

Sermon on the Mount

Message 6

Murder in Jesus' Kingdom

Matthew 5:21-26

Introduction

Last week we observed that no one really likes laws. All human beings – and especially Americans – love their freedom; and rules, regulations, and laws restrict us. But if there is one law which everyone agrees is necessary, it's a law against murder. I am not an anthropologist, but I am told that every society on earth prohibits murder. I guess that's not so surprising. A society which freely killed its members would soon cease to exist. So we are not shocked when Jesus reaffirms the law, "You shall not murder." What's shocking is what He does with that simple law, and how it affects everything we do and even think.

Backing up for a moment, remember that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' vision of His Kingdom. This is not so much a list of commands or a set of doctrines, although commands and doctrines are implied. These three chapters of Matthew are essentially a picture of how Jesus' followers will live. Jesus began with the beatitudes, which describe the character of Jesus' followers, and the blessings of life with godly character. Then, right near the beginning, Jesus made it clear that His followers will encounter opposition – hostile at times – for they are part of an entirely different Kingdom than those around them. This Kingdom is a true body politic, for it also operates by law. Many people think that following Jesus consists simply of loving and worshiping Him – but they are wrong. Jesus kept God's law, and His followers must do so as well. And to clinch the point, Jesus said we must keep it better than the expert law-keepers of their day.

Now we get to the heart of the matter. If the scribes and Pharisees, those scrupulous law-keepers, failed to obey the law, what was missing, and what is required to keep the law fully? This is the point Jesus addresses in the rest of chapter five, where He takes several laws, one by one, and explains how *His* followers will keep them. These are sort of legal cases that establish precedent, and show us the way in keeping all God's laws.

You Shall not Kill

Jesus begins by quoting from the law of the Old Testament, specifically from the ten commandments, "You shall not murder," – and he also includes an interpretive comment circulated among the teachers of His day, "whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment." Before we look at Jesus' comments on this law we must clear the air of some confusion about the basic meaning of this commandment. Some Christians have read this command and concluded that any termination of human life is forbidden. But this view is clearly mistaken. A cursory reading of the Old Testament, even the same books where this law is found, will show that God permitted, even required certain kinds of killing. In Deuteronomy 22:22 we read, "If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then both of them shall die – the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel." God declared that adultery was a capital offense, as well as murder. Deuteronomy 19:11-13 demonstrates how firmly God opposes murder.

But if anyone hates his neighbor, lies in wait for him, rises against him and strikes him mortally, so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and bring him from there, and deliver him over to the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die. Your eye shall not pity him, but you shall put away the guilt of innocent blood from Israel, that it may go well with you.

Now some people will find a contradiction here. How can God oppose murder when He requires it? Isn't that even hypocritical? Recently people have also argued that capital punishment is wrong because a second violent act does not correct a first violent act – rather, it inflames a culture of violence. This is not

the place to argue for or against capital punishment – I only cite these scriptures to illustrate that in God’s mind, at least, there is a difference between murder and execution. The verses we just read plainly illustrate that difference. Murder is committed by a private citizen in hatred, and execution is performed by the civil government according to law. When God said, “You shall not murder,” He was speaking of ordinary, everyday situations involving private citizens. Later He clarified the conditions under which the civil government would need to execute evildoers.

Jesus follows this same path in discussing God’s laws. Nothing in the whole Sermon on the Mount refers to the operation of civil government. This whole message has to do with personal morality, not civil law. It is about salt and light, not planes and guns. It speaks of influence, not coercion. Therefore it is illegitimate to use this passage to address the topic of capital punishment, or of warfare either, for that matter.

Jesus the Lawgiver

After quoting the sixth commandment, Jesus continued by saying, “But I say to you...” Notice the difference between this and the manner in which the prophets spoke. They always began, “Thus says the Lord,” but here Jesus begins with “I say”. Obviously He is putting Himself on par with the giver of the law. Jesus is not merely explaining the law, He is giving the absolute interpretation of it. Some theologians have seen this passage revealing Jesus as the new Moses, the new law-giver. Moses gave the law of the old covenant, and Jesus gives the new law of the new covenant. Moses gave the first law to Israel, and Jesus gives the new law to the new Israel, the church. This is a valid way of seeing this passage, but there is something even more significant happening. Jesus not only came as the new Moses, He came as God. God gave the law to Moses, and Jesus gave the divine interpretation of the law to the disciples. As God, Jesus spoke on His own authority.

