

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:21-26

We have already seen Jesus throw a curveball to the prevailing assumptions of who is “well-off”, “blessed”, and who has the “good life”. He has already established that those who are experiencing the Kingdom that He is ushering in are the ones who are well-off/blessed, and that His Kingdom is open, available, and accessible to all..even those (especially those) who are afterthoughts by the worldly value system.

Now another curveball is coming down the pike. Who is a truly good person? The prevailing assumption was that people like the Pharisees and teachers of the law (and that’s just representative...we can throw in the whole religious establishment in the spirit of what Jesus is saying) were truly good people. No one would dare argue or challenge that. Well, no one except Jesus. Recall that we left off with Jesus saying, “...*unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*” (5:20, emphasis added)

We can certainly say that a “righteous” person is a truly good person. Yet, Jesus seems to take issue with the brand of “righteousness” propagated by the religious establishment...which, of course, painted itself/themselves out to be “righteous”, the measuring stick for everyone else to compare themselves to...and generally fall short of.

From here on out, through the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is going to describe true “righteousness” as well as describe the type of life available in/through the Kingdom. In Matthew 5:21-48 (though we’ll be taking it in smaller chunks as we go through this series), as N.T. Wright states, “...*Jesus takes the commands of the law and shows how they provide a blueprint for a way of being fully, genuinely, gloriously human. This new way, which Jesus had come to pioneer and make possible, goes deep down into the roots of personality and produces a different pattern of behavior altogether.*”

Or as Dallas Willard puts it, “[Jesus] knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the kind of person from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow...It is the inner life of the soul that we must aim to transform, and then behavior will naturally and easily follow. But not the reverse. A special term is used in the New Testament to mark the character of the inner life when it is as it should be. This is the term dikaiousune.” (the Greek word translated “righteousness” or “justice”, the emphasis being cultivating and maintaining right relationships.)

The inner life...the heart...character...this is the root source Jesus aims at. Righteousness, or a truly good person, is determined on this level...not external performance or legalistically upholding the law...as Jesus is about to demonstrate with a series of six case studies, six illustrations of Kingdom righteousness, to illustrate the point. We’ll just be looking at the first case study this week.

“You have heard that it was said to people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.” (5:21-22a)

Whoa! I’m pretty confident that nobody reading this right now has committed murder. I’m equally confident that everybody reading this has been angry with another person. If righteousness is simply based on not killing anybody, then most of us would be doing pretty good. But apparently, according to Jesus (who is the One who gets to determine such things) that’s too low of a bar, and misses the spirit of the law. Speaking of the law, in case you’re unaware, “Do not murder.” is one of the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17)

The point Jesus is making is that it is possible, even quite likely, to keep the commandments/laws and NOT be a righteous person, or to keep the letter of the law and miss the spirit of the law. Thankfully, Jesus goes on to expound on the true spirit of the law. He invites His hearers (then and now) to examine their relationship with anger. I suspect that’s something we can all relate to.

Please allow me to pause and offer a personal reflection. I would say that nothing in the past 12-15 years of my life has spurred on as much growth/maturity in me as examining and wrestling with my relationship with anger. What brought this about was recognizing how anger was negatively affecting my life and relationships, and so consequently doing a deep dive into understanding anger through reading, reflection, counseling, etc. Among other things, I discovered our passage at hand is a bedrock to developing a good Christian perspective on anger.

Peter Scazzero, author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, puts it well when he says, “*It’s impossible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.*” I was running into my own emotional immaturity, of which anger was the leading evidence. Thankfully, God is good, and He beckoned me deeper into the Kingdom life available to me, to all of us. So this week we’re invited to examine our anger, explore it with Jesus, and allow Him to begin transforming our hearts, which is where true righteousness (or lack thereof) resides.

So let’s talk about anger. What is anger? Anger is an emotional reaction to unmet expectations (not getting what we want) or to fear (or both). David Powlison, author of the book *Good & Angry*, states, “[*Anger*] is the way we react when something we think important is not the way it’s supposed to be.”

