

I invite you to open your bibles this morning to today's scripture text which can be found in Matthew, the 5th chapter, verses 21 - 26. We continue our series today in our discovery of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus's intimate teachings to us, his disciples, Jesus's teachings today covers one of the most important lessons in the whole New Testament, revealing the principle of peace.

Mt 5:21-26

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Jesus speaks with an authority which no other man had ever dreamed of assuming: the authority which Jesus assumed always amazed those who came into contact with him. Right at the beginning of his ministry, after he had been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, all of those who heard him speak said they were astonished with his teachings. The astonishing factor which Jesus taught with was as one who had authority, and not like scribes of the day. Matthew concludes his account of the Sermon on the Mount with the words: “ *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching for he taught them as one who had authority and not as the scribes*” (Matt 7:28,29)

It's difficult for us to realize just how shocking a thing this authority of Jesus must have seemed to the Jews who listened to him. To the Jew the Law was absolutely holy and absolutely divine; it is *impossible to exaggerate* the place that the *Law* had in their reverence. In their beliefs, the Law is holy and has been given by God. It was a common belief of the Rabbis that those who deny that the Law is from heaven, from God, have no part in the world to come. If anyone were to deny this fact, in any way, they show irreverence toward the Law and that would merit the destruction of their very soul. The first act of every synagogue service would be for the Rabbi to take the scrolls of the Law from the ark in which they were stored, and carry them around for the congregation to show their reverence for them, just as we showed our reverence for the Word of God with our praise to God after the reading of the Word.

That is what the Jews thought of the Law; and no fewer than five times Jesus quotes the Law, only to contradict it, and to substitute a teaching of his own. Jesus claimed the right to point out the inadequacies of the most sacred writings in the world, and he corrected them out of his own wisdom.

The Greeks describe authority, *exousia* (ex ou see' ah), as "the power to add and the power to take away at will." Jesus *claimed that power*, even with regard to *that* which the Jews *believed* to be the *unchanging* and *unchangeable word of God*. Jesus didn't argue about this, or seek in *any way* to justify himself for doing this. Jesus didn't seek to prove his right to do so. He calmly and without question assumed that right.

No one had ever heard anything like this before. The great Jewish teachers of that time had always had characteristic phrases in their teaching. Such as "Thus sayeth the Lord", or "There is a teaching that..." The teacher claimed no personal authority at all. The teachers only claim was that he spoke what God had told him. The scribes or the Rabbis never dared to express even an opinion of his own unless he could reinforce it with supporting quotations from the great teachers of the past. Independence was a quality that a teacher would never claim. But to Jesus, a statement required no authority other than the fact that he made it. He was his own authority.

So either Jesus was mad, or he was unique; either Jesus was a megalomaniac or he was the Son of God. No *ordinary person* would ever dare claim to *take and overturn* that which was regarded as the eternal word of God. The amazing thing about authority is that it is self-evidencing. No sooner does a person begin to teach than we know at once whether or not they have the right to teach. Authority is like an atmosphere about a person. The person doesn't need to claim it; the authority is either there, or it's not.

Jesus took the highest wisdom of men, and corrected it, because he was who he was. The Son of God. The main reason for this observation about Jesus' authority, is because it brings us right into our scripture today. As startling as Jesus' accent of authority was, the standard which he put before men was even more startling.

Jesus said, that *in God's sight*, it was not only the person who committed murder that was guilty; the person who was angry with his brother was also guilty and was liable for judgement. It was not only the person who committed adultery was guilty; but the person who allowed the unclean desire to settle in their heart was also guilty. Here our inner motive is connected with the outward act. We don't even need to commit the act; we only need to meditate on the act in our mind or heart to be subject to judgement. This was something entirely new, something which people have not fully grasped. Jesus is giving us here, an *all new revelation* that *complements* the Law. Jesus tells us here that it *wasn't enough* to **not commit** murder or adultery; the *only thing* sufficient, was never even to wish to commit the offenses.

