

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Matthew 5:17-20, 21-26
“Jesus The Radical”

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(6th Sunday After Epiphany)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

IIIC, D1: MATTHEW 5:17-20, 21-26 "JESUS THE RADICAL"

How Are Jesus' Disciples Different?

IIIC. 5:17-20 KINGDOM STANDARDS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS. Preface To Antitheses: 4 Sayings

Author Shows Up! 6 Examples Of *Jesus Reading The Torah*, 5:21-48

1) v.17 Jesus' Relation To Law And Prophets, Phrased As Correction Of Error (M). Mt.'s Program

17 "Think not that Not A False Prophet, Followers Not Lawless, Not Cause Obedience To Cease

False 'I have come *I Come As Messiah (Whole Life) = Mind Blower!* 1:23, 4:17, *Authoritative I*, 9:13, 10:34-35, 9:23, 20:28

to abolish the 'law (Torah) and the prophets;' Heb. Bible = OT (//7:12, 11:13, 22:34-40, 19:16-19)

True I have come Key To Larger Story (6C's), Dt. 18:15-20, A New Continuity, Acts 6:13-14

not to abolish them but to fulfill them." //22:40, Rom. 7:12, 8:4, Great Christological Claim

Claim + Clarification + 2 Audiences, ot Abolish, *Recapture Deep Intent*

2) v.18 Solemn Promise (//Lk. 16:17 = Q + M). Ground = Scripture Endures Valid To The End

18 **For truly (amen), I say to you,** //16:28, 23:34, 26:29, Oath Formula, *Authoritative I*, 17:5

a until heaven and earth/ pass away World As It Is, Coming Of Kingdom In Fullness, 24:35

b not an iota, *yodh* = Smallest Heb. Letter, *dot* = horn (hook of a letter)

b' not a dot, Torah As A Base For Jesus, No Need For Law In New Age

a' will pass from the law/ until all is accomplished [and the prophets], Details Of Scripture Are Critical

What Remains In Force Must Be Obeyed, 24:34-35// Mk. 13:31//Lk. 21:33

1') v.19 The Teacher's Relation To These "Fulfilled" Commandments (M). Word: Conditional Judgment

19 a Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments Consequence, Distinguish *Heavy/Light* Commands

b and teaches men to do so, Sentence Of Holy Law, Not Evade Intent Of Scripture

c shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, p.v. = *By God*; Not Two Levels Of Entry (7:21-23)

a' but he who does them Teachers Must First Obey, Mt. Encourages Both

b' and teaches them 1) v.19 Consequence: Teachers, 2) v.20 All Auditors

c' shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven . //7:21, 19:3, 19:23-24 Enter Kingdom Sayings

Jesus' Teaching Has Ultimate Force, No Laxity

2') v.20 All Hearers, Solemn Promise: Admission Saying (M). Chap. 23, 613 Commands

20 **For truly (amen), I tell you,** Deficient vs. Surpassing Covenant Faithfulness, //5:47

Deficient unless your righteousness (faithfulness) exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, //12:33-37, 15:14, 23:5, 27-28

you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Christology: Jesus Speaks For God As Final Judge

Scribes And Pharisees = Most Devout Jews, Gal. 1:11, Phil 3:5-6

IIID1. 5:21-26 FIRST APPLICATION OF PRINCIPLE: ON ANGER & RECONCILIATION.

Move Is To Obey *God's Intent Behind Torah*, Not Just Outward, Shows v.17

1) vv.21-22 Radicalization On Murder/Anger And Three Stages Of Severity (19:18) (M).

21 "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, //5:33, Tradition, 6/10 = Ex. 20:13, Dt. 5:17, Divine Passive

'You shall not kill (murder)'; Traditional = Take Life + Brought To Court, How To Live As Peacemakers

and 'whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' Num. 35:16-34, Dt. 17:8-13, 19:1-14, Sinai Generation, Gen. 4:3-7

Broken Jesus Over Moses! //Summary: Ex. 21:12, Lev. 24:17, Num. 35:12, 16, Dt. 17:8-13

22 **But (de = And) I say to you** 7:29, 17:5, 23:8, Rage/Anger = Signal Of Wrong, 1 Jn. 3:15, Ps. 4:4, 1 Tim. 2:8

a that everyone who is angry (continuously) with his brother (sister) Nurse Anger, Heart Habit, Sir. 27:30, Eph. 4:26, 31

shall be liable to judgment; Village Magistrates, Name-Calling, Outward Compliance Not Enough

b whoever insults (*Raca*) his brother (sister) 23:17, *Hollow Head!* Contempt, Escalating Attacks, Col. 3:8

shall be liable to the council, Sanhedrin, 10:17, Character Assassination Is Murder, 2 Enoch 44:2-3

c and whoever says, 'You fool!' Humiliation, Contempt, m. Avot. 3:12, Ps. 14:53, Lk. 12:20

shall be liable to the hell of fire. *Gehenna*, Though The Wrong Was Another's, Judgment Is Yours!

