

But I Tell You... 2-22-04

21 "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. 23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. 25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he 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 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. Matthew 5:21-26 (NIV)

The problem I have of breaking up the Gospel of Matthew into such small morsels is that we are in danger of losing the flow. Let us remember that we are still in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus has given heaven's perspective of the kind of life that is blessed. In living that kind of life you will be the salt and light of the world. Then we pick up with our passage for today in which Jesus corrects their understanding of the Law and shows us that we are all guilty before God.

There is an amazing thing about the Spirit of God at work as we look at His word. What He is emphasizing this time is different from any other time. What He emphasizes the next time I go through Matthew may be totally different and yet equally of value. The Word of God is such an incredible thing!

What stands out to me like a trumpet blast in our recent studies is this emphasis on the need to see things from heaven's perspective. I think the Lord really wants to drive this home. I can't escape it. In my carnal mind I'm telling the Lord, "I think they got the point already." But the next passage comes along and there it is again. You have heard...but I say to you... I'll never see Matthew the same again. Jesus wants us to understand things as they really are. He is offering us heavenly vision. Will you see the world through His eyes? It's a choice we make continually.

In Newsweek's article on *The Passion of the Christ*, Jon Meacham implies that the gospel authors are not reporting without bias but trying to win converts to their new sect of Judaism and attack the power of the Jewish religious elite. As I read Matthew, nothing could be further from the truth. Matthew is presenting the radical perspective of the man who came down from heaven to change Matthew's, Romans', Jews', your and my understanding of reality. They aren't trying to win converts or attack anyone as Meacham claims. They are endeavoring to relay to others the incredible words and life of the man they were going to lay down their life for. They saw what He was showing them and wanted to pass it on to us.

It is never so clear as in these passages we are looking at today. First, Jesus presents the way that His listeners understood things, the way their culture had ingrained these ideas into the fabric of society. Then He tells it from the perspective of heaven.

To understand how this sounded in their ears we must know that *"to the Jew the Law was absolutely holy and absolutely divine; it is impossible to exaggerate the place that the Law had in their reverence. "The Law," said Aristeas, "is holy and has been given by God." "Only Moses' decrees," said Philo, "are everlasting, unchangeable and unshakable, as signed by nature herself with her seal." The Rabbis said, "Those who deny that the Law is from heaven have no part in the world to come." They said, "Even if one says that the Law is from God with the exception of this or that verse, which Moses, not God, spoke from his own mouth, then there applies to him the judgment. He has despised the word of the Lord: he has shown the irreverence which merits the destruction of the soul." The first act of every synagogue service was the taking of the rolls of the Law from the ark in which they were stored, and the carrying of them round the congregation, that the congregation might show their reverence for them.*"—Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)

In the context of that mindset, hear Jesus say, 21 *"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'* 22 *But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.* Jesus quoted Exodus 20:13 but added what must have been a contemporary expression with it. To Jesus, the fact that we are not to murder was obvious. What He knows people need to hear is that God is going to hold us accountable for our heart attitude. Judgment by the law of the local town was one thing, based on the evidence that men could gather, but God sees the heart and hears the mouth that spills out what is in the heart.

Anger is the root that leads to murder. God judges the anger in a heart. The King James Version uses a manuscript that says "angry with his brother without cause." "Without cause" is not in the best manuscripts. There is always a cause for anger, just or not. Understanding the two Greek words that Jesus could have used for anger will help us get at what Jesus was really saying. *Thumos* is a word used for the sudden flaring up of anger that quickly dies down, like the burning of dried wheat stalks. But the word Jesus used here is *orgizesthai*. *Orgē* is used for the kind of deep-seated anger that is long-lived. It is the anger that is nursed and kept burning in a man's heart. It is the kind that will not consider forgiveness as an option.

Jesus unashamedly and without hesitation told them that the divine Law said one thing that was well and true, but God was going to judge people by the condition of their heart whether or not they acted on it. *"They were astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the Scribes."* Mark 1:22 The teachers of the Law didn't dare presume authority without quoting Scripture or a famous Rabbi to back their opinion, but Jesus spoke with authority that stunned His hearers. Yet, when you hear the words, you know instinctively that what He is saying is absolute truth.

