



From Anger to Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21-26

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Indeed we do have so much to be thankful for, don't we? The knowledge of the forgiveness of sin, the opportunity for ministry to one another, not to mention the material blessings that the Lord pours out upon us – we of all people should be most grateful. And grateful even for the opportunity when we come to the word of God to have it search our hearts, to have it confront our sin, and to have it set forth before us a standard that is higher than the place where we are currently living.

We are in the midst of a passage like that as we teach through the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount cuts us and exposes our sin and yet, at the same time, promises blessing upon the citizens of the kingdom of heaven that pursue the righteousness of God and desire that above all else in their lives. God is a God who dispenses blessing on His children. And we of all people, no matter what our current circumstances may be, should be people whose hearts are filled with gratitude because we live in a universe created by a gracious God and sustained by a gracious God, and if you are a Christian, you belong to that gracious God and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are surrounded by blessing above us and below us and to our left and to our right. And so we of all people can most sing of gratitude and thankfulness to the Lord.

And it is with that spirit that I want to bring you back to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. I would encourage you to turn there as we contemplate the reality of murder without bloodshed, the possibility of killing people without knives or guns, and seeing what the Lord says about this topic.

Last time we came and we did an overview of Matthew 5:21-48. And we saw that Jesus was expounding the significance of His statement in chapter 5:20. Look at verse 20 with me where it says:

For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

And what we did last time was something that was just really important for the whole of biblical theology and the whole of living a righteous life and understanding the kind of righteousness that God requires from you and from me – what is His standard? And what we saw was that even in the Old Testament, God required of Israel – He requires of us today – an inner heart righteousness that goes where other men cannot see. It goes to the depths of your heart, the depths of your being, the depths of your attitudes and

motivations and feelings and all of those things. It is in that inner sanctuary known only by you and God where He says, “I require righteousness.”

We read Jeremiah 17:10 last time, where the Lord said this:

I, the Lord, search the heart; I test the mind, even to give each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.

And if you think about that for very long, suddenly you feel very spiritually undressed before the throne of Almighty God – if I can make such a bold statement. You realize that there is no thought, no heart attitude, of yours that goes unnoticed by God. If you have ever been driving in a car, thinking you are alone, maybe stopped at the stop light and kind of doing the jig to the music that you like and then you look over and you see, “Oh, somebody is watching me” – and then you kind of do the thing like you were cool all along (laughter).

To a much greater extent, that should be the way that we feel. And to a more serious extent, that should be the way that we feel when we contemplate the reality that God searches our hearts. There is not a single thought that you have thought ever during the course of your life that wasn't intimately scrutinized by Him. And when you realize that you are a sinner just like I am, when you realize that you think thoughts that are unworthy of Him and that you harbor attitudes toward other people at least from time to time that are not worthy of Him, all of a sudden you have that sense of, “Oh, my goodness, this is serious. The almighty gracious God is seeing what I think.” And we realize that God requires a heart-felt spirituality, a heart-felt righteousness that transcends the external religion that is represented by the Pharisees of the first century or the external religion that satisfies the masses today.

God requires from us a spiritual life that conforms to His perfect holiness and His perfect righteousness. Understand: I'm not talking anything about your behavior here. I'm talking about who you are in the private depths of your heart. And we looked last time and kind of saw this as a bookend to what Jesus said in verse 20, a bookend at the end of chapter 5 where Jesus said, after going through a number of different spiritual attitudes and ways that we can sin in our heart attitudes, Jesus said:

Therefore, you are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.

And when we think about the righteousness of God from that kind of perspective and with that level of depth, we quickly realize that this convicts us and shows us that we are guilty before Him. No one could look at this standard, no one could look at the true standard of the law of God, the true standard of the righteousness of God and what He requires, and stand up and with any integrity say, “Yes, I've met that standard, I have accomplished what God requires.” Even that statement would be sinful, and so we are just utterly crushed before what this says.

What I need to help you understand, because I'm just deathly afraid of people running away from this and saying, "I don't want to listen to this; I'll get back when he talks about how to help me with living my life" – you have to understand that the true believer wants to respond to this. It is not without purpose that Jesus said in verse 6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they should be satisfied." And I believe many of you, if not most of you, are here because you have in some measure or another that desire for righteousness. But we have to see what God says that righteousness is; we have to understand it from His perspective. We don't want our own righteousness according to our own standard. We want the very righteousness of God; we want to live that out on a practical day-to-day life.