Not Deny Anger, Deal With It! Eph. 4:26, Peacemaker

Restored **2) vv.23-24 Radical Action: Reconciliation Before Worship (M).** Hyperbole: Imagination

23 a So if *you* are offering *your* gift at the altar, Jerusalem Temple, //Cain's Sin, Wisdom 10:3

b and there remember that *your* brother (sister) has something against *you*, Holy Spirit Prompts

24 c leave *your* gift there before the altar Take Initiative, Not Reconciled To God!

c" and go; Other Is Angry, Engage Face To Face

b' first be reconciled to *your* brother (sister), Seek Out, Confess, Forgive, Repent, Restore

a' and then come and offer *your* gift. Now Ready For God! *Relationship Restored*, Hos. 6:6

Rom. 12:18, Stop Charade Before It Goes Any Further, *Brother* (4x)

Consequences **1') vv.25-26 Three Stages Of Judgment And Solemn Promise (//Lk. 12:57-59, Q).** Mediation

25 Make friends quickly with *your* accuser while you are going with him to court, Legal Issue, Reconciliation Is Urgent!

a lest your accuser hand *you* over to the judge, Accuser, Judge, Guard: Prison, Prov. 6:1-5, 25:7b-10

b and the judge to the guard, Take Initiative! Cool Hot Blood Before It Boils Over

c and *you* be put in prison. Guilty As Charged, Apply To Conscience?

26 **Truly (amen), I say to you,** Live Out The Covenant, Kingdom Brings Reconciled Relationships

you will never get out till *you* have paid the last penny. Not Purgatory, Broken Relationships Are Costly, Unpaid Debt

A Brief Treatment Of Matthew 5:17-20, 21-26

With IIIC. 5:17-20 we move into the next section of the SM which stands in parallel to IIIC' 7:1-12. Key parallel terms are *the law and the prophets* (5:17//7:12) and *heaven* (5:19-20//7:11). The surface structure is a 1-2//1'-2' stairstep parallelism with the authoritative introduction *For truly I say to you* in 2. v.18 // 2' v.20. Jesus begins with a negation of the charge he is undermining loyalty to Scripture using his frequent *I have come* assertion (5:17 [2x], 9:13, 23; 10:34-35, 20:28). It is negated in *Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets*, then affirmed in repetition and personal fulfillment, *I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them*. This is a Messianic self-confession of tremendous authority. Jesus claims to be the goal of all God has been doing; he is the key that unlocks the entire Scripture. He is to fulfill and complete every minor detail, since *not an iota* (smallest letter) or *a dot* (decorative serif) is discounted. Scripture stands wholly inspired and will not be put on heaven's shelf till all its hopes are accomplished in Jesus. But, when the kingdom arrives, there is no more need for such a book; it gives way to something new. At our destination the map is put away. That this prophecy is certified is made clear in Jesus solemn assurance *For truly (amen) I say to you* (v.18a). And if vv.17-18 show Jesus high regard for Scripture and his role as Messiah, vv.19-20 demonstrates that those who teach and hear have a role to play. To soften Jesus radical reading of the Torah (5:21-48 in six antitheses) is to place oneself outside the coming dominion (v.19a), but to *do and to teach* the full force of Jesus reading will bring the accolade *great in the kingdom of heaven* (v.19b). The strict program of the scribes and Pharisees is not sufficient because it excludes a primary loyalty to Jesus. Followers are not to just work harder at the Pharisaic program; Jesus offers a new relationship with God which exceeds conventional readings by a return to original intent. This is certified by a second *For truly I tell you* (v.20a). Jesus is not reticent about his exegetical authority.

