

Anger and Adultery

^{NRS} **Matthew 5:21-30** "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

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Last week we got as far as Matthew 5:20. Jesus had been teaching that his purpose wasn't to destroy the law, but rather to fulfill the law. And he went on to say that our righteousness needs to be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Now we begin to look at six commandments, where Jesus begins by saying, "You have heard it said. . . but I say. . ." Jesus is basically saying, "Here is what the law says, and I am going to the heart of the law to show how children of the kingdom of heaven live out its deepest meaning."¹ By going deeper than the surface of the law, by going into the heart of the law, the followers of Jesus will exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.

A few years ago I mentioned that Christianity was rather radical, which surprised the person I was talking with at the time. These days we often use the word *radical* to mean an idea which isn't conventional. The word *radical* comes from the word *radix*, which means *root*. If you ever learned how to get the square root of a number, you might remember that you put the number under a symbol called a radical. Both meanings of the word *radical*, both "root" and "unconventional" apply to much of the teaching of Jesus' in the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we will look at two of the radical teachings found in that sermon.

None of the six of the teachings that make up the rest of Matthew chapter five deal with religious rituals, nor do they deal with belief. These teachings aren't about what you have to believe - what is the right or correct belief. These teachings aren't about the proper way to worship, about a list of prayers in worship - from invocation to benediction - nor are they about the right songs to sing, or a required percentage of income to be offered to God. These six teachings deal with relationships between people, and with ways that relationships can go bad. Remember that Jesus taught us to love God and to love our neighbor - and that all of the law and the teachings of the prophets flow from those two commands. These six teachings that begin in verse twenty-one certainly illustrate that point.

It may be especially easy to see the foundation of "love your neighbor" in the teaching on anger. Murder ends relationship, eliminates the future possibilities of the deceased, and destroys community. Murder has final results that cannot be undone. Jesus doesn't issue a new command, but a call to a deeper way of life. Jesus is calling for us to have respect for the life of another, to recognize others as the creation of God. It's God's will not only that we don't kill each other, but it's also God's will that there not be any hostility between people.

At first glance, this teaching about anger just seems impossible. Don't be angry? Jesus is asking for something we can't do? We think that this is grossly unfair - or else Jesus doesn't really mean exactly this. Besides, isn't being a Christian supposed to make life easy, not harder? The irony is, that more we do the hard work of controlling our anger, the easier life becomes. So often we say, that situation or that person makes me so angry. That **makes** me angry. By the very way we express our anger, we claim that it is out of our control, that

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 55

something or someone has forced us into the condition of anger. It is **their fault**, not **our responsibility**. Yet, here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us that anger is wrong and that angry outbursts are punishable. How can we deal with such a difficult teaching?

First, we need to realize that ultimately, there is very little that anyone else can make you do or feel. You have more control, if you choose to use it, over your own actions and feelings, than anyone else. That doesn't mean that isn't very difficult at some times.

Second, notice that Jesus immediately begins talking about what we do with our anger. He talks about throwing verbal insults around and calling people names like "fool." When we start tossing verbal grenades at each other, our intent is to injure – and we always succeed. Usually we injure the person that we've insulted. We may have succeeded in hurting their feelings, damaging their self-image, and diminishing their view of themselves as a loved child of God. We may have pushed them into anger. And the relationship can degenerate from love to grudging respect to mere tolerance to disrespect to dislike to anger and hate – as the insults are tossed back and forth and become ever more pointed and injurious. What began as disagreement can escalate to violence, to murder, and to war. You don't have to watch very many news analysis programs, or listen to very much talk radio to see and hear this process of escalating insults and anger. Anger destroys relationships – like murder destroys life.

But even before the insult is hurled at someone else, injury has already taken place. We've already begun to injure ourselves. We've already begun to close our minds, we've already begun to diminish love and increase anger in our heart, our blood pressure is increasing, our stomach has begun to tighten and churn – the internal mental and physical festering and infection has started. And Jesus teaches us not only that it is sinful to harbor anger, but also how to move away from anger. He doesn't just say "Thou shalt not be angry," but also shows us the path away from anger. Despite all of the rejection, despite all of the people who ignored Jesus, despite all of the anger and insults hurled at him, despite false accusations and torture, Jesus never zapped anyone.

Jesus tells us to actively seek out reconciliation. He says, "Wouldn't you rather settle out of court by finding some mutually agreeable solution, than by having some judgment imposed on you? And Jesus gives an interesting example about making an offering in the temple and seeking reconciliation. He uses a bit of exaggeration here to drive a few points home. It wouldn't do to literally leave a goat in the temple while you left for a few hours to go find someone and sit down with them and try to reconcile your differences. The goat would get bored or hungry and chew on things that shouldn't be chewed on, or desecrate the temple in some other goat fashion. But Jesus is making three things clear.