And the fact that seeing the standard convicts us, the fact that seeing the standard brings to mind our guilt, is not something that we resist or cross our arms and say, "I'm not going to hear that." The truth of the matter is that we come to this with an attitude of saying, "God, make it plain to me, make it plain to every one of us so that we would see this and respond to it, so that we could worship You in spirit and in truth." We want to be righteous, growing Christians, not simply people who go through the motions on a Sunday morning.

That kind of thought of being a Sunday morning-Sunday evening Christian should just be utterly repulsive to you when you realize that the Lord left the glories of heaven and came down to earth and lived His life for 33 years to offer Himself as a sacrifice for your sins. When you truly understand that, beloved, there is an urge within you, there is a hunger within you that says, "I have got to respond to that from the depths of my inner man, and I'm not going to put on a sham or a show of righteousness that doesn't conform to an inner reality in my heart."

And so Jesus is helping us with this as we go through verses 21-48. He is helping us to see exactly what it is that God requires deep in the depths of your heart in such a pristine purity. We say without hesitation that if we attain to it and consistently live it that our lives would be much better off, that we would know the blessing of God, we would know the peace of God more deeply and more profoundly than our current experience of it is.

As I said last time, in verses 21-48 Jesus is giving us six illustrations of what the inner righteousness that God requires looks like. He is illustrating it; everything that follows in what we are going to talk about in the weeks to come is inextricably linked to verse 20 where He said, "Your righteousness must surpass the scribes and Pharisees' if you wish to enter the kingdom of heaven." This is what God's righteousness looks like and so Jesus is expounding on that theme.

What we are going to do today is we are going to look at the first illustration of the depth of righteousness that God requires as Jesus exposes the dreadful, wicked, evil sin of anger. Look at verses 21-26 with me as I read them. Jesus said:

You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder," and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." 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.

Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering.

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. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

If you are taking notes this morning, we are going to break this passage down into three points, and the first point of it is, in terms of seeing the righteousness of God and understanding how it applies to your life in this particular area of dealing with anger:

1. See Anger as a Terrible Sin

We see that in verses 21 and 22. It is not an innocent thought that you keep to yourself as you cultivate bitterness in your heart; no, it is a horrible sin, lived out in the sight of a holy God who sees every thought and intention of your heart.

Jesus starts us out in verse 21 by saying, "You have heard that the ancients were told..." As we said last time, Jesus throughout this passage is refuting the current teaching that existed at that time amongst the Pharisees, and He starts with the sin of anger. And He says: "You have heard that the ancients were told "You shall not commit murder," and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." The Pharisees weighed out this sixth commandment and they said in one sense it was true enough as far as it goes, "You shall not commit murder..." But the Pharisees had taken that truth and turned it into a lie because they hadn't taught everything that was connected with the reality of that commandment. They only talked about it in terms of the human judgment that would come, "Whoever commits murder would be liable to the court..." and they were utterly silent on the inner reality that God commanded through that commandment that "You shall not commit murder," they said nothing about that. And so what they did was they pulled down the standard of God to something that only prohibited an outward act of murder. And if you hadn't committed the outward act of murder, then you were innocent of any guilt before the sixth commandment.

Jesus says, "You heard this taught." And what He does in verse 22 is He takes that and rips away all of the false diminishment of the law that the Pharisees had covered up with. They had covered it up with blankets of omission. Jesus pulls all of those blankets back and says, "Here is what the law really requires." Look at verse 22. Speaking on His own authority, He says:

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.

Jesus says, "Let Me tell you what the sixth commandment is really about: it is about prohibiting the outward act of murder, but it goes to the inward attitude that produces the act of murder." Murder flows from a heart that has been engendered by anger and hatred or retaliation or whatever it is. What Jesus is saying as He is teaching here on the Mount, He is saying, "Understand that the law of God and the commandment against murder starts at the heart; it doesn't let you get engaged in your heart with all of these wicked thoughts and then stop you just before you plunge the knife. No, it goes all the way back – that initial thought is what is being prohibited."

