

Control Your Anger Before it Controls You

Matthew 5:21-26

God tells us, “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers in the divine nature” *2 Peter 1:3*. In other words, God has given us the power, through His word, to grow in holiness this side of eternity.

In light of that promise, what does God have to say about anger? Let me say this before we go any farther... This message is not just for the person that has uncontrollable fits of anger. This message is not just for the person that periodically flies off the handle. This message is not just for the hot-tempered individual. We all struggle with anger in a fallen world. It wasn't very long after sin entered into the world (only one chapter later) that Cain, out of anger, killed his brother Abel (cf. Genesis 4:8). For many of us, we have refined our anger. We have learned to polish our appearance, which is for many of us an idol in and of itself. In light of our sin-refining desires, we tend to use non-biblical language to minimize our anger. We say things like:

“I'm not angry, I'm just *frustrated*...” “I'm not angry, I'm just *irritated*...”
“I'm not angry, I'm am just *upset*...” “I'm not angry, I'm just *annoyed*...”

Frustration, irritation, and annoyance are nothing more than “respectable” terms for anger. Unrighteous anger is a sin for which we are all guilty and a sin which demanded that Jesus be crushed and crucified on our behalf. Let's turn our attention to our text. Matthew, recording Jesus' words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, writes:

“You have heard that it was said to 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. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” Matthew 5:21–26.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8).

I. JESUS PUTS HIS FINGER ON OUR MURDEROUS HEART (v.21).

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'

THE ATROCITY OF MURDER

It wasn't long after sin entered into the world in Genesis 3 that we see the first murder recorded in Scripture. Just one chapter later in Genesis 4:8, Cain, in a moment of selfish, impassioned anger, killed his brother Abel. Of the 30 cities with the highest murder rate per 1000 residents, St. Louis, Missouri ranks 4th. It seems as though you can hardly turn the pages of the paper or watch local evening news without the mention of someone being murdered. When it comes to news, "If it bleeds, it leads". As a result, we are desensitized to the atrocity of murder. God gives us the first specific prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6 when He says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." God gives us both the divine penalty for murder and the reason for its seriousness. The one who takes the life of another was to be likewise punished by death. The reason for such a severe penalty is clear – man is made in God's image (cf. Genesis 1:26-27). To take another person's life is to snuff out the sacredness of the image of God. Solomon tells us, "There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and *hands that shed innocent blood*, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers" Proverbs 6:16-19.

Make no mistake about it, God has not scrubbed his Word of the evil of murder. Both the Old and New Testaments are filled with the names of murderers. In the Old Testament we find Cain, Lamech, Pharaoh, Abimelech, Joab, the Amalekites, David, Moses, Absalom, Zimri, Jezebel, Haziell, Jehu, Athaliah, Joash, Manasseh, and many others. The New Testament list includes Herod, Judas, the high priests, Barabbas, Paul, Herodias and her daughter, and others. Biblical history, like human history in general, is filled with murderers.¹

Looking back at verse 21, Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'" The specific commandment that Jesus has in view comes from the sixth commandment of the Decalogue (10 Commandments). Every good Jew was well-versed in the Law of God. As a matter of fact, everyone who stood listening to Jesus' sermon would have been in full agreement with the penalty of death that God's Law imposed on a murderer.

The issue that Jesus puts His finger on, so to speak, is that the Scribes and Pharisees were seeking to restrict the application of the sixth commandment to the act of murder alone. In their minds, if they refrained from the physical act of murder, they proudly considered themselves to have kept the commandment. But Jesus called foul on their man-centered interpretation of the Law. He said,

¹ John MacArthur, *Matthew 1-7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 291. Note: a few additions were made.

“Don’t think you are justified because you haven’t committed the physical act of murder.” Jesus was teaching that true application of the Law was much wider, for it included thoughts and words as well as actions. In other words, Jesus was saying that it’s possible to be completely innocent of taking a life, but yet be completely guilty of breaking the sixth commandment because murder originates in the heart, not in the hands.

As you can imagine, these were startling words. The low rumbling of the crowd would have immediately turned to a deafening silence. Eyebrows would have furled. Arms would have been crossed. “What did He just say,” would have been the response. Because the Scribes and Pharisees’ view of righteousness was largely external, their view of themselves was exceptionally complimentary. But, in a single sentence, Jesus shatters any illusion of self-righteousness they or we may possess by declaring that our anger, the precursor to murder, renders each of us guilty of murder and deserving of a murderer’s punishment.

RIGHTEOUS ANGER

Is it possible to be angry and yet not sin as Paul mentions in Ephesians 4:26? Yes, it is. The emotion of anger isn’t intrinsically evil. We know that because it is an emotion God Himself possesses - God gets angry. The Psalmist writes, “God is a righteous judge, and a God who feels indignation every day” Psalm 7:11. We clearly see the anger of Jesus as he sweeps the temple clean of the “robbers” who defiled it (cf. Mark 11:15-18). Jesus was filled with indignation at the dishonor of God and the disconcert for His Holiness. As creatures made in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Christ, we too should be angry when God is dishonored. Matthew Henry notes, “If we would be angry and not sin, we must be angry at nothing but sin; and we should be more jealous for the glory of God than for any interest or reputation of our own.”

There is an anger that is not only righteous, but is required (anger at sin against God). In other words, faithfulness to Christ will sometimes demand our anger. But like Henry says, we must be very careful that our anger is motivated by God’s dishonor and not our own. That is the fine line between righteous anger and unrighteous anger. Let me ask you a question: Do you find yourself becoming angry more often because the honor of God is being maligned, or is your anger more often a result of what you perceive as your “rights” being somehow infringed upon? I think if we are honest, most of our anger is a result of how I believe someone has transgressed me and not how God’s righteous word has been transgressed. All too often our anger is a result of someone stepping on the toes of our perceived rights. It’s fueled by the pride, vanity, hatred, malice, and vengeful spirit toward the person who gets in the way of us getting what we want when we want it.

IDOLATRY: THE HEART OF ANGER

Jesus says, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander” Matthew 15:19. If we stop for a moment and think about fruit vs. root, which is anger? Is anger a fruit of something or is anger itself the root? I would submit to you that our anger is the visible fruit of an idol factory that resides in our heart that never goes off line – it chugs along 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Consider this truth: unrighteousness anger is a response to failed idolatry. What is an idol? An idol is anything that you believe you need apart from Christ for satisfaction, fulfillment, worth, acceptance, or protection. It’s anything you have installed upon the throne of your heart and depend on or trust in. We were designed to find our satisfaction in Christ, we were designed to put our hope in Christ, we were designed to worship and serve Christ, but because we are sinful, we seek satisfaction in people and things, we put our hope in people and things, and we worship people and things – these will fail you every time. Anger is the sinful fruit that is revealed when our idols are blocked, frustrated, or come into conflict with other people’s idols. Because of the widespread idolatry in our hearts, there is widespread anger in our relationships.

I’ve always been challenged by Romans 1:25. Paul says, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than their creator, who is forever praised.” Do you know who you end up worshipping when you exchange the truth of God for a lie? You end up worshipping YOU! You become the one who needs to be worshipped, honored, revered, respected, and served. In other words, we begin to deify ourselves. And when others don’t treat us like the little deities we think we are, because we worship ourselves, we get angry.

10 COMMON IDOLS THAT RESIDE IN OUR HEART

1. *Reputation idols* - These are revealed with situations or people that disrupt your carefully constructed reputation or status as a hard worker, good housekeeper, godly parent, wise counselor, or peacemaker.
2. *Control idols* - These are revealed when situations or people disrupt your plans and organization. You think your way is the best way, you rarely ask for help, you micromanage anything that could possibly have your name associated with it, and you spend more time trying to manage things, your life included, than you do praying for God’s help.
3. *Lordship idols* – These are revealed when you react to the fact that people are not serving and catering to your every need. You are the most important person in the universe and when others don’t recognize this, you get angry.

4. *Money idols* - These are revealed by your use of money to feed your desires or status and anything or anyone that gets in the way of you earning what you think you deserve or using that money to further your reputation. It may also flesh itself out in you finding security or taking comfort in the amount of money that you have saved. (You don't have to have a lot of money to possess this idol.)
5. *Sexual idols* – These are revealed when husbands become angry that their wife is not giving them what they think they deserve, or wives become angry because their husband is not giving them what they think they deserve. Frustration is a red flag that another person isn't meeting my idol's expectations.
6. *Health idols* - These are revealed when you get sick on Friday afternoon and find yourself in bed instead of your weekend get away with friends, or the doctor tells you that you because of the accident you may never regain the ability to walk, or your child is diagnosed with an inoperable illness and isn't expected to see the end of the year. We forget Job's words, "The Lord gives and Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord" Job 1:21.
7. *Victim idols* - These are revealed when you desire that your problems, challenges, and difficult circumstances are well known so that people focus on you and therefore you are never responsible for anything. When people don't treat you as you think your problems and difficult circumstances deserve, or hold you accountable to any standard that you think your difficulties limit you from meeting, you become angry.
8. *Pleasure idols* – These are revealed when the electricity goes out right when you are getting ready for a relaxing evening in front of the television, or you are expecting something exciting in the mail only to find out that it delivery has been delayed, or you have been told that the deadline at work is not going to allow for your planned vacation and it makes you angry.
9. *Fear idols* – These are revealed when we fear what others may think about us and we get angry if we find out that someone has said something about us to another person.
10. *Spiritual idols* – These are ministry related idols. Idols connected to your serving, teaching, personal ministry, evangelism, discipleship, hospitality... What happens when you fail at the things that you think you are gifted at? How do you respond when your serving is not recognized, when your lesson was a flop, when there is not much fruit to be shown for your ministry labors, when people are not responding to your evangelism, when your disciples seem to be growing at a slower rate than you expected, and when you have burned your supper club meal?

Can you see how our anger is connected to our idols? We have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and the result is that we worship and serve ourselves and anger is the unrighteous fruit of our failed idolatry. This means that anger is not primarily a result of our circumstances, it is primarily a result of a disconnect in our understanding of the gospel. It's a result of disbelief in the sovereignty of God in every circumstance of your life. The next time you are tempted to become angry, instead of thinking, "How dare this person not give me what I want," you must learn to think, "Having a person in my life who doesn't...(insert your perceived right), is for my good. God is committed to my sanctification and the loving destruction of my idols. I must learn to love God and to love others more than I love my...(insert your perceived right)." Again, Jesus shatters any illusion of self-righteousness we think we may possess by declaring that our anger, the precursor to murder, renders each of us guilty of murder and deserving of a murderer's punishment.

II. JESUS PUTS HIS FINGER ON OUR MURDEROUS MOUTH (v.22).

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.

Not only does Jesus put His finger on our hearts, but He also puts His finger on our mouths. Your mouth serves as a barometer for your heart (cf. Luke 6:45).

A. Everyone who is angry (ὀργίζω – orgizo)... The idea behind this word has to do with brooding, simmering anger that is nurtured and not allowed to die. It's often displayed in the holding of a grudge and in the smoldering bitterness that refuses to forgive. It is the anger that cherishes resentment and does not want reconciliation. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled" Hebrews 12:15.² Jesus says that when we are angry with our brother, we are liable to judgment. God will judge us for the log in our eye when we are angered by the speck in our brothers eye (cf. Matthew 7:3-5).

B. Whoever "insults" (ῥακά – rhaka) his brother... Rhaka is a term of vilification. There isn't a great English equivalent and so it's often just transliterated in our Bibles. The ESV translates it "insults". It carries the idea of "empty-headed", "worthless", or "stupid". This is when anger spills over into slanderous speech. To slander or speak ill of a creature made in God's image is to slander and speak ill of his Creator. Jesus is calling us to the rug for our murderous speech. The one who insults his brother is liable to the council. It's probable that this referred to the Sanhedrin of Jesus' day. For us, it may mean that the one who murders his brother with his words will be subject to a third party stepping in to arbitrate and diffuse the situation.

² John MacArthur, 294.

C. Whoever says “you fool” (μωρός – moros)... This is where we get our English word moron. Moros carries the idea of “dull”, and in a moral sense, “heedless”. It appears as though to call a person “rhaka” is to insult his *intelligence*, while to call someone a “moros” was to insult his *character*. Friends, even though our hurtful, angry words may never lead to the ultimate act of murder, we need to be clear about the fact that they are tantamount to murder in God’s eyes. Angry words are the ugly symptom of a desire to get rid of someone who stands in the way of our idols.³ Though we may not use the exact language, when our anger spills over into hurtful speech, it is as if we were saying, “I wish you were dead.” Such an evil wish, revealed by our words, is a breach of the sixth commandment and renders the guilty person liable to the very penalties to which the murder exposes himself – not in a human court since anger isn’t a visible charge, but it certainly is before the bar of God.