I appreciate James Bryan Smith’s delineation between visceral anger and meditative anger. (See *The Good and Beautiful Life*, chapter 4, “Living Without Anger”). Visceral anger is instantaneous, “*There is little lag time between the action and the reaction.*” (JBS) Something happens, we immediately respond/react in the moment, and then it dissipates rather quickly as well...unless our reaction produces longer-term consequences. Meditative anger “*is more common and more damaging to the soul...it grows over a period of time. The more we stew on it the worse it becomes.*” (JBS) While both types of anger reflect the condition of the heart, here

in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus seems to be addressing meditative anger more than visceral anger.

Dallas Willard writes, *“The primary function of anger in life is to alert me to an obstruction to my will, and immediately raise alarm and resistance, before I even have time to think about it...Anger first arises spontaneously. But we can actively receive it and decide to indulge it, and we usually do...Anger indulged, instead of simply waved off, always has in it an element of self-righteousness and vanity. Find a person who has embraced anger, and you find a person with a wounded ego...anger can become anything from a low-burning resentment to a holy crusade to inflict harm on the one who has thwarted me...I may become addicted to the adrenaline rush and never feel really alive except when my anger is pumping.”*

Desire and fear work in tandem and produce a need to try and control results, outcomes, situations, or people. As Jim Smith says, *“This need to control leads us to turn to our own resources, which is an occasion for sin—‘walking in the flesh.’”* So the two overarching points we want to keep in mind are that the core/root problem is our heart (where desire and fear dwell), and the solution is the present reality of the Kingdom of God (which means there’s something bigger at play than ourselves and our limited resources). These two points are key to understanding the Sermon.

With that in mind, we can see how simply not murdering somebody falls short of the kind of character we would hope for from citizens of the Kingdom of God. Jesus desires His people to BECOME (remember our theme for the year) the type of people for whom obeying God comes naturally and easily. In order for that to happen He has to get to the root issue, our heart/character. Jesus is not interested in simply behavior management/modification.

This is what makes the outline and order of things addressed in the Sermon significant. Every idea builds upon the preceding idea. Jesus didn’t randomly choose six issues to contrast, *“You have heard it said...but I tell you...”* Dealing with anger first is important/significant. As we’ll see in the coming weeks, these six *“issues of the heart”* are, as Dallas Willard states, *“...stages in a progression toward a life of agape love.”* We must deal with anger first, before we’ll be able to successfully address the upcoming issues. Willard continues, *“That is what we would naturally expect when we realize that we are hearing from Someone who has absolute mastery of the subject matter with which He is dealing and is absolute master of how to present it. The later parts of the Discourse presuppose the earlier parts...”* (emphasis added, and also High Christology, Baby!)

This is crucial to being a disciple, an apprentice, of Jesus. We must trust unequivocally that He knows what He’s talking about. Jesus gets to define what/who is a truly good person, AND He knows how to help us BECOME truly good people. What Jesus knows/understands is that truly good people have a heart/character that reflects the Father’s heart and character. So when God gives us laws/commandments it behooves us to reflect deeply on the intent of them and what they are really trying to get at.

We all have occasion to experience anger. But what are we to do with it? I've found a helpful parallel in physical pain. Physical pain is something we all experience. In fact, physical pain is an innate warning system that something is wrong and needs our attention. If physical pain is not appropriately attended to it can cause long term problems and prolonged suffering. Anger is similar in that it's an internal warning system that signals there is something that we need to attend to. (Where this illustration falls short is that unattended anger can also cause suffering to others.)

If anger is not dealt with properly it can breed bitterness, resentment, and contempt. When someone is consumed with such things, it's like a cancer to their soul, and causes them to degrade other people, sometimes externally in actions and words, sometimes internally in our attitude toward them. This is what Jesus is getting at when He talks about calling people "Raca" or "Fool". It's not the specific words/names Jesus is concerned about. It's the desire in the heart to put others down that indicates a lack of righteousness. Once we've objectified and degraded people, it becomes easier to justify treating them poorly, as less than human, as less than the image of God.