Jesus says, "Everyone who is angry." The term that He uses here is often used to refer to a simmering anger, the kind of slow boil that some of you know, against another person – not so much talking about a violent outburst. A violent outburst would be covered by the external act of murder. Jesus says the law of God forbids you from maintaining that inward attitude of seething of resentment, of bitterness, against another person. He says God sees that, God condemns it, God forbids it – you cannot do that. And all of a sudden, our hearts are exposed like nothing before.

He says, "Everyone who is angry with his brother..." He uses this word "brother," and in this setting it would be a broad term to refer to any Jewish person in that culture. Not just limited to people of faith, not limited to Christians, but the whole idea here as Jesus spoke it would be referring to anyone who is a brother by Jewish lineage in that culture. If we are applying it to our time, we should take it in the broad sense of a neighbor, someone that we have a relationship with, and not try to simply limit it to fellow Christians within the church, in order for us to get the full sense of what Jesus' words are here.

Remember, Jesus is giving an expansive teaching about the totality of your heart. There are not artificial restrictions on this sphere of relationships – "You can't be angry here, but in other places you can." No, that doesn't work at all, especially when you look just a few verses later at verses 43 and 44 of chapter 5. Let your eyes run down there so that you can see the fullness of this. Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven...

And so if you are commanded to love them, commanded to love your enemies, even those who are outside of the church, then it would be obvious in the totality of what Jesus is speaking that you can't cherish anger against them in that outer circle of relationships. And then if that's true, then how much more as you go into the inner circle of your relationships within the body of Christ – how much more so within the inner relationships

of your family and those closest relations to you. So whether you start from the outside and go in in your sphere of relationships or from the inside and work your way out, Jesus says that that kind of anger is absolutely prohibited. In fact He says that kind of anger incurs a guilt that is enough for you to go into the fiery hell. Guilty, He says – that anger is worthy of eternal judgment because God requires an inner righteousness.

If you think about it this way, that anger in your heart violates the inner sanctum where God is supposed to be loved with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, where the God of love and peace is to be worshiped. And so you can't bring that kind of bitterness into the very inner temple of God and expect Him to pronounce you innocent, can you? Of course not. And what Jesus does here is He elevates our awareness and elevates our consciousness of how seriously God takes all of these things. He says people who indulge in these actions and attitudes are subject to judgment.

And He kind of works His way up: subject to judgment, subject to the Sanhedrin, subject to the fiery hell. The Sanhedrin was the highest Jewish court in the land of that day. Fiery hell was a reference that – literally in the Greek, the “Gehenna of fire” – refers to a physical ravine outside of Jerusalem where rubbish was dumped and burned. It became a symbol for eternal judgment itself. What Jesus is doing is He is just laying out the fact that there is guilt attached to all of this, attached to the angry thoughts, attached to the angry, contemptuous words that come out of our mouths.

Now just as a point of interpretation in verse 22 where Jesus goes from talking about being angry and saying “You good-for-nothing” and “You fool” – on first reading, you might think, and some good commentators do, that Jesus was giving a progression here, that He was going from the least culpable sin up to the most damning kind of anger. But I don't really think that is what's going on here. The main reason that I don't is because it's hard for me to distinguish the difference of saying out of anger, “You good-for-nothing, you empty head,” and then turning around and saying out of the same kind of anger, “You fool” – what's the difference? It can't be significant enough that one is only subject to human judgment, the other one is doomed to receive eternal damnation. Either way you go, you will be talking about the same kind of anger that Jesus condemns.

What I – and many other commentators – think is that Jesus is simply using three different expressions here. He is multiplying the examples and using repetition to make His point. The repetition of different kinds of anger makes you feel the weight of His pronouncement, as if Jesus is saying, “I've said it, I'll say it now, and I'll say it again: That kind of anger and the words that give expression to it are subject to judgment; they lie at the root of murder, and – get this – they bear guilt just as much as the physical act of murder itself.” The same level of accountability that God brings to someone who plunges the knife in the heart will be brought to you for your angry words and your angry attitudes and your seething bitterness.