Three points emerge from this:

Jesus was profoundly right, for *Jesus' way* is the *only way* to safety, to security, and to peace. For us to truly achieve peace, we must guard our minds and hearts closely. We must prevent ourselves from allowing an inner battle to occur within ourselves. To some extent we all have a split personality within ourselves. There is a part of us that is attracted to good, and a part of us that is attracted to evil. As long as we are like this, an inner battle will exist within us. One voice is inciting us to do the forbidden thing; and the other voice is forbidding us to do it.

Plato, a Greek philosopher, and the founder of the Academy in Athens, which was the first institution of higher learning in the Western world. Who was considered the most pivotal figure in the development of philosophy, compares our soul to a charioteer, who's task it was to drive two horses. One horse was gentle and obedient to the reins and to the word of command; the other horse was wild, untamed, and rebellious. The name of the first horse was reason; the name of the other was passion.

Life is always a conflict between the demands of the passions and the control of the reason. The reason is the leash which keeps the passions in check. But, a leash may snap at any time. Self-Control may be for just a moment off its guard – then what happens? As long as there is this *inner tension*, this *inner conflict*, life is insecure. With this circumstance, there will be no safety, there will be no peace. The only way we are going to achieve our safety, and our peace, according to Jesus, is to eradicate the desire for the forbidden thing, forever. Then, and only then, will there be safety. Then, and only then will there be peace.

Our second point, if never even wishing to do the act, is the case, then God alone can judge us. Because we only see the outward actions of a person; but God alone sees the secret of the heart and mind. There are so many people out there that outwardly have composure, who's outward actions are a model of integrity, honesty, decency, or even righteousness; but their inward thoughts stand condemned before God. There are many people that can stand the judgement of men, which is no more than a judgement of externals; but who's goodness collapses before the all seeing eye of God.

Thirdly, it means that everyone of us is in default; because there is none who can stand this judgment of God. Even if we have lived a life of outward moral perfection, there is none who can say that they have never experienced the forbidden desire for the wrong things. For this inner perfection, the only thing for us to say, is that we ourselves are dead and Christ lives in us. "I have been crucified with Christ", Paul says in Gal2:19,20, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me"

This new standard kills all pride, and forces us to Jesus Christ who alone can enable us to rise to that standard which he himself has set before us.

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

So here, is the first example of the new standard that Jesus talks about. The ancient Law had laid it down in Exodus 20:13. “you shall not kill” But Jesus lays it down here, that anger against each other is forbidden. In Jesus’ words, the person who is condemned is the person who is angry with someone *without a cause*. But the words *without a cause* are not found in any of the great manuscripts, and this is nothing less than a total prohibition of anger. It’s not enough to strike someone; the only thing that is enough, is not even to wish to strike someone; not even to have a had feeling against them within the heart.

In this passage, Jesus is arguing as a Rabbi might argue. He was showing that he was skillful in using the debating methods which the wise men of his time were in the habit of using. In this passage, there is a degree of anger, and an appropriate degree of punishment.

There is first the person who, as Jesus says, is *angry with his brother*. In Greek there are two words for angry. There is thumos, which was described as being like the flame which comes from dried straw. It is the anger which quickly blazes up and which just as quickly dies down. It is an anger which rises speedily, and which just as speedily passes. Then there is *orge (or ghee)*, which was described as anger that becomes hardened, anger that becomes incurable; hard-core anger. It is the long-lived anger; the anger that a person nurses their wrath to keep it warm; a brooding anger, one that we will not let die.

So then, Jesus condemns all selfish anger. The bible is clear that anger is forbidden. “The anger of man,” says James, “Does not work the righteousness of God.” (James 1:20) Paul orders his people to put off all “anger, wrath, malice, slander” (we find in Colossians 3:8)

When anger enters into the situation, nothing can be done rightly, nothing can be done sensibly. We could say that hard-core anger is “a brief insanity”

So, Jesus forbids forever the anger which broods, the anger which will not forget, the anger which refuses to be pacified, the anger which seeks revenge. If we are to obey Jesus, all anger must be banished from life. Especially the anger that lingers too long. We are warned that no one can be called Christian, and lose their temper because of any personal wrong that has been suffered.

