

Sermon On Matthew 5:21-23

When I was in junior high, I rode the bus to school and I hated it. Every kid wanted to sit in the back - those were the best and “cool” seats. But on our bus, the bully also sat in the back. So snatching up a back seat also came with the stipulation that you may, on any particular day, be the object of an older, meaner kid’s irrational scorn, threat of violence, and relentless verbal abuse.

I don’t remember what this kid’s name was nor do I remember the name of the girl he always sat with who was just as mean spirited and would just as often pick on the younger, smaller kids. They were something of a dynamic duo of back-of-the-bus terror.

I hated riding the bus. On a good day you simply avoided eye contact with the bullies hoping not to set off their soul-crushing ire. On a bad day, you cautiously joined in on the jeering of another student because you were glad it wasn’t you that day. On the worst days, you received the full load of their pent up and seemingly baseless rage.

It was on one of those days, where I had been targeted by the bullies, that finally set me off. I came home after a bus ride where I was mocked, belittled, and laughed at mostly by the girl who served as the better half of the bully duo. And I was furious. My little ego was deeply wounded and the constant abuse and threat of abuse had finally hit the boiling point.

I walked in the door and yelled as loud as my little voice could muster every vile and terrible curse and swear in my vocabulary. I was letting it all out. It crescendoed as I burst into my brother’s room spouting a particularly nasty description of what I had hoped would happen to that girl-bully in the near future. Of all the details of that day, the one I remember most clearly was the look of absolute concern on my brother’s face when I finished my tirade and he said, “dad’s home.”

My life ended that day. (Just kidding, I know my dad was upset, but I don’t even remember getting in trouble. Maybe he suspected what was going on, or maybe it was such a shock to the system that he didn’t really know what to do).

The reason I'm telling you that story is two-fold. 1) I'll be able to refer back to it as we study our scripture for this morning, and 2) I want to point out that the repressed, angry, vile, and wounded-ego 6th grade version of ourselves has been getting a lot more air time lately. You've seen those viral videos of someone throwing a fit in the middle of a Costco because of masks, and you've read about in news reports of people threatening school boards, you've seen crowds of angry people using violence as the protest violence. People seem unhinged lately, and if you're like me, you can feel it in your everyday encounters - a boiling up of anger and resentment toward any and everyone who has some kind of political/ideological opposition to me.

The Holy Conversations series is about how to reopen channels of communication with one another, but this morning I want to deal directly with the heart of the matter as Jesus did in Matthew, chapter 5.

So let's do that together. Open your bible (there's one in the seat next to you) or open it on your mobile device to Matthew 5:21. To quickly set this up, Jesus is preaching a sermon to a crowd of people. We call this the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has just said two key things: The first being that he is the fulfillment of the Law of Moses - even though it's going to sound like he's disregarding it. Second, that his listeners (including you and I) must have a righteousness that supasses that of the religious professionals or they'll have no part in his kingdom. What he goes on to show is that one can simply follow the letter of the law but still miss the heart of the matter - and as it is so often with God, he cares about what's in the heart.

Matthew 5:21-23

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder,^[a] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' **22** But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister^{[b][c]} will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,'^[d] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24** leave your gift

there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

This is the word of God for the people of God (Thanks be to God)

In this passage, Jesus is pointing out the moral inadequacy of what might be the easiest to follow of the 10 Commandments - do not murder. Again, not to abolish that law, but to fulfill it, Jesus explains how a person swept up in his Kingdom doesn't just NOT kill people who annoy or anger them, but leaves traces of anger and contempt aside for the sake of love and reconciliation.

There's a progression of sorts here in Jesus' teaching - the order being Anger, then Raca (whatever that means), and then "you fool!" So let's start with anger.

Anger is a powerful emotion. It's a feeling that immediately impels us to want to act, usually to interrupt or harm anyone or anything that has interfered with our life. It's probably impossible to avoid anger altogether. Often anger is spontaneous - and almost always contains some degree of malice.

More than once in my life, I've been bending down to pick something up and then stood up only to bonk my head on an open cabinet or drawer. That ever happened to you? The anger is immediate, isn't it? What happens next? Maybe you swear? Perhaps you slam that door as hard as you can? Maybe you start looking for who was responsible for leaving the cabinet door open?

