

Dealing with a Murderous Heart

Matthew 5:21-26

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here. And friends, it is good to be with you. If you're our guest or visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us and glad to see you here because one of the things that we believe at CTK along with other churches that hold fast to the truth of the gospel is that the word that we're coming to now is the very word of God. It is the word of life. And this is the word that we're in need of. We're in need of this word to be reminded of it weekly. We're in need of this word day in and day out. And we're in need of it because as we go out into the world, there are all sorts of other words that are speaking into our ears and vying for our attentions and calling us to follow after those other words, those other things. And some of those things are good, but many of them do not lead to life, but they lead to death. And so, we need to be reminded again and again that this is the very word of life.

That's actually what Jesus' disciples said to him. Do you remember there was a time when Jesus was teaching the crowds and many of the crowds had left him. They departed and Jesus looked at his disciples and he said to them, "do you want to leave too? Are you going to go as well?" And his disciples looked and said, "where would we go, Lord? You have the word of life." And that's what we have. Before us this morning, we have the very word of life. Jesus is our life. He is the one we give our lives to and he is the one who directs our ways. And that's what we've been hearing as we've been going through the Sermon on the Mount. We've been reminded of what it means to follow after this man who brought life.

What does it mean to be his Kingdom people and how is it that we are to live in the Kingdom of God as we are surrounded by other kingdoms? And this morning, we continue looking at the Sermon on the Mount. So, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew 5. We'll look at verses 21 through 26 this morning. And here again, Jesus is teaching us how we are to live distinctively from the world. What does it mean to be his Kingdom people? Those who are following after this one who brings life. And if you were with us last week, then you might remember that we ended our passage last week with a shocking statement. Jesus said, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Now, this was a shocking statement for Jesus' hearers because in their world, the scribes and the Pharisees were the most righteous people around. There was no one who exceeded their righteousness. And yet, Jesus says we must exceed their righteousness if we are to follow after him.

And so, last week, we talked about righteousness generally, but now Jesus is going to get a little more specific. This morning, we have the first of six antithetical statements. So, we have these antithesis statements that Jesus makes where he says, "you have heard, but I say." And we have the first one of them this morning as Jesus fleshes out what it looks like for us to have a righteousness that is in line with his kingdom. So, let's read Matthew 5, beginning in verse 21. Jesus says,

"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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would direct our ways now and that you would help us to see what it means to be a people of righteousness, a people who live in your kingdom. And so, we ask, open our eyes, direct our hearts, lead us in the way that we are to go and allow my words to give you honor and glory. Allow the meditations of our hearts to be pleasing to you, our God and our King, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, a few winters ago, two of my kids, Meade and Cole, they were playing in the snow. We had just had a snowstorm and a few days before and we had shoveled off the driveway and pushed all the snow to the edges. And so, we had snow built up along the edge of the driveway. This is, you know, normal. Y'all had this the same winter. And my kids saw this as an opportunity to build their fort. They're going to build a great snow fort. I think we'd probably just watched Elf and they saw the snowball fight. So, they were preparing for some epic snowball fight. And so, they went out there with their buckets and their shovels and they're moving the snow around and they're forming the walls of their fort and they're digging and they're digging and they're digging some more. And when they think that they're about to hit the ground, well, they don't. There's just more snow. And they keep digging a little bit deeper, a little bit deeper, and Cole's reaching his hand in and he's thinking he's going to hit the ground, but there's no ground to be found.

And so, they're perplexed and they come into the house and they call me out and they're like, there's no ground. We don't know where it is. You know, there's a hole there. They thought it was a snake hole. That's what they thought. But I went out and I looked and it was getting dark and it was kind of hard to see. So, I just said, “let's put a pause on this. Let's put a pin in it. We'll come back in the morning.” And in the morning, we went out there and we started pushing more of the snow away. And sure enough, there was no ground. Over time, a sinkhole had formed. And at the side of our driveway, we now had this hole where there once was solid ground. Now, I have to tell you, I'm glad that we waited until the morning to look at this because the sinkhole was deep enough that we actually could see the power line going into our house. And at night, I thought when I reached in that it was a root. And I'm glad I didn't strike it with an axe. That wouldn't have gone well for me. But what was amazing was that this hole had formed seemingly out of nowhere.

