

Anger

Matthew 5:21-26

On March 1, 2008 AP news ran a story about a 27-year-old Minnesota man named Justin Boudin. Boudin has just pleaded guilty to fifth-degree assault charges. According to the criminal complaint, Boudin was waiting at a bus stop when he harassed a 59-year-old woman. Witnesses say he yelled, "Why don't you show me some respect?" at the woman. The complaint further stated that when she took out her cell to call the police, he punched her in the face. And then when a 63-year-old man tried to stop him, Boudin hit him with a blue folder. He then ran away, but as he did so he dropped the folder that he was carrying. Police were able to track him down using the papers inside that blue folder. The papers included his name and his anger management homework. He lost his temper on the way to his anger management class. The article stated - "Justin John Boudin may have done his anger management homework, but he apparently didn't learn his lesson."

Now, that's kind of a humorous story, but the issue of anger is not funny. It can be such a destructive emotion. We see every day don't we? A tennis player threatens to shove a tennis ball down a line judge's throat. An area football team runs onto the field in a bench-clearing brawl. A legislator yells out at the president. Anger is all around. You see the results of anger in the news literally every day. You see it in sporting events. You see it at the work place. You see it on the roads when someone makes a driving mistake.

But the problem with anger is not just "out there." It is within us. And the truth of the matter is the for many of us, we don't have to look any further than inside the four walls of our homes to see anger and its destruction.

Well today we are going to take a look at anger as we continue on our journey through the Sermon on the Mount. Last week Steve talked about how God wants to work out in our lives a deep, substantial righteousness - a righteousness born not of our own heroic efforts, but through the work of God in us as we follow Christ as apprentices. In that passage Jesus said that unless we have a righteousness that surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees that we shall not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:20).

As we move into the next section Jesus gives several specific examples of what this deeper righteousness looks like. He presents six antithesis, each with the basic structure of "You have heard . . . but I say." His first one deals with anger. And so I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 5:21.

The first thing we gain as we look at this passage is that Jesus wants us to. . .

I. Understand God's View of Anger (5:21-22)

²¹ *"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'*

Jesus begins this list of examples, by addressing the sixth commandment (Ex. 20:15). And yet, what He is really addressing is His hearer's understanding of the sixth commandment. When He says, *You have heard*, He is addressing the tradition of understanding that they have received regarding what the *ancients* were told. The *ancients* probably refers to the original recipients of the Mosaic Law. He says that the *ancients* were told, "*You shall not commit murder.*" This is exactly what the sixth commandment says in Exodus 20:15. But he also adds that they had heard that the ancients were told that "*Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.*" There are a number of places where the Old Testament teaches such things. For instance, Numbers 35:16 says:

¹⁶ 'But if he struck him down with an iron object, so that he died, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death.

And so, the Mosaic Law certainly taught that there were consequences for one who murders. Such a person is *liable to the court*. So, there is a prohibition - do not murder - and there are consequences for those who do. This is what they had heard and understood.

As we come to verse 22, Jesus essentially says, "You've had this understanding of the sixth commandment and what it requires, *but I say to you.*" When Jesus says, *But I say to you*, the *I* is the first word in the Greek sentence, which is an emphatic position. Jesus, the one who, as we saw last week, is the ultimate fulfiller of the law (5:17), stands as the ultimate authority of what the sixth commandment actually means and to what kind of righteousness it points. This assertion of authority is what caused people at the end of the Sermon on the Mount to be "*amazed at His teaching for He was teaching them as one having authority*" (Matt. 7:28-29).

Verse 22:

²² "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

Jesus presents three examples of anger and their punishments. I don't believe that Jesus is intending here to present any kind of progression of greater and greater offenses and their punishment, rather it is the same offense of anger in each case. He is making His point by multiplying examples.

First, He says, *everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court*. Jesus uses, *brother*, here more broadly than just of a male sibling. And *court* might refer to the local court found in larger cities that was responsible for handling murder cases. Jesus says that if you are angry with a brother you are just as guilty as a murderer.