The first test case of original intent is 5:21-26, the first of six antitheses which fall into two series of three with the first (v.21) and the fourth (v.33) introduced with the full formula *You have heard that it was said to the men of old*. The formula is followed by quotation from the decalogue (v.21b) and a summary of judicial consequences (v.21c). The community engages in warfare and sanctions the death penalty, but personal manslaughter is sanctioned. Jesus then traces murder back to its origin in escalating anger and introduces it with the formula of authority, *But (and) I say to you* (v.22a). Continuous anger is culpable to a minor court, slander to a higher, and the humiliation of a member of the community (*You fool!*) puts one under the ultimate penalty of exclusion (i.e. *the hell of fire*). In other words, stop anger soon because it only escalates. A second example indicates the important of healing the wounds of anger through reconciliation. The surface structure of 2. vv.23-24 is a 6:2 concentric pattern (a-b-c//c'-b'-a') with the commands to *leave* and *go* at the center. Even temple sacrifice must be interrupted when an offense comes to mind, "My brother has something against me. I am not right with God unless I go, and so far as possible, set things right." Worship operates on twin axes: vertical and horizontal; God accepts the gifts of the reconciled. But, even if the work of reconciliation has been postponed and the brother has filed suit, there is still time to act, and here in v.25 are three stages (judge, guard, prison) as in v.22 (judgment, council, hell). So act decisively and quickly lest you find yourself sentenced with little hope. The warning of v.26a is again the solemn *Truly I say to you*. Note that the surface structure of vv.21-26 is an a. vv.21-22, b. vv.23-24, a' vv.25-27 chiasm with the first and last parts (a//a') each containing judgment language and an escalating series of three. The center (b. vv.23-24) is a 6:2 chiasm on the pattern *gift-brother-leave // go-brother-gift*. That the authority formula *But I say to you* (v.22a) // *Truly I say to you* (v.26) act as inclusions is no accident. Jesus is aware how easily anger gets out of hand and murders relationships. He goes for the originating emotion of offense, not just the terminal action. Healing relationships is a priority, even over the rituals of worship. The love of neighbor matters!

JESUS THE RADICAL

“I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them.”

Jesus corrects a public misunderstanding of his mission.

M A T T H E W 5 : 1 7 b

Christian faith is not a leap in the dark; faith- biblically understood- is trust based on evidence. I hear lots of such stories, and people say things like the following:

“There I was, cruising along, when the other world broke into this one and grabbed my attention! I was intrigued; curiosity led me on a trail of discovery as one clue and question led to the next. I think it was God who make a move on me and set up the whole process! And when I read the Bible and talked to other followers, I got the rest of the story and a new script for life. Nothing around me changed, but I have. I’ve got a new set of eyes, which I think are connected to the deepest part of who I am, my heart, the place where I make decisions about who to trust and how to live. This God is not safe, but he is fully worthy of trust.”

If Jesus is the human face of God at ground level, and if the Spirit who was with him is still around to make a living link possible, then you really need to make an informed decision about trusting this God, the Creator, who according to ancient Christian thinking, is best described as tri-personal. You are a person in God’s image. You know intuitively what it is to be a person in relationship to other persons, but God is a personal in a much higher and cooperative sense. The being of the one God is constituted in the mutual relationships of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one God in three persons, blessed Trinity.¹ And this mysterious tri-personed God wants a relationship with each of us. We take the nail-pierced hand that reaches out. Then a new world opens up, right in the midst of the old.

¹ Two accessible treatments are Stanley Grenz, *Rediscovering The Triune God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2004); Roger Olson & Christopher Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

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This understanding of faith is not irrational; it welcomes emotion and intuition as part of the process but does not over-rely on them as if they were the only factor. Our faith does not cancel out clear thinking and argumentation, but it does go beyond what can be strictly proven in a scientific sense. Science asks *When questions* and *How questions* about phenomena that are repeatable and can be measured in a controlled setting, a lab. But since Christian faith is about historical events through which God is revealed, the events themselves are not repeatable. For example, the singular life of Jesus, which climaxed in his bodily resurrection from the dead, happened only once. Because events are embedded in time; there's no rewind button. We don't get to be among the twelve and have their experience of following Jesus. But we have four official biographies that are grounded in their memories and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church as their interpreter. You can know and be known by Jesus as he introduces you to his Father and the Holy Spirit, the reason being that he's alive and available. The life he lived is the definition of who he is, and so we read the Gospels to understand the one who interacts with us now. We immerse ourselves in his history to recognize his workings in the present. Ours is a living faith with historical foundations.

