

Jesus on the Law

PART 2: MURDER VS. ANGER • MATTHEW 5:21-26

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It is good to see all of you here this morning! As usual, I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as I/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then Clayton/Chris will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss today.

As we begin today, we want to make sure we clearly communicate God's plan of salvation. We know that we sinned; that's the bad news. The good news is, God anticipated this, and he sent his only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He lived a perfect life, he was crucified, he was buried, but he was also raised up on the third day. We respond to this good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with him in baptism, for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family, and the Christian life begins.

And once again, we have some good news this morning! This one comes to us from JJ Hendrix, a friend who preaches at the Northwest congregation in Fort Worth, Texas. JJ posted last Sunday, and he says, "The angels rejoice as Leslie Culverhouse put on Christ in baptism (Galatians 3:27) for the forgiveness of her sins (Acts 22:16)! God be praised for adding a new soul to the church (Acts 2:47)!" We are so happy for Leslie this morning! And we share this by way of encouragement: What Leslie did last Lord's Day morning, you can do today. Pull me aside after worship, give me or one of our other shepherds a call or text during the week, and we would be more than happy to study together.

If you were with us last Sunday, you might remember how we studied whether the Law of Moses is "obsolete." And for an authoritative ruling on that question, we went to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. And in Matthew 5:17-20, we learned that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill, we learned that as Scripture, the Law itself is permanent (in that it will always be with us), we learned that the Law must be kept and taught (obviously, interpreted properly in light of the New Covenant), and we also learned that Scripture must shape us (in that our righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees). And at the end of our study last week, I said that we would be moving forward over the next several weeks, as Jesus will go on to give several examples. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus will clarify and explain what he said in this passage.

He will make a series of statements, ***“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you.”*** And there has been much discussion about this through the years. Is Jesus dismissing Moses and bringing in something completely new? Or is there something else going on here? As we dig into this, I should probably point out that in time sequence, when we consult a Harmony of the Gospels (where Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are laid out chronologically, in columns), we find that Jesus has already had several run-ins with the scribes and Pharisees over the Sabbath. Several times, the religious leaders have condemned Jesus for “violating” the Sabbath. The original command, of course, was to ***“remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.”*** They were not to ***“work,”*** they were not to carry a ***“burden.”*** Over time, though, the people had added to God’s original Law with their own “clarifications,” with their own “enhancements” to the Law. What is ***“work”***? What is a ***“burden”***? They had to define these things. One oral tradition defined a ***“burden”*** as being a weight less than that of a dried fig, or enough wine to fill a goblet, enough milk for one swallow, and enough honey to put on a wound. To carry anything more than this was a ***“burden,”*** and would violate the Law (in their view). And they gave some examples of things that were too heavy to carry on the Sabbath, an artificial limb, a wig, a set of false teeth, and so on. So, I can carry a fig on the Sabbath, but if I try to carry my wooden leg, that is an abomination before the Lord! I have transgressed the commandment. Jesus, then, steps into this culture, and he starts healing people on the Sabbath. And when we read through the gospel accounts, it’s almost as if he does this on purpose, just to irritate these people. And even those who are healed get caught up in the drama. Jesus says to the man who cannot walk, ***“Pick up your pallet and walk!”*** And that sets these people off. In John 5:10, ***“So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, “It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet.”*** The pallet, of course, must have weighed more than a dried fig, so he gets in trouble. The man, then, throws Jesus under the bus, “He made me do it!” [paraphrased]. And so the tension is building. We have the scribes and the Pharisees with their made-up “enhancements” to the Law, and then we have Jesus, who honors the Law, but seems to be breaking it, because he is not honoring their traditions. And into this tension, Jesus speaks to perhaps thousands of people in the Sermon on the Mount, and six times he says, ***“You have heard that it was said...but I say to you,”*** and then he gives some examples.

As I see it, then, Jesus is not dismissing the Law of Moses here, but he is contrasting what these people have HEARD, with what God has always INTENDED. Jesus is clarifying (first of all), but at the same time, he is also introducing something new and better. He is in the process of introducing a ***“New Covenant,”*** a new agreement. And as he does this, he seems to take the commandment (which was usually enforced EXTERNALLY), and he INTERNALIZES each one of these. He applies each commandment to the HEART. Instead of an external ritual, instead of merely outward obedience, Jesus explains what is implied, what God really wants out of each of these. And what he’s doing here is explaining what it really means to live as one of his followers. This is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

So, with this as background, let’s start with the first example – the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:21-26,

21 “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer,

and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

As we learn from what Jesus says here, I want us to look at what Jesus says they had HEARD, I want us to pay special attention to what JESUS has to say, and then I want us to learn something from the TWO EXAMPLES he gives here.

I. We start, then, with what these people had HEARD about the Law.

“You have heard that the ancients were told,” Jesus says. And here at the beginning, I hope we notice that he does NOT say, “This is what you have READ.” And the reason is: Very few of these people had ever actually READ the Law of Moses for themselves. Back in those days, most people had to rely on what they had heard in the synagogue each week. The average Israelite didn’t have access to the written word of God. As we have often pointed out: If I had to pay somebody an average salary to make me a handwritten copy of the Bible, it would take about a year and would probably cost close to \$80,000 (an average salary here in Madison). How many Bibles would we have if one copy came to \$80,000? Perhaps we could pool our resources and get one copy for all of us to share, but we would probably keep it here in this building, but as a fragile treasure it would probably never leave. Instead, we would probably come here to hear it read to us. And this is what we find in the synagogues. The religious leaders (those who were highly educated and actually able to read), they would read the word and explain it. And sometimes they would need to translate from Hebrew into Aramaic or Greek. The problem is: The scribes and the Pharisees would often combine the word of God with their own explanations. Not only that, but instead of reading the actual Law, the teachers would often just read commentaries on the Law. So, they have this ever-growing collection of written and oral traditions, and we eventually end up only able to carry a fig on the Sabbath! The people had been separated from the word of God.

Jesus, then, emphasizes what the ancients were ***“told,” “You have heard that the ancients were told.”*** The first part of this is a direct quote from the Law, ***“You shall not commit murder.”*** They get this one right. The people are probably saying “Amen” to this one, “Yep, murder is bad!” And they can agree, because murder is pretty rare. Very few of us will ever go out and murder somebody. So, this is an accurate statement that all of us can agree to. This is what the word of God really says. The second part, though, isn’t actually found anywhere in scripture, ***“Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.”*** It sounds good, but God never said it! And notice the emphasis here: If you murder somebody, you’re gonna be in trouble! Whoever has been explaining this commandment isn’t looking at it from GOD’S point of view, but they are looking at it from a “you’ll-need-to-go-to-court” point of view. It’s probably an accurate statement. Yes, if you murder somebody, you will probably end up in court, but that is not the heart of the command. The Pharisees were thinking: As long as I can avoid getting convicted, I should be good to go before the Lord. I can hate the guy, I can slander his reputation, I can be full of rage against the man, but I need to stop just short of murder, so I don’t end up in court. But notice: This does not address the heart of the issue. I’m thinking of Proverbs 16:2, where Solomon says, ***“All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives.”*** Do we see the issue here? I can look at my actual behavior, and I can be proud of the fact that I’ve never murdered anybody. The Lord, though, weighs the motives. So sure, I’ve never murdered anybody, but there’s a chance I just haven’t had the opportunity; there’s a chance I just haven’t had the courage; there’s a chance that I would have murdered somebody only if I wasn’t scared of going to jail. These are different issues. But Jesus starts here, ***“You have heard that the ancients were told....”***

II. In verse 22, though, Jesus continues, **“BUT I SAY TO YOU...”**

And this is quite the contrast! On one hand, God says this, but this is what I have to say. This is a bold statement! Back in those days, religious leaders would speak almost like a term paper. They spoke with footnotes, we might say. They might quote from the Law, but then they would explain by citing what dozens of other famous rabbis had said down through the years. Jesus, though, speaks on his own, and he speaks with authority. This, by the way, is something the crowds noticed. If you skip down to the end of the Sermon on the Mount (in your hard copy of the Bible, fast forward to where the words in red stop), in Matthew 7:28-29, Matthew says, ***“When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”*** And this is what we see here: You have heard this, but this is what I say. And what he says is authoritative. He’s not speaking as a commentator or as some kind of expert, he’s not giving his opinion on the Law, but he is speaking as a lawgiver.

And as I said earlier, he goes beyond actions, and he speaks to motives. It’s not just murder that’ll get you in trouble with God, you can burn in hell, not just when God finds a body, but it’s anger, it’s calling people names. We seem to have three levels here, and he starts with ANGER. It’s the idea of murdering somebody in our heart. Jesus got angry from time to time, but his anger was justified. We think of Jesus violently driving the money changers out of the temple. That’s righteous anger. But Jesus never got angry when he was personally attacked. He never retaliated. The kind of anger Jesus condemns here is the unjustified hatred or disdain for another human being. In reality, the Law of Moses did address this. In Leviticus 19:17-18, God said, ***“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD”*** [ESV]. Some people had forgotten about this, but Jesus gives the reminder.

The next level here is calling somebody, ***“You good-for-nothing.”*** The translations are all over the place here. The word is RACA, an Aramaic word meaning “empty head.” We might refer to this as being the original “R-word,” “RACA.” I feel like I’m back in kindergarten, talking about calling someone an “empty head.” It’s also a little weird that we’re learning curse words in another language. But that’s what the word means. We are dehumanizing the other person. I don’t know whether I’ve ever really been tempted to call somebody “RACA” or “empty head.” “Idiot,” though? “Moron”? All. The. Time. In traffic? All the time. On my way over here about two weeks ago, I was on the Beltline around 5:20 in the morning on a Sunday morning, and I was passed by a black SUV with no muffler, and they might have been going twice as fast as I was. Certain words come to mind in a situation like that. And the danger is: In the privacy of my car, I think of myself as better than somebody who would do that. I am morally superior, and it’s easy to start looking at other drivers as being almost less than human. And things can very quickly and easily escalate. In traffic, to help me snap out of it, sometimes I will try to think of the other driver as being my son or daughter just learning to drive. And in that moment, I’m often able to calm down just a bit. All of us have “stupid-attacks,” from time to time. All of us do some “empty-headed” things from time to time, especially with driving. But the warning here is against calling somebody an “empty head.”

Several years ago, I ran across a website that provided a “Biblical Curse Generator.” They take random words, and phrases, and actual curses (primarily from the Old Testament), and they mix them up. There’s a “TAKE THAT” button, and every time you press it, it spits out a new combination:

- Thou shalt see your pomegranates wither, thou Amalekite dog!
- Harken, O ye bull of Bashan, for you will be smitten with all-over boils!

- Woe unto thee, O thou lying Gergashite, for you will be mocked by eunuchs!
- May you have more mothers-in-law than King Solomon, O thou babbling Assyrian!

And on and on. But the example Jesus uses here is much simpler. If we call somebody “empty-headed” or “stupid” (as we might say today), Jesus says we will be **“guilty before the supreme court.”**

He continues by warning against calling somebody a **“fool.”** And this is where we realize that JESUS calls people foolish from time to time! Later in this sermon, in fact, Jesus talks about the **“foolish man”** who builds his house on the sand. Psalms and Proverbs both describe fools as being those who don’t believe in God, and those who refuse to listen to instruction, and so on. Some people really are foolish. In Greek, the word is, in fact, “moron.” Sometimes people really do act in foolish or moronic ways. So, it seems as if the warning here is not just in the description, but is more against using this term in some kind of angry outburst. To call somebody a fool was to slander their reputation. And doing this in a fit of rage makes us **“guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”** The word **“hell”** here is a reference to Gehenna, a valley on the southwest side of Jerusalem that was basically used as a garbage dump. At one time it had been used for human sacrifice, but it was eventually used as a dump. And it was constantly on fire. They were always adding garbage to this burning pile. I think of the burn barrel at my grandparents’ house down in Tennessee. We didn’t have those in the Chicago suburbs, so I thought it was really cool to get to burn the trash in the 55-gallon drum out back. But that’s what Gehenna was, a burning garbage dump, and it’s used here as a picture of eternal torment. And what’ll get you sent there? There are no dead bodies, no fingerprints, no blood-splatter, no weapon, no DNA at the scene of the crime, but one word spoken in anger. Even in private. God looks at the heart.

Just a quick note before we move on: Jesus does not say that murder and anger and insults are the SAME, only that all are subject to judgment. And I say that, because different sins do have different consequences (at least here in this life). I would much rather be called an “idiot” as opposed to getting murdered. But the Lord’s point here is: The command to not murder is a bit more than not hitting my neighbor over the head with a rock. One commentator says, “It is possible for a person who has never been involved in so much as a fist fight to have more of a murderous spirit than a multiple killer. In the deepest feelings of their hearts, [they] have anger and hatred to such a degree that their true desire is for the hated person to be dead.” This is not okay. Anger is the seed of murder. As John says in 1 John 3:15, **“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”** Think of the Pharisees: They would never murder somebody themselves, but their hatred of Jesus caused them to outsource Jesus’ murder to the Romans. They looked good on the outside, but their hearts were evil. And this can be true of anybody. Most of us can fake it long enough to where most people see us as being decent human beings, but God looks at the heart. As one commentator has said, “The real issue with murder is that the act of murder comes from a homicidal heart.” So the question is: Have you murdered anybody lately? And if the answer is, “Not yet,” then how far along on that path are we right now. The warning is: Get off the path completely. Congrats on not murdering anybody lately, but let’s also be working on the anger and the insults. And if we get the anger and the insults under control, we will probably never commit murder, either. So, when somebody cuts us off in traffic, when somebody takes the last parking spot we’ve been waiting for, when the truck rental place loses our reservation, when somebody tracks mud on my freshly mopped floor, let’s pay special attention to how we respond, not just outwardly (my not murdering the person), but in the heart (with what we think and with what we say).

III. All of this leads us to what is basically the SO WHAT? section. This is where Jesus comes to the “THEREFORE.” This is what this new teaching really means. And we learn that when it comes to murder, and anger, and insults, we do have a choice as to how we react.

A. And we notice how Jesus gives two examples, starting with the “ALTAR.”

And I hope we notice how being reconciled is even more important than worship in this illustration. As we are on our way to worship, if we remember that somebody has something against us, we are to drop what we are doing, and we are to go and work it out before coming back to worship. The point is not that we are to avoid worship, the point is that we need to work it out! The word translated here as *“reconciled”* is only used here in the entire New Testament, but in secular Greek it was used to refer to two warring parties coming together to discuss how to establish peace. We don’t go looking for an apology, “Hey, I think you need to apologize to me today” (that rarely ends well), but we go looking for “reconciliation.”

Just a few observations here, starting with how reconciliation comes first, even before worship. Sometimes, if we aren’t getting along with somebody, we might think we need to pray about it first. And we understand the importance of prayer. However, no amount of worship can cover up some kind of conflict we are having. And so, instead of going to God, we might need to go to the other person to work it out. God will not miraculously fix something that we refuse to fix. In fact, there’s a chance God will refuse to hear our prayer. I’m thinking of that passage in 1 Peter 3:7, where we learn that husbands are to live with their wives *“in an understanding way,”* we are to *“show her honor...so that your prayers will not be hindered.”* We can’t be a jerk to our wives and then ask God to fix our marriage. I can’t give an extra \$10 at church to make up for being mean this week. That’s not how it works. Fix it first, and then go to God. God is concerned about relationships. He doesn’t say, “Pray harder,” or, “Sing louder,” or, “Bring a bigger sacrifice,” but he says, “Fix it!” [paraphrased].

But I also want us to notice an interesting twist in this passage: It’s not me going to somebody who has wronged me in some way, but in this case, it’s me going to somebody who thinks that I have done something wrong. In other words, if I have perhaps done something moron-worthy, if I have done something to cause somebody to want to murder me, if I have caused somebody to get angry with me to the point of calling me names, I need to go to them to work things out. This is pretty much the other side of what Jesus says in Matthew 18, that if somebody sins against us, we need to go to them in private, and then with witnesses, and then take it to the church if needed. This is the opposite of that. If somebody has a problem with me, I need to go to them to work things out. So, we have both directions covered, don’t we? In God’s kingdom, both sides have an obligation to reconcile, if possible. And here’s why: If I have caused someone to be angry enough at me to call me an empty-headed moron, I might be contributing to that person being cast into Gehenna, and no conflict is worth that. That other soul is too valuable. As Paul says in Romans 12:18, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people.”* It’s not always possible, but we do need to try. So, if anybody needs to leave right now to go work something out, go for it.

B. The other example Jesus gives here is the example of being taken to COURT. And with this, we see a slight shift from the PRIORITY of reconciliation to the URGENCY of reconciliation.

Jesus specifically says that this needs to happen *“quickly,”* and he uses the example of being taken to court. If it gets to the point where someone sues you, do everything possible to get things worked out before it makes it to court. Don’t let this thing fester. “Nip it in the bud,” we might say. And what Jesus says seems to go back to a Roman custom: If a bad debt makes it to the judge, at that point, it’s too late to settle, and whatever the judge

decides, that's it. And you might end up in prison until the debt was paid, which was probably for the rest of your life. And in that case: Nobody wins. The guy who sues never gets his money, the guy in prison never gets out, and the relationship is broken forever. Debtors, then, had an incentive to work things out. I almost think about getting in a fight with my sister. If we can work it out before it gets to mom and dad, that's great. But once it gets to mom and dad level, who knows what might happen, and it might not be good for either of us. And what is true in the family, is often true at work. It's better if two co-workers get things worked out before getting a supervisor involved. The same is true on a team or in a classroom. Let's take care of this ourselves before we go to the coach or the teacher. Jesus says: Work things out quickly before it gets to the judge. And in this case, God is the judge. I would much rather take care of conflict or a misunderstanding between us personally as opposed to God handling it on the Day of Judgment.

We think of Paul's encouragement in Ephesians 4:26-27, where he said, ***"BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity."*** There's a time and a place for being angry, but don't let it percolate for too long. The danger is: If I'm over here stewing over something I think you did to me, you might be thinking the same thing, and before long, we both start interpreting everything between us as being hostile, we start assuming the worst of each other, and then we start murdering each other in our hearts, with our words, and possibly even with our hands. And that's how we ***"give the devil an opportunity."*** So, work it out quickly, Jesus says.

Conclusion:

Some have suggested that by forbidding murder, the Pharisees perhaps assumed that God was fine with anything up to the act of murder, as long as they didn't cross that line. But Jesus corrects this way of thinking. Don't even take any steps toward murder! Don't be murdering people in your mind, thinking that you are somehow pleasing to God by simply having the moral strength not to beat your neighbor to death with a brick. God expects more than that! God has raised the bar! But even beyond this: If you know that somebody has something against you, if you have perhaps done something worthy of being murdered or insulted, if you know that you have caused anger, you go first and you take steps to make things right. And do it quickly – before continuing with worship, and certainly before the case gets all the way to the judge.

Before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for Jesus, and thank you for taking the first step in making things right between us. We have sinned, but you sent your only Son so that we can be reconciled to you. As we live our lives each day, we pray that we would see others the way you see them, as souls in need of love and forgiveness. And we pray that we would treat others as we would like to be treated. Today, we ask for your help in overcoming anger. And we ask for strength in controlling what we say and think. Instead of calling names, we pray that we would take the first step to make things right, even if we are the ones who have sinned. We pray that we would forgive others, just as you have forgiven us.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com