

***Anger Kills***  
***Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount***  
***Matt. 5:21-26***  
***June 28, 2009***

What makes you angry? For some of you, something or someone – maybe several something’s or someone’s – immediately comes to mind. For others, maybe you think, “I hardly ever get really angry.” Some of you have what we call a “short fuse” and others, a long one. Sometimes our anger could be called “righteous” anger: anger at injustice like racism, anger at the wrongs inflicted on innocents like helpless children, anger at the effects of poverty and disease. But much of our anger is not “righteous” – it is, rather, *self*-righteous. We get angry when things don’t turn out the way we want. We get mad when people don’t do what we want. We get angry when somebody cuts us off in traffic. We all get angry from time to time, in varying degrees. But as far as I know, anyway, none of you has ever been so angry that it led you to commit murder. You’d agree, would you not? that anger and murder do not belong in the same category. Yet Jesus puts these two together in this next section of the Sermon on the Mount.

Last week as we listened to Jesus teaching on the hillside, we heard Him insist that the Scriptures – the Law and the Prophets – are still fully valid. We heard Jesus point out that He isn’t throwing out the Law and replacing it with a new teaching, a different standard for righteousness. Rather, He is going to the heart of the Law to show how children of the Kingdom live out its deepest meaning. Jesus said that the heart of the Law given by God leads to a new and better kind of righteousness than what the Pharisees pursued. But this “better righteousness” Jesus calls for is a rightness of heart, mind, and attitude, not merely a rightness of action.

It’s not enough to merely do the *right* things, or *not do* the *wrong* things – it’s not enough to keep only the *letter* of the law. What really counts in God’s eyes is that we do the *right* things for the *right* reasons motivated by a heart that is in right relationship with God and with others. The righteousness Jesus calls for is simply this: “The state of him who is as he ought to be: in right relationship with God and with others.” It’s really all about relationships. And so Jesus now proceeds to give six examples of practical righteousness.

It’s as if Jesus is saying: “Okay, that’s the basic theory, now let’s get practical, let’s get real. Here are some real life examples of the kind of righteousness that I’m talking about.” And Jesus uses this pattern: “You have heard that it was said...But *I* tell you...” Jesus is not doing away with what they have been taught, but He is deepening it, fulfilling it, filling it full of its true meaning. In fact, *every time* Jesus refers to any teaching from what we now know as the Old Testament – *every time* – He raises the bar on what it means to keep the Law, on obedience, on righteousness, He *never* lowers it.

He begins with the sixth commandment, the No Murder rule. Matt. 5:21-22a. Now, as I said, as far as I know, none of you have ever murdered anybody. But Jesus says, if you have ever been angry with someone, you are liable to the same judgment as if you had murdered them. Look around. I suspect that you are now sitting around a bunch of murderers. Is Jesus exaggerating when He seems to equate murder and anger? He goes on to talk about calling someone names. Matt. 5:22b. “Raca” means something like, “You idiot.” And the meaning of “You fool,” is

much more contemptuous than it sounds to us. It's closer to something you might call the driver who just cut you off in traffic. It involves words than really should not be spoken in church – or anywhere else, for that matter.

In fact, Jesus seems to suggest that insulting one's brother is even more serious than being angry, now you're answerable to the Sanhedrin, the high court of the Jews, or even in danger of hell fire. You see, anger can be checked but the angry word once spoken cannot be taken back. To curse someone is just like saying, "I wish you were dead." Cursing and contempt, words spoken with the intention to stab and wound, all these are as bad as murder, Jesus says. Because they are like a knife in the soul. Because they damage and destroy relationships. They wound and devastate the spirit of the one at whom they are directed. When we speak badly about someone else to another person, we call it "character assassination." Because it has the potential to kill the reputation of the one you speak about.

According to the US Dept. of Justice, in 2005 there were approximately 16,700 homicides in the U.S. How many of them do you think involved anger? Most, I would guess. How many more 'homicides of the soul or spirit' do you think were committed? How many characters were assassinated? Jesus says that not only is the *act* of murder contrary to the Law – not only is the *act* of murder sin – but the thoughts and feelings that could lead to murder are also sin. The thoughts and feelings that make us angry, that result in insults, bitterness, and rage are sin.

So watch out for what goes on in your mind. Because what you think about will eventually come out in your life. What you think about you will eventually act upon. At the heart of God's command: *Thou shalt not kill* – is respect for the life of another, reverence for another as a precious creation of God Himself. It's not just that we should *not* kill one another that Jesus is teaching, it's that we are to have no hostility between us either. Does that sound impossible? Does it sound like Jesus is commanding perfection in an imperfect world?

That's why He goes on to give two concrete illustrations of what we should do when we find ourselves estranged due to hostility, anger, bitterness, and unforgiveness. It's not just *not* doing something negative: not expressing your anger or speaking contemptuous words or cursing somebody out. Jesus commands us to do something *positive* instead. Vv. 23-24. The command not to kill means we should take positive steps to put ourselves right with people. And Jesus says that seeking reconciliation is more important than fulfilling religious obligations.

