

Anger: The Spirit of Murder (Matt 5.21-26)

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' most comprehensive teaching on what it looks like for a believer to actively participate with God's grace to build firm and steady foundations in this life. This teaching portrays a life that is lived in partnership with the grace of God that is centered around the things that God defines as valuable.
- B. The Sermon begins with the eight beatitudes, which are Jesus' most succinct portrait of the value system of his kingdom (5.3-12). The presence and growth of these values in our lives are the substance of our discipleship (5.13-16) and are the measure of true and lasting greatness in God's kingdom (5.17-20).
- C. Matthew 5.21 begins a new section in the Sermon. After laying out the eight virtues and their importance, Jesus now highlights six particular sins that must be *actively resisted* in our pursuit of cultivating and pursuing wholehearted obedience to Jesus.
- D. Each of these six examples are like strongholds in the human heart that stand in the way of the fruits of righteousness being fully matured in our lives.
- E. These are each introduced by Jesus highlighting what his hearers would have often heard said ("it is said...") either through the Old Testament or the teaching of the rabbis. He then demonstrates the true spirit of the law ("but I say to you...") and invites his disciples to practice walking in the *opposite spirit* from these inner dispositions.
- F. It is important to understand that Jesus is not presenting this as a new, or deeper, law. If he was doing so, he would have exhorted his followers to resist the sin itself or be on guard to not fall prey to its power. Rather, Jesus gives particular *applications* or *practices* to break the cycle of these sins (and their effects) in our hearts and in the lives of others.
- G. Each of these realities could be said to be like a poison (either in our hearts or in relationship around us), and the applications that Jesus gives are meant to resist and remove the poison and its effects *primarily* in our hearts.

II. A GREATER RIGHTEOUSNESS AND WHOLENESS

- A. To best understand the meaning of these six statements, we have to understand both what has just come before in Jesus' teaching (5.17-20) and the statement that Jesus uses to close this section (5.48).
- B. In the previous section (5.17-20), Jesus had declared that he did not come to do away with any part of the Old Testament purposes of God (the Law and the Prophets). Rather, he came to *fulfill* the purposes of God in relation to all that had come before.
- C. What this means is that Jesus declares that in his life and ministry he is bringing all of God's dealings with humanity to their full purpose. He is now the hinge upon which the promises, the plans, and the revelation of God swings.
- D. He did not come to do away with any of those purposes, but rather to bring them to their fullest intent and their absolute completion. In the ministry of Jesus, God is bringing to fulfillment what the Old Testament Scriptures always pointed to and were always seeking to accomplish.

- E. What God has always been about accomplishing is bringing humans back into right relationship with him in order that they might live in accordance with their created reality. The goal of all his dealings is to bring people back into covenant relationship with him and *thereby* experience the “blessed” (whole, satisfied, complete life). **The Westminster Catechism: *Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever!***
- F. The result of Jesus’ work would be a ***greater righteousness*** than was expressed and sought after by the Scribes and Pharisees. This greater righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ apart from external obedience to the law and unites a believer to Christ. This now empowers them to walk in greater measures of communion with him and greater measures of conformity to his will.

¹⁶For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... ¹⁷For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Rom 1.16-17)

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8.1-4)

- G. The result of this work is that Jesus’ disciples are invited into participating in his life *in part* now through faith. The redeemed are brought into union with him and given the grace to walk in his ways — even though this will remain weak and incomplete through this life.
- H. This section culminates with Jesus’ exhortation for his disciples to “be perfect” as the Father in heaven is perfect.

⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt 5.48)

- I. Far from being a demand to walk in moral perfection (an unfortunate result of the English use of the word ‘perfect’ in translation),¹ Jesus is inviting his followers to walk in the way that will lead to “wholeness”. This has far reaching implications for how we understand these six statements:
1. ***Sin is not neutral.*** The reality of sin in the hearts of humans is like a poison. Sin is not to be taken lightly, and the presence of sin in our lives requires zealous, radical, and even violent (spiritually) actions to resist its presence.
 2. ***The commandments of God are meant to maximize joy.*** To understand Jesus’ teaching as being ordered toward the “blessed” and “whole” life shows us that his commandments are not intended to keep us from joy. Rather, they are specifically designed to maximize our joy. To live outside of the commandments of God (his design) is to be less than human. To live in accordance with what we were designed for is to be truly and fully alive. Ultimate blessedness (joy, satisfaction, etc.) is eternal conformity to God’s image in order that we might participate in immediate and unbroken communion with the Triune God (who is “blessed” and “whole” and “satisfied”).
 3. ***Pursuing wholehearted obedience in these areas reinforces and cultivates the eight beatitudes.*** When we see the presence of these sins in our hearts and seek to live in accordance with God’s ways, we are quickly brought to the place of our own poverty of spirit (recognizing our inability to walk in obedience in our own strength). These pursuits remove the hindrances to the growth of the beatitudes (like weeds in a garden) and bring us face to face with our need for God’s grace to grow in holiness.

