

Reconciliation Comes First
Matthew 5:21-24

May 19, 2019

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Today's Scripture is comprised of words that are quoted from Jesus the Christ. Jesus is the authority. Due to his divine status he knows God, the will of God, and the law. Jesus does not distract from law. He adds to the law.

In chapter 4 Jesus is led by the Spirit into the desert to face temptation. Then he starts his ministry in Galilee and begins to recruit his disciples. News spreads throughout the area about his healing and his teaching. As a consequence large crowds follow him. Then he gives the Sermon on Mount. Today's Scripture is part of that sermon. Jesus' sermon is new teaching. It is different from what the people have heard before; different from what they are familiar with; different from the religious leaders and it is very significant.

In seminary I was engaged in a discussion with my professor. I was talking about my biggest frustration within the realm of religion. That is, a lot of people get off track, believe what they want to believe, and embrace a dogmatic doctrine that does not match the teaching of the Bible. He mentioned a concept that he called "centered theology." He was able to summarize what I have thought about for years. I plan to address centered theology in my next newsletter article. It is a founding principle of the Disciples of Christ. Centered theology is theology that is centered on the teachings of Jesus. The main focus is Jesus' words spoken and action taken as opposed to human doctrine. It is a focus on the New Testament Bible over human opinions. So, the teachings of Jesus - all of the teachings of Jesus - are very significant.

According to Jesus anger is a sin. Now, I would like to stop and give that time to sink in. Anger is a sin. We have all been angry. Anger is a normal human emotion. When somebody does something wrong to you, hurts you, steals from you, lies to you, or breaks a promise, you can't help but be mad. If somebody hurts someone I love, I can't help but be mad! But according to Jesus anger is a sin. There is no way out of this! You can't tear out this page from the Bible. You can't skip this chapter and pretend it does not exist. You can't rationalize that maybe Jesus wasn't really serious about this. Well, let's analyze just how serious Jesus is. Jesus takes the worst case scenario which is murder and he says that if you murder someone "you are liable to judgment." Then he takes this new lesson on anger and says "you are liable to judgment." So, anger gets same consequence as murder. So, Jesus says this for a specific reason; to show just how serious this offense is to God. This does not mean that anger is as bad as murder. We all know that murder is extremely worse. Jesus does not say what the punishment is, he says "you are liable to judgment." This means you have to answer to God for your anger just like you have to answer to God for murder.

Jesus says with a brother or sister. Well, we are all brothers and sisters. We are adopted by Christ as siblings of his into the family of God. So, brothers and sisters means all of us. If you are angry with anyone it is a sin and is liable to judgment. Then Jesus builds up intensity for drama and to have more impact. He goes from being "liable to judgment" to "liable to the

council." According to Jesus if you insult someone it is a sin and "liable to the council." Then he goes from being "liable to the council" to being "liable to the hell of fire." According to Jesus if you call someone a fool it is a sin and "liable to the hell of fire." Jesus is being dramatic to emphasize seriousness of this offense. So, you cannot simply ignore the lesson.

To help understand the Bible it helps if we frame the Scripture within its context. Before this time people had the Old Testament law where an offense often resulted in vengeance. Pay back was virtually always greater than the original offense. The reason for this was to discourage the offense in the first place. For example if someone was caught stealing they would cut off a hand. In that culture vengeance tended to escalate. Whatever the offense, vengeance was greater. The Old Testament law brought justice and order by containing vengeance. It helped to eliminate the escalation of violence. During the time of Jesus it was OK to be angry, you were expected to be angry, demand justice and expect to get it. Well, Jesus gives a lesson that is totally different from common expectations. Anger is a sin. Insulting someone is a sin. Calling someone a fool is a sin. Jesus teaches that you have to answer for these offenses just like you have to answer for murder.

This is a hard lesson. But Jesus takes it a step further and adds to the lesson by teaching reconciliation. Jesus teaches us that reconciliation comes first. Not only are anger, insulting others, or calling someone a fool, serious offenses to God, but reconciliation is so important to God that it even comes before the offering. Jesus is not teaching to neglect the offering or withhold your offering. Jesus is teaching to go and be reconciled first. Reconciliation is a top priority. It is not enough just to do away with your anger, you must make an effort at reconciliation. Jesus is teaching get rid of your anger and make an effort to resolve whatever you are angry about and whatever someone else may be angry at you for. You are commanded by Jesus to do two things. One is to avoid the offense. Do not be angry. Do not insult others. Do not call someone a fool. The other is to make reconciliation. Resolve your anger to others. Make an effort to resolve any grievance another may have with you.

I am going to conclude with a question. How on earth can we do this? How on earth are we expected to have zero anger? Maybe I can get through life and not intentionally insult very many people. I confess, certainly I have insulted way too many people during my lifetime. Maybe now that I know better there will only be a few offenses here and there and I can seek repentance when I slip up. Maybe I can even be disciplined and exercise restraint and go without calling someone a fool. But, how on earth are we expected to have zero anger? The answer is to be like Jesus. Forgive absolutely everything and love everyone.