

April 14, 2023

“Scripture that Wrecks Us” (Sermon on the Mount Series)

[Psalm 30](#), [Matthew 5:21-26](#)

Matthew 5:21-26 (NIV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,^[a] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister^{[b][c]} will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’^[d] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Well – I was wondering if this scripture might do its work and send one or two of you scuttling out the door to make something right this morning, but alas you have decided to stay and hear my teaching on this.

I actually picked this scripture to teach on. But in all honesty I’ve spent the last few weeks wondering why? I guess it’s good that my last sermon ended with encouragement for the spiritual practice of confession because today’s “sermon” feels a bit more like a confession.

Thankfully, I’m learning that Jesus’ teaching here in the sermon on the mount was probably intended to feel so personal the listener might be moved toward confession and repair.

Would you pray with me?

May the mediations of my heart and the words of my mouth be pleasing in your sight.

Last week, Tom shared this quote from Dale Bruner:

“Make your life goal the translation of scripture into life, and you will be given an award of being called Great in the kingdom.”

Translating scripture into life. I wrote that down feeling sort of confident that I am “on the right track”, but then... this sermon.

Some scripture feels so completely hard to live out. It’s hard to face how often I miss the mark when I’ve spent so much time and energy trying to live out this following of Jesus – especially

with this struggle I have with anger. It's tempting to think, maybe I'm okay with no rewards for greatness and I should just throw in the towel.

I sent my friends a text on Monday. "This sermon is wrecking me."

Then I read more from Dale Bruner. He described the inner-turmoil I've endured in preparation for today's teaching – and I felt relief as I realized the tension was part of the journey.

Bruner says this, "Where Jesus' words on anger are heard with faith, they slay us. If our anger is as bad as these two verses say, then we are not as surely en route to the kingdom as we thought we were." He explains that hearing these verses drives us to remember the first three beatitudes and to accept our place among the poor in spirit and grieving.

That is how I felt leading up to this message. Broken and powerless in my own great struggle with letting go of anger.

Gut wrenching grief in the realization that I don't know when my anger at injustice turned into an unrelenting anger – carried around and spewed out on the unsuspecting and innocent in ways I didn't even consider to be wrong. Slayed – and not in the good way.

Broken, full of sorrow and loved by Jesus. This is the teacher who stands before you today.

Thankfully, God is so kind and so cool and so in this with me, I can stand up here and share with you a few things I am learning and imperfectly practicing in my effort to be a follower of Jesus. I hope that as God is using this sermon to work out a healing in my story, the Spirit will move in you today as well.

One thing that's been helpful in my study is to think about the way Jesus teaches these commands in Matthew 5.

1. Jesus looks at the Old Commandment found in the Torah – "you have heard it said to the people long ago."
2. Jesus gives his command: a deeper, more nuanced understanding related to the heart of a person.
3. Jesus gives little steps of obedience: Creative ways in which we can consider how to move when conviction comes.

Marty Solomon, host of the Bema Podcast, explains that each command and its upside-down responses are intended to help us learn how to follow Jesus' primary command to LOVE PEOPLE better. Solomon clarifies that Jesus wanted to help the listeners see that the original command was always meant to be interpreted in a deeper way. And when we say Yes! to trying to follow Jesus' creative examples provided in the teaching we are saying Yes! to being set apart, a holy people.

I have been thinking a lot about the reason Jesus decided to start with anger in this list of really tough heart issues found in Matthew 5: anger, lust, divorce, vows, revenge, and hatred toward

enemies. Is it that anger is so incredibly universal and there are so many valid reasons to be angry? Is it that anger can lie at the heart of being able or unable to think creatively in our responses to the following injustices? I wonder what you think about this starting point?

Let's look at Jesus' teaching. We'll start with the old commandment found in Torah.

Jesus says – you have heard it said that you should not murder. This original command might be the easiest for many people to recognize from the Old Testament – it's part of the ten commandments that God gave to Moses to lead the Israelites. And honestly, it feels like it makes a lot of sense.

Murder – the elimination of another person's life – feels pretty wrong. When people in the Bible murder - Cain killing his brother Abel, King David killing Uriah, Bathsheba's husband - God isn't happy it. And Jesus, in John 8 calls Satan a murderer. It's not hard for us to agree: murder is wrong.

Jesus agrees. Murder is wrong. And whoever murders will face the judgement of God.

It's in the second section that everything begins to get a little tricky and a whole lot more personal. Jesus wants us to consider what leads up to murder: anger. And anger, even in its most "harmless" form – name calling – is deserving of the ultimate judgement by God.

Tim Mackey of the Bible project points out Jesus' creative and upside-down teaching method here once again. As the outward deed becomes culturally more acceptable, the judgement becomes more intense.

Murder → Judgement

Anger → Judgement

Call someone "Raca" (good for nothing, idiot, removal of human dignity) → Court (Sanhedrin)

Call someone a fool → Well that's worthy of fires of Ghenna (hell)* (See BibleProject for the teaching on this metaphor for God's ultimate judgement:

https://youtu.be/vHj_06mXiBw?si=9qne_1Cr174ut_IT)

Confession: Last week, I called a parent in the school drop-off line a name. That parent didn't hear me – but my child did. Does this moment in my life warrant such a harsh judgement – the fires of Ghenna?

Well – I told you this sermon was wrecking me, and here's why:

Bruner spends a good deal of time in his commentary helping to clarify what Jesus means with the specific word he uses that gets translated into anger. This is important. We've been talking a lot about emotions being helpful, informative tools as we get healthier with our emotions and our spirituality. When is anger helpful and informative and when does it become the problem Jesus is referencing here?