¹ The Greek word *teleios* (here translated ‘perfect’) does not carry the idea of moral perfection, but of “wholeness”, “devotion”, or “orderliness”.

III. THE SPIRIT OF MURDER: ANGER

- A. The first of the six temptations that Jesus identifies as poison to our hearts is the spirit of escalating anger. Jesus demonstrates that the Old Testament law had commanded against murder, but the desire and the intention of God's heart was always that the hearts of his people not succumb to the cycles of increasing anger and bitterness toward one another.
- B. There are many stages to anger. We must have an active resistance to the presence of anger in our lives in every form (angry emotions, manipulation, contempt, certain types of sarcasm, resentment, vindication, etc.) because it can become like a cancer that grows within us and brings much defilement.

¹⁵See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. (Heb 12.15)

- C. Nursing bitterness toward others must be seen as dangerous and destructive. To succumb to patterns of unrighteousness anger in our thoughts and actions will have devastating effects over time.

¹⁵Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer (1 John 3.15)

- D. From the earliest points in the Old Testament, there was a clear relationship between anger and murder. In the story of Cain and Abel, we see that anger opens a door for greater darkness and demonic activity. Satan himself is described as a "murderer" from the beginning (John 8.44).

³In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord and offering of the fruit of the ground, ⁴and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it. ⁸Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. (Gen 4.3-9)

- E. Unchecked anger has an ability to fester and grow in our hearts. This brings destruction to our own souls (thinking, emotions, etc.) and to our relationships. Jesus is concerned to show us that the point of the commandment was never to *solely* outlaw the act of physical murder. Rather, he demonstrates that the internal realities of harboring and nursing contempt and disdain in our hearts toward others are evidence of dangerous realities in our soul.
- F. Anger often arises in us when people stand in the way of our own selfish desires. When we do not "get what we want" we have a tendency to react in a spirit of anger. James outlines the relationship between unfulfilled expectations and murder.

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. (Jas 4.1-2)

- G. Jesus here is describing the unrighteous expressions of anger in our lives. Because the commandments in the Scripture to be angry and not sin, we must believe there are righteous expressions and experiences of anger. However, the expression of God-like righteous anger must be seriously evaluated and assessed based on the Biblical portrayal of God's own anger (i.e., slow to anger, patient, delighting in mercy, etc.).

I. OVERCOMING ANGER

- A. Jesus outlines four truths related to anger that are important for us to understand in our war against it. Again, Jesus is inviting us to partner with his grace in breaking the cycle of anger and its poison in our hearts. Jesus desires that our hearts would be free before him.

- B. **Truth #1:** Anyone who operates in anger will be in danger of the judgment both in the courts of men and the court of God.

²²But 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 (Matt 5.22)

- C. **Truth #2:** Anyone who speaks or acts in anger is in danger because of the escalating nature of its consequences.

²²Whoever insults his brother... whoever says, "You fool!" (Matt 5.22)

1. Speaking/acting in anger allows for strongholds of anger to be built in us. It also wounds others, breaks relationships, and leads to hardening of the heart.
2. The tongue has the power to start fires in our own hearts and in the hearts of others. (Jas 3.5-12)
3. Sarcasm is one of the most subtle forms of speaking in anger (contempt) that is socially acceptable and permitted in our world. (cf. Prov 26.18-19)
4. Our emotions will follow our words and our thoughts.

- D. **Truth #3:** When we see anger in our lives we must act in the opposite spirit with *urgency*.

²³So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5.23-24)

1. Jesus connects this action to *speaking/acting in anger* of the prior verses (*therefore*). This practice is meant to be interpreted specifically in relation to wounding relationship by participating in anger.
2. Jesus commands us to leave our gift (i.e., act with unprecedented urgency) and go make peace with our brother.
3. This begins with confessing our anger and repenting for our words/behaviors that wounded the relationship.
4. This is important because anger opens a door for our adversary in our lives (cf. Gen 4.6-7).

- E. **Truth #4:** Without repentance, we will pay the full debt of our anger.

²⁵Come 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. ²⁶Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matt 5.25-26)

1. Anger brings us into bondage (emotional, relational, etc.), and without repentance, we will experience the full consequences of it.
2. Provision has been made for us in Christ Jesus, but we must repent of our anger. We do this before God and before others (to the extent that we spoke/acted in anger toward or about them).