Some men have an air of authority because of their position and power. You can sense when they speak that their words carry weight and influence things. Jesus spoke with the authority of Almighty God. When the priests sent temple guards to arrest Jesus, they came back empty-handed saying, *"No one ever spoke the way this man does!"* John 7:46 What a presence He has!

Why would God be so ready to judge anger? If we refrain from acting it out, isn't that good enough? After all, didn't Jesus express anger? Answering this question will help us understand God's perspective. Jesus' was angry, but He was angry at sin that kept people from worship, not at the people themselves. The anger that God is ready to judge is the kind that is directed toward a brother and nursed into an infection of the heart. We use the expression, "angry at sin not the sinner", to describe the difference. That is hard to do when the sin in someone's life has caused you pain. Remember, to be angry with the sinner is to miss the fact that the sinner is enslaved and is suffering too. (John 8:34)

Matthew uses the word "brother" more than the other New Testament writers. His application seems to be toward those in the family of God. Considering the great grace of God toward my sin, I should be expressing the same grace and mercy towards others, especially those to whom God has forgiven, my brothers. Jesus just declared that the merciful would be blessed with mercy. Here is the counterpart. Those who refuse to be merciful become angry. The anger is a seed that can turn into deadly fruit. If you hang on to anger, you'd better prepare for God's judgment.

Call someone an idiot and you could be called to the national tribunal that deals with death sentences. (Not in actuality. Jesus is emphasizing the increased severity.) Then you've gone from internal anger to a demeaning expression toward someone made in the image of God. If they are a brother, then Christ died for them and is in the process of transforming them. Calling them a moral fool brings you in danger of hell. Yes! Jesus certainly had a different perspective.

We have a similar idea today. We say something like this, "As long as you don't harm anyone, whatever you do is fine." Jesus would say, "Fine with you but not with my Father. He will judge the person who is angry with their brother after all He has gone through to make you both right with Himself. Call the person names, crushing their spirit, and you are going against the very work I am doing, and walking on the edge of the Lake of Fire." Too severe you say? Maybe Jesus is trying to wake us up to the need of walking in the Spirit, opening our eyes to the depravity in our heart, trying to give us a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Words can be as crushing as physical blows. How many people live with the bruising image that cripples their image of themselves and causes them to shrink back from the life God has planned?

We can do what the Jews of that day were doing, looking at certain outward things and patting themselves on the back as being pretty good. But Jesus gets down to how God sees and how serious our condition is to a holy God. You've heard people say, "I'm pretty good, better than most. I don't hurt anyone and try to be generous

Commented [notes1]: 34 Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. John 8:34 (NIV)

and kind. I'm certainly not a murder." Sounds pretty good until Jesus comes along and gives us God's opinion of our righteousness.

Jesus mentions anger, proceeds to insulting a person's intelligence, and the third expression is one of moral character. The Greek word used here is *moros*. To ruin a person's character through false accusation, through exaggerated expressions, is to take the mercy God has given you for granted. It makes me wonder what is in store for those who insulted Jesus' character, accusing him of being a drunk and a glutton. But before we go on considering their fate, we need to look at our own tongue. If God so loved the world that He gave His Son for each of us, what are we doing destroying one for whom Jesus died? James tells us that the same mouth that praises God should not utter curses toward men. (James 3:9-10)

This type of anger and name calling usually comes out of personal insult or loss. In our fallen nature we wish to inflict on others the pain they have caused us to suffer. But this is so unlike our Lord, "*Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously:*" 1 Peter 2:23 (KJV) Listen to how the Apostle Paul responded to words. "*When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; 13 when we are slandered, we answer kindly.*" 1 Corinthians 4:12b-13a (NIV) This is the powerful, life-changing response of the Spirit of God in us. How can anyone stand up to that? A soft word breaks a bone. (Proverbs 25:15) Just as in all the teaching to this point, we can't do these things unless we are indwelt by the Spirit of God and yielding to Him.

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

Don't forget that when there is a "therefore" you have to go back and see what it is there for. It is there because Jesus is warning that since God deals seriously with broken relationships and a lack of love, for our own sake, we had better take the advice He is giving.

Jesus was speaking to people worshipping under the Temple system. If you wanted to give something to God, you brought it to the Temple and gave it to the priest to place on the altar. The Jews understood this was useless unless you had done everything you could to rectify the wrong you had done, the reason you were offering the sacrifice. You had to make it right with men before relationship with God was restored. Jesus was reminding them of something they already knew but may have been sidestepping. The equivalent today would be any act of worship, a song of praise, a good deed, or an offering. If you are on your way to do something because of your love for God, remember, He isn't going to be pleased with it until you are right with your brother.

