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Series: The Sermon on the Mount
Message: Actions & Attitudes

Transcribed Message
January 21, 2018
Matthew 5:21-26

It's been suggested that people respond in one of three ways when they're angry. Some people become maniacs. They just explode. Maybe they're like a volcano that takes a little while to get there or maybe they're like a short fused firecracker and they just explode. One lady described her husband as being temperamental – 50% temper and 50% mental. Other people become muted. They don't talk. So when they're mad and someone asks them are you mad? Nope. Are you upset? Nope. Are you okay? Yes. It is usually that one word answer that tells you all you need to know about that person because they are in fact angry. They're suppressing it. The third category has been suggested as the manipulators. The manipulators are those who tend to respond in sarcasm. They respond with insults. Maybe with what they think of as humor but really it's hurtful. I don't know if that is all of the categories that cover how we respond in anger. I don't know which one you might gravitate towards and find yourself fitting into, but if you're like me, you can think of multiple times no doubt in your life when anger overwhelmed you and it ruined your testimony. It caused hurt within your family or within your relationships, and may very well have injured and bruised people that you love very much. Jesus, in what has been described by some as the greatest sermon in the world, addresses this matter of anger. When He does it, He brings together in the same group of verses not only the matter of anger but the matter of murder. In doing that, He certainly gets our attention.

Let's turn to Matthew 5 again this morning. We're looking at verses 21 through 26. We want to see that God is concerned about our actions and God is concerned about our attitudes. It matters to Him what we do and why we do it. Let me just put before you a general principle. The general principle before us in this passage and really all the way through this 5th chapter is that right living really begins from the heart. Right living is a matter of the heart. That's what Jesus was talking about when we

looked at that 20th verse last week. It's going to continue all the way through this, all the way to the end of the chapter beginning at verse 21 this morning, and every one of these sets of six categories or topics Jesus draws the contrast between the righteousness of the Pharisees and the righteousness that God requires.

You remember from our lesson last week that Jesus said you better be doing better than the scribes and the Pharisees. That got the attention of His listeners because in the 1st century the scribes and Pharisees were like the spiritual giants. They were the ones who if anybody was to get to heaven it was surely them. So when Jesus announces to the crowd if you're following in their path you're going to fall short because their righteousness is not the righteousness that God is looking for. You look at verse 21 Jesus says you've heard it said. We'll see in verse 27 you've heard it said. Verse 31 you've heard it said. Verse 33, 38 verse 43. In every one of these topics Jesus begins by saying this is what you've heard; now this is what I want you to understand about what you've heard.

I know this. Two things. Number one. We're really good at self-righteousness and that's what the Pharisees ultimately were really good at. We're really good at it too. The other thing I know is we are good at self-justification. Jesus, as we come to this set of verses, tells us that He's not impressed with either one of those things. He is not impressed with our self-righteousness and He is not impressed with our ability to justify our actions.

Let's start off and I would like to just very briefly give you a contrast between self-righteousness and God's righteousness. This will really set the table for the whole chapter as we work our way through these different topics. The first thing is self-righteousness is external in its focus. It is external whereas God's righteousness focuses on the internal. In self-righteousness, I'm always worried about what other people think about me. I'm always worried about appearances. I'm always worried about image and what people see. It is all about the outside. Sadly, for some reason, lots and lots of our churches are right there. They're very concerned about appearances. They are very concerned about what people see in our lives on the outside, the external things. I know from listening to many testimonies that many of you grew up in those kinds of places, that setting within your home and within churches. That really should

not be. We should be pursuing God's righteousness. God's righteousness begins from the inside and works out. God's righteousness is concerned about things that other people maybe can't even see, about heart transformation.

Secondly, self-righteousness lowers God's standard. We're in there changing the Word around to what we want it to say or we're just ignoring it altogether. But it ultimately lowers the standard that God has put before us whereas obviously God's righteousness fulfills that standard. That's what Jesus said He came to do.

Thirdly, self-righteousness glorifies self and God's righteousness glorifies God. Fourth, it is unacceptable to God. Self-righteousness is unacceptable. That's what Jesus was saying. If your righteousness is no better than that of the scribes and Pharisees, then it is unacceptable to God. It is only God's righteousness that is acceptable to Him. So this contrast then is going to go on through the rest of the chapter.