One, reconciliation is more important than worship. Jesus knew about all of the rules regarding temple worship. He knew what sacrifices were specified for what offences and what was to be offered on which occasions. But it was more important to seek reconciliation with a fellow human being, than it was to follow the rules about sacrifice to God. In fact, we can interpret this teaching to mean that we can't get right with God if we aren't trying to get right with each other. "Before you open your mouth to sing 'Peace Like a River,' do what you humanly can to make peace with those around you."²

Two, notice that Jesus doesn't limit this to the person who has offended someone else. Jesus says, if you know that someone has something against you, go and reconcile. Whether you are the person who has said the angry words or the person who has received them, whether you are the one who has hurt or the one who has been hurt, whether you are offensive or offended, go seek reconciliation. None of this attitude of, "She hurt me so it's up to her to apologize." The person who is aware of the broken relationship is responsible for initiating restoration. Make the first move! The goal is to restore relationships by reconciliation.

Three, the acceptance of our gift to God, is dependent on our reconciliation with our neighbors. Make your offering after you have reconciled. Can you imagine how this teaching about sacrifices in the temple would be told today? Can you picture how the worship service moves toward the moment when we give our offerings? Suddenly chaos breaks out. This person and that begin to move across the sanctuary to be reconciled with estranged fellow members. Who is right or wrong seems beside the point. The issue is the disrupted relationship, and the concrete move toward healing. Think of the peace that would fill this community, and the peace that would fill your heart.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 57

The next topic that Jesus addresses is adultery. Early in the week I begin to work on putting the worship service together. Once the scripture passage is selected, the search begins for other elements of worship that will address the same themes. As hard as one looks, there aren't any hymns in the hymnal about adultery. Country-western music would have certainly offered a lot of songs on the topic, but sometimes it's difficult to be sure if the song writer was for or against.

In this teaching, Jesus chooses to emphasize a specific part of the law. Yes, the seventh commandment is against adultery. The tenth commandment prohibits coveting. Coveting can be a matter of greed, wanting a neighbor's spouse because they make a lot of money. But when we speak of coveting someone else's spouse, it can also be because of lust. Just as anger can evolve into murder, so it is that lust can lead to adultery. The thought is the father of the deed. Our first reaction to this passage might be to say that it's impossible to control what pops into your mind. But it is possible to control what you dwell on.

It's become difficult for us to picture the context of first century Palestine. While women aren't treated as complete equals in our society today, we have a hard time imagining just how restricted their place was in society back then. A woman was essentially her father's property, until she became her husband's property. Since men were so dominant, it was so much easier to cast women as beguiling tempters, than it was to take any responsibility for one's own lust. In other words, it's her fault – she made me do it. We still see evidence of that today in the way that rape victims are sometimes treated. And we arrest prostitutes but not their clients.

However, in the ministry of Jesus, and in the early church, women were not avoided as seductresses, but welcomed as sisters. Luke tells us there were women who traveled with Jesus and the disciples and gave financial support to the ministry. In the book of Acts, the writer recounts how Priscilla was an important teacher, and a new congregation was formed with Lydia's help. The apostle Paul heaps praise and recognition on several women. This new relationship with women required new self-discipline of men. Notice how this reduces male power and changes the interaction between the sexes. Jesus mentions the seventh commandment, and immediately moves deeper to teach about the man who treats a woman as a sexual object.

Another aspect of this teaching is that while fidelity nourishes and supports love and trust, adultery diminishes love and trust. It not only eats away at the relationship of spouses, but of the whole community. Because lying and deception are involved, friends and acquaintances begin to wonder about how much to believe and how much to trust someone who practices deception. You begin to wonder, if they are capable of lusting after someone else who is married, would your own marriage deter them? And so, the shalom of the community begins to unravel.

Once again, Jesus uses exaggeration for emphasis. You don't want to lose an arm or an eye, do you? Well, don't lose your head over someone else's spouse, either. Finding God's realm is so valuable, living in the shalom of the kingdom now is so precious, it is such a treasure, that we mustn't let anything interfere with it. In *The Message* Eugene Peterson translates this passage as, "Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump." It's actually a pretty exact translation. Many translations read hell instead of dump. The Greek word here is Gehenna – the valley of the sons of Hinnon, a ravine on the south side of Jerusalem. It had been used for human sacrifices back in the early days of Israel, and in the time of Jesus, for burning garbage.

In both of today's teachings, Jesus emphasizes that what we do is important. Because that is so, our emotions and motivations must be under control. We may not be able to control what emotion pops into our head, but we can control what we dwell on, whether or not we obsess about something, and therefore, whether we emotionally decay until our behavior becomes destructive. Jesus tells us that if we maintain peace in our heart, peace in our life will follow. Amen.

Originally, adultery was defined as an illicit relationship with a married woman, violating the rights of the husband.

^{NRS} **Exodus 20:17** You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. house = everything man owns, and wife is the first thing listed. Covet in Hebrew implies planning to obtain.

^{NRS} **Micah 2:1** Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. ² They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance.