

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.” Matthew 5:21-26

An old experienced hunting guide was once asked how one would go about catching a porcupine. He responded by saying it was his experience that if you can get the porcupine to run away from you, if you stay clear of his barbed tail, what works best is to drop a large wash tub over on top of the animal. “The washtub,” he said, “will then give you something to sit on while you think about your next move.” This is where we find ourselves as we enter our text for this morning. As we step into the next section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48) we find ourselves trapped under Jesus’ words at the end of last week’s text: *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* (Matthew 5:19). And so as we think about our next move, we must now consider Jesus’ closing words of this section that we read in Matthew 5:48: *“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* As we sit between Jesus telling us we must be exceeding more righteous than those who sought perfection and his declaration that we must be as perfect as God, we are not in a much different place than the guy sitting on top of a washtub, who knows if he really wants to keep the porcupine, he’s going to face some hard, painful realities, and it’s going to cost him dearly.

These two verses of Jesus’ sermon clearly indicate that the only path by which anyone can *“enter the kingdom of heaven”* is the path that is paved with the *perfection of righteousness*. Of course, the truth is, that as naturally-born members of the fall in the Garden - righteousness that is of God, perfection as God defines it, is truly beyond us. Yet Jesus has been speaking of a new kind of righteousness before God, a truly impossible righteousness, a righteousness of God that is more than just following rules and regulations, more than just living up to human expectations for what God desires and requires of us – a righteousness that goes far beyond just having one’s sins forgiven. Last week Jesus unveiled the means of this God-initiated, grace-given righteousness when he declared that he did not come to *“abolish the Law or the Prophets . . . but to fulfill them.”* In the past God’s people had been forgiven and cleansed and made “right” before God by following the “law.” But Old Testament “law” dealt only with outward actions - while in the new Kingdom, Jesus defined it in the Beatitudes as more about inward attitudes of the heart. Those of the Kingdom do not keep the law, the commands of God, by outward constraint but rather by an inward life they have received by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our next move after *“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”* must be a transformation of the heart, a reflection of the character of the Kingdom within our souls.

Here is where we find ourselves most often sitting on our own washtubs, the prickly thorn-in-the-flesh issues of our own sin covered up before the world. Yet God knows what lies beneath, and this morning we hear Jesus call us to make the next move towards a righteousness of the Kingdom. In spite of our denials - the voice of Christ pierces the depths of our hearts and asks us to consider what lies within. Of course in order to move towards a true righteousness that is of the Kingdom, we must deal with the truth of what does lie within – *which is our sin*. Specifically Jesus is addressing the sins of the heart. He has been and is telling us, that not only are sinful actions wrong but so also are sinful desires. Sin has really never been a popular subject to talk about – at least not about our own sins anyway. Our culture hasn’t helped us here. Morality has become what our society currently says it is, and many today prefer to say they have faults, short-comings, problems, or dysfunctions rather than take responsibility for sin.

Of course none of us is immune to this. The Word of God tells us this is self-centered blind spot we all possess. While we commonly believe, that as divinely created human beings, our actions and behaviors flow out of our opinions and beliefs - decades of social science research reveal the exact opposite. Dr. Mark McMinn writes: "More often than not, we first observe our behaviors and then craft our opinions to be consistent with those behaviors. In other words, we justify what we have already done by changing our beliefs. . . . We shift our opinions to be consistent with our behaviors." This morning Jesus is focusing on that blind spot of our hearts. He will be doing so all throughout the remaining chapters and verses of the Sermon on the Mount, by looking at specific areas in our lives that reveal our constant struggle with internal and external righteousness, and Kingdom character and Kingdom conduct.

Bottom line, Jesus tells us that those who are of the Kingdom are not simply concerned with outward actions and external appearances. The scribes and Pharisees were content with a superficial approach to faith that presented a righteous facade without developing their inward heart of Kingdom character. Jesus will address this issue in our verses today, as well as all throughout the Sermon on the Mount - by framing different areas of our lives within the context of how the scribes and Pharisees would have interpreted the "law" as to what proper conduct was acceptable in each circumstance. Jesus begins each area by saying: "*You have heard that it was said*" or "*it is written*" emphasizing how the scribes and Pharisees would interpret the "law" regarding what area he is going to address – and then Jesus says, "*But I say to you*" - in describing the kingdom character that leads to kingdom conduct. We see this in our text for today as Jesus looks at how righteous Kingdom character should affect our relationships.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." Jesus begins by defining how righteous Kingdom character should affect our relationships - by looking at the issue of anger in the context of how the scribes and Pharisees interpreted the sixth commandment of the Ten Commandments. While the religious leaders of the day went to the extremes regarding their interpretation of keeping the Sabbath - they did not go far enough when it came to prohibiting murder.

Murder is a prominent theme in the Scriptures. It started when Cain killed Abel and it became the image throughout the rest of Scripture for the essence of fallen human sinfulness. And while the sixth commandment addresses this, we tend to define murder as the ultimate application in the taking of human life, which lets us off the hook. Yet Jesus wants us to understand that behind that commandment is something much deeper about God's view of our hearts that we need to consider. *Jesus equates anger, insult and a judgmental spirit as being equal to murder.* To be so irritated that we become angry and insult and judgemental of another human being is to be guilty of violating God's prohibition of murder.