What does that mean? Well, obviously, starting at one point, it means that you can't carry that seething anger against a Christian or non-Christian – it's pretty comprehensive. It's not about the person that you are angry with; it's about your own heart that Jesus is

driving the point home to. Beloved, we have to take this seriously. You know, we would gladly proclaim that we believe in the holiness of God – all of you in here would in one manner or another would say, “Yes, I affirm the holiness of God.” Well, understand that the Bible says that you should be holy as God Himself is holy. And so there are implications to your theology that go beyond what we teach and what we believe and it goes to what you do and even more, it gets drilled down into the depths of your heart and the kinds of attitudes that you carry about with you.

Jesus is showing us how God views such attitudes, and what He says is that God sees that anger, He sees that seething bitterness, and He calls forth His judgment.

How could you claim to have fellowship with the risen Christ, the holy Christ, the meek and humble Christ, who prayed to the Father to forgive those who crucified Him, when you yourself are bitter at your spouse or your kids or your co-workers or your neighbors? That just doesn't fit; that's oil and water.

And we have to take it seriously and realize that we have got to purge all of that stuff out of our hearts and take it seriously because God takes it seriously and not be content with the fact that people see your external behavior and don't see anything to condemn so you can kind of maneuver around. No, there is no room to maneuver with that kind of bitterness in your heart because God sees it even if no one else does. And so we are just brought face to face with the reality and one of the implications of living out our lives in the presence of the holy God. The fact that your anger resides in your private thoughts doesn't mean that it is a private matter that you don't have to worry about. In God's eyes it is public; it is out on display because it is there for Him to see.

Charles Spurgeon saw this issue well when he said this:

When I have a hasty thought against a man and wish him out of the world, I have killed him in thought, and even though I may disguise the wish under the expression of wishing him into heaven, there is guilt in the desire. Oh the hard, cruel, black thoughts which men have toward one another, when they are angry: why they kill and slay a thousand times over. These hasty sins are soon forgotten by us, but they are not soon forgotten by God.

And so beloved, we need to see anger for the terrible sin that it is, the wicked sin that it is. God's commandment against murder not only forbids the physical taking of the life, but also the anger which leads to it and the words which show the anger which is in the heart. I had a preacher a number of years ago who said that whenever he hears somebody expressing anger with their words and speaking against somebody harshly or something like that, he'll say, “Time-out: your heart is showing.” That's a good statement because the Bible says we speak from that which fills our heart.

And beloved, it is my responsibility and I would not be faithful to my calling if I didn't make clear to you that that kind of anger, if it is the pattern of your life, will keep you out of heaven. The apostle Paul said in Galatians 5:19-21:

The deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The apostle John said something similar in 1 John 3:15, where he said:

Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Wow. Wow! This confronts us with all that is within our hearts. Your heart is laid open before God, and you are not allowed to nurse anger or bitterness toward another person without sacrificing your assurance that you are a genuine Christian. That's how searching, that's how serious, that's how far-reaching all of this goes. And you say, "I'm not like that." You say, "But I can't do that – I mean, I'm guilty of murder!" That, beloved, is precisely the point, if you get that, you get what Jesus is saying and you see how dreadfully serious this is.

What you need to say, the next step that you need to take in your thinking is this, if you realize that about yourself, you have to realize that the problem is not with God's standard of righteousness. The problem is not that God grades on too tough of a curve. The problem is that you are a sinner and fall short of God. You fall short of the perfect character of Jesus and that puts you under judgment. Anger is a serious sin. Countless numbers of people will plunge into eternal perdition on account of it despite their outward morality.

And the conviction that it brings upon your heart and soul and mind should drive you to Christ, drive you to Him, cause you to run to Him and say, "Oh, Jesus, I am a sinner, and I have heard something about You shedding your blood on the cross to take away my sin. I have heard something about Your righteousness. I need something outside of me to deliver me. Have mercy on me the sinner." That's where this should drive you.

It drives you away from yourself. It brings you to a point where you say with utter conviction, without any qualification, where you say, "I'm a ruined sinner on my own before the throne of God and if there is to be any hope for me, if there is to be any deliverance for me from my sin, if I'm ever going to enjoy fellowship with God in heaven, it has to come through the blood and righteousness of Christ because there is nothing in me that would merit that. The truth of the matter is that what's in me calls for God's judgment." And it drives you to grace, it drives you to the cross.