Bruner says, the word Jesus uses is a present-tense participle and it literally means:

“is being angry,”

“is carrying anger,”

“is remaining angry,”

“is nursing a grudge,”

or perhaps the best translation “resenting” since resentment is continuing anger.

Bruner goes onto explain:

“It is the habit of carried anger that Jesus confronts with judgment. ... This attitude of carried anger presumes a decision to carry it around, ... a decision to live this way.”

Essentially when we choose to carry our anger around it is bound to show up in the way we live and treat people and that makes it judgable by God.

There are justifiable reasons to feel anger. Often when anger shows up like an unannounced guest it is caused by encountering real injustices that warrant anger. There are injustices that cause God to get angry.

Anger can inform us that an injustice has occurred and can help us move forward and take next steps when we encounter injustice.

In his essay on Ephesians 4: 26 “Be angry and do not sin,” Theologian Allen Dwight Callahan says, “When faced with an outrage, it is a sin not to be angry.”

I like how ecological teacher Sara Jolena Wolcott says, “The trick with anger is to let it inform us, maybe even to let it warm us if we have become too cold with indifference or apathy, but not to let the fire control or consume us.”

Let anger inform, but do not let it control. After all, we are to LOVE people. All people. Even those with whom we disagree. With those whose behavior incites anger. With the person who is sitting in this room who will vote differently from you in November. And yes with the mom who pulls into the spot you’ve been waiting for in the drop-off line.

Well friends, let’s get real. Did the unkind name that flew from my mouth describe the woman dropping her children off at school or would beautiful child created in the image of God be a more appropriate description? In taking Jesus’ teaching seriously, I had to ask myself what was going on in my heart to allow venom from my lips with such readiness? This was not an exercise of condemnation, but a search for information. What could I discover from that moment of anger?

Some truth about this teacher. I’ve been sick because of unrelenting anger.

1. My first sermon given in September of 2021 addressed my own struggle with anger and how unresolved grief and loss from childhood adversity was causing angry attacks within my home. I have been working with God on that anger since 2015.
2. In 2018, anger informed me of injustice and helped me take step after step to address that injustice.
3. In 2020, I became aware of my struggle with unforgiveness toward the people and situations involved in the 2018 situation.
4. I asked God to help me figure it out because I didn't know how to forgive.
5. In 2022, I spent the year learning and practicing surrender. Somewhere along the way I learned that forgiveness is the greatest act of surrender.
6. In March of 2023, I learned that forgiveness must be offered again and again for the deepest wounds.
7. In the fall of 2023, I told you all I wasn't ready to give a sermon on forgiveness when I taught about Joseph and his brothers. And I wasn't.
8. In fall 2023, I entered a sabbatical. I was confronted by a truth from Nadia Boltz Weber – what we sometimes think is righteous anger that we carry around with us – is in fact an unrelenting anger that feeds the darkness.
9. I encountered a person that I had been holding this grudge with. I offered the hurt, the hate, the harm up to God. This happened twice in November with two different people.
10. I decided to do a deep dive on forgiveness. I saw the definition and for the first time – I realized that forgiveness means to stop being angry or resentful.
11. In the last few months, I've learned some tools and I'm feeling less angry most of the time. I'm learning to untangle the hurt from injustice, the fear, and the sorrow. I'm naming the truth of my hardened heart and claiming my inability to resolve the wounds on my own. I honestly can't look back in any of these scenarios and tell you when an appropriate anger changed into an anger that controlled me more than love. But it's a pattern I need to pay attention to because it's happened multiple times.
12. My friend Jayme taught me a prayer recently that comes from Psalm 30. When I looked up the Psalm, I thought how appropriate it is a praise for recovering from a grave illness. I feel like this journey with anger has been like recovering from an illness that manifests itself in new ways again and again – like a morphing virus. I recognized the symptoms of yelling at my kids. Now the symptom of calling an innocent parent a name. Psalm 30 says that God's anger is only for a moment. Jayme's prayer: God let my anger only last for a moment. Let it inform me. Let it help me move toward your love for all people. And then let me let it go.

So here is where we finish up. Jesus' invitation to reconciliation. Back to that peace making business here. Health and wholeness in relationship. You are gonna get angry. And you're probably going to hold that anger and let it unleash in some way that causes harm. But it doesn't have to end there. When you feel the conviction – do something about it.

Get creative.

Make things right.

Jesus examples are a starting point for us.

When you feel convicted: maybe you are heading to church to worship and offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God – your ordinary life. And you realize that in a moment of anger (or that moment your long-held anger was expressed) you hurt someone you love. Well – go make it right. Do your part to reconcile.

Or maybe the situation is with an adversary. Someone who has done you wrong. Try your best to make it right along the way. In the moment. As you can.

These are hard examples to live out when life and people cause us real harm. It has taken me to be a broken open vessel so that God could be the one to move. Sometimes you just don't have the ability to reconcile something. But Jesus does.

Jesus faced the harshest anger. And he faced it because He lived out love. He held the sickness and pain and the hurt of the people, and he was killed for that. And he cried out for those who harmed him – God forgive them because they don't get it. They can't see where they're going wrong – how anger is wrecking them. He died because of that unrelenting human anger.

But that was not the end of the story.

For God's anger lasts only for a moment but God's favor lasts a lifetime.

Jesus conquered death and darkness and he reconciled us to God. – a favor for eternity

I'm going to get it wrong again with anger – though I hope I'll keep growing in awareness. I'm going to have to make repair for the ruptures. And I'm going to have to turn more over to God – because I won't be able to figure out how to do it myself.

And when God shows up because He will - in that I can lift my voice with praise:

“Thank you God. You have turned my mourning into dancing. You have clothed me with joy. Let my soul praise you and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.” (Psalm 30 11-12)