Our Lord seems to reveal an escalating severity of each category of anger by the different penalties of which they were worthy. Mere "anger" was worthy of being "*liable to judgment*" and prosecution in a local court; in Jesus's day this would have been the 23-member Sanhedrin court. Anger that led the offense of *insulting* another was worthy of trial before the greater Sanhedrin, the seventy-one member supreme court. Anger that leads to verbally *attacking the character of another* is a crime punishable by the eternal death "*to the hell of fire.*" These words would have stunned those who heard them in Jesus' day - and they most likely still stun us today. But this is the Kingdom character we are called to. Jesus puts this before us because he wants us to understand that behind the commandment "*You shall not murder*" there is something much deeper about God's view of our hearts that we need to deal with. He is telling us this commandment is not just about an outward act but more so about an inward attitude toward others. A human being is more than a body. Murder is more than just about the taking of a physical life. The body is also connected to an eternal soul that was created in the image of God by God. When we attack another human being - with our hands or our anger or our emotions or our words, we are in essence violently and aggressively attacking the God-created soul of another human being.

What Jesus is telling us here is that the heart of the sixth commandment prohibiting murder *is about our heart attitude towards God*. God unconditionally and completely loves each and every individual that he has ever created. Even when we engage in the assassination of someone's character through our words, we attack the essence of that person, and fail to love someone whom God truly loves. *Murder at the level of the heart in anger, insult and a judgmental spirit is rooted our lack of love for God*. When asked what was the greatest commandment, Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12:30-31). What this means is that the greatest commandment in the Kingdom of God is about *love relationships*. We are to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength – and that love will be evident, when we love others, as we love ourselves, in light of God's love for us. Jesus is telling us that our love for God and our love for others is reciprocal. When we love God, we *will* love others because of God's love for us. The apostle John affirms this in 1 John 4:19-21: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother." What this means is that we cannot love God in isolation from all other relationships in life. Our love for God is our heart commitment to God that is expressed in all our conduct and relationships.

Murder at the level of the heart in anger, insult and a judgmental spirit that is rooted our lack of love for God, *will cause us to elevate ourselves above God and above others*. When we selfishly love ourselves we will place ourselves above God and above others – and our wants, our needs, our ambitions, our expectations will become our driving motivation. When we selfishly value personal feelings more highly than we value another's life, we then enter into the very act which Cain carried out over his brother Abel in the Garden. Of course we do read of Jesus' becoming angry, but he only became angry when he saw hypocrisy, self-righteousness, deceit, manipulation, arrogance and prejudice. But at the same time Scripture reveals that Jesus never became angry when he himself was attacked, slandered, and eventually crucified. He offered no resistance and refused to attack others in return.

"I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." It is significant to note that Jesus uses the word "brother" here. While, by implication, the principles here apply to all human relationships – here, by direct meaning, Jesus makes a specific application to those of us who are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, in the church. 1 Peter 4:17: "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" Those who claim Christ are to be beacons of the love and mercy and grace and forgiveness of God. While the world might be unforgiving, ungracious, and malicious toward one another we are to exemplify the Kingdom character of Jesus Christ as he did on the cross, when he prayed that God would love and forgive those who drove nails into body in order to put him to death.

The truth is, this can be hard to do. But the fact is - not doing so puts our lives in *eternal danger*. What should strike us most in all of this is how our Lord illustrates *the consequences* of expressing anger, insult and a judgmental spirit towards others. Despising a person through murderous attitudes like insult, gossip, bitterness, slander and a judgmental spirit imperils our souls – "liable to judgment . . . liable to the council; and . . . liable to the hell of fire." The word "hell" is the word *gehenna* in the original language which was the local garbage dump in the valley outside Jerusalem, where the bodies of criminals were dumped and burned ever since the Old Testament times of Josiah. It was a place that was always smoldering and burning, which became a picture of future judgment. Jesus is making a statement about how serious he is about the sin of anger. If we attack someone whom God lovingly created in His own image, we do so at great personal cost. In 1 John 4:20 the apostle John puts it this way: "If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." Our words reveal the condition of our hearts.

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny” (Matthew 5:23-26). Here Jesus speaks of the urgency of restoring relationships when we do express murderous attitudes towards others. He is bluntly and graciously reminding us again that Kingdom conduct flows out of Kingdom character. After expressing murderous attitudes towards others - we are to humbly repent and reconcile with those who have something against us - *because* we have murderously attacked a soul created in the image of God. Kingdom reconciliation begets righteousness in that Kingdom reconciliation means getting right with God and each other. Jesus then illustrates this with two real-life situations: one within the church and the other within a court of law. In both illustrations, the implication is that if God reveals you are the one who has done something wrong, you have an obligation to seek reconciliation.

