

Matthew 5:21-26

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[0 : 00] We are going to pick things up this morning in verse 21 of Matthew 5. If you can have that open, that would be great! I asked Paul to read the whole chapter, though, so that we could be reminded that we're landing into a sermon.

This is a sermon that Jesus has preached, and we're jumping in, as it were, and we'll do the same with the next section this evening. Do come back for that if you can, but it gives us context and it helps us to remember that we're not just having this sort of separate sermon on a topic. Well, I think you'll agree, life is noisy.

There's traffic all around us. We put earphones in a lot of the time. There's background music in shops, in lifts, wherever you go there's always noise, and many of us have busy homes that are noisy.

And we're surrounded by distractions wherever we turn. Advertising boards, I noticed in the warm-up games for the Rugby World Cup.

It may have been happening before, but I only noticed it yesterday that not only do they now have advertising hoardings around the edge, but they move while the game is going on. And there's distractions even if you're trying to play an international rugby match.

[1 : 18] Television, lots of us, we walk into the living room and the first thing we do is put the TV on, regardless of what is on. It's on in the background. It's there. It's distracting all the time.

We've got, of course, then, our phones. It seems like we can't put them down. Do you ever think, I say this maybe particularly, well, this is true for all of us, but teenagers, why is it when we're sitting with our family or we're travelling on a bus or we have any down time at all, we lift our phone. We check, we check, we check all the time.

I'll tell you why, because they're designed to make us do that. The little hit that you get when you hear the ping in your head, that little hit of dopamine, that's addictive, and that's why you do it. We're distracted. Life is distracting. So, being present is difficult. So many of us, so much of the time, are trying to do many different things at once.

We're on our phone. We're talking to people. Who among us isn't when we're on a phone, put it on speaker, respond to emails? You know you do it. And so on and so on.

[2 : 27] If being present is difficult, taking time to have a good, hard look at ourselves is almost impossible.

Do you, I wonder, ever take time to examine why you think and act the way you do? Why you want the stuff that you want?

Where those desires come from? Why those activities, those actions are a pattern in your life? Do you stop to consider what kind of person you actually really are?

I'm not talking about the self-obsession that our culture wants us to have. I'm talking about what the 16th century French novelist, Michel de Montaigne, cut short a successful career in order to devote himself to.

That is, he felt that his struggle for internal depth and personal mastery, that is, becoming a substantial person and being in control of his appetites and desires, he gave up his lucrative career in order to devote himself to that, put everything else aside in order to give himself to that pursuit.

[3 : 39] He said this, Everyone can play his part in the farce. The farce was what he described life as. Everyone can play his part in the farce and act an honest role on the stage.

But to be disciplined within, in one's own breast, where all is permissible and all is concealed. Isn't that an interesting way to put it?

In our hearts, it's as if everything is possible, but it's hidden. We can put on a front on the outside.

We can play our part in the farce. And what we really think in there, well, we can think whatever we

like, but it's hidden.

He said that's the point. Montaigne knew that the inner self was the true self. That is, the real you on the inside. Not the person that you put on a front to show outside, the outside world, but the inner self is the true self.

And so it was that person that he wanted to discipline and to change. And to do that, he had to face up to things that were uncomfortable to admit. He said this, If others examine themselves attentively, as I do, they would find themselves, as I do, so full of inanity and nonsense.

[4 : 54] Boys and girls, inanity is just daftness. Daftness and nonsense. When we think about the inner life, we think daft things, don't we?

We feel nonsensical things. That's true for all of us. Boys and girls, that's true for you. It's true for grownups. Inanity and nonsense. Well, as we come back to the Sermon on the Mount this morning, Jesus is forcing us to look inside, to consider our inner person.

And in doing this, he is making us face up to things that are going to make us uncomfortable. We heard him say last time, very plainly, that the life of blessing, the life of flourishing that he has come to bring in his kingdom, doesn't rest on him abolishing the law and the prophets.

He has not come to abolish the Old Testament, but to fulfill it. And in these examples from the Torah and from the life of Israel, you have heard it said. He's talking about what they've been told in the context of the life of Israel.

He explains what this actually means, what it means to live out the law in the context of the Christian life. He's not contradicting the law.

[6 : 03] It's not a case that the law said this, but I tell you this. You heard it said this in the law, but I tell you something different. No. It's like he's reaching back into the law and drawing out the deepest significance of what is there.

Well, it's also challenging how the religious leaders of the day had misrepresented it. You have heard it said by this group of religious leaders. They missed the point. I'm going to take you to the heart of the issue, but I tell you.

And this searches our hearts. Indeed, God's law has always functioned in that way. The point of the Ten Commandments was never just do these things outwardly. Don't worry about your heart.

Quite the opposite. We could say when he talks about the law and the prophets, that phrase that encapsulates the whole Old Testament, we could say that the law was always about the heart, but also when the prophets came and proclaimed to the people of God, calling them back to obedience, the obedience that he was calling them back to, that they were calling them back to, the people back to, was a heart obedience.

Not a merely external religious performative thing, but a wholehearted devotion to the Lord. God has always cared about the inner person.

[7 : 19] It is the truest expression of who you are. And as Jesus takes this up in this next section of the sermon, the first thing that he addresses as we shift uncomfortably in our seats, we don't like having to go and focus on these things, is anger.

Verse 21. You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder, and whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But 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. Strong words. Here's our first point.

Anger is a capital crime. Anger is a capital crime. Everyone would have agreed that God's law clearly prohibits murder, and that there was a penalty for doing it.

But Jesus explains that it isn't enough simply to not physically murder someone, but the anger that expresses itself in insults and vindictive name-calling, verse 22, are part and parcel of that same spiritual sickness.

[8 : 28] There is more than one way to murder someone. Now, clearly, Jesus doesn't mean that there's absolutely no difference between insulting someone and stabbing them.

Obviously, there's a big difference. Not all sins are equally serious in one sense. He simply means that angry insults share the same DNA as murder, because both activities are rooted in the same hatred of other people.

And we need to talk about anger. Whether it's social media, ranting, or road rage, or people going on the rampage with guns, or just the general, under the surface, bubbling away that we have in our

culture.

There is a lot of anger upon. Now, sometimes it can be amusing when you see Basil Fawlty losing it and whacking his car with the branch of a tree.

That clip on YouTube hasn't been watched millions of times because it isn't funny. It is. It's very funny. Some comedians, their whole shtick is angry ranting. The Welsh comedian Rod Gilbert, he's hilarious.

[9 : 42] And it's all, the way he does his thing is he starts a story and he gets more and more angry as he goes through. And at the end, there's saliva flying out of his mouth as he rants. And it is very funny.

But it's important that we don't think that that's okay when it's placed into the context of everyday life. What are we prone to do with anger? Well, lots of cases we play it down.

So there's an outburst of some kind, maybe at home. Perhaps we've yelled or we've thrown something or we've had a fight with somebody and that's got all of the, it's kind of blown it out of our system.

And we look around at the people that are cowering, whether it's our siblings or our spouse, and we say, what's wrong with you? Wasn't that bad?

Very sensitive. We play it down. Wasn't that bad? Well, we try and justify it. We're good at that. Often we feel sheepish because of something we've said or done.

[10 : 46] We realize that in that explosion, we did the wrong thing. And we say, listen, I only reacted like that because you dot, dot, dot. We justify it. We also just deny it outright, don't we?

Someone says something cheeky or smart, and you're just not in the mood, and you just think, I am. Or your expectation goes unmet.

That's where it normally happens. You're tired. You want some peace. And someone cuts across that expectation of peace and relaxation, and you don't show it outwardly. You don't do this with your mouth, maybe?

