

Matthew 5:21 – 26

^{5:21} 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. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Cultural Background

- Jesus had just announced ‘the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt.4:12 – 25), triggering all kinds of questions, hopes, and expectations. The Jewish people knew that they had sinned and were in exile. This exile began with Babylonian captivity in 586 BC but it continued under the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.
- Recall that in Matthew 5:1 – 16 Jesus was describing how his process of transforming people will have a certain kind of influence in the world. In this section, called the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Mt.5:1 – 7:28), Jesus is laying out his transformation of the human heart.
- ‘Liable to judgment’ = in the local town court
- ‘Liable to the council’ = in the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jews made up of 70 elders
- ‘Liable to the hell of fire’ = in the valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem where non-Jews and some Jews once sacrificed their children to the fires of the false god Molech (Jeremiah 19:1 – 6)
- ‘You fool’: This is not a casual insult. From the Psalms, this is a term of excommunication or shunning. The Psalms say, ‘The fool has said in his heart there is no God’ (Ps.14:1; 53:1; cf. 107:17)

Questions, v.21 – 26

1. Discuss v.21 – 26. What questions or thoughts come to mind?
2. How does Jesus raise the stakes over the Old Testament law?
3. Notice that Jesus describes a progression of anger in v.22. Trace the progression of anger, and trace the progression of the warnings.
 - a. Angry → Insult → ‘You fool!’
 - b. Liable to judgment → liable to the council → liable to the hell of fire
 - c. One challenge here is Jesus’ hyperbolic language. He surely takes anger seriously, but it is a little uncertain what real life scenarios he refers to. He uses hyperbole to make his points. For example, in v.25, Jesus is probably envisioning a situation where you are at fault, and need to negotiate with your accuser before you get the guilty verdict pronounced over you. The scenario is probably not meant to indicate something about God being an accuser, judge, and then guard. The scenario probably illustrates the importance of settling matters quickly. Don’t make this an analogy of God.
4. Why might anger increase like this?
 - a. ‘If you are angry with a brother or sister’: Anger towards a person, if it is harbored, festers over time, smoldering like a coal while it consumes us. Bitterness is a stress on the body. It is like eating poison and hoping someone else dies.
 - b. ‘If you insult a brother or sister’: We start to rehearse our anger, and nurse it, and then envision how we could get verbal revenge. We gossip and form a coalition against the person. We become passive-aggressive. We assume the worst about the other person’s intentions. We address the person with profound disrespect.
 - c. ‘If you say, *You fool*’: This is not a casual insult. From the Psalms, this is a term of excommunication or shunning. The Psalms say, ‘The fool has said in his heart there is no God’ (Ps.14:1; 53:1; cf. 107:17)
5. How could anger become increasingly problematic in the way Jesus describes?
 - a. We explode at a time that is unexpected
 - b. Illus: my story of holding in anger against Ming during our first few months of marriage, when she didn’t get me orange juice!
 - c. We form a coalition, getting other people to side with us against the person
 - d. We divide the body of Christ over a personal, emotional grievance
 - e. On excommunicating a person over anger, and being liable to hell: What else can be thrown out, that Jesus has already talked about? Trash is thrown out, just like impure *salt* is thrown out and good for nothing. Because the Christian life is essentially relational, and rests on having relational integrity, breaking relationship over emotional grievances like this weakens a Christian’s integrity and witness, and may even render that Christian useless.
 - f. Obviously Jesus is using vivid metaphors to underscore his point. But why does he take anger so seriously? Why is anger something that renders a Christian useless to Jesus? Because he’s already said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’ And also he’s going to talk about loving your enemies later. Someone not interested in reconciliation is useless to Jesus.
6. After speaking about anger in v.21 – 22, what would you expect Jesus to say? ‘So now, be really careful about anger in yourself.’ Yes? But no! He says, ‘Care about how other people experience anger at you.’ Read v.23 – 24:
 - a. God cares about human relationships more than religious ceremonies (offering a gift at the altar). Another way of saying that is that a very important form of worship is loving others and caring about your relationships.
7. Application: What does Jesus teach us about conflict resolution? Does it matter who started it? Or who’s mad?
 - a. It doesn’t matter who started it, or who’s angry (you in v.22 or another in v.23 – 26). We are to always initiate reconciliation.
 - b. Romans 12:18 says ‘Be at peace with all people, to the extent it depends on you.’ Sometimes conflicts can’t be totally resolved, but we have to give it a fair shot.
8. Application: Some of us don’t feel angry quickly, but have a delayed reaction of anger. Some of us get angry quickly. Where are you on this spectrum, and why?

- a. Does it matter? Eventually, it doesn't matter if you're the one who gets angry easily, or if you're the one who easily causes other people to get angry. Jesus calls us to care about other people's anger as much as our own.
 - b. Illus: Someone who is not so aware of the negative impact s/he has on others. This is a growth area.
 - c. How do you feel about this?
 - d. Illus: Here is a good quote to ponder: 'There is the case of a man minding his own business, sitting at peace and quiet; and when a brother comes up and says an annoying word to him, he is put out by it. And from the circumstances he thinks that he is justifiably angered, and he speaks against the one who troubled him, saying, "If he had not come and spoken to me and annoyed me I should not have been at fault." This is a delusion: this is false reasoning! It was not the one who spoke that put him in a bad mood. He only showed that it already existed in him; so that he could, if he chose, make reparation for his fault. But the man referred to above is like clean-looking winter wheat, externally good and ready to use; but when someone crushes it, its corruption is revealed. He was sitting at peace but he had this anger inside him and he did not know it. One word to him from the other and the corruption hidden inside him leapt out.' (Abba Dorotheos of Gaza, who founded a monastery in 540 AD in Gaza, and is deeply appreciated by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches). Although I don't think that covers every case, because I think that Paul recognizes that there are some cases where you should feel anger (Eph.4:26 – 27). It's a good check on yourself to ask whether the other person is the cause of your anger, or only the occasion for it and the cause is deeper in yourself.
9. Application: How do you sense Jesus leading you in however it is you deal with anger in yourself and in others? End in prayer for each other.