Second, Jesus says, if you say to your brother '*Raca*' you *shall be guilty before the supreme court*. *Raca* is an Aramaic word that was transliterated into Greek. It means something to the effect of "blockhead," or "idiot." In that culture, it was a much more objectionable offense than it sounds to our ears. One who says such a thing is *guilty before the supreme court*, which probably refers to the highest court in Jerusalem.

Finally, Jesus says that *whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell*. To call someone a *fool*, again, would have been much more offensive than it sounds to our ears. One who says this, Jesus says, is *guilty enough to go into the fiery hell*. This phrase is literally "the Gehenna of fire." The word, Gehenna, comes from the valley of Hinnom, which was a valley south of Jerusalem. At one time it was associated with the worship of the pagan god, Molech, which involved human sacrifices. When Josiah abolished such practices in the 7th century B.C., he made the valley a dumping ground for filth and for the corpses of criminals (2 Kings 23:10). In the first century it very well may still have been used as a rubbish pit that had continuous fires smoldering. This valley came to symbolize the place of eternal punishment. And so Jesus says that one who calls another a *fool* is *guilty enough to go into this fire*.

Jesus' point to His hearers is this: You had thought that based on the tradition that you have received that if you refrain from homicide you are righteous, but the righteousness to which the sixth commandment points is much deeper. It addresses your heart attitudes. Kingdom righteousness goes way beyond simply refraining from murder. Jesus is saying that anger, which is murder of the heart, violates God's law and is worthy of judgment.

All of us understand how bad murder is, but Jesus is saying that anger in the heart is just as deserving of God's judgment. God's desire is that we would have hearts full of love not anger. This is the deeper righteousness to which the sixth commandment points.

Now, I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Didn't Jesus get angry? Isn't anger okay sometimes? The answer is yes. There were times that Jesus got angry (e.g. Matt 21:12ff; Mark 3:1ff). But Jesus' anger was never over any personal offense suffered. Rather it was at sin and injustice. In fact, when Jesus was most abused during his trial and crucifixion, He did not have malice or contempt or anger. Rather there were gracious words of forgiveness. And so, certainly there is a kind of anger directed towards injustice and sin that can be appropriate, but the reality is that most of the anger we experience doesn't fall into that category. Most of our anger results from personal offenses - our rights are violated or our goals are blocked or we experience irritations or we feel misunderstood and we get angry. This kind of anger is worthy of condemnation and must be put away.

Do you have anger in your life? Some of you know that you do and everyone close to you knows that you do because your anger manifests itself in explosive ways.

When I was younger, I struggled some with this kind of anger. I remember one time when I got so mad at Drew when he was just a little guy. Out of anger I was talking to him with this angry intensity and I remember seeing a look in his eyes that no loving father ever wants to see in the eyes of his child - I saw fear. He was afraid of his dad. It was a wake up moment for me. It was a time where I realized how destructive my anger could be.

Some of you related to that, don't you? You are doing the same thing with your anger. Your anger erupts and you are causing your children to be afraid of you. You are causing them to not feel safe with you. Some of you discipline your children, not out of love, but out of anger.

Some of you struggle with anger in your marriage. Your anger causes you to lose control. You blow up. You put holes in walls. You throw things. You say ugly, abusive things. Some of you have maybe even been physically abusive. Your anger is destructive.

For others of you, your anger is less obvious. You don't erupt. Your anger is more subtle. You don't yell and scream and break things; you express your anger by turning a cold shoulder, but withdrawing emotionally and just shutting out the other person.

For some of you your anger is not so much directed at family members, but at others through whom you have suffered some kind of personal offense. And you are harboring bitterness in your heart. For you, your anger comes out in gossip about the person who hurt you. Or you love to plan out scenarios in your mind of how you will get even. When you are around this person your anger manifests itself in critical, biting or sarcasm words. It comes out in passive-aggressive behavior.

Folks, we need to understand God's view of anger. If you are thinking things like, "My anger is not a big deal. I haven't killed the person I'm mad at. I haven't even laid a hand on them" you are not understanding God's view of anger. Everyone who is angry with a brother is guilty. It needs to be dealt with.

As we turn to the final part of this section, Jesus gives us a principle of where we should start in confronting our anger. Jesus wants us to . . .