Then Jesus goes on to speak of two cases where anger turns into insulting words. Jewish teachers forbade such anger and such words. They spoke of “oppression in words,” and of “the sin of insult.” They had a saying, “Three classes go down to Gehenna (the lake of fire) and return not -- the adulterer, he who puts his neighbor openly to shame, and he who gives his neighbor an insulting name.” Anger in a person’s heart, and anger in a person’s speech are equally forbidden.

We read in verse 22, that the person who calls his brother *Raca*, is condemned. *Raca* is an almost untranslatable word, because it describes a tone of voice more than anything else. Its whole accent is the accent of contempt. To call a person *Raca* was to call him a brainless idiot, a silly fool, an empty-headed blunderer. It’s the word of someone who despises another with an arrogant contempt.

The sin of contempt is liable to an even severer judgement. It is liable to the judgement of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. This shouldn’t be taken literally. It is as if Jesus said: “The sin of hard-core, incurable anger is bad; the sin of contempt is worse.” There is no sin quite so unchristian as the sin of contempt.

There is contempt which comes from pride of birth, and being a snob is in truth an ugly thing. There is contempt which comes from *position* and from *money*, and pride in material things is also an ugly thing. There is contempt which comes from knowledge, and of all snobberies intellectual snobbery is the hardest to understand, because no wise man was ever impressed with anything else than his own ignorance. We should **never** look *with contempt* upon *anyone* for *whom Christ died*.

Then Jesus goes on to speak of the man who calls his brother *moros*. *Moros* also means fool, it's the word *moron* comes from. The person who is *moros* is the person who is a moral fool. That person, is the person who is *playing the fool*. The psalmist spoke of the fool who has said in his heart that there is no God (Psalms 14:1) Such a person is a moral fool, a person who lived an immoral life, and, who in wishful thinking said that there was no God. To call a person *moros* was not to criticize their mental ability; it was to *cast slander on their moral character*; it was to smear and take their name and reputation from them, and to brand them as a loose-living and immoral person.

So, Jesus says that he who destroys his brother's name and reputation is liable to the severest judgement of all, the judgement of the fire of Gehenna. Gehenna, the lake of fire, or hell as most translations refer to it as, is identified with all that is accursed and filthy, the place where useless and evil things are destroyed. That is why it became a synonym for the place of God's destroying power, for hell.

So, then, Jesus insists that the gravest thing of all is to destroy a person's reputation and to take their good name away. No punishment is too severe for the malicious tale-bearer, or the gossip which murders people's reputations. Such conduct, in the most literal sense, is a hell-deserving sin.

What Jesus is saying here is this: "In the old days men condemned murder; and truly murder is forever wrong. But I tell you that not only are a man's outward actions under judgment; his innermost thoughts are also under the scrutiny and the judgement of God. Long lasting anger is bad; contemptuous speaking is worse, and the careless or the malicious talk which destroys a man's good name is worst of all." The person who is the slave of anger, the person who speaks in the accent of contempt, and the person who destroys another's good name, may never have committed a murder in action, but they are a murderer at heart.

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

The idea behind sacrifice is quite simple. If a person did a wrong thing, that action disturbed the relationship between them and God, and the sacrifice was meant to be the cure which restored that relationship. But there are two very important things that must be said about this. First, it was never held that sacrifice could atone for deliberate sin, for what the Jews called "the sin of the high hand." If someone unknowingly committed sin, if they were swept into sin in a moment of passion, when self-control broke, then, sacrifice was effective; but if a person deliberately, defiantly, callously, and open-eyed committed sin, then sacrifice was powerless to atone.

