

9.18.05 Living Free from Anger and Contempt Matthew 5:21-26,33-37

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Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to people in ancient times, 'You must not murder'; and 'The person who murders will be in danger of judgment.' I myself am telling you that someone who is **angry** with a fellow believer without a reason will have to answer to the local court!

And someone **who says** to a fellow believer, 'Stupid idiot!' has to answer to the district court. , but whoever calls someone 'You Complete Fool!' will be thrown into the burning Garbage Pit Gehenna!

Now if you bring your offering to the altar and then remember that **your fellow believer** has a grudge against you, you are to leave your offering there in front of the altar. Go and make friend with your fellow believer, and then come back and offer your gift.

If you see a legal trial looming, come to an agreement with **your opponent** before it lands in the courts. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge and the judge will hand you over to the officer and you will be thrown into prison! Listen to me – you won't get out of there until you have paid the very last cent!"<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:21-26

In the two passages we've heard today from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is talking about murder and anger and not swearing oaths but using clear, transparent speech. I am going to focus on anger because that is primary in what Jesus is talking about in his sermon. An article in Friday's Boston Globe concerned a convicted, unrepentant triple murderer named Daniel LaPlante whose crime was so horrendous that the Superior Court judge who presided over his trial was quoted as saying, "*Of the 150 murder cases I heard, he is one of only five that I would personally have no problem pulling the switch on the electric chair myself.*"<sup>2</sup> In most societies including that of Moses, Jesus, and our own murder is viewed as the ultimate crime and often was and is punished with the ultimate of penalties. When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to people in ancient times, 'You must not murder'; and 'The person who murders will be in danger of judgment.' The folks on the hill would have nodded their heads in agreement, of course that is the way it is and the way it should be. Their nodding agreement would have been shocked by what Jesus said next, **that a person who is**

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<sup>1</sup> From The Source New Testament, a translation by Dr. Ann Nyland, Smith and Stirling Publishing, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McGrory, Injustice for Almost All, Boston Globe, 9/16/05, B1.

**intensely angry with some one else is open to equal condemnation as one who commits murder.** Jesus uses the exact same phrase, “*shall stand condemned before the law,*” to apply to anger as the teaching of Moses applied to murder. This is difficult for us to hear and to deal with because murder is not an act most of us are likely to engage in. We look down upon those who commit acts of murder as the most reprehensible in our society. However, while we’re not murderers, the truth is most of us get angry and when we do, our anger frequently leads us to sin and does violence to ourselves and to others every day. **Jesus says eliminating anger and contempt is the first step toward having a heart filled with the goodness of God.**

What is anger? Anger is an emotion - an emotion is “**a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act.**”

Anger and its family comprise one of the primary human emotions. Anger’s disagreeable and unattractive offspring including fury, outrage, resentment, wrath, exasperation, indignation, vexation, acrimony (not to be confused with matrimony), animosity, annoyance, irritability, hostility, and perhaps at the extreme, pathological hatred and violence.<sup>3</sup> Those of us who are familiar with Paul’s words about love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 will recognize how love is described in nearly opposite terms, “love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude, doesn’t insist on its own way, is not irritable, or resentful. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

Anger is impatient, unkind, often boastful and arrogant, frequently arising because we insist on getting our own way and we’re mad because we’re not and we refuse to yield. Anger clearly is irritable and resentful, unwilling to bear hurts, often not believing or trusting another’s words or motives, has lost hope, and the ability to endure. Anger can lead us to quit or give up.

Jesus obviously wants what is best for us and for others which is why he is so concerned about anger. **Anger does violence to our selves.** In the terrific book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman describes **how anger is suicidal.** A study of anger in heart patients at Stanford University Medical School revealed **that anger seems to be the one emotion that does most harm to the heart**, dozens of studies have pointed to the power of anger to damage the heart. Dr. Redford Williams at Duke University found that being prone to anger was a stronger predictor of dying young than

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<sup>3</sup> Emotional Intelligence, 289.

were other risk factors such as smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. A Yale School of Medicine study tracked over 900 men who had survived heart attacks and found that those who had been rated as easily roused to anger were **three times** more likely to die of cardiac arrest than those who were more even-tempered. So if you don't like what you're hearing this morning, the first thing you need to do is calm down.

Goleman writes, "These findings do not mean that people should try to suppress anger when it is appropriate," **but "the net effect of ventilating anger every time it is felt is simply to feed it, making it a more likely response to any annoying situation."** The difficulty is when anger and hostility become "so constant as to define an antagonistic personal style – one marked by repeated feelings of mistrust and cynicism and the propensity to snide comments and put-downs, as well as more obvious bouts of temper and rage. The hopeful news is that chronic anger need not be a death sentence: hostility is a habit that can change."<sup>4</sup> Dr. Williams from Duke concluded, "**The antidote to hostility is to develop a more trusting heart.** *All it takes is the right motivation. When people see that their hostility can lead to an early grave, they are ready to try.*"

**Anger not only does violence to our selves, it hurts other people.** When we learn someone is angry with us, we are already wounded or hurt, even if we haven't received that anger directly. Anger raises the stress level of everyone exposed to it. The tension around a table or in a room goes up rapidly when someone is expressing anger, especially if they are out of control. Anger feeds on anger and often evokes anger in others. People who are angry at us want to hurt us which they can do by how they look at us or refusing to look at us, or by how they talk to us, or refuse to talk to us. Most of us are very adept at these behaviors and we can recognize quickly when they are being done to us. According to a news report, there are around 25,000 murders each year in the United States, many of these deaths can be attributed to first hand or second hand anger. Second hand anger being the innocent people who are mistakenly shot when the murderer is after someone else. It is a simple fact that most murders would not happen except that the killer chose to embrace and indulge his or her anger, instead of letting it go. Dallas Willard describes how "When we trace wrongdoing back to its roots in the human heart, we find that in the overwhelming number of cases it involves some form of anger. Close behind anger you will find its twin brother, contempt. To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil. That is why Paul says simply,

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<sup>4</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, (Bantam Books, NY, 1995), pages 169-172.