Let's look this morning at verses 21 through 26. The specific application of that general principle is this: in God's kingdom, it is not only wrong to take a life, but it is also wrong to be angry and lose control. They're both sin. So we start off where Jesus does in verse 21 by talking about what is murder. What is murder? We notice in verse 21 the act of murder itself: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment." The first example that Jesus takes us to out of the 10 Commandments is the 6th commandment. It's just interesting. It is fascinating to me that all of the Commandments He could've gone to to draw them into this discussion, He starts with number 6. As He does that, He tells us that God is the one who values life. It is appropriate on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday that we're looking at this commandment that says thou shalt not take another life. Job is the one who said the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. That is in the hands of the sovereignty of God. The 6th commandment speaks directly to that. There is almost a universal understanding across the centuries of time and even across the cultures that to take another person's life is almost universally viewed as putting oneself in a place for receiving the judgment of God and the judgment of man. There are rare exceptions to that within cultures. Most cultures across time and across the spectrum understand that murder, the taking of another person's life, is wrong.

Someone might even say I'm not perfect but I've never killed anybody. They're basically saying in a self-righteous way that they're not perfect but it's bad people who take other people's lives. I haven't taken anybody's life therefore I'm a good person. That's the very kind of thinking that Jesus wants to challenge here. Jesus says within the scope of the law of God there is not only to be concern and understanding on our part about what the law says, but the spirit of the law behind that. So there is the letter of the law that defines murder as the taking of another person's life, yes. That is an act of murder. But Jesus doesn't limit it to that. He broadens the scope out and He says I'm concerned not only about the act of murder, I'm concerned also about the attitude that could be behind that.

Look at verse 22. He addresses the attitude: "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 widens the circle. He moves them from focusing only on the act of murder itself, which is the way the Pharisees were treating the law. They were going basically by the letter of the law. They were ignoring the spirit of the law. They were totally focused on the externals and they were ignoring what was going on in the heart. Jesus says that's not the way to read the law. That is not the way to understand what God wants. Jesus is going to press in and say don't murder. That's true, but don't murder people in your heart either.

What had happened is that as God gave the law, pretty soon the traditions of men began to be added to that law. It was lost on God's people as to what the true intent was when God gave His commands. Instead of simply teaching the law that was called the Torah, by the time of Jesus's day there were all the traditions that had grown up around it and it was called the Talmud. That was basically what was being taught. They took the law but they added all of these other things that really obscured the heart of the law that God wanted His people to see.

That's why Jesus says I say to you. Literally we could interpret that to say I myself say to you. I myself say to you. You've been taught this but I want you to understand that this is what is really behind it all. Jesus peels away the external tradition and He says God wants to see the heart as well. Just because you haven't committed

an act of murder in physically taking somebody's life, Jesus says don't think that you have necessarily fulfilled the 6th command. You may very well have violated the 6th command more than someone who has taken someone's life, as we are to understand what Jesus teaches here. If you have anger and contempt in your heart for somebody else, Jesus says the spirit of the law says that's a form of murder.

Jesus tells us what we can't do. What we can't do in verse 22 is we can't say to people *raca* and *moros*. Now that first word is a word that we honestly don't know how to translate into an English word. There's a lot of words we use that probably would fit that word. The other word is pretty easy to see. It's the word "moron". Jesus says whatever word that you use when you want to show utter contempt for somebody, whatever word you use when you want to inflict the most harm and pain that you can on somebody, whatever comes to your mind and whatever comes out of your mouth at that moment in which you have lost control qualifies as *raca* or *moros*. Jesus says that's wrong. We call it something. We call it character assassination. When someone says something mean and hurtful and unkind and cutting and wrong about somebody else, it is a form of character assassination. The word *raca* speaks of someone's intellectual capacities. *Moros* speaks more to their moral capacities, to their character. In either event, Jesus is saying that that is not allowed under the 6th command.