No moment in history is repeatable because the flow of time doesn't pause or stop; like a river it surges forward carrying us with it. Events may be similar and have analogy to one another so that items may be grouped- birthday parties are *this*; amphibious landing are *that*- but no two within the same category are just alike. Each is one of a kind. History is the study of such non-repeatables, and its methods are not the same as science; each has a fitting exploratory method, and they are not the same. We need historical probability and scientific exactitude for differing enterprises. A faith that claims to be rooted in events within history must embrace the proper approach. Science tells us a lot, and the technology it enables is amazing. But it cannot tell you what is good or true or beautiful or who to love or what to believe or if there's a God who showed up in first century Palestine looking just like a working guy named Jesus. Science can tell you some things with great exactitude, but there are vast areas of human experience about which it can tell you very little that matters.

You get to know a physical phenomena through careful scientific observation and theory testing, but you get to know a person by reading about them, or better yet, spending time with them, perhaps interviewing others who know them, what we call the *evidence from testimony*. Over time you piece together a working portrait of who you're dealing with: Do they ring true? Are they basically consistent? Are they competent? Do they know what they're talking about? Are they in touch with more

reality and wisdom than I am? And maybe even this question: Do I want to make this relationship central to the direction of my life?

Getting to know God is more like falling in love than testing a scientific hypothesis. Will you marry me? is not the same as, Do you understand the chemistry of oxytocin that bonds us together? That is because the One in whom faith trusts is the living and invisible God whom Christians claim showed up personally in Jesus of Nazareth to make a fresh case to the whole human family. Jesus is God’s ultimate offer of historical evidence. You *assent* to a scientific theory because it’s tested and has great explanatory power over the evidence; you *rely* on a chair because you’ve successfully sat in it many times; you have *faith and trust* in a person, even under trying circumstances, when you know them to be reliable on other grounds. Jesus says that he, his Father, and the Spirit are trustworthy. You can rest and rely on them, and they will support you and give you a new way to makes sense of life. If anything, God is comprehensive; it goes with the job description.

It is basic to say that the whole of the Christian faith rests on the person of Jesus as our window into God and to whom we give a range of impressive titles to describe his importance: Messiah or Christ, Son of God, Lord and Savior, Friend and Rabbi, Warrior and Hero.² But to call him, in a lesser sense, a great teacher or a noble man or one among other religious geniuses seems a bit patronizing because it’s not how he described himself or how he was described by those who knew him best. Jesus announced the initial invasion of the Kingdom of God and saw himself as the point of the spear; he was a one man D-Day invasion. He spoke about a new administration of the world, a new dominion or rule, and he demonstrated its effects in healing and exorcisms aplenty. He also spoke about himself as its unique agent with the formula *I have come* as if his arrival changed everything. To this he added the authoritative *For truly I say to you* and the shocking-to-Jews *You have heard that is was said to the men of old... but I say to you*, as if he had the right to amend Moses.

Earlier in the last century the esteemed Rabbi Ginsberg was blunt in his negative assessment of Jesus’ unique sense of personal authority. He tells us one of the reasons Jews find Jesus so difficult:

“Israel cannot accept with religious enthusiasm as the Word of God, the

² For a summary, see Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1992).

utterances of a man who speaks in his own name- not ‘thus saith the Lord’ but I say to you.’ This ‘I’ is in itself sufficient to drive Judaism away from the Gospel forever.”³

Now I don’t believe the *forever* part, but Ginsberg was right in his understanding of the high sense of personal- and he would say *blasphemous*-authority Jesus attributed to himself. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, is a myth. Was it ego? Was it delusion? Was he pious but misguided? Or, is his identity such that he has the perfect right to talk this way? The most famous- and still disputed- formulation of this issue remains C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.”⁴

It’s know as the *MBG* argument. Was Jesus mad? Or was he bad? Or was he God? Some have added a fourth, Was he a legend that had little to do with the real man? Scholars still debate the logic and content of this famous paragraph, but many find it persuasive.⁵ Who is this man who has so disturbed the world since his arrival?

³ *Ten Essays on Zionism and Judaism* (London, 1922), as found in David Garland, *Matthew* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1993), 64.

⁴ (London: Collins, 1952), 51.

⁵ See “Lewis Trilemma,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis's_trilemma.