But inwardly, you're simmering with resentment. Are you cross? No. Everything's fine. I'm all right. Everything's okay.

We just deny it. Sometimes it comes out of nowhere. The Romans, the ancient Romans, had a saying that described anger as a brief madness.

[11 : 48] Doesn't it feel like that sometimes? We think to ourselves, I don't know what came over me. When the red mist has gone and we've settled down, we think to ourselves, where did that come from?

I came into the room in a perfectly good mood. Where did that come from? It was a brief madness. The truth is, we probably know people, we might be those people ourselves for whom this madness actually isn't that brief.

Their lives always seem to find the way to conflict. So, whether we're laughing at it, playing it down, justifying it, or suppressing it, the truth is that we know that anger is a problem.

Because we know, when we're honest with ourselves, as David Powlison says, quote, in real life, anger is the reaction that incinerates marriages and disintegrates families.

It energizes gossip and guns down classmates. It divides churches. It turns friendship to enmity and erupts in rude rage. It is the stuff of every form of grievance and bitterness.

[12 : 58] And then on top of all that, Jesus tells us, verse 22, that unchecked, it will incur the same judgment as murder. Anger is way more serious than most of us assume.

So, we must allow Jesus to get under our skin here and to confront us on this matter. Now, I'm sure that part of this, part of the problem, is living in an angry city.

Car horns, angry hand-waving, and signals, shouting, yelling, those things are going on around us in a city like London all the time. The busyness and the intensity of a place like London draws impatience out of people.

It draws anger to the surface. And what that means is that for us, we're existing in this context all the time, and it means then that it's more normal. We just think that's how things are.

And when you think that's just how things are, you become immune to them. You go, ah, that's just how it is. It also means, it's not just that it's normal and we tolerate it, but it also means that there are plenty of worse examples for us to compare ourselves to.

[14 : 07] So we say, well, I might have exploded there. I might have just blown up about that situation, but at least I'm not like that. I haven't ventured into knife crime yet.

So, we're in a particularly difficult context to address this issue. We need to work hard to look within. We need to call what we see in there what it is. So our first instinct is always to try and explain it away, to do those things, to play it down, to deny it, to blame shift, whatever it might be.

But Jesus says here, nothing about fault. Did you notice that? He is interested in the heart. So let's admit our anger when we see it and let's root it out in repentance.

And because of what we've said about it being normal and because we've other examples that we can pass away and kind of justify our anger with, and because we are so easily self-deceived, it's true, isn't it, that we can see other people's sins much more clearly than we can see our own. We need each other. We need each other in the context of the church to help us. Even suppressed anger is obvious to those who know us well. So we need to welcome the clear sight of others to remind us how perilous it is to harbor bitterness, to cultivate animosity, to let resentment grow towards others, even those who have wronged us.

[15:42] Because the stakes are too high to just ignore it. Everyone, Jesus says, who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.

Now, in the interest of health and safety, a word on process. I am not suggesting that you try and confront the person when the red mist has fallen.

It doesn't matter how right or well-meaning you are. When that person is all steamed up in the moment, it's best probably to get out of the way rather than to open Matthew 5 and point at this passage.

But do choose a suitable time and do have a word. They need you to. We need you to. Because unchecked anger is a capital crime.

Jesus doesn't just leave it there. In the verses that follow, he moves from the negative to the positive. The two are bound together. They're linked. If we aren't to engage in physical or verbal murder, we are to be committed to reconciliation.

[16:55] That's our second point. If murder is a capital crime, point number two, reconciliation is a Christian characteristic. Reconciliation is a Christian characteristic.

The examples that Jesus uses here illustrate the point in two ways. We are to pursue reconciliation, first of all, actively. So, verse 23, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Jesus pictures the man or woman in church. They're about to take their seat for worship or they're about, as the church has understood this for centuries, they're about to come to the Lord's table, that most profound expression and picture of our unity.

but they know that they have not been enjoying fellowship with their brother or sister. There's animosity or awkwardness between them and Jesus says that they should stop and they should seek out that brother and be reconciled before returning to worship God with a clear conscience and an undivided heart.