In that culture, I think what Jesus said hit with a tremendous amount of force. That culture was much more mindful of honor and shame in terms of how they related to each other and things that they would say to each other. I think in our culture unfortunately we probably have lost any true understanding of the depth of what Jesus is saying to us here because it's everywhere today. The things that people say about each other, the things that people say about anybody in such public settings is almost to miss the point of what Jesus says here because we just think it is so common. It is so ordinary and so every day. But what does Jesus say? If you want to understand the gravity of what He is saying he says if you're doing that, if you're treating another human being that way, you are putting yourself in danger of the fires of hell.

Jesus isn't saying that if you use a bad word and call somebody a name, you're going to hell. If you're a believer in Christ, by faith in Christ, you know your sins have been taken care of. But what Jesus is saying is that's the kind of behavior that qualifies

somebody for hell. He is putting a lot of weight to this. He is putting a lot of gravity to what He is saying here.

Let me address two misunderstandings that I think easily flow out of what Jesus says in verse 22. Jesus is not saying when you're angry at someone it's the same thing as murdering them. There are a lot of people when they go through this passage that they interpret it that way. You can read in any number of commentaries that people think that Jesus is equating these two as being moral equivalents and I just don't think that's what Jesus is doing. I don't think He is saying if you have committed this sin in your heart toward somebody and maybe even verbalized it, well, since you've done it you may as well as go ahead and kill them because it's one and the same. I can personalize it for you. I can live with you hating me. I can live with you not liking me. I can live with you calling me names. I can't live with you killing me. That's as simple as it is. Jesus is not saying that they're one and the same. He's saying they're both sin. They're both sin. We don't have time to get into it this morning but clearly there is in Scripture a difference between sin. There's a difference between the consequences of sin. When we look in the next section at adultery, Jesus certainly doesn't mean if you've lusted in your heart for somebody to go ahead and sleep with them because it is just one and the same anyway. Of course not. The ramifications, the consequences for these choices are vastly different. What He is saying is don't pat yourself on the back because you've never killed anybody. Don't pat yourself on the back because you've never physically committed adultery. Realize that you could have sinned just as significantly in your heart with an attitude toward someone that is contemptuous and disdainful.

The second thing I think is a misunderstanding is Jesus is not saying that all anger is sin. Jesus isn't saying that all anger is sin. We know from the gospel accounts that on more than one occasion Jesus Himself was angry and He responded in righteousness to that. He responded with righteous anger. Our memory verse for today Ephesians 4:26 tells us to be angry but don't sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. Jesus isn't saying all anger is sin. But He is saying that unrighteous anger is sin and He wants us to deal with that.

Let's look at that. Let's look at how it is that we deal with anger. I want to touch on four things. Three of them come right out of the text, and the last one is kind of a wrap up in how to and in a more practical way. So let's start off and just reemphasize what we just said. The first thing is to admit unrighteous anger is sin. I started off by saying we are really good at two things. We're really good at self-righteousness and self-justification. What Jesus calls us to is first of all admit that unrighteous anger is sin. One of the affirmations of the work of God's Spirit in our life as a follower of Christ in what we think of as sanctification is a growing awareness of sin in our life. When we step over the boundary and we lose control and we express unrighteous anger, one of the things that the Holy Spirit surely does to any ear that is willing to listen is to say that was wrong. That is sin. We need to begin there. We need to stop blaming other people for our anger. We need to stop blaming our circumstances for our anger. We can stop with self-justification. We can probably stop telling ourselves that our anger is a righteous anger. There may be times when we're righteously angry, but I would imagine that for most of us, our anger oftentimes falls into the category of unrighteous rather than righteous. The cause of our anger is not people around us. It's not our spouse. It is not our children. It is not our parents, not our coworkers. It is not the circumstances that we find ourselves in. It's coming from within here is what Jesus is saying. It's not the guy that cuts you off in traffic. Maybe in that case it is. It might be. When it comes to the sin of anger, Jesus's explanation is it's not out there. It is right in here. That's the point of the 6th command.