Second, to be effective, sacrifice had to include confession of sin and true penitence; and true penitence involved the attempt to rectify any consequences sin might have had.

If any sacrifice was to be valid, confession and restoration were involved. The picture which Jesus is painting is very vivid. Jesus is quite clear about this basic fact – we cannot be right with God until we are right with men; we cannot hope for forgiveness until we have confessed our sin, not only to God, but also to men, and until we have done our best to remove the practical consequences of it. Sometimes we may wonder why there seems to be a barrier between us and God, why our prayers seem unanswered. The reason may well be that we have erected that barrier, through being in conflict or discord with our fellow-man, or because we have wronged someone and have done nothing to put things right.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Here Jesus is giving us the most practical advice; he is telling us to get trouble sorted out in time, before it piles up even worse trouble for the future. He draws us a picture of two opponents on their way together to the law courts; and he tells them to get things settled and straightened out before they reach the court, for, if they do not, and the law takes its course, there will be still worse trouble for one of them at least in the days to come. This picture of two opponents on the way to court together seems to us a bit strange, and even improbable. But in the ancient world it often happened.

It is much more likely that Jesus would be thinking in terms of Jewish law; and this situation was by no means impossible under Jewish law. This is a case of debt, and, if peace is not made, the last farthing will have to be paid. When a man was adjudged guilty, he was handed over to the court officer. It was the duty of the court officer to see that the penalty was duly paid, and if it was not paid, he had the power to imprison the defaulter, until it was paid. It is no doubt of that situation that Jesus was thinking. Jesus' advice may mean one of two things.

It may be a piece of most practical advice. Again, and again it is the experience of life that, if a quarrel, or a difference, or a dispute is not healed immediately, it can go on breeding worse and worse trouble as time goes on, and peace may not likely happen. Bitterness breeds bitterness. It has often happened that a quarrel between two people has descended to their families, and has been inherited by future generations, and has in the end succeeded in splitting a church or a society in two.

If at the very beginning one of the parties had had the grace to apologize or to admit fault, a grievous situation need never have arisen. If ever we are at conflict with someone else, we must get the situation put right straight away. It may mean that we must be humble enough to confess that we were wrong and to apologize; it may mean that, even if we were in the right, we have to take the first step towards healing the breach. When personal relations go wrong, in most cases, immediate action will mend them; but if that immediate action is not taken, they will continue to deteriorate, the bitterness will spread in an ever-widening circle.

It may be that in Jesus' mind there was something more ultimate than this. It may mean that he is saying, "Put things right with your fellow-men, while life lasts, for some day – you know not when – life will finish, and you will go to stand before God, the final judge of all. A person cannot be right with God, unless they are right with their fellow-man. We must so live that the end will find us at peace with all people.

Ultimately what Jesus is saying to us in this scripture here today, "If you want peace in time, if you want peace in eternity, never leave an unreconciled quarrel or an unhealed breach between yourself and your brother man. Act immediately to remove the barriers which anger has raised."

CLOSING PRAYER

Heavenly Father we thank you so much for sending us your son Jesus,

We thank you that Christ died for us, and right now, we invite him

into our lives to be our Savior, to be our Prince of Peace.

Help us to live like people with the righteousness that reflects of the Glory of God

We realize Father that this means that we live a righteousness with our

brothers and sisters in Christ right here in this fellowship and to our neighbors

Help us to be honest with one another,

that we will not be too proud or arrogant to say I'm sorry, forgive me.

We pray that we will be people, when we face the Lord Jesus Christ,

who will hear him say, well done my good and faithful servant.

because we had integrity in our relationships.

We pray that you would set a watch before our mouths, bridle our tongues,

and set a watch before our emotions.

Help us to be sober minded in the way we think and respond

to our brothers and sisters in Christ and to our neighbors.

Thank you for your Grace, we marvel Lord when we read verses like this

that you would have anything to do any person in humanity.

Send us out now as your ministers of Love, as your ambassadors of Peace Lord.