Intelligent faith looks at the evidence in light of the whole of the life, and what must not be minimized is Jesus immense sense of mission and clarity of identity. His self-assessment is fully Messianic, but on his own terms. He didn't fit the expected model of a Davidic warrior using violence to set things right; instead, he claimed the title and redefined by who he was: come from God with love and truth and restoring power and forgiveness and mercy and a willingness to die, to absorb violence rather than return it. This is new Messiah Jesus was. Michael Bird has recently written:

"Jesus identified himself as a divine agent with a unique authority and... relationship with Israel's God. In addition, he spoke as one who spoke for God in an immediate sense and believed himself to be embodying the very person of God in his mission to renew and restore Israel."⁶

Let's see if this matches what's in the text. Jesus makes the claim to be the one who fulfills and completes the entire plot line of the Old Testament, God's written revelation, "I have come not to abolish them but to fill them to overflowing." He claims to be the one to whom all the promises point. He's also the one who repeatedly claims God's authority for what he says, "For truly I say to you." Further, he claims to know what kinds of persons will be included and excluded when the kingdom arrives based on whether or not they were faithful to *his* teaching. He enables a new relationship with God that pierces to the core of a person and refuses to stay on the surface of behavior or belief. He knows what God requires in human relationships and announces it to his followers ahead of time:

"Don't just avoid manslaughter; turn quickly from out-of-control rage because it only leads to ruin. Don't show contempt for a brother or sister by humiliating them; they bear God's image, and God will judge those who deface his image. When God shines light on a broken relationship, drop your gift and go put your relationships in order; then come back to do business with me because worship works on the twin axes of God and neighbor, and if have not sought peace with your brother or sister, you're wrong with me. Don't procrastinate but settle things quickly before permanent consequences kick in." And before each section, just to make sure we don't forget, Jesus punctuates his

⁶ Michael F. Bird, et. al., *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature, A Response to Bart D. Ehrman* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), Chapter 3 by M. Bird, "Did Jesus Think He Was God?" 46.

teaching with a fresh authority formula, “Amen, I say to you” as if it was not just his word but a Word from above.

In relationship with the living Jesus, in trusting him in order to follow him and be changed from the center outwards, we meet a demand to do what is impossible without his direct aid. Who can live this way? Who can break the cycle of anger and violence that destroys relationships and takes lives? Who can carry peace enough within themselves to spread it to others? Only his followers who are under the supervision of his Holy Spirit. Our actions can set off shockwaves of peace.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The One Who Fulfills It All (vv.17-20).

The only way to understand Jesus is to immerse him in his culture and in the Book and people that shaped his life. He does not appear out of nowhere but laid in the cradle of a people whose intellectual and spiritual life was shaped by the books they claimed were from God. Anything that minimizes the continuing importance of the Old Testament or of our Jewish Savior is to be rejected. There is not one God of the Old Testament and another of the New.⁷ Same God, same character, one Bible in two parts. Love and mercy, righteousness and judgment from start to finish. All the earliest disciples were Jews who saw in Jesus the one God had promised. Anti-Semitism is anti-Christian. Listen to what is found in our *Articles of Religion*:

“The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard who feign (i.e. falsely teach) that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses as touching ceremonies and rites doth not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.”⁸

⁷ The name for this ancient false teaching is Marcionism.

⁸ Article VI, “Of The Old Testament,” *BOD 2012*, 65.

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We are to welcome the whole of the Old Testament. It's the raw material out of which the life and teachings of Jesus were quarried. It's rituals and ceremonial regulations are not to be imitated by us, but its moral commandments and vision of who this holy God of love is are binding upon us all. Read the Book of Proverbs and gain wisdom; read the Song of Solomon and learn about passionate love between a man and woman; read the Psalms and learn how to pray through the full range of your emotions; read the prophets and learn about social justice; read the historical books to see how God dealt with the sins of his own people; read the book of Genesis to learn about the purposes of creation and how this world soon got into a mess. We are a people of one book on two parts, and the living link between them is the person of Jesus who said, "I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them." Christians and Jews are bound together as a divided family only God can ultimately reconcile.

In order to reinforce the importance of what he had just said about his coming, Jesus makes a solemn affirmation in v.18, "...till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota (the smallest letter), not a dot (the smallest flourish on a Hebrew letter) will pass away until all is accomplished." Until the kingdom of God actually invades this world at the end of time, the Holy Scriptures are our guide to faith and practice, to what we believe and how we behave. Nothing takes its place.

