

Understanding Anger
Matthew 5:21-26
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- I. The Person of the Christ (1:1-7:29)
 - A. The Incarnation of Christ (1:1-2:23)
 - B. The Preparation of Christ (3:1-4:11)
 - C. The Beginning of Christ's Ministry (4:12-25)
 - D. The Beginning of Christ's Teaching (5:1-7:29)

Matthew 5:21 begins a series of six specific examples that contrast the traditional teaching by the scribes and Pharisees with the teaching of Jesus. Each of the six examples follow the same pattern:

- 1. Traditionally understood teaching (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43)
- 2. Jesus teaching - "but I say to you" (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)
- 3. Application of Jesus teaching (5:23-26, 29-30, 34-37, 39-42, 45-48)

Not only are there six sections in the remainder of chapter 5 that follow this same pattern but the first three sections form a set and the second three sections form a set. 5:21-32 is the first unit and 5:33-48 is the second unit. This can be observed by the repetitive phrasing of the beginning of each of the two sets that include the same "you have heard that the ancients were told" (5:21 and 5:33). These units build toward a more and more developed understanding of what it means to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The traditional teaching (5:21)

The statement "you have heard that the ancients were told" was a common expression used by rabbis of Jesus' day to refer to the teachings of the Old Testament. Jesus quotes the sixth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) "you shall not commit murder."

This commandment to not murder is equally non-controversial 2,000 years ago as it is today. The King James Version's "Thou shalt not kill" is unwarranted since killing capital punishment is directed under the Law. The difference between murder and killing, is that killing is the taking of any life whereas murder is limited to the intentional taking of an innocent life. It is against the will of God to choose to kill an innocent person.

Jesus adds the second statement to the sixth commandment by saying “whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.” This is not a direct quotation of the Old Testament but is rather an allusion to certain passages that convey this concept:

“He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.” (Exodus 21:12).

“If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses. So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them and they will declare to you the verdict in the case. You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the Lord chooses; and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you. According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left. The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the Lord your God, nor to the judge, that man shall die; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel. Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again.”
(Deuteronomy 17:8-13).

Based upon these passages the religious leaders established courts to adjudicate crimes. This court is the civil court of Israel. This second quotation is likely the teaching of the religious leaders in their application of the Old Testament. This teaching is then not inconsistent with the Old Testament but it does not address more than the external act of murder. Thus the issue was the failure to teach beyond externals.

The teaching of Jesus (5:22)

Jesus' teaching is not just contrasted with the sixth commandment but the package of the sixth commandment with this statement of application of the Law. By saying “but I say to you” is a bold, strong statement against the religious leaders of the day. It not only introduces the correction of their false understanding but it expresses an authority that surprises the crowds (7:29).

As will be the case with the following examples of religious teaching that Jesus corrects, here He moves from the outward manifestation to the internal problem, the external sin of murder to the internal sin of anger. Like people today, the scribes and Pharisees only concerned themselves with these external behaviors. Refraining from murder does not make one righteous in the sight of God.

Jesus' words are consistent with the Old Testament as it echos the teaching of Leviticus 19:17-18, which addresses the internal sin of hatred:

"You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."

Jesus' focus on the internal issue of anger as the root of murder is the contrast with the traditional teaching. The sin of anger is unequivocal. There is no nuance given between supposed righteous anger and unrighteous anger. Anger is referred to as sinful in the New Testament.

"Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice." (Ephesians 4:31).

"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (Galatians 5:19-21)

"This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God." (James 1:19-20).

There are Bible verses that describe God's righteous anger (Exodus 4:14; Mark 3:5) but only God has a rightful place for anger. The one verse that has been used as a proof-text for righteous anger is Ephesians 4:26 ("be angry and do not sin") but this verse does not speak of our anger toward other people but rather our anger toward our own sin only.

The context of Ephesians 4:26 is putting off our sin and putting on our righteousness. In Ephesians 4:26 we are *commanded* to be angry. How can we possibly be commanded to be angry when it is sinful? The only way that we must be angry is in regard to our emotional attitude about our sin. This attitude must never cease ("do not let the sun go down on your anger"). This also explains why the context of Ephesians 4:31 tells us to put aside anger. It is the anger of man against people that is categorically sinful since we have no right regardless of what has been done to us. Our responsibility is forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-35).

Jesus speaks about the guilt of anger with his brother. The term “brother” was used by Jesus in Matthew to refer to those of the community of the disciples (cf. Matthew 5:47; Matthew 18:15). This is not necessarily a statement regarding one’s eternal destiny but rather of their participation in the community of faith (cf. Matthew 18:17). However, this does not mean that we are free to be angry with those outside the faith since we are to love our enemies as well (Matthew 5:44).

There are three examples given by Jesus of ways that result in the judgment of God. The first is the internal attitude of anger and the punishment is guilty before the court. The second is calling someone a “good-for-nothing” (“insults” in the ESV) is guilty before the highest court (Sanhedrin in Greek). The third is calling someone “you fool” and is guilty enough to be sent to the fiery hell (Gehenna in Greek, referring to a valley south of Jerusalem where refuse would be burned). There is an increasing nature of the punishments that correspond to the increase in manifestations of sinfulness.

All three examples bring guilt and even the internal sin of anger makes us guilty before the court as does murder in 5:21. Yet while all of these sins render a person guilty, the actual punishment is absolved through faith in Jesus Christ. This is not a reference to condemnation but of guiltiness.