It is interesting to note that it is when you remember your brother has something against you. Jesus didn't say when you remember someone who offended you. In that case you are simply to forgive. That is just what a Christian does because of the life of Christ in them. Jesus is addressing the case in which someone has been

Commented [notes2]: 9 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. 10 Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.
James 3:9-10 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: 15 Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.
Prov 25:15 (NIV)

offended by you and been unable to forgive you. It doesn't say if you are in the right or wrong. Jesus didn't get into that.

Does someone have something against you? Go to them and ask how you can make it right. Even if you think you are completely within your rights, see if there isn't something you can do to help the person out of the trap they are in. They are poisoning themselves with unforgiveness. You may not agree with the way they see things, but they are your brother, and you need to obey Jesus' command and extend the mercy that has been given to you from God to your brother for whom Christ died.

As long as we are in the world we will find things in which we disagree with our brother. We will intentionally and unintentionally offend and be offended. The mature Christian realizes that he is just as likely to be wrong as the next guy. The offense is not the main issue; relationship is what its all about. Fix it! Do whatever it takes. The more mature person will go the extra mile. The mature person will give up their right to be right and let the other person "win". Jesus further illustrates it with the next injunction.

25 "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he 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 I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

If someone has it in their head that you have wronged them, they are going to want to get even. Do whatever it takes to put an end to their anger. Do they think you owe them? Pay it! You can say you don't agree, but if that is what they believe then you should pay it. It shows that you value that relationship more than money. It shows you trust God to provide your needs. It shows you trust God to balance the books, and by that I don't mean God will strike the person dead.

We have bought into a worldly perspective of thinking that says we have to have people understand us. We think we must protect our assets and our image. The only thing we really have to do is love God and our neighbor as ourselves, and we will find everything will work out.

Jesus warned that if you play hardball and it goes to a judge you might end up in jail and still pay all your adversary thinks you owe. The justice system of the world is not always just. Judges aren't always wise. (Micah 3:12) They can be fooled. If someone is taking your to the cleaners, they are probably pretty slick at pulling the wool over people's eyes and will do that to the judge. I've seen so many cases where the good guy got what the bad guy deserved. Judges are men, and sometimes the legal system binds them to act in ways they know is not fair. Bite the bullet and settle out of court. Is God's hand short that it cannot save? (Numbers 11:23) Did this problem somehow take you out of God's ability to provide? Do the right thing, and watch how God takes care of your needs. (Philippians 4:19)

You have heard that it has been said, "Do not murder." But I'm telling you that God will judge not only the actions, but the thoughts and intent of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12) Your refusal to forgive is refusal to pass on the grace that has been extended to

Commented [notes4]: 11 The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.
Micah 3:11 (KJV)

Commented [notes5]: 23 The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you."
Num 11:23 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 19 And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
Phil 4:19 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.
Heb 4:12 (NIV)

you. It is refusal to pass it on to those for whom Christ died. It is saying, "I love you Lord, but I hate this one you love and I will never forgive him or her. I know you have had mercy on me, but I refuse to have mercy on them." Scripture warns us that we are on very precarious footing when we go down that road. (1John 2:9-11)

This admonition from Jesus is an attempt to get us to realize that our heavenly Father loves mankind and won't tolerate His children's refusal to love too. He is love. (1John 4:8) The anger, the harsh words, the insults are all the opposite of His character. It expresses a refusal to be like Him. It is cooperation with and participation in evil. The Law asks for the bare minimum, but God is looking into your heart. (Jeremiah 17:10) Do you have the love that is His very own or a stubborn refusal to be like Him? Let us pray with David, "*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*" Psalms 139:23-24 (NIV) Only the grace of God can help you forgive and let go. Only His life in you can keep you from fanning the flames of anger and animosity and keep your lips from insulting His creations. Search us O God. Lead us in the way everlasting.

Commented [notes8]: 9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness.
10 Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.
11 But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.
1 John 2:9-11 (NIV)

Commented [notes9]: 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.
1 John 4:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 10 "I the LORD search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward a man according to his conduct,
according to what his deeds deserve."
Jer 17:10 (NIV)