



MAKING IT RIGHT

PSALM 119:1-8, MATTHEW 5:21-28

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As followers of Christ, we're called to examine how we behave and to do that, we look into a spiritual mirror. If everything is fine, wonderful. But if everything is not fine (and it never is), we've got work to do.

The mirror we've been using for the last several Sundays is the Sermon on the Mount found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew. There, Jesus gives us a detailed set of instructions concerning our relationships with God and with one another. The brief passage I just read deals with those times when good relationships go bad. Jesus starts off with one of the problems that all relationships sometimes face...anger. Let's look into it.

When Jesus said, "But I tell you..." He wasn't doing away with the law or adding His own beliefs. Rather, He was giving a fuller understanding of why God made that law in the first place. Moses reported that God instructed, "You shall not murder." Jesus taught that we should not even become angry, for then we have already committed murder in our heart.

The Jewish religious leaders of the first century read the Law of Moses and, not having literally murdered anyone, felt righteous. Yet they were angry enough with Jesus that they would soon plot His death, though they would not do the dirty work themselves. Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we miss the intent of God's Word when we read God's rules for living without trying to understand why God gave them in the first place.

Yet, truth be told, most of us don't see anger as such a big problem. In fact, some people seem to take a strange kind of pride in just how angry they can sometimes get. They say, "Do not cross me! ... I have quite a temper." But Jesus says we'd better not be proud of that temper, because it can get us in a peck of trouble... eternal trouble. Listen to the Lord again: (Matthew 5:21-22) "You've heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you're angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you'll be liable to the Council; and if you say, 'raca,' you'll be in danger of the fire of hell."

Why would Jesus come down so hard with a blanket condemnation of anger, especially considering that it seems to be a natural human emotion? And so, we ask, “Jesus, aren’t there times when we should get angry? After all, You got angry.”

We might think of that incident in the synagogue on the Sabbath day where the Lord encountered a man with a withered hand. (Mark 3:1-5) The religious purists were watching to see how Jesus would handle the situation; after all, their law said that it was illegal to heal on the Sabbath. The Talmud said you could help someone stay alive if it were a matter of life and death, but obviously, a withered hand was not a matter of life and death, especially if the hand was not your own. Now we see how shocking Jesus’ choices were to those present in that synagogue. Mark tells us that Jesus “looked around at them in anger...” But, note that Jesus wasn’t mad at anything they had done to Him, rather, He was furious at the religious attitude which would make human compassion “illegal.”

We might think of another incident, this one in the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-16) where Jesus became incensed at the callous commercialism, the blatant money-grubbing of those taking advantage of worshipers. In this instance, they were charging outrageous prices for the purchase of goods and inflated the exchange rate used to convert different currencies into currency of the Temple. Both were necessary to offer temple sacrifice, which was in itself at the heart of worshiping God in the Jerusalem Temple. It all made Jesus angry enough to fashion a whip and lay it to the hides of those He called “thieves” and chase them out. Was His anger justified?

Well, yes, we say. Most of us have learned to call it “righteous indignation” and it would be nice if we could say that that is the only kind of anger, we ever have ... but we know better.

We get angry. We get angry with people we think have done us dirt. And this is the kind of anger Jesus says to get rid of. Why? He illustrates ... murder.

Let’s leave the first century and consider our own in which, according to The Pew Research Center, over 19,500 murders were committed in the United States in 2017 (the last year that complete data is available). Why did so many souls end up murdered? The research shows us that most often someone got angry enough to kill. Clarence Darrow, one of the most famous criminal defense lawyers of his generation, once said, “Everyone is a potential murderer. I have not killed anyone, but I frequently get satisfaction out of obituary notices.”

The Greeks considered anger to be “a short madness,” and we agree: we get angry, we say we get “mad.” Police say that more than half of the people murdered in our nation are killed by someone who was either their relative or their friend...some friend! The root cause is anger. And anger is dangerous.

Obviously, murder is not the only outcome of anger. Other harm gets done as well. Have you ever been hurt...really hurt...by what someone said to you? It’s happened to most of us. Angry words can wound with insult.