In Matthew 23:17, we find Jesus calling the Pharisees “fools.” Yet we read of Paul calling the Galatians “fools” (Galatians 3:1-3). There is no doubt that foolish people exist (cf. Romans 1:21-22, 31). This teaching by Jesus in Matthew 5:22 does not mean that there are no foolish people, nor does it mean that we must not recognize foolishness when we see it. Paul often uses the term “fool” in various contexts. We should not pretend that foolishness does not exist or worse, to consider foolishness on the part of others to be wisdom.

At issue isn’t the concept of foolishness but rather the use of degrading pejorative terms such as “you fool.” We cannot exempt ourselves by simply avoiding one term while insulting our brothers with other terms. The point at hand is our attitude toward others. When we are angry with another, we are not seeking their best interest but our own (contra Philippians 2:3-4). When we insult another person we do not serve them but sin against them. This teaching must be understood at the root and not limited to superficial levels.

“To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.” (1 Peter 3:9).

The application of Jesus' teaching (5:23-26)

There are two practical illustrations that are given to apply the teaching of Jesus. The first involves temple worship (5:23-24) and the second involves legal action (5:25-26). Surprisingly, both cases do not deal with anger on the part of the hearer of this teaching but how to respond to anger caused by the hearer of this teaching. The reason for this follows the pattern of this chapter, which elevates moral responsibility to the level of "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

It is one thing to not murder but an entirely different challenge for mankind to not become angry. Likewise, it is even more challenging to respond rightly when your brother has something against you. Jesus elevated the importance of seeking reconciliation beyond just controlling one's own actions, speech and attitudes.

This first illustration regards personal reconciliation as more urgent than sacrificial offerings in the temple. This begins to build the ethic of treating people the same way that you want them to treat you (Matthew 7:12) and loving your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39). This type of love fulfills the Law (Romans 13:8; Galatians 5:14), including the sacrificial system of laws.

The difficulty of perfectly fulfilling this teaching is that it involves the response of someone else. The illustration assumes that you are aware that someone has something against you but it does not address the legitimacy of the other person's perspective. Implied is that the other person's perspective may not be legitimate since the instruction is for the reconciliation of the relationship, not repentance on the part of the hearer of Jesus. We must seek reconciliation even when the other person's perspective is flawed. How to approach this reconciliation is left undefined.

Further complicating the teaching is the possibility that reconciliation is not achievable since the other person may not be willing to be reconciled. Romans 12:18 speaks to this potential, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." We must seek peace in all relationships at all times.

Therefore, also implied in Matthew 5:23-24, is that the brother is likewise obligated toward reconciliation and even forgiveness if necessary. Indeed, divine forgiveness is linked to human forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:14-15).

The second illustrative circumstance is of a legal nature. This example is beyond the community of faith. This points to our responsibility to all men. If we do not resolve issues successfully, there will be resulting consequences.

The second example emphasizes the speed at which reconciliation should occur. The reason given to “make friends quickly with your opponent” is so that “your opponent may not hand you over to the judge.” While it may seem as if there is a just claim that leads to imprisonment, we must keep in mind the corrupt nature of the Romans justice system. The possibility exists that, like the brother in the first example, there is no actual basis for the judgment.

This potential for false accusations heightens the need to resolve issues rapidly. If things fester, it may become impossible to undo. Certainly if we have wronged a person, we must make things right but this extends to any opponent regardless of the situation. We may suffer unnecessarily if we fail to extend our friendship so as to defuse the conflict. Unless we resolve matters outside of the court system, we may suffer from the judicial system.

The illustration of what may happen when opponents are not addressed successfully is the duration of imprisonment will not allow for leniency. Matthew 5:26 assumes this opposition is over a financial matter and the debt must be repaid before freedom is granted. This serves as a strong warning to eliminate conflict quickly.

Many have viewed Matthew 5:25-26 in a metaphorical sense to resolve the wrath of God quickly lest punishment occurs. However, the context is the misunderstanding of the seriousness of anger and what it may bring. There is no indication that this illustration is any more than addressing conflict between people. Verses 25-26 simply address the same problem as 23-24, another party who is offended.

This concept of seeking reconciliation with people, even in cases where their perspective on the matter may not be accurate, is a precursor to the even stronger teaching of Matthew 5:38-48. Later in this chapter, the hearers will be exhorted to love their enemies. This goes beyond settling matters so that we will be able to peacefully go about with our lives. The building toward being perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect is only beginning.

Conclusion

The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God. There is no place for lingering anger against another. We have only the responsibility to forgive (Ephesians 4:32). It is impossible to angrily forgive someone. If we are not forgiving, our heavenly Father will not forgive us (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiveness describes a Christian, not angry indignation.

If we turn from the internal sinful condition of anger, we will not speak in insulting terms that come from our wrong attitude of anger. Our words will edify with grace according to the need of the moment rather than unwholesome words that create conflict (cf. Ephesians 4:29). This speech comes from the proper attitude before God.

With right thinking about anger and the resulting wholesome words, Christians will be peacemakers, living at peace with one another (Matthew 5:9; Mark 9:50). This must be pursued vigorously. The practice of unrighteous judgment, lack of forgiveness, selfish ambition, self-willed desires bring conflict, not peace.

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.” (James 3:13-18).

Our responsibility to bring peace is rooted in the recognition that God is the God of peace (Romans 15:33) who has brought peace with God to us through the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). When we truly understand that we have been delivered from condemnation to peace by God, we will by faith pursue peace with others in the power of the Holy Spirit.