Secondly, He says to us reconciliation is important. Reconciliation is important. Look at verses 23 and 24: "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." This statement that Jesus makes here is simple. It is pointed. It's practical. Dealing with unrighteous anger begins by admitting it for what it is. The second thing Jesus calls us to is reconciling is important. Reconciliation is important. How important is reconciliation? Jesus's answer is it's important enough to interrupt your worship. It's important enough to stop you in your tracks from worship. Again, get the picture that Jesus gives to us here. Put yourself back in the context of the 1st century and the picture

that Jesus paints for us here is a 1st century Old Testament Jew bringing their offering to the altar. They've come to the temple. This is something that's going on all of the time as Jesus is living and moving among these people. This is a part of their daily and their weekly routine. They can immediately relate to what Jesus says. I'm coming to the altar. I have my lamb. I'm getting ready to make a statement about my relationship to God. The Holy Spirit prompts you and says hold on. Don't offer that sacrifice because you know that you have a broken relationship in your life. You know there's somebody with whom you need to make reconciliation. There is something that has happened. I take it that it's something significant. This is all happening within the context of murder and anger in one's heart. So it must rise to some level where you realize that there's been a breach. Jesus says stop. Stop. Take the initiative. Seek that person out. Seek forgiveness and be reconciled.

Now let's just bring that to today. As the people of God, we come together week to week. That's one of the benefits. That's why the writer of Hebrews says do this every week. Don't fall out of the habit and show up once every six weeks. There's something the Spirit of God wants to do in our lives individually and as a church that requires us coming together. One of the things that the Spirit of God wants to do is right out of this passage this morning. He wants us to understand the importance of reconciliation, to literally stop us in our tracks, if you will, and cause us to think about the fact that there are fractured relationships in our lives. Based on that God is saying to us, when you come together and sing or pray or hear the word read and taught, when you offer your offering and take communion as we do, all of those things should be as stop signs if we're neglecting the sin in our life that is a part of a broken relationship.

God thinks this is important. Listen to what He said in Isaiah chapter 1 beginning in verse 11: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I've had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before Me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations – I cannot endure iniquities and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you

spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice.” He goes on and on to speak of the fact that it's not sacrifices that God desires. It's a broken and contrite heart. How is it that we could come week after week after week when maybe even in this room with us is someone with whom we have a fractured broken relationship that needs to be reconciled? I'm not the one who said this. Jesus is the one who said interrupt your worship. Stop. It is a weighty word that God gives to us.

Notice then thirdly He says reconciliation is not only important, reconciliation is urgent. Verse 25: “come to terms quickly with your accuser while you were 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.” This illustration moves us from within the context of worship to what appears to be the context of the courtroom. Some have suggested that what we have here is we're moving from within the family to outside of the family. That is from within the church family as we would understand it to those who are outside. Clearly Jesus has in mind that we be reconciled in relationships whether they're believers or not. I think this does drive that point home. He tells us three things that we need to do. First, what to do. Make peace. Be reconciled. Don't think it's going to go away. Broken relationships don't just mend on their own. They often times in fact, most often get worse. That's why it's so important to understand the value and the need to reconcile with each other. Secondly, when to do it. What would you say? Do it quickly. Do it urgently. Do it now. Do it today. Thirdly why do it? It may spare you a lot of unforeseen trouble. Unresolved issues often lead to unknown consequences. So Jesus says do it. Do it quickly because you're going to spare yourself a lot of grief and a lot of trouble. Let's look at this last point then and just bring these things together in some practical applications. Realize that God has provided victory over anger. Obviously Jesus brings this before us and the importance of this before us. But he also has in mind that we would understand and apply the victory that God has provided for us over anger. So let's look at a couple things that will be of help to us. First of all it might very well be that

