



Conflict and Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21-26

Grace Church Waco | 1.24.21

When you believe the gospel, what the good news of Jesus to you ultimately does is it rearranges you back towards reality. And sometimes that rearranging involves a bit of a shift: a shift in thinking, a shift in action, a shift of the heart. So for the last few weeks in January we have been asking: “how does the gospel change and shift specific parts of my everyday life.” We started by seeing that the gospel impacts our vocation by allowing us to see very part of our lives as a gift from God to be invested in his kingdom. Then we saw how the gospel impacts our stage of life, whether single or married, and teaches us that we are not our own but we live to God, no matter our relational status. Last week we saw in God’s word how the gospel story impacts the day to day of discipleship for the next generation in the home and the church. Today then we ask this question: what does the life and death and resurrection of Jesus say about my relationships? Does it speak to disagreements, to relational stress, to disunity, to what I feel when someone says or does something to anger or wrong me?

And of the course, as we believe the Word of God is entirely sufficient for all of life, the answer is yes. Today in this simple text from the Sermon on the Mount, we will find these two truths:

1. **Jesus became angry, insults, and stereotypes—so you don’t have to dish them out.**
2. **Jesus reconciled you to God—so you can be reconciled to those you’ve wronged and those who have wronged you.**

Let’s get right to it.

Jesus became angry, insults, and stereotypes—so you don’t have to dish them out (21-22)

I am a millennial—social media was just beginning its monumental rise about the same time I was old enough to begin partaking in it. Never before have I seen the amount of anger, division, insulting, disrespect, and stereotyping as I have in the last year online. This is the currency of our public discourse, this is the way we treat those created in the image of God. It’s par for the course to call someone stupid, ignorant, foolish, bigoted. And Jesus calls it murder.



Take a look in **verses 21-22**. If you consider the correlation Jesus makes between murder and anger and insults to be radical and a bit shocking, then you are getting the picture. Here in Matthew 5, Jesus has just launched into the meat of his most famous recorded teaching: the Sermon on the Mount. After he rearranges expectations of blessing in verses 1-12 and points to the importance of public virtue in verses 13-16, we come to his remarks in 17-20, the text immediately before ours. Notice what Jesus says to the gathered crowd in verse 17 and 20.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus is a master rhetorician. He anticipates that his sermon is going to be met with confusion. For the rest of chapter 5, he will begin each of his teaching with the phrase we find in **verse 20**. “You have heard it said”, followed by the phrase of verse 21: “but I say to you.” Jesus is contrasting his teaching with the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes, the teaching handed down to the people of Israel all the way from the law of Moses. So he knows that some will think: is he completely abolishing the law? What does he think he is doing? So before he gets to his contrast between what the interpretation of Moses that they have been taught and the one that he will teach, he reassures them: my teaching is not new. I have not come to abolish the law, to get rid of it. Rather, I have come to fulfill it. I have come to show you the very heart of the law, to show you what you have been missing all along. I am the fulfillment, Jesus says, because I am the king of the kingdom, and the king has come to show that all the laws and commands and ethics you have been taught really find their place in me. Jesus Christ then is the full embodiment of the ethics of the kingdom of God.

And what does he say about the ethics of this kingdom? Unless your righteousness *exceeds* that of the scribes and pharisees, you will not enter. In other words: Jesus has not come to relax the standard of living for his people, he has come to up the ante. And so he starts with a pillar of any just society: the command against murder.

In **verse 21** Jesus makes note: those who commit murder are liable to judgement. The judgement he refers to here is *civil* judgement as well as divine judgement. Particularly in the mosaic law, anyone who took the life of another was liable to the judgement of death. But even in Roman society, there were commands against murder, as there are in our day today. Virtually every organized society in human history has had laws against murder, the ancient sin of man that infiltrated even the first human family. Why? Because murder is the ultimate example of a denegration of humanity. It fails to protect the right that is central to living in any community: the right to life.

At the core of the command not to murder is the Biblical doctrine of the *imago dei*, which means the “image of God.” Christians have always believed that every man and woman and child is created by God with value and dignity and worth. Not because of their actions or inactions, or because of their abilities or skills, but simply because they are a creation of God almighty. God has



placed on every man and woman and child a picture of himself, literally a stamp of his character and nature. And so to murderously take away the life of a human being is to spit in the face of God by destroying and devaluing his image bearer.

I don't have to explain to you, then, why the Christian ethic that Jesus Christ affirms in full force in this text values human life so dearly. From conception to natural death, human life is sacred, and we mourn when it is taken at the hands of men. The very existence of abortion in our society should make the depths of our soul lament and cry out for justice. The historic injustices of our country in murdering and lynching black men and women should pain us deeply. Euthanasia and assisted suicide should be unimaginably tragic to us. Cultural attitudes that create hate and give rise to heightened criminal activity should wake us up. Even our stance on just war and any infliction of capital punishment, whatever it is, should give us pause, should be considered with nuance and sobriety.

All of the realities of murder in our world should bring our souls to a place of quiet. Since the fall of Adam, a trajectory was set in place for natural man to naturally reject the sanctity of life and to kill. This, rightfully so, is liable to the judgement of both man and God.

But Jesus is not so concerned here with a reiteration of what we know. Instead, what does he say in **verse 22**? Jesus' words here are meant to not just confront the murderers, but any and all who fail to value the sanctity and dignity of those made in the image of God. We may try to identify some ascending scale of judgement here in this verse, but I think that misses the point. Rather than seeing this as three different scenarios with three different punishments, Jesus' main point is to show three different ways that although we may not murder, we are guilty of the root of murder before God. We can divide these three offenses against the image of God as they are given to us: 1) unrighteous anger; 2) insults; and 3) unjust stereotypes.

First, Jesus compares anger with murder. Now, there is such a thing as righteous anger. Hearing about the injustices of the world should make us angry, it should drive us towards an anger that fuels compassion and a love and desire for justice. But unrighteous anger is self-centered, it is pointed at image-bearers directly with no compassion and no humility. In our personal relationships, anger looks like this: *we are internally driven to intense emotion by the actions of others.*

I came across an interesting article this week that was explaining the rise of a culture of shame/honor in American society. What I found fascinating was how easy it is for Christians to wade into this water. What a culture based on shame and honor fears most is a lack of honor or a lack of respect. If you feel personally like you or the group you identify with, say Christians or Republicans or Democrats or Southerners, you name it, is attacked, the only way to respond to such shame and regain your honor is anger and retribution. There is a fragility here that is so prevalent among us, and was likewise prevalent among the Roman culture Jesus is speaking to.¹

¹ <https://frenchpress.thedispach.com/p/where-does-the-south-end-and-christianity>



If I stood here and began to make fun and dishonor you, your family, your political ideals, your doctrine perhaps, or any other group you feel like you belong to, you are conditioned to fight back. To accept the trampling of your honor is unthinkable. It's why any online platform you access now is full of the kind of anger and vitriol that Jesus is putting on par with murder. If we are careful, social media is a hotbed not for the free exchange of ideas, but for the free exchange of unmitigated anger.

It is this unrighteous anger that stands at the root of the so many of our ordinary, everyday moments. We are angry when we don't get our way, we are angry when someone disagrees with us, we are angry when someone gets in our way, upsets our expectations, causes us nuisance, attacks our group identity, our ideologies, our ideas. Perhaps for us, it comes in small ways. We don't rage outwardly, but inwardly. Jesus in **verse 22** says "angry with his brother". His immediate point is that this is especially egregious with someone you know, a fellow disciple of Jesus. It's clear in context the application of this ethic doesn't stop there, but I think this important. We must stop and ask: are we a church who is easily driven to be inwardly angry with one another? If so, we trample over the image of God and deny the very gospel we preach.

Inward anger often gives itself to outward anger. This is what Jesus addresses next when he says in **verse 22**, anyone who *insults* his brother. While there is such a thing as righteous anger that burns internally, there is never such a thing as a righteous insult. By insult, which is translated here from the greek "Raka", I don't mean just anything that offends someone. The word literally translate as something like "empty". People are easily offended, sometimes the truth offends them. What Jesus has in mind here is what one commentator defines as "a vernacular word of mild abuse, used in the family circle."² In other words, it's a simple insult, even used in jest. Not normally too offensive.

What does Jesus then take this so seriously? He is trying to show that behind the heart of any insult is the tearing down of the image of God. Insults inherently say: you are less than me. Calling someone empty is a chipping away at the fabric of their God-given identity. No man or woman is empty, they are God-breathed image bearers.

Right alongside this comes a more specific insult in **verse 22**, namely calling someone "a fool". Now, we normally wouldn't think much of this. Remember, the aim of Jesus' teaching is not to say that we are forbidden from ever calling anything or any idea foolish. Plenty of things are foolish, and need to be called so. The significance of this is that it is directed at the identity of an individual—the example is not of someone being called out for doing something foolish, but rather someone being identified as a fool. I could not think of any better word to describe this than stereotyping. Perhaps that comes with a strange connotation, but that is what is going on here.

When, instead of identifying an image bearer by their possession of an eternal, God-stamped soul, we categorize someone into an inherently negative category, we judge who we believe someone

² R. T. France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 201.



to be rather than seeing them for who they are. Now, of course, there are truths we believe about sin. We are all fools before God, that is true. But do see the difference between an acknowledgement between the pervasives of human sin and the stereotype of someone who we are angry at? One says: We need God. The other says: I am better because I am not like you. One is a lament in love that sees the reality of the human state, and the other is the stepping stone to wickedness and murder.

Think of that person you have trouble valuing, who you see as the epitome of foolishness. Where does their value come, their beauty? Why should you love and not hate them? Your love for them, their value, does not from their accomplishments, not from their intellect. If that is where their value came from, it would be right to devalue the life of those with intellectual disadvantages, as many do. It's the reason, lamentably, that they boast in certain Scandinavian countries of eliminating down syndrome by the use of prenatal testing to murder all down-syndrome babies in the womb. The value of their life is seen in their intellect or ability to accomplish what we deem valuable. But if it is really true what Christians believe, that the worth of an individual comes from God alone, that the very fact that he has brought any person to life means they are worthy of love, then how can we call foolish or unnecessary or unworthy what God has called good?³

Last week we heard the command that Jesus says sums up all the law and prophets: love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. What is the second command, which Jesus says is like it? Love your neighbor as yourself. Why is hatred and insults and anger so serious to God? Because it is the taking away of love. The ancient preacher John Crysostom says it well:

For in truth nothing so effectually gives entrance and root to all wickedness, as the taking away of love.⁴

Friends, we live in an everyday where we are constantly tempted to dish out anger, insults, and judgement. We live in a world where we are called to love only those who we deem lovely. But you came here to hear good news, so let me give it to you. You are lovely because God created you, but you were born in the mud. Sin has marred and scarred the image of God in you, it's made you act in ways that are terribly dim and dark. It brings you shame and dishonor, sin seems at times to diminish your very value. By rejecting God from the moment of your birth, you didn't lose the image of God, but it became harder and harder to see.

And the gospel tells us that in that mess, in that darkness, when the God-parts of you were barely noticeable, buried by the stain of sin, Jesus didn't see you as dirty and filthy. You were foolish, but he didn't call you a fool. You had dishonored him, but he wasn't angry. Instead, he loved you. He loved you enough not just to tolerate you, but to take on the stain of humanity to come and get you. In his incarnation the scripture says he "came in the likeness of sinful flesh", and in his death

³ <https://mereorthodoxy.com/dignity-beyond-accomplishment/>

⁴ John Crysostom, Homilies on Matthew 5



on the cross the scripture says he “became sin”. He literally clothed himself in your anger, wrapped himself in insults, and became so foolish in the eyes of men.

Jesus became anger, insults, and stereotypes—so you don’t have to dish them out. He died not just to clean you up and wipe you off when you get dirty again, but to completely remake you how you were always meant to be. He came as the firstborn of creation to recreate you in the image of God again, in his image, to model him and showcase him, and represent him in the world. And the way we represent Jesus is by loving as Jesus did. It’s by carrying out our personal relationships like the gospel is true: we are free to love and not be angry, to love and not insult, to love and not to stereotype.

You have no idea how transformative the love of Christ is. Let’s not murder one another, anything can teach us that. Let’s love, because only the gospel can teach us that.

Jesus reconciled you to God—so you can be reconciled to those you’ve wronged and those who have wronged you (23-26).

I could end the sermon there, that is for sure. But Jesus doesn’t end his sermon there. Again he anticipates some pushback. So far he has given a negative command: do not be unrighteously angry, do not insult the image of God. But now, Jesus shows us a better, positive way. The love of the gospel leads us not just to refrain from anger and insult in our relationships, it leads us towards peace and reconciliation, with those we have wronged and with those who have wronged us.

Let’s look at the interesting scenario in **verses 23-24**. Notice first that **verse 23** says the situation is someone “has something against you.” It means that in some way, you have wronged someone. What Jesus does not mean in this specific point is that someone is just upset with you unjustly. Remember this comes on the heels of the beatitudes, one of which reads in verses 11-12:

Blessed are you when men cast insults at you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely [not truly], on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sometimes people will be angry with you, and have something against you, and the accusation doesn’t stick. Jesus actually promises us in Matthew 24:9 "You will be hated by all nations on account of my name." So clearly Jesus is talking here about a real wrong that you have committed, something that someone has against you that is not grounded in their unjust hatred but in your inability to love them.

It is important that Jesus mentions the “altar” here. Nowhere would there be an altar at which to present sacrifice or gifts other than in Jerusalem. Here, Jesus is preaching in Galilee. The picture here is of the personal cost of a man who travels all eighty miles to Jerusalem with his sacrifice, only to turn back for a journey of a week or more towards Galilee to make peace with someone he



has wronged and then returning again to Jerusalem to resume his sacrifice. The scenario is intentionally preposterous: Jesus is again showing the severity of the situation. What is more important to God than sacrifice, that a gift at the altar, than your religious devotion or tithe or offering? Devotion to God means nothing if you cannot recognize the sanctity of God's chief creation: man.