You might think that anger is harmless as long as it's not acted on, but even anger itself can be harmful.

If Pastor Lisa told me, Tyler, I was really angry with you after the last time you preached...that would have a profound effect on me. I might be hurt that I had angered a friend and coworker. Or maybe I'd be defensive, or be angry in return. And perhaps if Katrina and Karen got wind of this, it would be awkward - everyone having guarded conversations and encounters. All this without anyone even acting on anger. It sort of feeds off itself.

It's no wonder that in Colossians, Paul writes: "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger..."

Anger isn't inherently bad, but we - you and I - have a natural tendency to not handle anger very well. When we don't wave off anger, we become bloated with it - and become self-righteous and vain. Perhaps we even become addicted to the adrenaline rush of being on edge.

Dallas Willard, when anger takes root:

"All our mental and emotional resources are marshaled to nurture and tend the anger, and our body throbs with it. Energy is dedicated to keeping the anger alive: we constantly remind ourselves of how wrongly we have been treated. And when it is allowed to govern our actions, of course, its evil is quickly multiplied in heart-rending consequences and in the replication of anger and rage in the hearts and bodies of everyone it touches.

Indeed we are reaping it now in a nation increasingly sick with rage and resentment of citizen toward citizen. And often then rage and resentment is upheld as justified in the name of God."

I keep thinking about 6th grade me...if things were so bad at the back of the bus, why did I keep sitting back there. Are we choosing to be angry?

Right now, when you surf the web, and turn on the news, when you keep your eye on social media, you are being encouraged to exist in a suspended state of constant anger. It's as if we're being trained to be angry or offended at everything and everyone. And our relationships are paying the price - as is our witness to the gospel of Jesus.

And that's just anger. Jesus goes on to say that anyone who says, "raca" to anyone is answerable to the court.

What is 'raca'? It's an expression of contempt. It may have originated from the sound a person makes when they are getting ready to spit.

If anger is bad, contempt is worse. If in anger I want to hurt, in contempt I don't care if you are hurt or not. Someone for whom you hold contempt is not worth your consideration. They are beneath you.

Contempt is also where we tend to get super-creative with our language. Without getting crude, we might call someone a loser, or idiot, or stupid. But those are light-weight compared to the usual sexual, racial, and personally degrading terms we come up with to exclude and isolate a person we're angry with.

So again, picture 6th grade version of me - the one who's marching through the house unleashing all the vile vocabulary I have at a person who isn't even there - that's contempt in action. It's impressive and creative and so cruel and serious. Contempt takes the initial anger and concentrates and magnifies it.

I don't have a great recollection of politics and media throughout my life. I just didn't pay very close attention to those things until maybe the last 10 years. Even so, it seems to me that contempt is the new weapon of politics and scourge on civility. We're just digging deeper and deeper lines in the sand so we know who is in, and who is out. Contempt is making it easier to disregard those we've deemed outside our circle.

When I think of the landscape of our culture - at least as I'm able to observe - and its effect on human relationships, I'd say we're squarely in the field of contempt. Everywhere I look I see not just anger at policies, past failures, and injustice, I see people holding one another in total disregard. We're unable to see the vast commonalities that should unite us. Instead, we zero in on the few differences that drive a wedge between us. And it's why we can't even talk to one another anymore. We tell ourselves, why even bother with that person?

What I'm concerned about is that if we don't break free of our contempt for one another that we'll naturally evolve to the third thing that Jesus addresses.

anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

This is one of those cases where the English version of the scription is a near perfect translation but an utter failure of an interpretation. You can't understand the weight of what Jesus is saying by just taking the words at face-value.

To give you a modern-day equivalent is actually pretty difficult both because I'm not going to swear with you today, but also because foul language is so prevalent in our current cultural vernacular that even an updated term doesn't quite do it.

So use your imagination to come up with a particularly vile insult, throw the full weight of anger and contempt behind it and you can get an idea.

The “fool” in Jesus day wasn’t just the same as calling someone an idiot. We can actually turn to the proverbs to get a good idea of who the biblical fool was. Proverbs mentions fool or foolish 72 times and some of the most concentrated verses come from Proverbs 26. This is a biblical fool:

Like snow in summer or rain in harvest,
honor is not fitting for a fool.

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey,
and a rod for the backs of fools!