But when the kingdom of God comes, when heaven comes down to swallow and transform creation on the model of Jesus bodily resurrection, we won't need the Book any longer. We will talk with the actors themselves! It's called, as we say in the Apostles' Creed, *the communion of the saints*. We will live inside the walls of the city to which the book was the road map. When we meet our beloved, we no longer need the book of family photographs. When sin and death are abolished, we no longer need the means of dealing with those hostile powers, and when our hearts are set on God, there's no more need for laws and regulations. Important as it is, the Bible is a temporary means of grace, and the day will come when it yields to the presence of the one to whom it pointed. Until that happens, it is our sure and only roadmap on the way of salvation because it tells us who God is, what God has done and promises to do, and how God's people are to live this side of the kingdom. The best cure for a shallow life is a deep engagement with Scripture and with the people who gather each Sunday to hear it read and preached. If you start reading the Book, the Book will start reading you! Jesus took it with utmost seriousness; so should we.

In verse 19 we have a promise and a warning for those whose job it is to publicly read and interpret the Scriptures. I know this because Jesus speaks of those

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who *teach*, which in our day are pastors and preachers like me. In Jesus' day it's estimated only about ten percent of people could read and a smaller percentage write; literacy was elite. Most Jews heard long passages read on the Sabbath and then commented on by rabbis. Scripture was on scrolls and immensely expensive to reproduce. But now most people can read, even if they choose not to, and most homes have at least one copy of Scripture, even if it lies mostly unread. So in a real sense our accountability is much higher. Hear the promise and warning of verse 19:

“Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so to do, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Those of us who stand behind pulpits have two temptations. Every Monday they stare us in the face. The first is to take the edge off what the Bible and the Lord teach, to relax it for the sake of the audience, to make it easier than it is. We turn it from God's Word into our words and in the process take off the sharp edges and round it out a bit so it now resembles common sense and conventional wisdom. When the preacher sounds vaguely like an after-dinner-speaker, something's wrong! That pastor has sold their soul for social acceptance and unruffled feathers. And when we do that, when we teach less than God requires to those who trust us, we move down the scale of heaven's approval. We may not yet be kicked out of the kingdom because of God's mercy, but we move from the center out near the dangerous edges. Perhaps the angels point their fingers and announce, “Because of that wimpy sermon, Pastor Phil, until he repents, is now to be labeled *the least in the kingdom of heaven*. He is now a danger within the church because of his false teaching.” Better I walk away and never preach again than that I should deliberately distort God's word in Scripture by making it easy for me and you. It's a hammer against hard heads and a sword that pierces hearts. It's also a tremendous consolation that the one who speaks the truth loves us most and that his help is always near.

The second temptation for us is not to practice what we preach and to think that being able to speak about this stuff is enough. No. We have to first obey it ourselves and model it for you. I will always be a hypocrite with a gap because we are talking about a very high standard. Loving God with all you are, all the time, and your neighbor as yourself? Have you actually tried to do that for a whole day? Notice the order in the second half of verse 19, “...but he who *does them* and (then) *teaches them* shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” If I don't first live the Christian life,

if I'm not a daily practitioner on my face before God asking for mercy and help, what's the use telling you about it?

It is then, after Jesus lifted up the Scriptures and warned the teachers, that he turns to the people with a sobering word. Verse 19 was for me; verse 20 is for you, "For truly I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Scholars call this an *admission saying*, and it's where Jesus sets the height of the bar for participation in the blessings of the age to come. If doesn't sober you, you've not yet understood it.

The scribes and Pharisees were the most serious practitioners of their day, the best Judaism had. Paul was one before his conversion. They spend enormous energies applying Scripture to daily living. They were dead serious about obeying the details. Some memorized the first five books of the Bible and could keep the time of day by the exact recitation. It's not that Jesus is against them; it's that this way of relating to God through the Scriptures but apart from the person of Jesus Christ is not enough. Only Christ can provide for us a restored relationship with God and put us in the embrace of a new covenant where his perfect performance covers our imperfect performance. It's only in relationship with him that we move towards being conformed to God's good demands. And remember: what's not in line with Jesus will not survive this life; it will not enter the kingdom of God. And one thing that will not make it across the boundary is the kind of anger that destroys relationships, which is Jesus first example of what it means to follow him from the center of the self.