Now, notice there that Jesus expects the person who knows that there is a relational problem to take the initiative. The statement, your brother has something against you, again, it doesn't apportion fault.

[18:14] It doesn't say anything about who's right or who's wrong. That person could have something against you because you actually wronged them or it could be that they have taken offense inappropriately.

The reason for enmity isn't actually the point. It doesn't say, it doesn't even say, look, you're the more mature Christian in this situation, it's down to you to sort it out.

It doesn't say that. It's just very straightforward. If there is an issue between you and someone else in the church, don't wait. Take the initiative. You go and pursue reconciliation.

Jesus is highlighting the point that in the context of the church, we never relate to Him as mere individuals. We do relate to Him individually in our walk with Him, but we don't relate merely in that way.

We always come to God as those who are related to others. When we are called to Christ, when we are brought to Christ, as it were, from all over the world in all different contexts, we are brought to the one Christ, well, we are brought together with other people as well.

[19:21] When we are united to Christ, we are united to others. And so, the way that we relate to God is connected to how we relate to others. So, if there is enmity between us, between you and a brother or a sister in the church, how can we come into God's presence with a pure heart?

We can't. He knows when we are being hypocritical. He knows when there is anger in our hearts towards those other people, or vice versa.

Put simply, being at odds with another Christian is detrimental to your relationship with God. Not just your relationship with them, but with God. Right relationships with others are part of the meaning of the commandment not to murder.

Paul mentioned that earlier on. They are a vital element, a vital element of our righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, the command in verse 20.

Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. That verse 20 is the kind of doorway to what follows. He's saying, you have heard it said.

[20 : 40] There was this kind of thing that people adopted externally. I want your righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, so I want you to do the inner work. I want this to come from the heart. That is what religion, righteousness, that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees means.

It is that it comes from the heart and is genuine. Well, if the first illustration is taken from the church community and it's calling us to pursue reconciliation actively, the second calls us to do it urgently. Urgently. Here, Jesus takes us out of the church context and into the middle of an argument on the way to the courthouse. Verse 25, come to terms quickly with your accuser while you're 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.

Truly, I say to you, you'll never get out until you have paid the last penny. Jesus' point is that the two men should settle the matter now. Don't wait to get to court.

Settle the matter now before they stand before the judge. It might be costly to settle now and it will likely be humbling. There may be a climbing down that's required but you want to do whatever you can to avoid experiencing judgment.

[21 : 53] Anger and enmity are so serious he's saying do whatever you can to sort it out and to do it now and do not delay. One author says this, animosity is a time bomb.

We do not know when it will go off. We must deal with it quickly before the consequences of our bitterness get completely out of control. Now look, we know the wisdom of this from our own experience, don't we?

Whether we've been part of it ourselves or we've seen it up close with others, the destruction of relationships that could have been preserved if one or both of those parties had sought to reconcile quickly.

If the problem had been addressed here, it would have been small and resolvable as it is. It's now over here and it's just vast. We've seen the cancer of bitterness consume people.

We've seen the joy in people's lives evaporate because of simmering anger and the effects of that played out through their families and their friendship circles if only the two parties had sought to reconcile when the grievance occurred.

[23 : 05] Their lives, their friendships, they would not have suffered the way that they did. But we can also see the wisdom of it in Jesus' words because of the contrast that He draws.

Do you notice? He's just shown us how anger is a capital crime and then He uses the word so. Do you see that? Verse 23, so if you are offering. He's saying there, therefore, that is in light of the fact that anger is a capital crime, we just talked about that, we must do all we can to eliminate the outworking of that anger from our relationships.

