

Relationships in the Kingdom

Our New Testament reading is Matthew 5:21-26, another passage from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where he gives examples of how the righteousness that God gives and requires is greater than that of the religious teachers of the day. In these six examples Jesus contrasts what the Old Covenant law says with his new interpretation. The first reinterpretation he gives is the Sixth Commandment, prohibiting murder (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17). Likely, when Jesus repeated this commandment, most of the people felt safe, having never physically murdered anyone. But then Jesus draws out the full implications of this commandment, showing the surpassing righteousness that he expects from his followers.

Follow as I read **Matthew 5:21-26**.

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.

Anybody here ever killed anyone? Jesus is speaking about much more than whether or not we've been guilty of actual murder in the physical sense. He's addressing how we've handled our relationships, which is at the very heart of Scripture and also of the life of a follower of Jesus.

Many years ago, when I was a young pastor attending a ministry conference, I recall the speaker's asking those of us in attendance, "What's the word that best summarizes the message of the entire Bible?" We all guessed words such as "God's love, salvation, holiness, righteousness, grace, forgiveness," etc. After we all had our opportunity, he posited that the most important word that most completely summarizes the message of the Bible is "relationships." He went on to explain that God created us for a relationship with himself, and redemption is God's story of how he through Christ seeks to restore that lost relationship. The gospel is about a relationship with God and one another, for now and eternity.

The intent of the 6th Commandment, says Jesus, is more than the prohibition of physical murder. He says that we're guilty before God if we have a murderous heart, one that's based on self-centered anger. Some anger is biblically justified, as we see even in the life of Jesus, who was angry with those who valued laws and traditions more than people (Mk. 3:5) and with those who had turned his house of prayer into a den of robbers (Matt. 21:12f). Paul noted that

there are occasions for anger, perhaps when we see the destructive effects of sin (Eph. 4:26). As followers of Jesus, we would do well to be angry when we see, for example, exploitation of the weak and injustice in our society. But a lot of our anger, perhaps even most of it, could hardly be labeled as “righteous indignation.” Much of our anger, the kind that Jesus condemns as sinful, is self-centered. Our anger is stirred when we’re deprived of something or someone offends us. As our example for how and when to be rightly angry, we need to look to Jesus. Amazingly, Jesus was not angry even when he was personally attacked and insulted (1 Pet. 2:23f).

In contrast to Jesus, we often retaliate when we’re insulted or otherwise offended, or our way and our rights are denied us. We may not immediately or overtly retaliate, but we seethe with anger within, and maybe even wish the offender were dead, or at least harmed in some way. This is the kind of stewing, self-centered anger that becomes rage. And we all know about the epidemic of road rage, which is the response of self-centered anger when our space is invaded or our right-of-way is denied. At the bottom of this self-centered anger is pride.

Jesus says that there’s no place in the kingdom of heaven for this self-centered anger that’s the seedbed for overt murder. We’re all painfully aware of the murder rate in cities like Chicago, and even here in Madison. And the most lethally dangerous place where the most violence takes place is within the home. We can assume that many of these murders are in the context of drug and gang culture, but essentially these attacks and murders began in hearts consumed by self-centered anger. Although anger and murderous thoughts are not as bad in consequences as physical murder, Jesus says that all guilty of un-forgiven anger will face judgment. Anger damages relationships and cuts us off from those who’ve wronged us.

Jesus speaks also about the damage of words. When I was a child there was a rhyme we’d reply to a playmate who’d ridiculed us, namely, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But nothing can be further from the truth. Jesus warned against angrily spitting out venomous words that can hurt another person’s feelings and character, and certainly would alienate us from the other. The Aramaic word “raka,” is an insult that refers to someone’s lack of intelligence; and “fool” is from a Greek word from which we get our word “moron.”

The Message translates these words as “idiot” and “stupid.” We’ve no idea the hurt that can be caused by our words, whether intentionally venomous and hurtful or simply careless. I’ve counseled with adults who suffer to this very day from words their parents spoke to them, hurtful words like “stupid, worthless, blockhead, idiot,” and “no-good.” These words did permanent damage to the self-esteem and self-confidence of these verbal abuse victims, who can’t erase the damaging and deadly effect of these words, whether spoken carelessly or with pre-mediated, angry and deadly intent. I’m guilty of curses again myself when I say things like, “What an idiot I am!” Such curses damage ourselves as well as offend God. Whatever the intent, these words can hurt a lot more than sticks and stones.

Jesus condemns hateful, derogatory words as inconsistent with life in the kingdom, and notes that anyone who uses inflammatory words is risking judgment (22). Hateful words hurt others and also will bring spiritual and possibly even eternal harm to us who speak them. Angry and derogatory words reveal a heart desperately in need of genuine conversion. In fact, John says that anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, “and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him” (1 Jn. 3:15).

Our relationships with others, perhaps damaged by our angry words, can't be separated from our relationship with God. Jesus pictures a worshiper approaching the altar where he's ready to hand his sacrificial offering to the priest. In the context of worship, he realizes that he has a broken relationship with a brother who's absent from worship, perhaps because the broken relationship has discouraged his fellow believer from attending worship. Maybe the relationship was broken through an angry outburst, with words of insult. Whatever the cause, the worshiper is made aware of that broken relationship that needs to be mended before his worship can be acceptable.

