us unable to live the way God intended. We have a problem and need intervention. If your heart is clogged up - find a trusted, mature believer and talk to them about it. Not to rake someone over the coals, but to get help with your anger issue. Call me and let's set up an appointment. But don't just settle for living with anger. Let anger drive you to action and do something about it.**