It's at this point the question is often asked: Are we responsible to try to reconcile the grudges and resentments and complaints and hostility and animosity and hatred against us, even if we've done no wrong? Well, that is a loaded question. First of all, we tend to lean towards interpreting our conduct as righteous rather than wrong. But more often than not, that attitude reflects a self-righteous attitude, which makes us wrong no matter what the circumstance. Secondly, the other side of this question has to do with what we should do about reconciliation *when we have been wronged*. While our text for today doesn't address that issue, in Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus tells us the offended party is also responsible to seek a resolution. And so the answer to our original question of “Are we responsible to try to reconcile the grudges and resentments and complaints and hostility and animosity and hatred against us, even if we've done no wrong?” can only be found in the context of the character of those in the Kingdom.

One month ago we looked at Matthew 5:9 together, where Jesus said: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”* In going through this text we learned that just as children on earth resemble their parents, *we are never more like God than when we are making peace as Jesus made peace. “Sons of God”* seek to make peace that is grounded in the cross of Christ. It is that family resemblance of making peace that marks us as sons/daughters of God. Whenever we make peace by bringing people into a relationship with God or by reconciling people together, we look more and more like God. The week after we looked at that text we looked at Matthew 5:10-12, where Jesus said: *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”* In going through that text we learned that God is pleased when we suffer persecution for faithfully living out our lives in a way that reveals that we love and honor and value God above everything and everyone else in the world. If we are truly following Jesus we will face opposition and persecution - like Jesus and his disciples did. The blessing of our reward will not be on earth, because it's already ours in heaven.

But that text doesn't seem to give us a directive regarding reconciliation. In fact Jesus' silence about this almost makes one think we need not pursue any kind of reconciliation. Well, what Jesus did say was that sometimes people will murderously hold something against us when they shouldn't - insulting us, persecuting us, saying all kinds of evil against us *falsely*. What then does Jesus tell us to do? *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”* Jesus lived his life for God. He was constantly opposed. They tried to trap him. They tried to kill him. They tried to shame him. Was their anger his fault? No. Were they open to be reconciled? No. Not at all. At least not yet. But someday, maybe, they might have been - after his crucifixion and his resurrection. When murderous attitudes like insult, gossip, bitterness, hate, slander and judgmental spirits are cast upon us because we are sacrificially living for Jesus. Be joyful. Forgive. Show mercy. Endure with grace. Love and pray for those who are attacking you. Your reward for enduring baseless false accusations will be seeing Jesus and living with Jesus forever in heaven.

The truth is - if we are truly following Jesus' call to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him; which means we will love every person who crosses our path in life, regardless of what they think, say and do to us; murderous attitudes of insult, gossip, bitterness, hate, slander and judgmental spirits *will cast upon us* because we are sacrificially living for Jesus. In Matthew 24:9 Jesus said: "*You will be hated by all nations for my name's sake.*" In other words he is saying, "If you are faithful to me, somebody will always have something against you." Jesus said: "*In this world you will have tribulation*" (John 16:33). In our text for today Jesus said: "*Be reconciled to your brother, and . . . Come to terms quickly with your accuser.*" This morning we've learned that Jesus is telling us that 1) if someone has something against us because we have sinfully wronged them, we are responsible to pursue reconciliation with them, and 2) if someone has something against us even though we have not wronged them - *as much as it depends upon us* - we should try to pursue reconciliation with them. Even though Jesus never sinned, he took every step required of a human being to make matters right with his enemies, and they still held things against him and they refused to be reconciled to him. If we try and don't succeed, we must love them and learn to live with the pain, because we cannot make reconciliation happen. Romans 12:14-21 says:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In these words the apostle Paul is telling us how to live out the righteous Kingdom character of Jesus in all of our relationships. Jesus overcame the "evil" murderous attitudes like insult, gossip, bitterness, hate, slander and judgmental spirits - with the "good" work of his love for us, which we see in his sacrificial crucifixion and glorious resurrection. Colossians 1:19-22 tells: "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*" This is the love of God we know in Jesus Christ. He sent his only Son to die on a cross in our place for the forgiveness of our sins – so that we might be reconciled back to God.

1 Peter 3:18 tells us: "*For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.*" Kingdom righteousness in relationships begets Kingdom reconciliation. When we are truly in love with God and truly following Jesus the powerful transforming, recreating and perfecting work of the Holy Spirit – *which will cause us* to joyfully submit to the reign and rule of King Jesus in our hearts - *which will cause us* to pursue reconciliation with those who are for us and against us, and with those who do not know Jesus as Lord and Savior – *because* the greatest need of every human being is that of reconciliation with God. This the primary work of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – more than the forgiveness of sins, the removal of the God's wrath toward his people, the imputation of his perfect righteousness to us as sinners, the defeat of death and the devil, the deliverance from hell and eternal pain, the resurrection of our bodies, the healing of every physical and mental disease or disability, the entrance into the new heavens and the new earth. Our greatest need is for reconciliation and *Kingdom reconciliation means getting right with God and right each other.* "*In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us*" (1 John 4:9-12). May God perfect His righteousness in our hearts and attitudes in the days before us!