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Meadowbrooke Church
August 28, 2022

Murder in the Heart
Matthew 5:21-26

Introduction
If there is a scripture passage that is timely and speaks into our experiences today, it is Matthew 5:21-26. When I started this sermon series back in May, I introduced to you a diagram Jim Belcher used in his book, *Cold Civil War*. For Belcher, the center of his diagram is a political ideal where love of neighbor and the value of human dignity are foundational. What we have seen over the past decade is four different political ideologies that are pulling individuals towards a more radicalized ideal that seems to be getting worse. Below is Belcher's diagram:

If you recall, Freedom Left views truth as relative and what you make of it. Order Left views the government as being obligated to eliminate poverty and the marginalization of minorities. Freedom Right is for open boarders, a global market, and certain forms of globalization. Order Right is for small government rooted is a type of Judeo-Christian worldview. Permit me to add another observation to what we are experiencing as a nation and why we must return to the Church's center (what we see in the Sermon on the Mount). The further left or right one is pulled, the angrier one becomes with everyone else.

It has not been uncommon for political parties polling for supporters to name call. The problem, as I see it, is that the Christian who finds himself/herself pulled in any one of the four quadrants will find it easier to do the same, and thus are further pulled from the Church's center. So, in Christian circles we have lost the willingness to speak and disagree charitably with one another, especially when it is related to politics, and have even resorted to name calling. In fact, we behave as though this is okay so long as we are not inflicting physical harm on the person. In the last four years I have had those who call themselves a "Christian" label me "bigoted" for not going far enough with addressing racial issues in our country as a pastor. I also have been

accused of being a "socialist" for going too far in addressing the racial issues in our nation. I am sure you have similar stories of those in the Church who have been angry or called you names in recent years. Maybe you are one who has done the name calling.

The Pharisees and scribes believed that the sixth commandment had only to do with the prohibition of premeditated murder of another human being. What Jesus stated in verses 21-26 was shocking, and it still shocks those of us who read his sermon today.

Remember what Jesus said concerning the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthews 5:20. Jesus said, "**For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**" What follows verse 20 are six statements about what the Mosaic Law taught; each of them beginning with the phrase, "**You have heard that it was said…, but I say to you…**". The Pharisees and Scribes taught, behaved, and lived as though the Mosaic Law was only about the behavior others could see or experience, but Jesus shows us that God is much more concerned about matters of the heart.

What is Murder?

Jesus already said in verse 17, "**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**." The scribes and Pharisees rightfully taught that murder was evil as the Law and the Prophets taught, but where they went wrong was to assume that the sixth commandment was only addressing the act of murder. The Law exposes the character and heart of man in light of the character and holiness of God. This is why Jesus said, "**You have heard that it was said of those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool' will be liable to the hell of fire.'**" (vv. 21-22).

Every human is born as one who reflects the image of God. To take the life of another is to destroy the image that person was created in. Most civilized people groups and nations have laws prohibiting the murder of another human, and the reason for this is because God has written his moral code on our hearts (Rom. 2:12-16). The scribes and Pharisees believed that so long as a person didn't physically kill another person, then that was another commandment they could pride themselves in obeying. Jesus says that the point of the command was to address not only the evil of murder, but the underlining cause of it.

So, what is the underlining cause of murder? Before a person murders another human, they have to see the worth of their victim as being no different than anything else in the animal kingdom. To bring oneself to commit murder, that person will first minimize the human life they take. This is one of the reasons why the abortion debate is over whether the embryo is really a human life yet. Is the fetus a human life at conception, and if not at conception… when? Does a fetus become a human life after three months in the womb? How about after six months in the womb? Now, it is even suggested that the child in a mother's womb is not a human life until after he/she is completely out of the birth canal. The question of the value of a human life does not stop with the fetus; those questions continue concerning disease, disability, and functionality where it is now even suggested that euthanasia is a responsible medical option.

We believe that human life is valuable because God is the Creator. It is his right to give life as it is to take it away (see Deut. 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:6). However, Jesus tells us that the commandment is much more than a prohibition against killing another human. The sixth commandment is also a prohibition against every thought and word that seeks to devalue and destroy the life of another human. To avoid physical murder does not mean that you have kept the sixth commandment, for Jesus exposes the root cause of first-degree murder, and it is threefold: anger, insults, and the defamation of a person.

Where Does Murder Come From?

The scribes and Pharisees identified righteousness by a person's behavior. We still do the same thing today, for we tend to judge a person based on what we see, but Jesus shows us that our problem is much, much deeper than what we think. According to Jesus, the righteous person is not only the person who does not kill, but the person who also does not entertain the devaluing of another person in his heart. The righteous person is the person who resists hostile thoughts against another person and sees others as individuals with value because they are created in the image of God.

The list Jesus gives us in verse 22 is not so much a grading scale of bad to worse: anger being "bad" and calling a person "fool" being the worst of the three. The list shows us that what we harbor in our heart and mind is far worse than what we think. The anger Jesus refers to here is the kind that seeks to destroy another person. Jesus places the focus of the one who is angry upon the brother which is a reference to those within the community of faith.