Now, just to clarify what's at stake here and at the risk of going on a little bit of a bunny trail, let me ask you a question – it may be in the minds of some of you and it comes up as people talk about this whole principle of anger and all of that – as you read through the gospels, you might be saying to yourself, "Wasn't Jesus angry? I seem to remember Him

taking a whip in a temple. I seem to remember Him overturning tables. Is Jesus guilty of inconsistency? Didn't He Himself call the Pharisees fools and blind men?"

Well, He did, but He was sinless – we know that. What Jesus was expressing in those instances – which aren't even a part of the Sermon on the Mount but I want to address the point – that's not the kind of anger that Jesus is talking about here in Matthew 5. That kind of anger is a righteous anger against those who attack the kingdom and glory of God. Jesus displayed a righteous anger; not all anger is sinful. Jesus displayed a righteous anger to vindicate the glory of God. And so yes, He became animated about that; there is no sin in that kind of anger. The Bible says about Jesus: "Zeal for Thy house consumes Me." But that's not the kind of anger that Jesus is describing here in Matthew 5. He is describing that sinful anger against others in personal relationships that flows from a heart of resentment, jealousy, or personal offense.

The truth of the matter is – let me state it a different way – don't be real quick to equate your kind of anger with the kind of anger that Jesus expressed, okay? Don't fool yourself into saying, "I'm just defending the glory of God as I harbor that bitterness against my spouse, that bitterness I've been harboring for five years or more. This is about the glory of God! Can't she ever get it right?" No, that doesn't work. Don't flatter yourself and justify sinful anger by comparing it to the righteous display of anger that Jesus had.

And here's the clincher on that: you know as well as I do that most of the time if we feel ourselves welling up with anger and getting that little bit of burn in our soul, it's because someone has stepped into our space, someone has done something we don't like. Realize and receive the conviction that comes of Jesus' response when that happened to Him: when it was personal to Jesus, when He was beaten, when He was spat upon, when the crown of thorns was thrust on His head by sinners, He did not retaliate, He did not respond in anger, He did not respond in kind.

The apostle Peter describes it this way – 1 Peter 2:23:

While being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.

With nails in His hand and a nail through His feet, with parched lips and unable to breathe because of the manner of crucifixion, somehow He forced out the words from His lips, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." That, beloved, is the standard; that is the example and I realize that we don't meet it. What we need to do is just speak flat out with that and say, "Yes, Lord, that is good, that is holy, that is righteous, and that is my standard; and Jesus, forgive me for having a different approach from the depths of my heart."

And so we just deal with this – we deal with this anger, we see what the righteousness of Christ is like, we see Him responding under provocation and responding in meekness, and we realize that when we are not like that that it's a terrible sin, it's a wicked sin that violate His standard, and we confess that.

Well, Jesus goes on in this passage, and – keeping in mind that He is really primarily dealing with the relational aspects and the relational implications of anger in this passage – and so in verse 23, He moves on and He draws some implications from it and leads us to our second point which is this:

2. Seek Reconciliation First

First point was “See anger as a terrible sin.” Second point is “Seek reconciliation first of all,” as seen in verses 23 and 24. Look at them with me where it says:

Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

Jesus doesn't simply condemn anger as sin; He shows you what to do about it if you have broken relationships that have caused bitterness. He starts with that word “therefore” in verse 23. So whatever He is going to say here in verses 23 and 24 flows out of the recognition that anger creates great guilt and the connection is this: Because anger incurs such great guilt, you should seek reconciliation in any broken relationships that you have. The commandment against murder in light of its heart application means that you must take positive steps to pursue right relationships with those around you. And this is just an echo of what Jesus said in Matthew 5:9 – “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” A Christian is someone who actively seeks peace and pursues it.

And as He comes here in verse 23 – look at the verse with me again – He says, “Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar...” You miss this in English, but in the original language, He has gone from a “we” in English; we use “you” to refer to plural. I could say “you”, all of you. And we also use that same word “you” in the first person singular, I say “you, Tom,” or whatever. In the Greek you can make a distinction between the two, you can make a distinction between “you” plural and “you” singular. In verse 22, He was talking in the plural. Here in verse 23, He switches to singular and it makes Jesus' words more pointed and direct.