You see, days before, before the snow came, if you were walking on that very spot, the ground would have been firm and solid. And months before, when it was the summer, there was green grass growing right there. And you would have never known that the soil would wash away. You had no idea what was going on. And yet, underground, hidden from our eyes, was this problem. It was hidden to me and it was hidden to everyone. That this hole was slowly forming. That over time, water was washing the soil away from this one particular spot. A problem we couldn't see. And who knows for how long it was there. But eventually, this problem came to the surface. So that everyone could see it. You couldn't miss it. It was revealed to us all.

The Problem Revealed

And Jesus is revealing to us a problem that hides deep in our hearts. A problem that is below the surface. It's not in our yards, but it's in our hearts. It resides within us. And he's not leaving it there, but he's bringing it to our attention. He's bringing it to the surface and he's revealing it to us. We see it in verses 21 through 22. Jesus says, "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." Now before moving on, let me just remind us of what we talked about last week. That when Jesus says, "You have heard it said, but I say." He's not contradicting the Old Testament. He's not replacing the Old Testament, right? Because last week he said explicitly, "I have not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."

So Jesus isn't challenging or opposing the Old Testament. He is challenging and opposing the people's application of it. In verse 21, he says, "You shall not murder." That's the 6th commandment. He's not arguing with that. And the people who would have been hearing Jesus wouldn't have argued with him. In fact, the people who heard him probably were sitting there thinking, "Shall not murder? Well, I've never murdered. I've never killed anyone. 6th commandment, check. I'm good." And I imagine many of us would feel that way too, right? I mean, I know most of y'all. I know many of your stories. I don't know all of your stories, but none of you have ever sat me down and said, "15 years ago I murdered someone." And I'm pretty confident none of you did that this morning, at least I hope not, right? And so it'd be very easy for us to think, "Well, 6th commandment, we're good."

But before we can start feeling good about ourselves and swelling with pride at our obedience for having not murdered anyone, Jesus reveals that the problem goes much deeper than that. That there's a problem that's really hard to ignore. He says in verse 22, "Everyone who is angry with his brother, who insults his brother, who says you fool to his brother, that just as the murderer is liable to judgment," so are those who are angry and those who insult and those who denigrate others. That they too, that we too, are liable to judgment. You see, Jesus is revealing the problem, the problem that lies within our hearts. A problem that isn't just murder with our hands, but murder with our hearts, murder with our lips. The Westminster Larger Catechism, question number 136, asks the question, "What are the sins forbidden in the 6th commandment?" Now, if you've ever read the Larger Catechism, the answers to these questions are pretty extensive. They're pretty exhaustive. So I'm not going to read the whole answer right now, but you could go back and look at it yourself. But this is some of what it says.

"What are the sins forbidden? All taking away of the life of ourselves and others. The neglecting or withdrawing the lawful and necessary means of preservation of life. Sinful anger, hatred, envy, desire of revenge, provoking words, oppression, quarreling, wounding, and whatsoever else lends to the destruction of the life of any."

I like that, "whatsoever else." So basically, if it wasn't named, it is now. But what Westminster is getting at, what they are recognizing is the very thing that Jesus is teaching. That the prohibition against murder goes deeper than simply physically killing. And so Jesus is calling us to look into our hearts. And when we do, I imagine many of us will see anger. And so some of us might actually start wondering, "Well, isn't some anger okay though?" Because we have Psalm 4 or Ephesians 4 in our minds where the psalmist and where Paul