“Lay aside anger” (Colossians 3:8). There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it. To retain anger and to cultivate it is “to give the devil a chance” (Ephesians 4:26-27). Anger is a feeling we can nurture or not, contempt is worse because then we are insulting and degrading the other person.

Whether our problem is with another believer or with an opponent or adversary who is suing us and taking us to court. Jesus says our response is not to be one of anger and self-righteousness. It is not to be one of patting ourselves on the back just because we didn't kill the other person. Jesus wants us to see the value of the people with whom we are angry. Laws like the Ten Commandments that deal only with actions, can't reach the human heart, the source of actions. A relationship with Jesus can get to matters of our innermost self so that we are not concerned merely with what we shouldn't do, but we are filled as Jesus was with an incredible positive regard for our neighbor, whom we love as God does. So if we find ourselves in the holiest of moments for a first century Jewish person, standing before the altar about to present your sacrifice to God, when suddenly you realize, you gossiped about somebody and that person is mad at you, Jesus says in that moment, a heart filled with the goodness of God, leaves everything to make that relationship right.

If anger is something you wrestle with, let me suggest three things.

**The antidote to anger involves Self-Awareness, being mindful when anger is beginning to stir within us, the ability to Regulate Anger once it has begun, and Empathy for other people.**

**Self-Awareness** – an old Japanese tale tells how a belligerent samurai challenged a Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell. The monk replied with scorn, *“You're nothing but a lout – I can't waste my time with the likes of you!”*

His honor attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled, *“I could kill you for your impertinence.”*

*“That,”* the monk calmly replied, *“is hell.”*

Startled at seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for the insight.”

*“And that,”* said the monk, *“is heaven.”*

When the angry samurai suddenly wakes up to his own emotional state, he illustrates the difference between being caught up by a feeling and becoming aware that

you are being swept away by it. Self-awareness means “being aware of both our mood and our thoughts about that mood.”<sup>5</sup>

**Self-awareness includes one of the most powerful ways to defuse anger undermining the convictions that are fueling the anger in the first place.**

“The longer we ruminate about what has made us angry, the more “good reasons” and self-justification for being angry we can invent. Brooding fuel’s anger’s flames. But seeing things differently douses those flames. Reframing a situation more positively is one of the most potent ways to put anger to rest.”<sup>6</sup> The Bible teaches us to be angry but not to sin. We are not to go to bed and sleep on our anger and stoke it.

**Regulating Anger – purposely substituting reasonable thoughts for cynical, mistrustful ones during trying situations.** For example, not being so selfish that every time something doesn’t go your way you think it is because the world is conspiring against you. This is especially applicable when we’re driving, some people think cars are a means of transportation. Actually they are God’s way of revealing exactly what is going on in our heart and soul at any given time. You don’t have to do away to a monastery for a retreat, just get in your car and start driving around and what is going on within you will become clear. So the next time someone goes flying by you on the mid Cape highway like an angel out of heaven, instead of cursing them out, think that they may be rushing to a hospital emergency room where a loved one has been taken and say a prayer that they will get there in time and that their loved one will be okay. Even if that isn’t the case, you’ll be amazed at how different you will feel. As we will learn from Jesus in a few weeks, it is much harder to stay mad at someone or to see them as your enemy, if you are praying for them.

**Empathy** – in frustrating situations learning to see things from the other person’s perspective helps to calm anger. God twice asks Jonah, the reluctant prophet with zero empathy for the residents of the city of Nineveh who he considers his enemies, “Is it right for you to be angry?” That is a good question to ask ourselves when we are angry. In his vanity, self-importance and immaturity, Jonah replies, “Yes, angry enough to die.” Well as we said earlier, anger can kill you.

We all are susceptible to angry flare-ups when we’re tired, worried, frustrated, or stressed and we can lash out with angry words often against the very people we love the most. These have their cost since incidents like these are like driving nails into a fence,

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<sup>5</sup> Goleman 46-47.

<sup>6</sup> Goleman, 60.

even when you pull the nails the holes in the fence remain. Wise families learn to excuse or overlook these outbursts while also working to undo the tangled knots and restore harmony.

We need to be even more on guard against contempt, resentment, bitterness, grudges, those angers with a long, slow-burning fuse are even more deadly and more destructive of our peace of mind, our health, our spiritual welfare, our families, and our relationships. Jesus says it is not enough merely not to do harm when we're tempted to say or do something in anger, rather we are to love and to seek the good of the other person. We are to be willing to give and receive forgiveness. We are to lay aside anger and to act out of an intense desire to help. Jesus goal in teaching about anger is to show the value of human beings.

On a weekend when a Tropical storm named Ophelia passed by the Cape, it seems appropriate to hear from Hamlet, the man Ophelia loved in Shakespeare's play. Hamlet, said to his friend Horatio, "Thou hast been....

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards  
Has taken with equal thanks....Give me that man  
**That is not passion's slave**, and I will wear him  
In my heart's core, aye in my heart of hearts  
As I do thee...."

"A sense of self-mastery, of being able to withstand the emotional storms that the buffeting of life and Fortune bring rather than being "passion's slave," has been praised as a virtue since the time of Plato. Jesus is comparing goodness in the kingdom of heaven with the mere goodness of not killing someone we're mad at. While it is good to avoid committing murder when we're mad, Jesus says it is even better to grow in spiritual maturity and self-awareness so that we can become aware of our emotions, so we master them rather than they ruling us.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to master ourselves, in order that we may become the servants of others.