Unfortunately, we live in a society/culture that actually values anger and contempt. Anger is often viewed as a way to "power up" and get what you want. Expressing anger and contempt is often seen as a way of demonstrating passion and commitment. Additionally, the ability to put someone down with a quick and witty insult is a skill many highly esteem. But this is not the way Jesus wants His people to act in the world, nor the heart from which He wants them to function from. Jesus wants us to see and value other people as He does. Deep seeded anger, contempt, bitterness, resentment leads to devaluing people.

Notice the "riddle" that Jesus describes in this passage...

- Murder leads to judgment. (Judgement, here, would be before a local court or tribunal.)
- But Jesus then says that anger also leads to judgment, putting it on par with murder.
- Then He goes on saying that calling someone "Raca" leads to being answerable/liable before the council/Sanhedrin (the highest court in the land). "Raca" basically meant "good for nothing" or "you are nothing".
- Then Jesus goes further by stating that calling someone a fool (basically calling someone stupid) was to be in danger of the fire of hell (or Gehenna, which was a valley that was turned into a burning trash heap).

Isn't that interesting and puzzling? We would all agree that actual murder is worse than name calling. Yet in this "riddle" (I borrow that term for what Jesus is doing here from our friends at the Bible Project) as the offense gets seemingly less the consequence gets harsher. What is Jesus doing here?

He is emphasizing the HIGH value of human beings, while at the same time drilling down deeper into the human heart, and how devaluing, demeaning, degrading, or demonizing others, in action or in attitude, is outside of God's will. Or in other words, a truly good person has a high view and value of fellow humans, both in their behavior towards them as well as their heart/attitude towards them.

(Here's a link for the Bible Project's comments on this section

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/matthew-521-22-murder-and-contempt/>)

So when we experience something as natural as anger the goal ought to be to do some reflection/introspection on the condition of our heart, and not just act on that anger or let it simmer. A truly good person wants to do the will of God first and foremost...not just act on emotional impulses or allow negative thoughts/feelings towards others to affect their heart.

Jesus then offers a couple of examples to illustrate the importance of having a right relationship with others. (A truly good person, or righteous person, is all about right relationships.) Please keep in mind that these are illustrations, not laws. They are meant to offer a picture of Kingdom values, principles and priorities...not to set a bar for legalistic performance. In other words, they are meant to hammer home a point more so than be taken "literally", per se. That doesn't mean they're not important. But as we'll see later in the Sermon, we just need to be careful and discerning regarding what Jesus expects us to take "literally". (Well, I'm assuming you enjoy the use of your eyes and hands. Preview: next week we'll discuss the difference between taking Jesus seriously versus taking Him literally. 😊)

In the first illustration Jesus says that fixing a disruption in a relationship is even more important than offering a gift at the altar (i.e. an act of worship). Imagine it this way: Say it's Sunday morning, you've arrived for worship service, found your pew, the service has started. Then you find yourself thinking about that bad interaction you had with your neighbor the day before. Jesus is saying that fixing/mending that relationship is more important than "worshipping" Him in that service. Or to say it another way, reconciliation is a form of worship, and one that takes a higher priority than ritualistic worship. (Relationships over ritual.)

Notice also in this illustration that you are the offending party. Jesus didn't say that if you realize you need to forgive someone, go take care of that. (Don't worry, He'll get to forgiveness later in the sermon.) Rather if someone has *something against you*...go take care of that.

Basically, we are to care so much about other people that we don't want anger to take root in them either. A truly good person is concerned about the internal well being (the heart) of others, as well as ourselves. Also, practically, we can't (nor should we try to) control others.

Reconciliation takes both sides working together. Jesus is telling us to own our part, and initiate reconciliation as needed.