It is also important to understand that Jesus is not condemning all forms of anger like we see the character Yoda do frequently in Star Wars: "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." There is a righteous anger that is right and good, and Jesus demonstrated it frequently in the Gospels. When Jesus saw the way the people were taking advantage of those who came to the temple to worship, and how they turned it into a marketplace for profit, he was so angry at what he saw that he chased out all who were selling and purchasing things while flipping over their tables and said (I think he yelled): "**It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers**" (Matt. 21:12-13). We also learn that Jesus expressed anger towards religious hypocrites (Mark 3:1-5) and even pronounced curses ("woes") upon the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 23:1-36). Needless to say, Jesus got angry, but it was an anger mingled with grief over hypocrisy, a refusal to understand, fruitlessness, unbelief, and deliberate and unrepentant sin.[1] One theologian observed: "Jesus became angry for the sake of others. There is an anger that is loving, that wishes no one any evil. It loves the sinner while it hates the sin."[2]

The kind of anger Jesus warns of in Matthew 5:22 is an unrighteous anger. It is an anger that lifts up the one who is angry and brings low the one that the anger is directed towards. It is not an anger that seeks to protect or preserve what is good, right, or innocent, but an anger that flows out of arrogance, an interest in oneself, or an injured pride. It is this type of anger that has no place among Jesus' people. We see this throughout the entire Bible:

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[1] Daniel m. Doriani, *Matthew: Volume I* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing; 2008), p. 143.
[2] *Ibid.*

"*Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.*" (Psalm 37:8)

"*A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.*" (Proverbs 15:18)

"*Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools.*" (Ecclesiastes 7:9)

"*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.*" (Ephesians 4:26–27)

"*But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.*" (Colossians 3:8)

The anger Jesus warns us about is unrighteous anger; it is an anger that gives birth to insults that devalue a person and calls into question the soul of a person. The Greek word Jesus uses for "insults" is *raka*, which literally means "stupid," or "good for nothing." *Raka* is the kind of insult that is a contempt for a person's mind. The Greek word for "you fool" is the word *mōre*; we get the word moron from it. But this word has nothing to do with a person's IQ. We really do not have a great word in English, so most translations translate it "you fool." It is a slur upon a person's reputation and is a contempt over a person's heart and character. Anger, the contempt for a person's mind, and the contempt for a person's heart and character is the fertile soil from which murder grows, and the words Jesus uses for what such a person deserves is severe.

Unlike myself at times, Jesus' words are carefully chosen and intentional. What Jesus says is what he means. Do not let the force of his words in these verses escape you. If anyone listening to Jesus' sermon on the mount on the day that he delivered it walked away, and then, out of a fit of rage, took the life of another human being; they would face judgement, they would stand before the council (the Jewish court known as the Sanhedrin), and then they would be sentenced to death, and then face another judgement before a holy God. The Pharisees and scribes were concerned with what people saw on the outside, but Jesus is concerned with the heart, for that is the source of our real problem. Listen to what Jesus said is the source of not only murder, but all kinds of other evils: **"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person**" (Mark 7:20–23).

What Do We Do with Our Anger?

There is not a whole lot I need to do to help make verses 23-26 more clear. If you have offended another brother or sister in Christ, Jesus tells you to go to that person before you go to Church. The point he is making in these verses is the urgency and need for reconciliation among his people. Jesus did not say: "When you are offended by another Christian, go… to another church so that you can avoid that person." He said, "**First be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift**." Oh, how we need to get over our pride, our arrogance, and our own selves for the glory of God and the good of one another! Jesus himself commanded us, "**A new**

commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35). It was his love that compelled him to come to seek and save the lost; we were the lost he came for. When it comes to our sin against others and the sins of others against us, Jesus tells us: "For the sake of love and the good of my kingdom, love one another… and do not withhold that love from those who make you anger. People will see the love you have for one another and know that you belong to me." The same applies when it comes to your accusers, if you have wronged them, go to them to be reconciled.

There is one more point in closing I need to make. The point is this: Just as the prohibition of murder is universal for all people regardless of what they believe, Jesus' prohibition of anger and the contempt for another's head, heart, and character in a way that devalues that person applies not just to those within the Church, but outside as well. Our citizenship is with Jesus and our character is to reflect his. This means that our anger must be an anger that is righteous, which does not bring low another person but is a righteous anger for the sake of others, an anger that is loving, that wishes no one any evil, and an anger that loves the sinner while it hates the sin.

My dear brothers and sisters, if you are guilty of the kind of murder Jesus describes in his sermon, the time for repentance is right now. Do not wait, do not excuse your sin, do not sugar coat Jesus' words by making them say something that they do not. Hear his words, obey his words, and allow his words to change you through the power of the Holy Spirit.

As a type of benediction, I leave you with the final words in Jesus' sermon on the mount:

> ***Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.*** (Matthew 7:24–27)

Discussion Questions

1. How has the Sermon on the Mount different challenged you recently?

2. Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:1-5. How does what you just read (the Gospel) humble you, and how does it affect the way you see others?

3. What does Jesus mean in Matthew 5:20? How can your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?

4. What is the difference between righteous anger and unrighteous anger?

5. Pastor Keith said that the fertile soil that murder is produced from must begin with the devaluing of another human being. In what ways can we devalue/dehumanize another person?

6. How does/can the Gospel help you view others in a way can keep you from devaluing others?

7. When someone has something against you, or you have been sinned against by another person, what should our response be a follower of Jesus (see also Matthew 18:15-20)?