

2-9-2020 SERMON CCI Matthew 5: 21-26 Kingdom Citizens: Handling Anger

Today, we begin a sermon series called Kingdom Citizens from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount found in the gospel of Matthew. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began to teach his followers how to live ethically as citizens of the kingdom of God. Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their ministries preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of God (that realm of reality where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven) is near." Last Sunday, we heard Jesus tell us that **we are** the salt of the earth and the light of the world. For the next few weeks we will be hearing how to live as salt and light.

SLIDE For the next three Sundays, we will hear Jesus say 6 times, "You have heard it said ... but I tell you...." Each time, Jesus will compare two kinds of Jewish reasoning. He will start with "You have heard it said" and give a halakah statement of what was legally required by Jewish law. Then Jesus will give his agadah statement with "But I tell you..." Agadah reasoning goes beyond what's legal to what's moral, what's happening inside, in our hearts, and it calls for nothing less than everything. We'll see Jesus do this 6 times.

SLIDE So let's look at what Jesus said in today's scripture using halakah and agadah. "You have heard it said 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'" (that's halakah) but I tell you (here comes the agadah), "that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." (Anyone feeling uncomfortable because we all get angry?) So let's dig in.

SLIDE You have heard it said, "You shall not murder." Jesus quotes from the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20. Those who were guilty of murder in ancient Israel would be brought into judgment. And according to Numbers 35:31, the penalty for murder was death. You take a life, you lose your life. None of the people listening to Jesus would have disagreed. The law was designed to bring justice when innocent people had their lives taken from them. We agree today; even if we disagree with capital punishment, we agree that people who murder should be punished.

If Jesus had just left it there, we'd all feel good, but then Jesus began to meddle:

Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.
Anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court.
Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

What exactly is Jesus saying? He's saying that God is concerned, not simply with the act of murder, which we all agree is wrong, but God is also concerned with the heart behind murder. God is concerned with the heart because what is in the heart drives our behavior. **SLIDE** What fuels the murderous heart in most cases? Anger.

Now, Jesus is not saying anger itself is wrong. The Bible describes how God gets angry. The New Testament speaks about Jesus being angry. We saw Jesus get angry a few weeks ago when he turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. There is a righteous kind of anger that is provoked by the injustice and destructiveness of sin. And there is simple anger in reaction to situations- like being cheated. The Bible says, "Be angry, but don't sin." And, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." But Jesus is talking here about the kind of anger that can lead to murder. It's anger directed at others, and it's anger informed by my own *me-centered* feelings. Jesus cares about the permanent damage anger can do- like murder.

But murder is just one example of what this kind of anger can do. As Jesus points out in verse 22, anger is also expressed in our words; in how we demean and insult people. Literally, Jesus is saying, "whoever says to his brother, "Raka!" That's an Aramaic word meaning *empty*. So today, we might say an insult like, "You, blockhead!" or "You're good-for-nothing!" Jesus then adds calling someone a fool.... literally, from the Greek *moros*, the insult is "You, moron!" How often have we done that when we're driving? Hurtful, demeaning, insulting words driven by anger inside.

There are so many ways to damage people with our anger. Moments of anger that make us lash out at someone; to hurt someone back; to tear someone down with our words, to make them feel small and worthless. Jesus is telling us that murdering someone isn't the only damage from anger; our anger can kill a person's spirit, can tear the heart out of someone's dream, and can destroy a relationship.

There is divine judgment against both the act of murder and the angry heart behind murder. God will judge those who take a person's life, AND those who tear down a person's heart- whether by angry words or actions (including kinds of physical abuse), or silently treating people with contempt in our minds, and writing them off as useless to us any longer. Today, Jesus might add road rage and the hateful facebook, twitter, and instagram postings we see. Ugly memes, and

fake pictures and videos that attempt to destroy reputations. God judges it all. Jesus calls us as kingdom citizens to let love govern our lives, not anger.

If Jesus had just stuck with “You shall not murder,” we could all be off the hook. I imagine none of us will ever murder someone. We can check that commandment off. Kept that one. But Jesus is concerned with what’s in our hearts, not just our actions. Are we letting anger brew inside? Contempt? Do we get upset at every little thing? Do we make excuses for blowing up? A woman once came to Preacher Billy Sunday and tried to justify her *angry* outbursts. “I blow my top, but then it’s all over.” Billy Sunday replied, ““So does a shotgun, and look at the damage it leaves behind.” Jesus doesn’t let us off the hook about our anger, doesn’t make light of it or take it in stride. Jesus knows the damage anger can do. But he also knows we won’t be perfect when it comes to our anger. So in verses 23-24, he tells us what to do when we fail.

SLIDE ²³ ***“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.***

If we know our anger has hurt someone else, as kingdom citizens we are called to seek the forgiveness of the person we have hurt. To go and be reconciled, to make it right. How important is reconciliation in the kingdom? Jesus tells us that reconciliation is important enough to interrupt worshipping to get it done. Jesus goes so far to say, don’t bother giving your offering until you’ve made it right.

SLIDE Imagine if next Sunday, as I invited the ushers to come forward for the morning offering, I announced that anyone who has something they’ve been avoiding making right are to just put their money away. Don’t even bother giving. Would we have any offering next Sunday? The offering God wants more than our money is our living humbly as citizens of the kingdom reconciled with one another. Because being right with each other is as important as being right with God. In fact, we can’t be right with God without it.

Jesus uses a parable to teach us one last thing about dealing with the damage our anger can cause.

²⁵ ***“Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be***

thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

SLIDE He paints the picture of a person who owed a debt they couldn't pay. That person could be legally dragged into court to settle the debt. He could plead for mercy, but the usual judgment was to throw the person owing money into debtor's prison until someone in his family or friends paid every last penny. Jesus says it's better to settle on the way to court before it's too late. In the same way, when we owe someone an apology for our anger, Jesus says don't delay; reconcile, make it right. Do what you would want someone to do for you if they had hurt you. Go and make it right. Then you can come and worship with your whole heart.

SLIDE Let's face it, we all get angry. Sometimes we're not even angry at the person we lash out at, they're just the person nearby. In our angry moments, Jesus calls us to respond like kingdom citizens, with kingdom behavior and words. Respond, not with contempt, or name calling, and certainly not with murder. Respond instead with what we said in our Call to Worship today: Love your neighbor as yourself. Talk disagreements out rather than yelling or giving an angry silent cold shoulder. What's in our hearts matters. Even the angry words we never say outloud matter to God. I've been thinking: in the turmoil after the impeachment trial, whether we're angry President Trump wasn't convicted or we're angry he was ever accused, how we respond matters, what's in our hearts matters. What we say and do matters. We have the opportunity to be light and salt instead. And when we fail and let our anger hurt others, Jesus calls us to face it and go make it right. Make it right now, not later. Even if the person you hurt rejects your attempts, do what you can. Romans 12: 18 says it this way: "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." It's important. In fact, our relationship with God is at stake.