

Sermon on the Mount: Reconciling Relationships

Matt.5:21-30

Remember: Jesus meddles. Here is where the meddling begins! (following the preamble of grace). However, once we begin to see as Jesus sees, and gain clarity of vision, this teaching makes sense. In light of the beatitudes, in the context of our being salt and light, in understanding that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law and prophets and the *inner* righteousness that Jesus points to, this will make sense. And, at the same time, it's gonna pinch a bit!

In the passage we looked at last week, Jesus said "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you won't enter the Kingdom of heaven." With today's reading we're getting into the "surpassing righteousness" that Jesus calls us to. For Pharisees and law-experts, righteousness was an external thing; rule-keeping and all that. For followers of Jesus, righteousness means relationship-keeping, and kingdom building. Something mostly *internal*, which works itself out externally.

Introductory note to the next few passages: As we read through the Sermon on the Mount, we'll notice that Jesus does not begin with light topics and then move onto heavier ones. He doesn't start with prayer, and your Father knows what you need before you ask, and consider the lilies of the field and all

that. Those teachings come later. He does the opposite. These first teachings feel like a splash of cold water in the face. And I wonder why Jesus doesn't ease us into things and start us off with some lighter fare. Perhaps, like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus wants to startle people awake and get our attention. That's what the prophets did. I describe the prophets as like an alarm clock, to wake people up. To themselves, and to God.

Whatever his reasons for arranging the teachings this way, we need to read these passages and study them in light of the entire gospel, and not in isolation. The gospel is the gospel of grace, not a gospel of works, where we need to shape up and earn it, jump over the higher bar. That's very important: that we read these individual passages in light of the entire gospel, the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

If we take these passages in isolation, then it's possible to see them only as warnings against eternal judgment and they will only scare us into a fearful kind of compliance. Or, they will just make us feel guilty, or inadequate. Jesus does not want to create fearful, guilt-ridden followers whose goal in life is not to go to the eternal time out corner for bad behavior. Jesus wants confident and assured disciples, who know the freedom that comes from having his Spirit living in us;

who are free from the burdens of guilt and shame; free to become the persons that God created us to be; who are free to be in thriving relationships; free to live as salt and light in the world. That's Jesus' goal! I'll work to remind us of this as we go along this morning, and throughout the rest of the series.

With that in mind, here is Jesus, the new Moses, giving his interpretation of the law. In this morning's passages he will quote from two of the ten commandments (6th and 7th), and give the grand positive of their inner meaning (though at first they may not sound very positive; hang in there!):

Matthew 5:21-30

"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

(now speaking metaphorically) Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (another reference to debtor's prison—the idea: don't get yourself into deep relational debt by holding resentments)

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

This is the word of the Lord.

Aren't you glad I'm preaching through the Sermon on the Mount?! I'm not sure I am right now. But these words were a good reminder to me this week, and they are a good reminder to all of us that Jesus is earnest about matters of heart and right relationship. And I'll say it again, I want us to hear these teachings as grace teachings. Jesus' goal here is to point to the inner meaning of the law and the commandments, and in doing so he is giving us a way to protect our hearts, and to reconcile relationships. Protect hearts, reconcile relationships. This is where real change and transformation happens, personally and societally.

And I'd like to note here, that Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount focuses on interpersonal relationships. We could easily talk about anger around social issues, political issues, racial justice, and there is some overlap and application of this teaching to those, but Jesus is speaking here about interpersonal, one-to-one relationships. Which, when reconciled, will benefit

society. But I wanted to make the interpersonal nature of the teaching clear because my comments today (and next week) will reflect that.

Now, let's step back for a moment: what was your gut reaction to hearing this reading? Maybe your reaction was like mine when I began taking this teaching to heart years ago: Whoa! That's harsh, Jesus. Are you saying that if I'm simply *angry* at someone, I'm in danger of judgment? That if I glance at someone and feel an attraction, that I'm liable to judgment? If that's really true, then I'm in deep trouble. We're all in trouble. Who of us, for example, has never been angry at someone before? And then failed, by acting on that anger by saying something hurtful or sending that email or text message.

Again, we need to understand this teaching in light of the entire gospel, which is the gospel of grace. And remember that Jesus is communicating a new way of seeing, and a new way of being. He is helping us protect hearts, and reconcile relationships. This is the Kingdom, or kin-dom, of right relationship.