And here is what He said: “Whoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment.” Do you see what Jesus has done? He has expanded the scope of the commandment from mere actions to the underlying attitude. Here is the key to His assertion that His followers would keep the law better than the scribes and Pharisees. We think of those fellows as exacting about the letter of the law, but that somewhat misses the mark. It’s not that they were careful about keeping every detail of the law – they were religious about keeping the *visible* laws! It’s clear from other passages in the gospels that the scribes and Pharisees were preoccupied with appearances. In the next chapter Jesus takes them to task for praying in order to be seen and admired. No, the scribes and Pharisees were not at all so faithful to keep every detail of the law – for even the law itself declared the importance of an obedient heart.

Remember the passage in Deuteronomy we read a few minutes ago? It was the law of capital punishment for murderers. But it began by distinguishing between murder and manslaughter. The opening phrase was, “if anyone hates his neighbor.” It is fashionable in some circles to belittle the Old Testament law as crude and unsophisticated. Such people obviously have not read the law, or have read it poorly. Fine and careful distinctions are made among all manner of circumstances, and the law is accordingly flexible. But the point here is that the key element in the law of murder is a murderous heart. The attitude of the heart was the primary issue all along. Jesus is not really expanding the scope of the law – He is merely restoring it to its full intention. In other words, He is showing us how to fulfill it!

You may notice that some translations include the phrase “without a cause” in verse 22. This reflects a difference among various ancient New Testament Greek manuscripts. Whether or not this phrase really was part of the original manuscript, the idea is certainly valid. Some anger is justified, and other anger is not. If that seems a strange notion, remember that God Himself gets angry. Psalm 78 contains a prime example in verses 17 to 22.

But they sinned even more against Him
By rebelling against the Most High in the wilderness.
And they tested God in their heart
By asking for the food of their fancy.
Yes, they spoke against God:
They said, "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?
Behold, He struck the rock, So that the waters gushed out, And the streams overflowed.
Can He give bread also? Can He provide meat for His people?"
Therefore the LORD heard this and was furious;
So a fire was kindled against Jacob, And anger also came up against Israel,
Because they did not believe in God,
And did not trust in His salvation.

God is provoked to anger by sin: idolatry, injustice, rebellion, ungratefulness, etc. And God's prophets followed His example, welling up in anger against sin. Ezra became so distressed at the sins of the Israelites, he pulled out his hair. Nehemiah was likewise angry at their sin, and he pulled out the Israelites' hair! God never censured the prophets when they became angry at sin. So if some anger is tolerable, or even right, how can we identify the wrong kind of anger?

Some sinful anger is fairly easy to spot – anger born of frustration or impatience, as when you are stuck in traffic. I find myself getting angry when traffic is stalled, but although it's a common response, it's still an unreasonable response. At root, such anger reveals a selfish heart – one set on *my* agenda and thoughtless about anything else. Anger also arises from envy and pride – especially when our pride is wounded. Just let someone make you look foolish, and how do you respond? And isn't it true that such anger easily leads to violence? Road rage has been a problem for a couple of decades now, as people take out their anger at the traffic by killing someone who crosses them. More recently we have witnessed the same behavior in stores, where shoppers turn violent toward inept clerks, and some clerks respond in kind. The common element to all sinful anger is a heart fixed on myself, while the common element to godly anger is a heart fixed on God. It's the difference between whether God's reputation is damaged, or mine.

The Fruit of Anger

The scribes reasoned, apparently accurately, that whoever murders will be in danger of judgment – and it appears that by this they meant divine, heavenly judgment. In pointing out that the command against murder included a prohibition against anger, Jesus also applies the consequence of murder to anger. Go through life an angry man or woman, and you will face God's judgment. But of course a habit of anger feeds itself and grows from one degree to another. Frustration leads to anger, which leads to full fury. Expressing your annoyance leads to name-calling, which leads to outright slander. "Raca" is an Aramaic word which means stupid, and calling someone a fool is essentially saying he is damned – as the book of Proverbs makes clear. The problem with this behavior is not only that it is unpleasant and hateful – it is making judgments that only God is qualified to make. Perhaps your antagonist *is* damned. Perhaps he *will* burn in hell – but that is not for you to decide, and even less is it for you to wish. So what is an appropriate punishment for these actions? He who murders will be brought before God to be judged, he who slanders will be tried by the civil court, and he who damns others shall himself be damned.