II. Understand the Urgency of Dealing with Anger (5:23-26)

As we come to verses 23-26, we might initially be tempted to think Jesus has moved on to a different topic. But when He says, *if therefore*, He is clearly making a connection to what He has just taught. Jesus gives two illustrations as points of application to what He has just taught about anger.

Verse 23:

²³ *"If therefore you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.*

Illustration number two:

²⁵ *"Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. ²⁶ Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.*

In the first illustration, Jesus is talking about a person who is at the temple ready to present an offering to God. Once there, this person remembers that a *brother has something against* him. In such a situation, Jesus says that seeking reconciliation is so urgent that the person should leave worship and go and *be reconciled* to his brother.

The second illustration has a judicial setting. There is a person who apparently owes another money and the person to whom the money is owed is in a position to take legal action. Jesus urges his listeners to be quick to settle this matter before it comes before the judge.

As we look at these two illustrations together, I think there is one point that Jesus is stressing and that is the urgency of personal reconciliation. Anger is such a big deal that whether it is our own anger towards someone or whether it is our offense that might cause anger in others, we need to do whatever we can to bring about reconciliation and avoid causing the offense of anger.

Jesus wants us to understand that there is urgency in dealing with issues of anger. Don't delay to deal with it. Don't delay to seek reconciliation in relationships so that anger doesn't have a place.

Is there any relationship right now in which you need to apply this principle? Is there any situation where you are dragging your feet and not wanting to confront your anger and a strained relationship? Jesus is urging you to not delay.

And so, understand God's view of anger - it is murder of the heart. It is something that deserves God's judgment. And understand that if we have anger we need to have an urgency in dealing with it. As far as it depends upon you, don't let it linger. Jesus wants his followers to have hearts full of love, not anger. This is the kind of deep, substantial righteousness that Jesus wants all who are his apprentices to have.

Now, as we come to the end of our time, let me mention a few points of application. Maybe you sense the urgency of dealing with your anger, but what do you do?

First, recognize that sinful anger is a manifestation of the flesh. Galatians 5:19-20 says:

¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,

When we have anger in our hearts, we should not think it is the fault of that person or this circumstance. Those things don't cause our anger, they just reveal the anger that is in our heart. Paul says that this is a deed of the sinful flesh. And so as such you need to confess it. Don't deny it. Don't make excuses for it. Be honest with what is really going on in your heart. Confess your anger for what it is - sin; a work of the flesh.

Secondly, seek to walk by the Spirit. Earlier in the same passage in Galatians 5:16, Paul writes:

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

And then in verse 22 he says,

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Having love in our hearts not anger is a work of the Spirit. And so seek to walk in the Spirit. This happens as we trust God; as we immerse ourselves in a life of prayer and in the Word of God and in encouraging fellowship. It happens as we seek to walk as apprentices of Jesus.

I guess what I'm saying is that if you see anger in your life, it is an indication that something is broken in your relationship with God. Something is not right. Dealing with your anger might be more about dealing with your relationship with God than directly with your anger.

Third, seek out help. The place to start might be to just acknowledge to a friend that you are angry. Just by bringing them into the situation, you are tapping into God's grace. They can pray for you. They can help you think through the steps. They can hold you accountable to do something that you need to do to deal with your anger.

For some of you, you might need to do more than just enlisting the help of a friend. Your anger issues are deep-seated and you might need to pursue Christian counseling to help you understand where your anger comes from and how to deal with it. There is no embarrassment in doing so. And so reach out and get the help that you need.

Finally, I want to give one last point of application. And this isn't so much about how to deal with anger, but rather it is a suggestion to help you see if you have an issue that

needs confronted. Some of us are angry and we don't even know it and so let me encourage you to do this - ask your spouse or your kids or a good friend if they think you have a problem with anger. And if they say yes, then heed Jesus encouragement to be urgent about dealing with it.

Remember what was said of John Boudin, that he may have done his anger management homework, but didn't learn his lesson? We have done our homework today; may we be people who learn our lesson. May we see anger like God does and may we understand the urgency of dealing with it.