And let's also remember *who* is doing the teaching here: this is the gracious and merciful Lord Jesus, who, in his own words, is "gentle and humble in heart." Jesus is not giving us this anger & reconciliation teaching with frustration, or with his own anger, but with love. Remember, the apostle John tells us that

God so *loved* the world that he gave Jesus. Not, God was so mad at the world that he sent Jesus... As if Jesus arrives on the scene with an angry frown: stop being angry! If you're angry you're going to hell!!" That would be the definition of irony. No, he's saying, "Look, beloved, friends! Let me tell you how best to live—for your benefit and for the world's benefit, and for God's glory."

Jesus said, "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... learn from me... my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus' goal is to lighten our load. And in these teachings in the Sermon on the Mount he is acknowledging that sometimes we are carrying heavy burdens. Carrying anger is a burden. Holding onto lust is a burden. Jesus wants us to have a lightness of being. It'll take some inner work to get there—he is realistic about that—but the blessed result Jesus wants for us is to be thriving in relationships as much as it depends on us.

So Jesus' teaching is for our blessing, because he cares about us, and because he loves the world, to whom we are salt and light.

Keep these things in mind, lest any of us go to places of guilt and shame. Jesus loves us—that's the grand truth undergirding this teaching. But he loves us

too much to let us stay the way we are. He wants us to grow; he wants us to be free, unburdened people.

And with that in mind, I'd like to share two reflections on these teachings—what both of them convey.

1. It's not about the emotion, but what we do with it. Or the experience...

A feeling of anger isn't bad; experiencing a moment of attraction isn't bad. These are normal human experiences, which actually come from a good place inside us. So it's not about the momentary experience. It's about *intent*, and what we **do** with our experience or emotion.

Here is where grammar comes to our rescue. Yay, grammar! In the original Greek, the phrase "is angry" and the other phrase "looks with lust" are present tense participles. And a present tense *participle* suggests continuous action or an ongoing state of being.

So, these phrases are more accurately translated this way: anyone who holds onto anger against a sister or brother. Likewise, the second teaching is more accurately translated, "anyone who looks with the intent to lust," or "*for the purpose of lusting.*"

Jesus is not describing the fleeting moment, the flash of fire, where in an instant we experience a reaction to something or someone; he is describing situations where we hold onto those experiences in a harmful way (harmful, mostly, to us). Jesus is not describing an “aaaargh, this is so frustrating” moment, or the “oops, I caught myself looking” moment. He is describing a behavior where we hold onto anger, or where the *intent* is to create fantasies about another person and thus objectify them—dehumanize them.

So the issue isn't whether we feel angry or not, but what do we do with it? We all feel anger from time to time. And that is normal and natural. Even Jesus got angry. And, feeling attracted isn't bad when we can either catch ourself in awareness and redirect our vision and thought, or redirect and channel it toward the person we're in covenant relationship with.

So, to look at it in a positive way, this teaching is an affirmation of the sacredness of human beings, who are created in the image of God, who are fearfully and wonderfully made. *You* are a sacred human being, created in the image of God, fearfully and wonderfully made, and Jesus wants you to protect your heart, and the hearts and personhood of others.

So the issue is, what do we do with what we're feeling and experiencing.

If our understanding of this teaching on anger, for example, is simply that any person who gets angry at another person is in danger of hell, then Jesus himself is in that danger. Because he got angry. Several times! Like when he called Peter “Satan” (not exactly a compliment); or when Jesus called the Pharisees whitewashed tombs or hard-hearted hypocrites. How about when Jesus enters the temple right after arriving in Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week? What does he do? He cleanses the temple by overturning tables and driving out the money changers who were ripping people off. He probably wasn’t wearing one of those t-shirts with a smiley face emoji that says “have a nice day.” Jesus got angry.

So the issue isn’t whether we feel angry or not, but what do we do with it? Same with a feeling of attraction. God created us sexual beings. So the issue isn’t whether or not we’ll occasionally see someone and think “there’s a good looking person.” The issue is, what do we do with that thought, that emotion? It’s a matter of holding on, or moving on.

Which leads to:

2. Deal with the situation right away. Don’t delay. Don’t let things fester.

In the teaching about anger, Jesus says, before you do anything else—especially if it's a religious something else—take steps toward the person who you're in conflict with.

And, if you find yourself attracted to someone, deal with it right away. Don't let yourself go down the spiral of objectifying someone, or worse, taking harmful action. Deal with it right away.

Jesus' simple principle is: be people who keep short accounts—both in actual relationships, and in our own hearts and minds. In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul says, "In your anger, do not sin" (again, he doesn't say "*don't* be angry"), and then he says, "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." That's not to be taken literally; rather, it's a figure of speech for saying "deal with it in a reasonable amount of time, but don't put it off." So anger doesn't fester and turn into resentment.