In the next illustration, about settling matters quickly with an adversary who is taking you to court, the point is to apply a Kingdom understanding of justice as opposed to appealing to worldly justice. Trust the values of the Kingdom over the way the world operates and human law courts. Relationships (thus people) take precedence over "rights" (self-interest).

Remember, this entire sermon is predicated on the present reality of the Kingdom of God, and only makes sense with that in view. Trusting, and living by, Kingdom values, principles, and priorities is HOW we are salt (distinctive) and light (engaged).

Possible Discussion Questions

- Potential icebreaker: Describe something that made you angry this past week, or how did you experience anger this past week?
- How would you define/describe a “good person”? What are the attributes, characteristics, qualities, or traits of such a person? What makes those attributes, characteristics, qualities, or traits the right/correct ones? How does one cultivate such attributes, characteristics, qualities, or traits?
- Who is someone you would identify as a “good person”? Why them...or what makes them “good”?
- How would you describe your relationship with anger? (From the standpoint of frequency, intensity, triggers, how you experience it and deal with it, etc.)
- How have you seen anger damage a relationship? How does anger affect your key relationships?
- Jesus invites us to examine our anger, keeping an eye out for bitterness, resentment, and contempt. Do you have any bitterness, resentment, or contempt residing in your heart? How would you know if you did? What indicators would you look for? (For example, do you find yourself having imaginary arguments with someone, or have a negative feeling toward someone? That might be worth exploring. Just because you might be able to treat them cordially in person, doesn’t mean your heart is right toward them.)
- Take a moment and bring to mind someone you have a hard time with. What is it about them that you have a hard time with? Now take a moment to examine your heart...what is your attitude toward them? How are you tempted to think less of them or devalue them?
- What are some ways in which we can guard our hearts from bitterness, resentment, and contempt?
- In what ways does our culture/society actually value anger and contempt? What are some ways in which objectifying people or devaluing people is actually encouraged in our society and culture?
- Do you currently have any fractured relationships that Jesus might be inviting you to attend to? Are you holding on to any grudges? (Explain if you feel comfortable doing so.)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Examining our Anger and Fear (and our Hearts)

When you experience anger (or fear), sit with Jesus and try this...

- Step 1: Notice and name it (the earlier the better). When you feel anger or fear, take time to examine it in order to understand it. Identify what's causing it. Ask yourself, "What do I want that I'm not getting?" and/or "What am I afraid of?" (Be specific.)
- Step 2: Determine whether or not it is a good and healthy want/desire or a reasonable fear. Ask yourself "Why do I want this?" or "Why am I afraid of this?"
- Step 3: If it is not a good/healthy desire or if it is an unreasonable fear, let it go. (This may require going on a walk, praying, talking to someone, etc.)
If it is a good/healthy want, then ask yourself, "*Is this the best way to go about getting what I want, or dealing with this fear?*" Or, "How am I going about getting what I want and how is it affecting those around me, my relationship with them, and my view of them?" And, "*What will happen if I don't get what I want?*"

At this point it is important to remember that we are not entitled to something just because it's a good/healthy want. There's likely other considerations to take into account. Additionally, as Dallas Willard has famously said, "*There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.*" (Remember, "righteousness" is about right relationships.)

- Step 4: Remember, for the sake of perspective, as James Bryan Smith says, "*I am one in whom Christ dwells and delights and I live in the strong and unshakeable Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not in trouble, and neither am I.*" Allow the present reality of God's Kingdom to inform, influence, affect the situation. Is your heart reflecting the values, principles, and priorities of the Kingdom? (Ask Jesus to help you.)
- Step 5: Remember, "*The righteous disadvantage themselves in order to advantage others. The wicked disadvantage others in order to advantage themselves.*"
- Step 6: Share your experience of walking through this process with someone. An important practice/habit is having relationships (spiritual friendships) in our lives with whom we regularly share what's going on in our hearts.

Granted, this is all easier said than done. But, nevertheless, we want to use anger as a trigger/signal to pay attention to what's going on in our hearts. This is where the real work of spiritual formation happens.