anger is a warning that something is wrong. Anger may be a warning that something is wrong. Tim Keller in his book, *The Healing of Anger*, talks about idols that we have in our life and especially as it relates to anger. He talks about how we can lift up an idol in our life and when that idol appears to not be in the place that we want it to be it's very easy to step into a spirit and heart of anger about that. That idol could be our own sense of self-worth or our appearance. It could be how other people see us. It could be the desire for success. It could be the pursuit of money. In my case it was time. I had raised time to a level of idolatry in my life. Let me explain. Early in our marriage I did not realize that Bonnie told time in a different way than I did. And when we had to go somewhere I was under the impression that being on time meant that you were early. And for her being on time meant that you were on time. And so in those early years, probably the first 20, I would regularly get angry and upset because she was not ready to go when I thought we needed to leave. This was like clockwork. This happened almost every time we had to go somewhere together. And she and I talked about this yesterday when I asked if I could share this little story and she said yeah you can. And then she reminded me what I would do is call from the other room. Five minutes. Three minutes. One minute. I'm in the car. All of that was really because I had made time in my perception of being an idol in my life. And I literally would step into resentment and anger on a regular basis because of this. I'm going to be honest with you. What really made me angry is when we would get there on time anyway. That really burned me up because I kept figuring we'd be late and then we'd get there on time. So what do you do? You recognize that anger is like a warning sign. There is something very likely going on that needs to be dealt with and often times it is an idol. Secondly, when angry a wise person doesn't act or speak. It is obviously easier said than done but it doesn't matter. It is a biblical truth. There are a lot of things that when we're angry that we do and say that we can't afford to do and say. We all know that, don't we? We all know there are things that we can't afford to say to another person. There are things that we do that we can't afford to do. And so we would do well to memorize James 1:19, 20. James tells us, "Let everybody be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger for the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God." It's a wonderful verse. And if you are dealing with anger you know one of the very practical things you can do is you can memorize

Scripture. There are so many passages and verses that speak of anger. Anger has a lot of very unseemly companions in Scripture. You just read through in especially Paul's letters and see the list that he gives to us. Anger is lumped in there with a lot of very unattractive things. And I think we are all aware. Thirdly, learn to overlook minor things. That can go a long way to helping resolve our getting too close to the boundary of unrighteous anger. Proverbs 19 verse 11 says: "good sense makes one slow to anger and it is his glory to overlook an offense." There is a lot of stuff that can be overlooked. It's a minor thing. 1 million years into eternity you won't even remember it right. If you're not going to remember it a million years into eternity, let it go. It's not that big of a deal. And so a lot of things that we would just see them for what they are as relatively minor issues would help us to stay in control. And then lastly, ask for God's help right. Ask for God's help. If you're one of those that that you're in a daily battle with anger then by all means that ought to be the daily prayer. When you wake up with God help me today to apply to my life James 1:19 and 20 and help me to be quick to listen slow to speak slow to anger. Because I know my anger never accomplishes what you want to have accomplished. And that needs to be our heart cry every day. James says you have not because you don't ask. Well maybe you don't have the enabling grace of God in your life in that specific area because you are not asking. So let's begin to ask that God would help us in that way because God is concerned with our actions and he's concerned with our attitudes. It matters to him what we do and why we do it. What do we take away from this? Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. Reconciliation is God working in such a way that we can have a relationship with him. So settle matters quickly. This whole section of the Sermon on the Mount is all about kingdom living. We've described it as living the way Jesus lives. And there isn't any way that you and I can exemplify the life of Christ more than by being people who reconcile relationships urgently and importantly. We never live like Jesus more than when we live in reconciliation with each other. It must grieve the Holy Spirit of God when we justify our sin, when we hear his word and we spurn that word, when we go and continue through life in broken relationships. I read this last week one pastor was saying people ask me all the time how can we improve the worship of our church. I thought he had a great answer. He said you know one of the ways we can improve the

worship of our church is we can be of people who come together mindful that we're in a good relationship with others in the body of Christ, that we've dealt with those issues. Then we become better singers. We become better listeners. We become better worshipers because we're walking in the life that God has called us to. Romans 12:18 "as much as it is possible with you live in peace with each other. Let's pray. Father God, this matter of living in peace with each other is made possible because of the cross. It is made possible because of what Christ has done. Christ came and he died on the cross to enable our broken relationship with you to be reconciled. Father when we understand and put our trust in Christ alone and what he did for us on that cross, our relationship with you is restored and made new. Lord, your heart for us is that we be in that kind of a relationship. So we pray this morning if there's someone here that is not certain or not sure or doesn't know, that your Holy Spirit would prompt them to continue to see and pursue and have conversations that will bring them to that understanding of the gospel of your grace. Lord as the people of Covenant cause us by your spirit to see the urgency and the importance of restored relationships in our homes in our marriages with our children towards our parents towards our neighbors coworkers or whatever it is. You call us to obedience in this area. May we as your people walk in the truth. I pray in Jesus's name, amen.