Sending a message by the hands of a fool
is like cutting off one’s feet or drinking poison

Like tying a stone in a sling
is the giving of honor to a fool.

As a dog returns to its vomit,
so fools repeat their folly.

Again, Dallas Willard:

To brand someone “fool” in this biblical sense was a violation of the soul so devastating, of such great harm, that, as Jesus saw, it would justify cosigning the offender to the smoldering garbage dump of human existence, gehenna - translated as “hell” in our version.

It’s not about the phrase - we would never say “you fool.” When we completely disregard someone’s humanity, when we consider a person to have nothing of value, when we mentally and verbally condemn them and would even revel in their misfortune, then we are in danger. This way of thinking is completely out of harmony with God’s Kingdom.

To sum up Jesus' teaching: The law is "Do no murder." The intent of the law, or the fulfilment of the law is: treat all human life as valuable.

AND he provides a nifty little illustration:

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, **24** leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

Now some of us have already got our minds working on practical solutions. But please understand that Jesus isn't giving out some new laws here: don't get angry, have no contempt, don't say "you fool" and skip all church and religious practices until you are fully reconciled to everyone. Though that's not a bad place to start, they aren't the point!

He means to show us on a deeper level what kind of person is in harmony with his love and life. Someone who has been transformed by God's love doesn't have to make it a point not to mentally condemn others - they're incapable of it. A person with true inner goodness treasures all human life and sees all people as God's children designed for his eternal purposes.

Imagine attending church for a service where there's a baptism. And the family is all dressed up nicely and people came in from out of town, and the pastor has just started going through the liturgy after introducing everyone to the congregation. There's flowers, and the baptismal font, a gift for the baby, and an uncle busy snapping photos on his smartphone. Just as the pastor gets to the water part, the dad says "wait!". And he rushes down the aisle and out the back door and gets on the phone with someone who isn't even there and says, "hey I'm about to have my child baptised into the faith and to commit myself and my whole family to raising him in the care of our church and it just didn't seem right that I should do that without first saying I'm sorry about the way we left things. You're important to me and I wish you were here and I love you."

It's not a new commandment of what we're supposed to do, it's the kind of thing a person who was fully living in the movement of God's kingdom would do.

I'm not there yet. And in the last few years, particularly in the last two, I feel like I've regressed more toward the 6th grade version of myself screaming into the void about the injustice of a bully at the back of the bus. It's not enough to simply commit to not getting angry and all that - that's not loving people.

So what can we do? I'm glad you asked as I have a few suggestions!

1. We need a graceful, sustained relationship with Jesus. We learn to love from our discipleship to Christ.
2. We need to cut off the constant flow of outrage. There are influential people that have much to gain by keeping you at a constant level of seething anger. There are those who will capitalize on the contempt we've built up for those on the "other side". True and loving relationships are in danger of being shattered if we don't stop reducing one another down to base ideologies. Do you love people enough to turn it off - social media, the news, gossiping and slander? Take a step away from those things and get in touch with real people again.
3. We need some new skills. A part of what we've lost in all this is the ability to communicate. Most of us have a person in the family that we avoid certain topics with and that list and those individuals seems to be growing. We need a refresher on how to engage. On October 3rd, we're hosting a workshop to help us do just that very thing. I encourage you to come. One of our small groups has already piloted this program and have helped us see the value in sharing this skill with all of you. You heard from Kevin last week and if you didn't check out our YouTube channel to watch the whole interview - it's well worth it.

This morning, I've asked Brad and Jill Hawk to share their experience and maybe what we can look forward to on Oct. 3

4. And finally, friends, we need to confess today, before God and one another, our struggle with loving our neighbor. So I ask that you participate with me in this prayer of confession - your part will be in bold text.

Holy God,

We confess that we do not always love our neighbor.

We confess that we have despised others, even to the point of hatred.

We confess that we have been hurt by others.

We confess that forgiveness and reconciliation sometimes seem impossible for us. But we know that nothing is impossible in You.

We come to You, seeking healing and wholeness for us.

Help us, whenever possible, to live in peace with others,

to seek reconciliation and healing and forgiveness.

For Your Son came and lived among us,

was betrayed and denied,

abused and put to death.

He rose again,

and came with the message of peace to those

who had denied him and abandoned him.

May we walk in his ways.

Amen.