The First Test Case: Anger (vv.21-26)

Dr. Emil Coccaro has studied anger for decades. He says many hotheads suffer from a newly named pathology, *Intermittent Explosive Disorder*. Dr. Coccaro is championing treatment with the drug Depakote, and in an interview gives this anecdote, "The other day I got into a friend's car and I noticed the visor on the passenger's side was gone. I asked what happened."

"Don't get me started on that," his friend said, "my wife ripped it off."

I told him these things are hard to rip off.

He told me, "Well, she was really angry."⁹

I am leery of taking every bad human behavior and sin and redefining it as a

⁹ Mike Conklin, *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 2000.

new psychological disorder for which people need to have brain chemistry adjusted. Drugs help in certain situations, but what folk need is a new heart and a new community that will love and teach them how to connect with Jesus Christ and disconnect from the Evil One. Eleanor Doar got my attention with this bit of wisdom, “Irritation in the heart of a believer is always an invitation to the devil to stand by.”¹⁰ It’s why Paul warned in Ephesians to put a timer on anger and to be aware how it opens to door to serious compromise, “Be angry,” he said, “but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, *and give no opportunity to the devil.*”¹¹ A mind set and lifestyle of simmering anger is an open door to evil.

You know the Bible: as a people the Hebrews waged war, and as a people they lived with the death penalty for serious offenses, but murder, the act of killing another for personal reasons, was absolutely prohibited, and when it did occur, sanctions followed. Jesus reminded them, “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill’; and ‘whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’” God says don’t do it, and if you do, the community through its legal institutions will call you to account for violating its peace and unleashing a new cycle of violence. In those days, as in the Middle East today, blood feuds and honor killings went on all the time. *No murder* was a first step to halting a chain reaction of vengeance that would draw families and clans into a vortex of increasing violence. But if you don’t start the cycle of killing, you don’t have to stop it. And if you deal with the root of anger early on, you won’t have to deal with the bitter fruit later on.

It was then, after quoting what everyone already knew, that Jesus said something extraordinary. He put his own words alongside those of the Old Testament in a breathtaking display of authority. “And I say to you....” Hidden in that little phrase is a revelation of who he is as God’s mouthpiece. How would you react if I were to declare, “You have heard it said by the Founding Fathers in the Constitution, but I say to you....” You’d think me a crackpot. I’d be taking to myself authority I do not possess. But if Jesus is who the church claims him to be, then he has every right to tell us what the commandments mean when applied to the heart. It’s not just killing that shatters community, it’s also the underlying spirit of anger and the accumulation of little offenses that breaks peace between people.

¹⁰ PreachingToday.com under *anger*.

¹¹ 4:26-27.

“Well, I haven’t killed anyone, so I must be one of the good folk.” “No so,” said Jesus. As long as there’s unresolved anger in your heart, we are potentially as malicious as the worst of people. God is not satisfied with external conformity; God wants to deal with the *deepest you* and make you a new person from the inside out. Not just for your benefit, but to make you a peacemaker.

“But I say to you,” said Jesus, “that *everyone* who is angry (and the Greek present tense means habitually or continually angry) shall be liable to the judgment.” When not dealt with quickly, anger has a negative power of transformation. It goes deep; it burrows into the soul and corrupts everything it touches.

A Christian counselor once spoke of a man who came in because he was having trouble with anger. His outbursts were affecting his work and his family.

She wanted to find out if her new client could conceive of a different way of living and asked, "What would your life look like if you got rid of your anger?"

He was quiet, then spoke, "But if I get rid of my anger, what will I have left?"¹²

Know anyone like that? I do. With them you feel the energy of anger at all times just below the surface, a volcano about to erupt. It’s their source of energy; the adrenalin of anger has become an addiction, and it’s toxic. That is what unresolved anger does; it torches all it touches till it’s all that’s left. A once healthy soul is slow-roasted to a burnt crisp by the inward heat, which is why it’s a deadly sin.