It is as if He were looking you straight in the eye, pointing directly at you with this statement. He says “If you,” individual – forget about the crowd that surrounds you; you, individual, if you find yourself in this position, here is what you need to do. And He sets forth the priority; He uses that word “first.” He says there in verse 24, “First, be reconciled to your brother.” What is it that I do first, Lord? And this is so very practical and searching. What Jesus is teaching in these verses is that there is a greater priority that reconciles human relationships before you bring your worship to God.

Jesus uses the picture of a Jewish worshiper, approaching the altar to present a sacrifice. He has brought it all up, the event is about to happen, and it is right at that moment when he would lay his hand on the head of the sacrifice and he remembers, “My brother has

something against me.” What Jesus says is, “Walk away from the sacrifice, go find your brother, and be reconciled to him; work it out.”

It applies to us today here in this room, applies as you come to church, applies during the week as you pursue your prayer and quiet time. You can’t do those acts when you consciously have broken relationships in your life without multiplying your sin. That’s what Jesus says – He says, “Go and be reconciled,” “Leave your offering at the altar.” If you love God, reflect it, live it out; put anger to death, mortify it by pursuing peace with those that you have been in opposition with. Psalm 66:18 says:

If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.

And beloved, I want to tell you, this is a great motivation to personal holiness, this is a great motivation to keep your relationship peaceful, because the last thing that you want to do is to let a human relationship sour, let a human relationship go unresolved and carry on your conscience the realization that this interferes with my ability to worship God – that’s what Jesus says.

And here is the point. You can’t say, “You know, Don, that’s right. I’m going to take care of that real soon. You know, later this week, I’m going to take care of that.” No. No, Jesus’ point is that you do it now. You do it despite the inconvenience, despite the interruption to your plans, despite the embarrassment that it may cause to you. It is more important to you to clear up those matters than it is for you to show up on Sunday at worship. God would be pleased if some of you missed the worship service and went out and dealt urgently with reconciliation – maybe with the person you are sitting next to.

As I was preparing to preach on this, I couldn’t help but remember a personal instance of this in my own life. This stuff convicts me too, by the way. I don’t speak down; I speak as a fellow sinner in need of grace. I couldn’t help but remember a rough time that Nancy and I had early in our marriage. It was entirely her fault (laughter). Wait, I read that wrong (laughter). It was my fault – I have it right here in my notes. It was my fault. I had gotten upset with her and I hadn’t resolved it right away. I kind of let it fester over a period of time. In the meantime, I was deep in my spiritual growth as I thought, planning to go to seminary. And this went on for a period of time – the amount of time doesn’t matter for the point that I’m making. But eventually it all came to a head and I was there with a bad situation on my hands and I had to come to the point to confess to Nancy over the bitterness that I had carried – it was not her fault. But what I realized at that moment, in that particular moment that is still vivid in my mind, was that I could not pretend to be a growing Christian, pursuing Christian ministry – I couldn’t put myself into seminary with that kind of bitterness in my heart. That’s a travesty; that’s mocking God to act that way. You don’t pursue those kinds of things when it is not true in your home life. I couldn’t use seminary to cover up my lack of inner righteousness.

And in the same way beloved, you can’t use this place to cover up a similar kind of lack in your own life. That’s not what church is for; that’s not what your quiet times and prayer times are for. You don’t make up for your lack of inner righteousness by

multiplying your religious observances – it doesn't work that way. That's just reflective of the fact that you still got a bit of a works-based salvation in your mindset – thinking that God doesn't see what is going on in your heart while you are multiplying all these other things. Don't insult the Spirit of grace that way. Don't insult God by pretending that He doesn't see that and that He doesn't command what is going on in your heart – He is Lord over all of it. Don't mock Him; don't multiply your sins. Simply what you need to do is to go and do whatever you can to reconcile that relationship as a matter of first priority, because you cannot please God with your external worship if you are presenting it with a bitter heart toward another man. Jesus talks about this also in chapter 6 at the end of the Lord's Prayer, or the Disciples' Prayer, but we will leave that for another time.