says, "Be angry and do not sin." And so isn't it possible that the anger in my heart could actually be anger that's not sinful? And so how is that anger different than what Jesus is saying? Well, clearly the difference is between righteous and unrighteous anger. Righteous and unrighteous anger. There is an unrighteous anger and there is a righteous anger. Righteous anger is that anger that opposes sin and the effects of the fall. So think about Jesus and his anger with the Pharisees when he calls them brood of vipers and whitewashed tombs. Or think about God's wrath that will come upon sin at the end of time. Or think about when Jesus comes to the grave of Lazarus. You remember that story? Jesus comes to Lazarus's grave and we're told that Jesus, seeing that his friend is dead, that he had this sigh that he communicates. Like he has this deep sigh that comes out of him. And the language there, the Greek word, is actually a word that is often used in association with a war horse. And how the war horse would snort as it's in battle. And that's what Jesus is doing. And so commentators understand that what Jesus is expressing there is anger. And it's anger not at those who are mourning. And it's not at those who are grieving. But it is anger at death. That Jesus is expressing a righteous anger at sin and the effects of the fall.

There is righteous anger. But is that the anger that's in our hearts? Friends, it would just be easy for us to say and conclude that all our anger is righteous anger, right? We'd feel a lot better about ourselves, wouldn't we? And this sermon could end right now. But when we're honest, we know that that's actually not the anger that we often feel. And that's not the anger that Jesus is talking about. He's not talking about righteous anger. He's talking about something different. In fact, this word here for anger, every time it's used in Matthew, it's used as a prelude to destructive behavior. The commentator Charles Quarles says that "this anger is intense fury, seething rage." That's the anger Jesus is talking about.

But Jesus isn't just talking about anger. He also talks about our language. The language that harms others, right? That word insult. It's a term of abuse. It means empty-headed or idiot or dim-witted. Or you fool. That's a Greek word that we get our word moron from. And so Jesus is addressing the attitudes, not only the physical expression, but the actual attitudes and condition of our heart. And what he is showing us is that the standard of his kingdom far exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees, but it also exceeds the standards of this world.

Because think about the world that we live in. I mean, it is a world marked by rage and biting criticism and destruction. It's marked by anger. I mean, just the other day, actually yesterday, there was this big dust up on X or Twitter, whatever you want to call it, about a woman at a Philadelphia Phillies game. Have any of you all seen this? Yeah, a few of you. Okay, so just to give a little bit of background, the Marlins are playing the Phillies. The Phillies are playing the Marlins. And Harrison Bader, who's an outfielder for the Philadelphia Phillies, former St. Louis Cardinal, by the way, just FYI. But Harrison Bader hits a home run. Now, when there's a home run that's hit, everyone rushes to the ball. Y'all have seen this right on TV. Maybe you've been lucky enough to be around when the home run lands near you. Everyone runs after it. It's a big scrum. It's every man for themselves.

And so this happens. And there's this woman. She goes to reach down, but before she can grab the ball, this dad sweeps in, grabs the ball, runs over, and hands it to his son. Now, it's his. This is fair. He didn't take it from her hand. It was laying on the ground, and he picked it up first. And this woman lost her mind. I mean, lost her mind. She comes running over. She gets in his face. The joy that the father and the son have together is replaced by just, I mean, craziness. She is yelling at him, screaming at him until he gives her the ball. And then people on Twitter, they lose their minds because everyone's zooming in on pictures of her and saying

things like, who is this Karen? What is her real name? What is her address? We need to find out who she is. Y'all, these are people who weren't at the game. They're not related to the dad. They're not related to the son. But boy, they're angry. I don't know what day that woman had, but it got much worse. And this is our world, y'all. It was a baseball. And yet people are losing their minds and filled with anger and resentment and using language about other people that destroy and criticize.

This is happening all the time. And Jesus is saying, but not in the Kingdom of God. That is not how we are to be. See, Jesus is exposing and revealing a deeper problem in us, and he's saying this is not who we are. This is not how we are to live. So how do we deal with that problem then? So Jesus revealed it to us, right? The problem isn't just that lady. The problem isn't just where. The problem's right here.