Most of Jesus’ followers came from villages where everyone knew everyone else’s business. Privacy is a modern luxury. Houses were only a room or two; life was lived in public. Anger between individuals quickly spills over, which is why Jesus notes the village elders as the first line of appeal, “But I say to you that everyone who is (continually) angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment.” In other words, “If the two of you can’t solve it, we will find help, for your benefit and the village since we’re all so dependent on one another.” Families and churches that don’t do this are neglecting their duties. Unresolved anger is a cancer that eats away at the healthy tissue of love and respect that holds us together. Better, as Barney Fife used to say, “to nip it in the bud.” If you don’t, it’s liable to escalate into slander and libel, which makes you liable to a higher court; and if continues beyond that and goes through the whole of life, it’s God who pronounces the judgment, “...and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.” Unaddressed anger escalates towards destruction and in the end destroys those who inflict it on others.

¹² PreachingToday.com under *anger*.

At the center of Jesus' treatment of the roots of murder is a vivid example in verses 23 and 24. The altar of which he speaks is in the courtyard of the Jerusalem temple. An altar is a place of sacrifice and reconciliation with God; it is a holy place. You come to an altar to do business with God. Perhaps it went something like this:

“It’s Passover, and my family made the pilgrimage from Nazareth down to the city of David. We’ve purchased our lamb and taken our place in line for the sacrifice. The knife will flash, the blood flow, the lamb will die, and we will remember that we came out of Egypt with Moses.

Standing here I look back twenty or thirty slots and see a neighbor of mine. Must have left after we did. Haven’t spoken in three months. I promised to help with the building of a new sheep pen but never followed through. I got busy, and besides that, our wives had a tiff the week before. Four of his ewes got out and were eaten by bears. I didn’t keep a promise, and it cost him dearly. We were once friends.

I would have to humble myself to make it right and pay the cost of the dead sheep as restitution. That’s too high a cost, personally and financially. Better to ignore him. Since we sit on opposite sides of the synagogue, it’s convenient. Don’t need his friendship anyway. My children can find other pals, and anyway, his wife gabs too much.”

The implication in Jesus’ example is that the worshiper is genuinely in the wrong, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that *your brother has something against you...*” This is not an accident of recall; it’s the work of the Spirit calling to mind a broken relationship that may be largely our fault. So take seriously who the Lord brings to mind in worship!

What Jesus calls for among his followers is radical action. Stop what you’re doing or your worship is empty. In my scenario it would mean getting out of line, going back to him in public, facing his anger, confessing my wrong, asking forgiveness, promising restitution, then following through to rebuild the friendship, the death of pride and isolation. I cannot be right with God by a sacrifice if I am not willing to be made right with my brother through humility. If I see you get up during the offering to mend a relationship, I will be encouraged. Pastor Bill Hybels was right, “The mark of community- true biblical unity- is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit.”¹³ The purpose of Jesus’ final illustration is that

¹³ Ibid.

it's never too late to take the initiative, even when the conflict is being adjudicated in court, because if you are in the wrong, the penalty may be severe. Until the judge speaks and the jailer comes, you still have space to maneuver.

CONCLUSION

In 1913, the Federal Government held a reunion at the 50th anniversary of Gettysburg. Thousands bivouacked in the old battlefield, swapping stories and looking up comrades. For the most part the old men got along well enough, but over dinner at a restaurant one evening harsh words passed between a Yankee and a rebel and they went at one another with forks: "Unscathed in the melee of 1863," one newspaperman wrote, "one of them- and I never learned which- was almost fatally wounded in 1913 with table hardware!"

The climax was a reenactment of Pickett's Charge. Thousands of spectators watched as Union veterans took their positions on Cemetery Ridge and waited as their old adversaries emerged from the woods and started forward again across the long, flat fields. "We could see," the reporter wrote, "not rifles and bayonets but canes and crutches. We soon could distinguish the more agile ones aiding those less able to maintain their places in the ranks."

As they neared the northern line, they broke into one final, defiant rebel yell. At the sound, "after half a century of silence, a moan, a sigh, a gigantic gasp of unbelief" rose from the Union men on Cemetery Ridge. "It was then," wrote Myers, "that the Yankees, unable to restrain themselves longer, burst from behind the stone wall, and flung themselves upon their former enemies ... not in mortal combat, but re-united in brother love and affection."¹⁴

That is what God wants among his people. The miracle is that it can begin today with each of us. Don't kid yourself, if you have not taken the initiative to heal a broken relationships and without accusation take responsibility for your part, even if it was the lesser, work remains to be done. Not because I said so, because Jesus said so, to both of us. Go get it right if at all possible; feel the burden lift, and bring us back a story to set the church on fire. Better yet, bring them back with you.

¹⁴ Ibid.