D. “Will be liable to the fire of hell...” Jesus not only extended the nature of the crime, but he also extended the nature of the punishment for which we are made liable. What is meant here is challenging to discern, but let me offer this thought. James speaks about how the unguarded comment – the failure to control the tongue – is like a spark that will set a forest on fire. He says, “The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and *set on fire by hell*” James 3:5-6. Once we give in to murderous speech, all hell can break loose. In a sense, we give the devil authorization – a warrant so to speak – to ride upon our anger.⁴ We open the door to him, give him a foothold, and things can quickly get out of control. In this sense, the fire of hell is set loose.

We could also see this phrase in light of 1 Corinthians 3:15. Paul says, “If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” All that we build with wood, hay and straw will one day be burned up. In other words, our sin, though it doesn’t result in the loss of our salvation, it does result in the loss of reward. Friends, don’t ever forget that we will have to give an account for every idle word we have spoken (cf. Matthew 12:36).

Let me try to give you some application here: When you are tempted to speak words of anger, stop and ask God for the grace to focus less on what has been done *to* you and more on what has been done *for* you. In other words, remember how great a forgiveness you have been given. In Ephesians 4:32 Paul writes, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” The answer to unrighteous anger is: 1. dealing with our idols, and 2. forgiveness. When we are angry at others, we have, at least momentarily, stopped being in awe of our own forgiveness. We’ve stopped marveling at the grace that has been shown to us. We’ve ceased to be amazed that despite our failures, Christ does not treat us as our sins deserve. So our anger is doubly sinful because it is not just an idol problem, but it is also a thankfulness problem. We have ceased to see and be thankful for the glorious forgiveness and grace of Christ.

³ John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 85.

⁴ R.T. Kendall, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, MN: Chosen Books, 2001), 117.

III. JESUS PUTS HIS FINGER ON THE NEED FOR IMMEDIATE RECONCILIATION (v.23-26).

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Here Jesus gives us some practical application. If anger and insults are as serious in Jesus' eyes as the act of murder, then we must seek to avoid them at all costs and take action as speedily as possible when we see them present in our lives. Jesus gives us two scenarios to flesh this out:

A. The Church House (v.23-24)

Jesus' illustration takes place at the Temple altar, but for our purposes that would be corporate worship. If you are here at church, in the middle of worship, and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, Jesus says, "Go at once and seek to make it right." Don't wait until the service is over – go seek out your brother or sister and ask for forgiveness. Do you see the order? First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your worship to God. Why do you suppose that is the case? Sin affects our worship. Our vertical relationship with God will not be as it should as long as our horizontal relationships with others are not at peace. Anger makes you lose your temper, but pride will keep you there. Remember, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (cf. James 4:6)

Reconciliation must precede worship. God said through the Prophet Jeremiah, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations?" Jeremiah 7:9-10.

B. The Courthouse (v.24-25)

The second illustration that Jesus gives us is that of an unpaid debt. If you have an unpaid debt and your creditor takes you to court to get his money back, it is advantageous of you to settle with him before you are standing in front of the judge. In other words, even if you are on your way to court, pay your debt. Once you reach the court, it will be too late. Your accuser will hand you over to the judge and you'll be arrested and imprisoned until you have paid your debt in full. The point that Jesus is stressing here is that it is better, more sensible, to pay your debt immediately.

These two illustrations are different. One is taken from the church and has to do with a brother, and the other is taken from the court and has to do with an enemy. The point is the same in both cases – the necessity of immediate, urgent action. Friends, how seldom do we heed Christ's call for immediacy of action? We must never allow an estrangement to remain, much less grow. There should never be a delay in our seeking reconciliation. We should go immediately – that is as soon as we are aware of a broken relationship – and take the initiative to seek forgiveness for any grievance we have caused and repayment of any debt that we have left unpaid. If we want to

avoid murder in God's sight, we must take every possible step to live at peace with all men (cf. Romans 12:18).

Jesus isn't content with the mere letter of the Law. Rather, He brings us face to face with the spirit of the Law. It is here that we feel the weight of our guilt. Praise God Jesus climbed Calvary's Hill and paid for our self-centered, prideful, murderous thoughts and words on the cross. We deserve the fiery Hell that Jesus speaks of in our text, but Jesus laid His life down as our substitute. Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God; He to rescue me from danger, interposed His precious blood. That's the gospel folks! We look forward to the day when freed from sinning, we shall see Thy lovely face; full arrayed in blood-washed linen, how we'll sing Thy sovereign grace!⁵

⁵ Come Thou Fount