Clearly anger is a serious problem. It's all the more serious because Christians often minimize it. We're like the Pharisees, aren't we? We recoil with shock at murder, but think nothing of indulging in a little anger ourselves. We pride ourselves on our honesty and sexual purity, but gossip and slander others freely. I doubt there is a single person here tonight who can honestly say he has never had ungodly anger. I suppose all of us at one time or another got angry at our parents for denying us something we wanted. And wasn't there some time when you were passed over for a prize, or when you received an unfair grade, or

when a classmate ridiculed you? And didn't you get angry then? Have you honestly gone through 17 years of life and never been angry at your bratty brother or sister? Since you have come to Lehigh, have you been angry at your professor, or T.A., or roommate, or others in the hall, or the dining service? Life is full of difficulties and frustrations, and it's a very rare person who can take these in stride without becoming angry. In the face of such things what shall we do?

Defusing Anger

Jesus provides a remedy for anger – reconciliation. You need to find the person who is the occasion of your anger, and fix things up. Whether it's another Christian or just a citizen, you need to settle your differences. In fact, this is so important, it takes priority over everything else. Even if you are in the middle of a worship service when you realize your sin, leave and go repair the damage. Even if you are in the middle of court proceedings, seek a settlement. Don't stubbornly stick to your guns. Don't proudly demand that *he* be the one to seek *you* out. Don't vainly assume that you will win the case. Seek forgiveness for *your* sin from your opponent and be reconciled.

I was staffing a camp for college students once, where the director had made a point of instructing all the staff to attend the evening worship service. We staff were busy constantly, and it was tempting to take that time when we had no teaching responsibilities to make phone calls or get some private time with our families. So I was rather shocked on evening to find the director himself on the phone during worship. It seemed clearly hypocritical. Later, he mentioned to me that he had been repairing a broken relationship. He was applying this teaching – he left worship to become reconciled with a brother.

Why should we be the ones to take the initiative? It's galling, isn't it? Why must we humiliate ourselves and make the first move? Why can't wait for the other guy to approach us? Because we are meek. We're peacemakers. We hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are in *pain* until fractured relationships are healed. When you have a broken bone, you don't go on about life until some later time – you get the bone set *right away*. If we are part of Jesus' Kingdom, we will likewise be fixed on repairing sore relationships. We will refuse to nurse our wounds and nourish our anger.

But what if its not your fault? What if you aren't angry? Why make the first move then? Besides the character issues mentioned above, you repair problems so that you don't *become* angry. The longer an irritation remains, the more irritating it becomes, and someday it will erupt in anger. Head it off at the pass. And ultimately, you make the first move so that your frustration not lead you to some worse problem and you find yourself heading to court.

But last, and most of all, you make the first move because God made the first move with you. You were once rebellious and hostile toward Him, but He didn't wait for you to come to Him. It never would have happened. You were so blind and hardened in sin, you had no desire to seek God. But He loved you, and desired fellowship with you anyway. He came to earth and preached peace, but we killed Him. Even still, God kept pursuing you until you gave in and loved Him in return.

Who is that obnoxious person in your life? Who irritates you and sets you on edge? Who causes you to erupt in frustration and anger? That is how you appeared to God, yet He loved you. You, now, go forth and love – not tolerate, but love – that person. You will, if you are a follower of Jesus.

But how? How can any mere mortal do this? Even if it's too wonderful to understand, at least we can *imagine* God loving us. But how can you love the hateful? You can't. You can only continue to live in anger. But if that God who loved you is in your life, He will love the unlovely through you. Do you believe this? Is God capable of using you to love irritating people? If you believe God can do this, then prove it. Make the first move. Tonight or tomorrow, go find someone who has been annoying you, and love him. And

if you know that God is not in your life, you need to be reconciled to Him right now. Don't leave here tonight without confessing your sinfulness and asking Him to forgive you. The gospel is that God came to love the unlovely. Don't be a fool – don't turn away from Him.

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