The good news, beloved, is that when you do this, when you respond to the word of God and when you go to clear those relationships, God meets you with His grace; God meets you with the enabling power that you need to do that. And beyond that moment of reconciliation and the embarrassment of that moment – beyond that lies a clear conscience, renewed spiritual vigor, renewed joy because you are living out the reality of your salvation and God blesses the inner man with joy when that inner man is responding to the truth of His word – it's glorious, it's gracious. He convicts us in order to heal us – it's a blessed thing.

So anger and resentment are terrible sins and you need to seek the reconciliation of those issues first as you pursue the inner righteousness that God requires from those who belong to His kingdom.

There is a final point and I'll make it quickly:

3. Seek Reconciliation Fast

Look at verses 25 and 26 with me where Jesus says:

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. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

He is using an illustration of the kind of urgency that you should bring to bear on this task. He says to do it quickly, make friends quickly, don't wait. This idea of "I'll do it later" is lethal to your spiritual life. It dulls your conscience, it makes you comfortable with sin, and it makes it easier for you to let it go another day and another day and then you quench the Spirit of God on this point. Don't do that, Jesus says. He is using the picture of two parties to a lawsuit on their way to court, facing an uncertain outcome. I understand how this works. In litigation, when you are litigating cases, cases always settle more quickly the closer you get to the trial day because people start to realize, "You know, I don't know how this is going to come out." And all of the bravado and all of the posturing that you have done, on the day when judgment is going to come down, you say,

“You know what? I don’t want to take a risk here. I’d rather settle on my own terms and get something rather than risk losing it all based on the decision of the judge.” Jesus is just making a simple point here when He says to resolve the issue now while you can before the resolution is taken out of your hands. He is stressing the urgency of personal reconciliation. Judgment is looming, and He says therefore keep clear of malice, keep clear of offense toward others, because even the one who is angry with his brother will be subject to accountability for it.

The truth of the matter is that many of our broken relationships could have been spared if there had been communication and action at the right time. And Jesus says the right time to deal with that is when you are conscious that you are at odds with someone else – it is the mark of spiritual growth, it is the mark of spiritual maturity.

And beloved, I say this with love, but I say it plainly, if you are a person who finds yourself in many conflicts as pattern of your life, you really need to step back and take some spiritual inventory, even if you are saying “Those conflicts are just me standing up for the truth of God,” because Proverbs 16:7 says:

When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.

Kent Hughes, the fine pastor in Wheaton, Illinois, leads us to the conclusion that this passage brings us to when he said this:

The radical righteousness that Jesus demands is not merely a refraining from outward sin – it is interior. And again we are made to see that our only hope is Christ who fulfilled all righteousness and offers it to us as a free gift. Jesus’ radical demand is meant to drive us to Him for grace. Have you done so? Murderers are welcome.

Let’s pray.

Father, as we respond to these searching words, I pray that those who do not know Christ would be confronted with their need to repent of their sins and to receive Christ and His righteousness as the first response to this. And Father, for those of us that are in Christ, Father, would You search our hearts with the question, “Are your relationships what they should be? Is your heart a peaceful sanctuary where God can dwell at home without having His character violated?”

Father, we pray that our hearts would be pure. And for those of us that have things to do as a result of hearing this truth from Your word, would You give each one of us, Father, that measure of grace that we need to take the first step and then meet us with multiplied grace as You work out relationships and bring resolution to some matters maybe that have even existed for years, O God. Because as we respond to this, Father, we are responding to Your command, we are responding to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ,

and we ask that You would superintend with Your grace the kind of reconciliation that Jesus calls us to.

And Father, if there is someone outside the walls of this room that simply will not reconcile with us, let us not be content or smug in that; let us mourn over that and pray for that person, recognizing that the call to make peace is in so far as depends upon us. So we ask You, Father, make us peacemakers, cleanse us from our guilt of anger, our sinfulness, and restore us with Your grace that alone is able to make us stand and to come back to that grace in the perfection of Christ, that righteousness that is outside of us which alone can make us fit to stand before You in your presence.

Thank you for the abundance of Your grace. May we know it fully as we leave this place. In Jesus' name, amen.

This transcript was prepared by Shari Main.