My mom was a shy and sensitive woman. When she was a girl, about ten years old or so, someone told her she had a terrible singing voice. Perhaps most of us wouldn’t let that remark bother us particularly, but it did bother my mom. Ten years old is a tender age. It bothered her so much that, for the remaining 65 years of her life, she never sang another note. I have no idea whether my mom had a good voice or not; she would never take the chance of letting us find out, and all because of one person’s careless and unfeeling insult.

I'm going to give us as the caring people I imagine us to be, more credit than to make statements like that to vulnerable children. However, most of us have said insulting things. We might not have meant them, we might even have apologized for saying them, but we said them, and we don't know what kind of long-lasting effect they may have had. Jesus says, "Watch it. This is dangerous."

He gives a couple of examples. First, there's the deliberate insult. In the original language and in our NIV Bible translation it is left in the original Aramaic: *raca*. *Raca* is a term of derision roughly comparable to "worthless-one" or "empty-head" or "contemptible-one." The reason we find it so often not translated is that the meaning is expressed by tone of voice as much as anything else. It is a kind of name-calling insult designed to inflict pain.

We ask, why would Jesus come down so hard on something as trivial as name-calling? Because name-calling is a source of pain and division between people, and such ought not to be.

Yet, there was more that came under the heat of Jesus' condemnation than simply mean-spirited insults. For example, there's the insult that can-do real damage to someone, the kind of insult that injures someone's good name. You might angrily call somebody "an idiot" and, painful as that might be to the person at that moment, unless you're a person of influence in their lives, it is unlikely that such a thing would follow them for the rest of their days. If someone overheard you say it, they would probably not think you were making a statement about the other person's intelligence; they would most likely figure that you were simply very angry. The one who overheard would not be likely to then go around saying that they had heard that so-and-so was mentally deficient. If they would say anything, they would probably say that you were angry. But if you called someone a liar or immoral and someone else overheard, there is every likelihood that your charge would be repeated. Not your anger, but your charge might do significant damage to the victim.

I'm convinced that if we could have been among that first crowd gathered to hear Jesus' teachings, we would have known that calling a person *raca* carried more weight than it might carry for us today. It meant more than that someone was acting foolishly; it had a moral tone about it. The Psalmist spoke of "the fool who said in his heart, 'There is no God.'" (Psalm 14:1) It implies that the individual has some sinning to do and, in a moment of wishful thinking, says there will be no one to judge. Thus, to call someone a fool was to brand that person as living without morals. Jesus says do not do it, because the one who destroys another's good name like that is liable to the most severe of judgments of all.

Condemned for some thoughtless words? Gracious! There is something else the Lord points out to us here: there is a relationship between our getting along with each other and our getting along with God. Listen to what Jesus says: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar and go. First go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24) The message is that God is very, very, very concerned about human relationships, concerned enough to let us know that making those relationships right is part of our worship.

There's no question that people can be frustrating ... irritating ... exasperating ... infuriating. No matter. We are in this together.

When the Bible defines God as love and defines us as created in God's image, the Bible is tipping us off to something extremely important. Love means relationship.

God made us for relationships - neighbors, friends, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, aunts, uncles, cousins and especially those with whom we are close in the family of God - and the care and nurture of those relationships is at the heart of our Christian discipleship.

A sixth-century teacher by the name of Dorotheos of Gaza, once preached a sermon for the monks in his monastery who were grumbling that they were unable to love God properly because they had to put up with one another's ordinary, irritating presence. Dorotheos told them they were wrong. He asked them to visualize the world as a great circle whose center is God, and upon whose circumference lie human lives. "Imagine now," he asked them, "that there are straight lines connecting from the outside of the circle all human lives to God at the center. Can you see that there is no way to move toward God without drawing closer to other people, and no way to approach other people without coming near to God?"

Listen once more to Jesus' instruction (Matthew 5:23-24): "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." In other words, Jesus is telling us, "MAKE IT RIGHT."