Reconciliation should be sought lest we fall into judgment. It's a serious warning. And yet, much as I might want to take heed, whether to avoid judgment or because I really desire to do the right thing, when you're in the midst of it, it's far easier said than done, is it not?

When your blood begins to rise, you're rarely thinking, huh, reconciliation will be best here, especially when the person who is the cause of your blood rising is the person with whom you need to reconcile.

When your anger comes from having been wronged, legitimately wronged, it gets even more complicated. And then there are harder questions to do with forgiveness in specific difficult cases.

[24 : 34] There are a whole lot of potential situations where there is more to say than these verses say. That is true. But there are steps that we can take that will help us to deal with our anger towards someone, help us to be reconcilers, help us to be, 5 verse 9, peacemakers.

Do you remember them? Then, blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. The first step to reconciliation then, it must be to acknowledge the person's humanity.

That person with whom your blood is beginning to rise, that person that you are angry with, whatever they have done, that person is a divine image bearer.

The connection between anger and murder that Jesus draws here is often easiest to see in the way that we think about and speak about those that we're angry with. We use words, don't we, that dehumanize them. In really bad cases, they're monsters or they're dreadful people, horrendous, and yet their humanity carries an inherent dignity.

A well-known quote from C.S. Lewis in *The Weight of Glory*, there are no ordinary people. You've never talked to a mere mortal. It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.

[25 : 58] When your anger begins to rise, never forget that the person that you want to destroy, whether verbally or physically, is someone who bears the image of God and their destruction is not something that you are at liberty to pursue.

Of course, alongside that, we must turn again to Christ. In every case, the one thing that will ultimately transform your angry heart is to see afresh the Lord Jesus and in particular to consider the cross.

When we look at the cross, we see there the Son of God wronged more deeply than you or I will ever be. He was misrepresented.

He was betrayed. He was flogged. And He was killed unjustly all the way down. And yet, and this is the profound reality at the heart of the Christian faith, He endured all of this for us.

He endured all of this injustice, all of this being wronged, all of these things for which anger in His heart would have been legitimate.

[27 : 26] He did that so that you could be forgiven and reconciled to your Father in heaven. See, whatever way you've been wronged, whatever that person has done to cause the anger in your soul, it doesn't get close to the offense that our sin caused to God.

And yet, in His great mercy, He took the initiative to actively pursue us. While we were still sinners, we weren't giving Him so much as a second thought.

He sent His Son. He was active in coming for us. He sent His Son, this Jesus, not just to teach us how to live, but to die in our place so that we could know the gracious gift of reconciliation that His death brings for all who put their faith in Him.

And the truth of the matter is it is as we meditate on that reality, as we spend time bringing that reality into our inner life, as those truths grip our hearts, we are enabled to show patience and mercy and grace to others.

when there is enmity between you and someone else, particularly in the church, and you opt to actively and urgently pursue reconciliation with them, you are treating those people the way Jesus treated you.

[28 : 52] That is why I'm saying that reconciliation is a Christian characteristic, because it embodies what you have been shown in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ. And the truth is, I'm thinking about this and I'm thinking to myself, it's all well and good saying this, but this is impossible.

Well, however impossible you might think reconciliation would be in your situation, think about what we confessed earlier in our confession of sin. We said this, our transgressions are many and often seem to overwhelm us, but you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, who is much stronger.

That's true. The power of the Holy Spirit is at work in you. The same power that raised Christ from the dead can make it happen.

He can make you someone who actively and urgently pursues reconciliation and eradicates this anger from your soul. Why? Because he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

I'm saying to you that anger and enmity are not inevitable. And in the gospel of Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit of Christ, you have the resources that you need to put off anger and to embrace reconciliation.

[30 : 12] This is the key. This message, this reality is the key to the healthy inner life and to our righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. Opening our hearts to the finished work of Christ again and again and again so that by his Spirit he might change us and renew us and give us the strength and the grace that we need to pursue reconciliation and put off anger.

Amen.