Jesus says, "if your right eye causes you to sin pluck it out" (vision metaphor again!) and, "if your right hand causes you to sin chop it off." Likewise, these are not to be taken literally, as austerity measures. That would create a lot of blind and dismembered persons. These are over-the-top, hyperbolic ways of saying, deal with it.

Jesus may also have been poking fun at the Pharisees who *did* employ austerity measures to show how righteous they are, and this perhaps is Jesus' way of saying, "It's a matter of heart, not of losing limbs and eyes. Don't be ridiculous like those guys. Work on what's in here (heart)."

Either way, in all of this teaching we're called to have a growing awareness of ourselves. And to take responsibility for what comes to our awareness. And then take appropriate action.

Here is where the preamble of grace helps us. The beatitudes, and the teaching on salt and light come into play now, from the preamble. For example, blessed are the peacemakers. Superimpose that beatitude on this teaching, and hear the blessing pronounced over us when we follow it. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness—for right-relationship. Superimpose that on this teaching and receive the blessing pronounced over us.

Blessed are the meek—those who have strength but exercise restraint and channel their strength and use it for the benefit of others instead of for self-gratification. This might apply particularly to men in relationship with women, especially in the context of today's teaching. And btw, I want us to notice in this teaching, and in the subsequent teaching on divorce (if you read on) that Jesus is

protecting women: he is holding men accountable, which is remarkable because at that time men did not have any accountability, and could treat women as they wished. So, blessed are the meek. Superimpose that on this teaching, and receive the blessing.

You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world. Superimpose that on this teaching, of being people of positive influence in the world. These are all good reminders from the preamble of grace, of having healthy vision, of seeing the way God sees. And acting accordingly.

Before concluding, I need to make a note about reconciliation: Jesus does not give us a detailed strategy for how to reconcile. He simply says, go; make the first move in reconciliation. I don't know about you, but I find myself wishing he'd give us the "5 simple steps to reconciliation." But there is wisdom in Jesus' restraint here. He gives no detailed steps or strategy for how to reconcile because we will each do it in our own unique way, according to the situation at hand, and according to the time that's needed.

So, there is grace in the fact that we are to do the best we can, and that not all situations are the same, and not all people are the same, and therefore not all

time frames are the same for working through reconciliation. But we are to make an effort anyway, with humility & vulnerability.

Workshop on racial justice last weekend: racial healing precedes racial reconciliation. Because many, or most, black Americans are dealing with trauma of some kind, and healing needs to happen before attempts at reconciliation. Otherwise we bypass the healing that's needed. He spoke of deep listening as part of the healing process. There is a lot more to say here, but it's a good example of reconciliation needing more time to be worked toward.

It also needs to be said that there are situations where someone has been deeply wounded by another person, and the harm that has been experienced and the lingering emotional struggles, do not make it possible for us to just traipse over to the person who wounded them and say 'let's be reconciled.' Those situations require special grace and a wider interpretation of Biblical principles, and perhaps extra help from outside sources. Because reconciliation and forgiveness may take a longer time in those situations, and in some instances real reconciliation is not possible. For example, if the other person has died. Forgiveness always is possible—even if it takes a while, and even if the other

person has died. However, sometimes reconciliation isn't. And maybe shouldn't even be attempted.

This is the wisdom of steps 8 and 9 of the 12 steps of recovery, of being willing to, and then making direct amends wherever possible, *except...* when doing so would cause further injury. That's a matter of discernment. The willingness needs to be there, though.

But in any situation where people have hurt each other and anger or other strong feelings come into play, we all need to rely on the forgiveness and grace of Jesus Christ, and the strength he gives us to do what he is asking us to do.

We need to **know** his forgiveness and grace when we make mistakes in anger. We experience his compassion and not condemnation.

Then we need to **employ** his forgiveness and grace when someone comes to us with their confession. To receive it from them, and forgive and be reconciled.

And if we are on the receiving end of a word of truth (if someone speaks the truth in love to us and confronts us with our faults) we need his grace to help us listen and receive that as well, and try to not get defensive and say "how dare you!" (sticky note verse...) James 1:19! "Let everyone be quick to listen and slow

to speak and slow to become angry. For one's anger does not produce God's righteousness." Easier said than done, brother James. But, point taken, and I promise to work on that!

Remembering in all things, that Jesus made the first move toward us in reconciliation. He didn't wait for us to come crawling to him on our hands and knees to apologize and get ourselves straightened out. Romans 5:8: "God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He made the first move, and always makes the first move toward us, and toward the world, in love.