Dealing with the Problem

So how do we deal with this problem? Well, Jesus helps us. He tells us how to deal with this problem. Now, I will just tell you, when we first discovered that hole in our yard, the first thing I did was call the power company because the power line was exposed. I wasn't going to go near it, right? And what'd they do? They came out and they filled the hole, and they tamped it down, and they threw some grass on the place, and it was firm. They threw grass down, but it was middle of winter. So it wasn't going to come back, but that's fine. And I thought, great, we're good. But a few months later, what happened? Well, it started to sink again. And I was like, no problem. I saw the experts. I saw what they did. I'll just go get some soil, and I'll throw it on the hole, and I'll tamp it down, and throw some seed on it, and we'll be great. And we were for about another month and started to sink again. And so I repeated this process for way too many times, but I realized that I couldn't just replace the soil. Like, I couldn't just keep filling in the hole, right? Because the hole right there, it was actually just the outward manifestation of a deeper problem.

What I had to do was I had to find where the water was flowing, and I had to stop that up, and I had to find the source, and I had to fill it with something stronger than the water, stronger than the soil. I had to put rock or concrete or something down there so that it couldn't be washed away anymore. I need to get to the source. And the same is true of our hearts. As Jesus has revealed the problem to us, this problem of anger in our hearts, it would be easy for us to just keep pushing it down, right? Well, I'm going to deal with this problem by pretending it's not there. I'm just going to fill my heart with all this anger, and I'm just going to keep pushing it down and pushing it deeper.

How's that going? It's going pretty well? Like, that's solving your anger problem? No, it doesn't, right? Because like that hole, it keeps returning. The anger keeps coming back up, doesn't it? It keeps rising and destructive and critical and hate-filled words come pouring out of our mouths. And so, how do we stop the flow of anger in our hearts? Well, Jesus tells us in verse 23: "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."

So, how do we deal with the anger in our hearts, this problem? Well, Jesus tells us we deal with it through reconciliation. That's what he says, the language, so, right there. Here's your

problem, anger, insult, denigrating people, so, do this. What do we do? We seek reconciliation. We pursue reconciliation with our brother and sister. We come to terms with our accuser. Look closely what he said in verses 23 and 24. This is fascinating. Jesus said, "If your brother has something against you, go to them." Isn't that interesting? Not if you have something against your brother, we'll talk about that in a second, but if your brother has something against you, go to your brother and be reconciled. One of my professors in seminary, Dane Doriani, he wrote this. He said, "If it is good for us to refrain from murder and murderous attitudes, then it is also good to prevent murderous attitudes in others. That is, we should love our brothers enough to act to remove their murderous disposition towards us. And we pursue them."

Now, I want to say a couple things because maybe there's some things running through your minds about this. So, maybe you're thinking this means that if I have a problem with my brother, then it's on them to come to me. That I can just sit back. You know, I can just let my problems stew because they need it, right? Jesus said, if your brother, you know, go to them. And so, maybe we're thinking, you know, this is one of those, like, well, if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you sort of situations. Like, you should know, right? You know, that's petty. Don't say that to people, right? To your spouse, to your kids, right? Like, that's juvenile. But maybe we're thinking that. Like, I'm struggling with something against my brother, so they're to come to me. But that's not what Jesus, that's not all that Jesus is saying. Because later in the Gospel of Matthew, he's going to talk about if we, if your brother sins against you, you are to go to him. So, this doesn't give us an excuse not to pursue. But what Jesus is saying is that if we're aware that our brother has something against us, that we don't wait for him, but that we can go to him even before he comes to us. That we pursue reconciliation.

And y'all, we do this in our other relationships, right? Like, we do this as married couples. I mean, how many times has one spouse, right, a husband or a wife, gone to their spouse and said, "hey, is there something wrong? It feels like you're mad at me. It feels like there's some sort of tension here. I'm not sure what it is. I'm sure I should know what it is, but I'm not sure." I mean, we do that, don't we? And we should do that. And if we're to do it in our marriages, well, Jesus is saying we're to do it in our church. That if our brother, we remember our brother has something against us, we would actually pursue them and seek to be restored to them, seek reconciliation. Now, another fact is, or the reality is, is that as we do that, there may be times where we will pursue a brother or sister, and they don't want to be reconciled. That's unfortunate and sad, and it's not the way it should be. But there may be relationships that we will seek to reconcile with, and they want nothing to do with it. It might be that we were in the wrong. It might be that they were. We may not know. But in that instance, then I think Romans 12 kicks in.