Have you ever come to church on Sunday and sat in the pew seething at the argument you had with your spouse the night before or even that morning on the way to church? Have you ever approached the communion table while in your heart you were holding a grudge against someone, nursing bitterness over some wrong that had been done to you? Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "If *you* have something against somebody else." He says, "If *they* have something against you." Jesus doesn't mention what the *other* person ought to do. He says *you* go. You go to them and make it right before approaching the altar with your offering. He says if someone else is suing you, *you go to them* and seek to make it right.

Now, this passage is not teaching us that it is never right to sue anybody. Jesus is not saying that you should literally walk out of here right now and go make it up with somebody and then come

back to church. Now, that's a great idea, but by the time you got back, we'd be gone. But I think we all get His point. Being reconciled must come before fulfilling sacrificial obligations.

You cannot get things right between you and God if things are not right between you and others. Wow, that's a biggie. Many of you may feel like God is distant, not hearing your prayers. Some of you are having a hard time feeling God's love for you. You might want to take an inventory of your relationships with others and see if anger, bitterness, or unforgiveness are getting the way of your relationship with God.

Some of you know you have a problem with anger. Some of you know or maybe even live with someone *else* who has a problem with anger. So, as Jesus was pretty concrete about what to do about anger, let me suggest four steps<sup>1</sup> to curing our anger problems:

The first is simply this: Admit it. Admit you struggle with anger. Many times we stubbornly refuse to acknowledge it or worse, make excuses for it, even justify it. If you have a problem with anger, be careful not to just write it off saying, "I can't help it. It's just the way I am." Following Jesus means more than just believing the right things. Following Jesus is supposed to result in a changed life.

So step one is to admit your anger. Step 2 is to do what you can to correct it. Apologize to those you have wronged and make restitution, if necessary and possible. And while you're at it, apologize to God. Confess the sin of your anger, your bitterness, the devastation caused by harsh words spoken in contempt for another. To live a changed life requires a change of direction: That's what repentance is. It is a change of mind and heart. It is literally to turn around and go in a different direction.

Do what you can to correct your anger, and thirdly, do what you must do immediately. Matt. 5:25-26. Here's another key passage about anger that I encourage you all to highlight, underline, and maybe even memorize: Eph. 4:26-27.

Finally, Ask God to change your heart, because only He can. When we are hurt or wronged or don't get what we want, our tendency is to get angry and strike back at the one who has hurt us or stopped us. But God says those who live in His Kingdom are to be different. So we need to ask God to change our bitter hearts so that we don't even *want* to strike back.

Today we ordain and install elders and deacons to new terms of service. There are many decisions these leaders will make over these next few years and some may be difficult, even contentious. I have found over the years that not everybody always agrees on everything. Our elders may have disagreements with one another. In fact, I'd put money on it, if I were a gambling kind of gal. They may even become angry with one another, even possibly hold one another in contempt. Sadly, that happens sometimes.

And so I say to those of you who are privileged to sit in positions of leadership here: You may – probably will – disagree with decisions that are made or the ways we decide to do things. And you may get angry or even feel contempt for those who do not see things as you do. If you do,

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from *The Sermon on the Mount*, James Montgomery Boice.

and if you allow those feelings to fester, even nursing and feeding them by gossiping about them with others, it will be very destructive, not only for your relationship with the person but for your leadership and our church.

Anger, bitterness, unforgiveness, grudges, are all very destructive if we let them play out. This is what Jesus was talking about here. I've used this example before, but I think it bears repeating: Holding onto bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness is like taking poison hoping your enemy will die. It doesn't work that way, does it? Holding onto anger, bitterness, and resentment doesn't cause the death of the one you resent, but your own death: spiritually, emotionally, even sometimes physically. Perhaps this is what Jesus meant when He equated anger and contempt with murder. Sometimes *you* are the one who dies.

Jesus famously once said that the greatest commandment in the Law was not just one commandment, but two: Love God and love people. In naming these two, Jesus was quoting from "the Law" – the first five books of our Bible, the Torah. "Love the Lord your God with all..." is from the book of Deuteronomy. And "Love your neighbor as yourself" is from Leviticus. It's actually the second half of a verse in Leviticus 19. To be honest, until this week, I'm not sure I ever really paid attention to what the *first* half of that verse is:

Lev. 19:18: God says: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." The antidote to the deadly poison of anger, bitterness, rage, and resentment is love. Just after his words about not letting the sun go down on your anger, Paul writes this: Eph. 4:31-5:2.

Okay, brutal honesty time. Think for a minute of all the many sins for which God has forgiven you. Because God has forgiven you so much, the one with whom you are so angry – go ahead, picture them – the one against whom you rage or toward whom you feel such bitterness or resentment, he or she is one you *must* forgive. In this way, in this offering of forgiveness, we imitate God, who showed us the way to love and forgiveness by giving Himself for us. And so we too, are commanded live lives of love and forgiveness and self-sacrifice.

Against whom are you harboring anger and resentment today? With whom do you need to be reconciled today? You have heard that it was said, "Do not murder." My friends, anger kills. But love and forgiveness give life.

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love..."