Unresolved sin and resentment against an image-bearer is resentment against God, hindering your communion with him. There is no covering it up, there is no ignoring it: by harboring anger in our heart towards others, and by refusing to repent and seek peace with those we have wronged, we are rendering our worship to be hypocritical hogwash. You cannot be in lockstep with God and be unreconciled to man. The souls of men and women are so valuable to God that he will not accept the aroma of our worship to him unless we value our relationships as he does. To say it one more time: we cannot value God if we do not value God's image-bearers.

Clearly, this move is the right one when we are in the wrong. It shows our repentance and our humility, and paves the way back into intimacy with Christ. But what about when we are not in the wrong? This seems likely to be the scenario that is suggested with the micro-parable of **verses 25-26**. Why do I think that this is describing a situation where you are perhaps not in the wrong? Because of how Jesus describes the two parties. In verse 23, there is a brother who has something against you, something he possesses that shows your guilt. But in verse 25, he is simply an accuser.

It's likely that Jesus has in mind the scenario of a debtor. Now, in that sense, the one in debt is in the wrong. He needs to pay up what he owes. But the offense is less personal and more economical. It becomes personal when the debtor fights it, brings it to court, makes an enemy out of the one he owes money to. That is what Jesus is commanding against. Someone comes to you to take what you owe, don't fight them, Jesus is saying. Instead, **verse 25**, come to terms quickly with them. Settle it, seek peace and reconciliation outside of court, because if you don't, the justice of the court will not have mercy on you.

I also imagine that in this scenario there is room for the accuser to be in the wrong. Perhaps he is asking for more than you owe. Perhaps he is going back on the deal you made, perhaps he is meaning to extort you. After all, there is some reason why going to court seems like an option. But rather than exercise your rights to unequivocal justice, Jesus says what is more important is that you are at peace with your accuser.

Listen to what John Calvin says about this text:

For whence come all injuries, but from this, that each person is too tenacious of his own rights, that is, each is too much disposed to consult his own convenience to the disadvantage of others?⁵

⁵ John Calvin, Commentary on Matthew 5



What is Jesus saying? He is not just saying: make sure to pay your debts. He is saying that even if you are accused unjustly, your right to be right is not worth sacrificing a display of Biblical reconciliation through humility. He is advocating for a radical ethic of reconciliation. What matters to the Christian more than financial stability, more even than justice in the earthly court of law, is gaining a brother or sister in Christ. Remember the beatitude just before this? Blessed, says Jesus, are the peacemakers. Not the ones who win arguments, not the ones who win court cases, not the ones who are never taken advantage of. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Why the emphasis on prison in **verse 26**? I believe Jesus is connecting this parable to the kingdom of God. Life in prison is not something any of us wants, but what really matters is the judge we must stand before on the last day. If we fail to reconcile on earth, we may be cast into prison. But if we fail to reconcile with God, we will be cast into the eternal prison of God's judgement. The stakes here are much higher, as we remember in **verse 22**, when Jesus brings up the hell of fire, the place of torment for the unrighteous dead.

How does the gospel impact your personal relationships? Well, it says that there is hope for them. Paul says in Romans 12:18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Even if it means you radically turn headlong out of the sanctuary right now to reconcile your wrongs, or even if it means you give up your day in court and give over some of your rights, reconciliation is the work of heaven. It's better than sacrifice, its better than riches, its even better than achieving justice here on earth. Some of us have felt wronged by many people in our life—and for that I am sorry. Our hands are not naturally bent towards justice, but rather towards hate and judgement and racism and discrimination.

But throwing aside reconciliation for justice on this side of heaven is not worth it. Because while God may give some earthly justice to you now, eternal justice is what you need. What you need is for you to stand before the judge and him to pardon you and bring his judgement on the unrighteousness that has wronged you. And the way that eternal justice happens is not by making enemies on earth. It's through reconciliation.

Jesus Christ was wronged by our sin. We came to him as the accusers. We handed him over to the huge and the guard and sentenced him to death. But he didn't owe us anything. And yet, he valued reconciliation so much, with us who didn't deserve it, that he took on our debt himself. He paid every penny, he made it right. He satisfied the justice of God by his blood on the cross. He bled so that you might be reconciled to God. He left the throne of heaven to do so, traveling from heaven to earth and back again, a distance eternally further than Galilee to Jerusalem. So we are called, even when we are sinned against, to take the lead in reconciliation, leaving the altar and condescending as Christ did.

And friends, this is the gospel for our relationships. We don't have to settle for anger and hate and insults. As much as it is up to us, we don't have to leave relationships unreconciled. We are radical



lovers of the image of God, radical reconcilers of enemies. Why? Because God in Christ is a radical lover and a radical reconciler of us. The gospel is such good news that it transforms us, into people of the cross, people of peace. I pray every day that Grace Church would be this kind of people. Let's pray it now.