Romans 12 says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." So far as it depends on you. You see, we can't control another person's response, but we can control our pursuit. We can control our attempts to prevent murderous attitudes in ourselves as well as others. So you see, Jesus is telling us that the way that we deal with the problem of a murderous heart is by pursuing reconciliation with others, and we do this because our relationship with others affects our worship of God. Now I say that because of what Jesus said. Did you see that? He said, if as you're presenting your offering, your gift at the altar, you remember your brother or sister has something against you, stop your worship and go pursue them. That's what he said, right? So we can imagine this. We can imagine the, you know, the Israelite comes and he brings his sacrifice. He's got his goat. He's got his lamb.

He's got whatever. He's presenting it. He's ready to offer it, ready to be sacrificed, and then he remembers, oh, my brother has something against me. And so Jesus is saying, you know, like tie up the offering, put it off to the side. It'll be there when you get back, but stop your worship and go. Go be reconciled and then return. And saying this, what Jesus is telling us is that our worship of God is inhibited by our severed relationships with one another.

And there are other passages that confirm this. 1 Corinthians 11 in talking about the Lord's Supper and how we are to consider one another as we come eat and drink. Or 1 Peter 3, where Peter says that husbands are to honor their wives so their prayers will not be hindered. You see, what these passages are telling us and what Jesus is telling us is that our communion with one another is significant to our communion with the Lord. So much so that if we remember we are out of accord, we are to stop our worship and be reconciled to our brother. You see, friends, if we're going to deal with the problem of a murderous heart, with the opposition of an adversary, of the murder of the hearts of others, if we're going to deal with that problem, we have to pursue reconciliation. We have to pursue it. And y'all, don't we want that? Like, don't we want the anger to stop? You know, I've never met anyone who says, "I wish I was more angry. I wish I was more critical. I really wish I had less control over my tongue and was more biting." I've never heard someone say that. Because we know we don't want that. We know that's not what we're meant to be. What we want is peace, not anger.

Thomas A. Kempis, he once said, "All men desire peace, but very few desire those things that make for peace." And what Jesus is telling us is that what makes for peace is reconciling one another, reconciling ourselves to one another. And that peace, it only comes through reconciliation. And friends, that's what Christ has done. That's what he has done for us. He has reconciled us to the Father. I mean, think about it. Jesus could have said, he could have used his lips, he could have used his words and called us rebels and usurpers and enemies, and he would have been right. Because that's who we were. And he could have called down legions of angels and brought destruction upon us, and he would have been just. But instead, what did he say from the cross? Father, forgive them.

And instead of calling us enemies and rebels, he called us brothers and sisters. He calls us followers and friends. He calls us beloved. Jesus pursued us. He didn't bring judgment, but instead he reconciled us to the Father. And if he has done that for us, for those deserving of his judgment, if he would reconcile us to the Father, how can we not pursue reconciliation with others? How can we not put away our anger and our murderous thoughts? How can we not repent and pursue reconciliation with one another when Christ has reconciled us to himself? Y'all, you see, that is the motivation and the empowerment. What Christ has done for you, and what he has done for me, and how he has reconciled us to himself and to the Father, that is what we pursue with one another. That is how we put away anger and murder. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you. Thank you that you have sent your Son, who has reconciled us to you, and that he has given us now the ministry of reconciliation. And so I pray, Father, that that is what we would pursue. That when anger builds up in our hearts, that we would repent and turn from it. That you would guard our tongues so that we would not call disparaging words upon our brother or sister. And that, Father, that you would help us to pursue one another in reconciliation. And so we ask, Lord, that you would give us the strength to do it, to be humble, and to lay aside our sin, and to pursue your righteousness. We ask that you would strengthen us to do it, and we ask all this in the name of Christ, and God's people said together, Amen.