It's easy for religious people to become smug, thinking our anger and alienation from others is a result of our “righteous indignation” because others didn't meet our expectations. We find a way to smugly dismiss them and their estrangement from us and the church as their “just desserts” for not playing the game according to our rules. But the spiritually sensitive will be aware of their guilt and the need to seek reconciliation. The truly humble and obedient won't be “keeping score” about who did what and who is responsible to make the first move toward reconciliation, but will take the first step and seek to be restored in every relationship. They'll know that unless they seek reconciliation, their worship will be insincere and an empty exercise.

A broken relationship between spouses will be a hindrance to prayer (1 Pet. 3:7). Our relationship with God is dependent on our relationship with the one we're called to love the most on this earth. A right relationship with God is dependent on our seeking the forgiveness of our spouse and a restored relationship of forgiveness, love and trust. If we mistreat our spouse, we're mistreating Christ himself, who loves and cherishes them and who lives within them.

If we're serious about our relationship with God we'll seriously seek to be reconciled with our fellow believers. The picture Jesus gives is of the worshiper leaving his sacrifice in the temple and heading to visit his estranged fellow worshiper. Today we could picture the worshiper going out to the foyer and calling on his cellular phone and expressing sincere apologies and encouraging the alienated worshiper to join him for the remainder of the service. The worshiper pictured perhaps was preparing to give his offering during the offertory or was preparing to receive communion.

If we took this command of Jesus seriously today, many of our churches would or should be temporarily emptied while people seek reconciliation with each

other. Some broken relationships should be healed privately. For example, you may have had bad thoughts and feelings about someone. You also may have spoken ill about someone. But if that person doesn't know about your bad thoughts, feelings and words, then all you need to do is confess these sinful thoughts and feelings to God alone, and not to the person who hasn't been offended, who is unaware of your sin. If you've spoken ill about this brother or sister, you need to go to the ones to whom you have spoken and tell them that you were wrong in what you said. If we make an honest attempt at reconciliation, God will be pleased with us and will deal with those who reject our efforts. God will then gladly accept our gifts.

The week prior to the Sunday that his church was to pledge a huge amount to pay off their building debt, a well-known pastor urged his people, before they made their pledge to give a special offering, to first be reconciled to God and to one another. He urged his congregation to first examine and then humble themselves if God revealed a broken relationship with someone in the church body. He noted that it was more important to the wellbeing of the church that they be united in love than that they be free of debt (J Piper). As a result, the pledge drive was successful.

My father said to me in his later years, somewhat wistfully, that relationships and friendship becomes more important, while job and career success become less important. This is true for us here at Dale Heights as well. The priority with God is our relationship with him and with one another. That's more important than our offerings to the church. When we're right with God and each other, the acceptable offering follows. We then can give with joy, knowing God is honored and pleased and will bless us as only he can do. God calls us to do "first things first," and reconciliation removes the barriers to true worship and effective prayer.

Finally, Jesus underscores the urgency of restoring broken relationships. The picture he gives is of one who encounters his adversary on the street, and being admonished to be reconciled with him before being taken to court to settle a matter. This says to us that we're indeed on our way to see the Judge, and will stand before him to give an account someday (2 Cor. 5:9f). Relationships are central in the kingdom of heaven, and we'll be judged by how we regard and guard them.

"Don't lose a minute. Make the first move" (*The Message*, v.25), is what Jesus seems to be saying here. We've been given only a limited "window of opportunity," and we must be willing to take the initiative rather than waiting for the estranged brother or sister to act. The longer we wait until we seek reconciliation, the more the problem festers, the more the relationship deteriorates and the fellowship of the church may suffer.

Jesus uses a picture of the possibility of court-ruled litigation as a result of the dispute between fellow believers. And of course, such disgraceful situations occur, like the dispute between different factions of a divided denomination, suing one another for valuable real estate used for a conference center, a place dedicated to spiritual renewal!

G Campbell Morgan speaks of the urgency of restoration and the source for the remedy for broken relationships when he says that to avoid judgment we must “hurry to the cross” (53-57). Christ is the only one who can bring healing to broken relationships and who gives us his love for one another. He gives grace to take on his humility and brokenness before others, causing us to surrender our rights and our insistence on our position in a dispute. How can we refuse the gift of reconciliation with others when Jesus died to reconcile us to God?

I can be confident I’ve never physically murdered anyone, but that doesn’t make me innocent of what God intends for and how Jesus interprets this Sixth Commandment. I know I’ve been angry, and not always with “righteous indignation. I’ve been angry without a just cause, and primarily because I didn’t get my way or was insulted and my ego was hurt. I realize that Jesus has called me to follow him, deny my rights and privileges and die to my self-centered self.

I must realize that the most precious thing to me is my relationship with Christ Jesus, who suffered and died that I might become God’s friend, his friend. And I can’t be rightly related to him if I’m not rightly related to all of his children, including myself. That means that all of my relationships are vitally important, that I be on speaking and fellowship terms with all of his people. So, just maybe the key concept in the Bible *is* relationships. The most important gift we have in life and for eternity is the gracious gift of our relationships—with God, with one another and even with myself.