

Sermon #1,275: Matthew 5:20-26 (Historic Gospel)
7-23-17 (Trinity 6), Bethany-Princeton MN

ANGER AND JUSTIFICATION

Prayer: Heavenly Father, God of all concord, it is Your gracious will that Your children on earth live together in harmony and peace. Defeat the plans of all who would stir up violence and strife, destroy the weapons of those who delight in war and bloodshed, and, according to Your will, end all conflicts in the world. Teach us to examine our hearts that we may recognize our own inclination toward envy, malice, hatred, and enmity. Help us, by Your Word and Spirit, to search our hearts and to root out the evil that would lead to strife and discord, so that in our lives we may be at peace with all people. Fill us with the zeal for the work of Your Church and the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which alone can bring that peace which is beyond all understanding; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Collect for Peace in the World, LSB p. 314*)

Sermon Text, Matthew 5:20-26 (v. 21-22a). ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,’ and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment. ²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. ...” Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your Words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. By Your word of truth, lead us on the way of truth so that our faith would bear the fruit to be reconciled with our neighbors. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who could in His justice remain angry with us but instead gave Himself for us, not imputing those trespasses:

Here Jesus is teaching the commandments. He is teaching the Law that condemns. Does that seem strange? We do not come to Jesus expecting to be condemned for sins. We expect Jesus to speak forgiveness. We know from the Bible that *“the Law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17)*. Jesus Himself said: *“I did not come to judge the world but to save the world” (Jn 12:47)*, and: *“God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world” (Jn 3:17)*.

Yet here Christ is in the Sermon on the Mount teaching (preaching) the Law that condemns. Jesus does condemn sins. Jesus does judge. He said,

“The Father has committed all judgment to the Son” (Jn 5:23). But judging sinners guilty is not the reason Jesus came. Preaching the Law is known as Jesus’ *foreign* or *strange work*, because it is not natural for Him to speak words of condemnation and it is not His ultimate goal. On the other hand His *proper work*, His intended work, the reason He is here, His whole essence in relation to us, is that He is the Savior. His proper work is to save, to preach the Gospel, to proclaim forgiveness.

So as we hear Jesus preaching the Law, we have to keep the goal in mind. His goal is not ultimately to condemn sins, but to forgive sins. He preaches the Law as a means to an end. The goal of condemning sins is to bring a sinner to repentance, so He can speak forgiveness.

So Jesus teaches the Law. He does not just speak about the Law in general. He gets specific. He takes specific commandments. The first one is the 5th commandment, *“You shall not kill.”* This happens to be a commandment that brings up some of the most notorious sins. It is one we think is easy to understand. The Pharisees and Scribes to whom Jesus was speaking these words certainly thought so. They reasoned, *“I have not murdered anyone, so I have kept the commandment, ‘You shall not kill.’ ”*

In a similar way, we easily take a self-righteous approach to this commandment. When we hear *“You shall not kill,”* we first of all think of murderers, terrorists, abortion doctors, etc. We get outraged by Planned Parenthood, the largest provider of abortions. When someone whom it seems plain has committed murder is able to get off without a conviction, we get outraged. We know that it is not breaking the commandment for our soldiers to kill in war as part of their vocation, or for policemen to protect by shooting at armed assailants – but if we hear that our soldiers do vicious things beyond their duty, or that a police officer shot an unarmed person, then we start accusing.

So we easily consider ourselves less guilty of the 5th commandment. We think we are not as bad – until Jesus says: **“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder,’ and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause will be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”**

Jesus clearly says that sinful anger is just as bad as murder. Sinful anger is a sin against the 5th commandment. This is not the first, or the last, time that the Bible speaks of this. In Genesis 4, God said to Cain: *“Why are you angry? ... Sin lies at [your] door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it”* (Ge 4:6-7). In 1 John, one of the last books of the Bible, we hear: *“He who hates his brother is a murderer”* (1 Jn 3:15).

We know that we are not to hate people. But we accept other terms for this. We think it’s OK to resent somebody, to not forgive, to treat them as badly as they’ve treated us; we gossip about them, despise them, ignore them, turn our back on them. We can talk about what leads to this: jealousy and envy, like in Cain’s case; or being legitimately hurt and burned by another person. Now, it’s true that you can’t just keep offering yourself up for emotional abuse. We don’t want to teach our children to just be victims of other people’s bullying tactics in word and deed.

But the honest truth is, we don’t err on the side of “overly patient” as often as we’d like to think. The longer we let this situation go on, we end up changing from being victimized originally into pursuing the other person with malice and a vengeful spirit, so that we are more to blame in the end for our ongoing hardened response than the other person doing the original harm. Adding to this is something that happens to your soul. St. Augustine said: *“Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”* It’s so true. It’s like you keep swallowing bitter poison.

Our usual response is to justify ourselves. We speak of what the other person did. We justify ourselves, complaining about or blaming someone else, making ourselves look better, easing our conscience with the evidence of someone’s sins against us. We cry out for justice to God, and we don’t move the dial on reconciliation until he/she makes the first move. When God’s Word says we are guilty, we justify ourselves.

But Jesus takes away that option. He uses the language of actual justification – not our self-justification, but God’s justification of the sinner. This teaching of justification – the central teaching of the Bible and Christianity – is what Jesus uses here. Justification is courtroom language. It has to do with judging – God’s judgment. Did you hear it? First He said a person **“... shall be in danger of the judgment ... shall be in danger of the**

council ... shall be in danger of hell fire.” Then Jesus says: “... lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there until you have paid the last penny.”

See, it's all about judgment, a judgment that includes hell fire, a sentence that is only avoided by everything being paid in full. Why is Jesus speaking this way? Why all this Law? Jesus wants to keep you from being judged guilty, and to ensure you will be judged innocent.

He shows you the real judgment, the real punishment, so not only will you not give people this judgment; also so that you will not come under God's judgment. His point is not to condemn you; it is always, always, to save you, to love you, to embrace you. He wants you to have that eternally, and He also wants you to have that kind of life now. He does not want you to drink that poison. He does not want you to live in the bitterness of anger, hatred, resentment, and opposition. He wants you to be at peace – with Him and with all people, as far as it depends on you.

So do you know what Jesus did? You know already, but in this context it's so beautiful. He came to be put under judgment. He came to be accused. He came to be judged unfairly. He came to be mistreated to the max. He came to be hurt and slapped and lied about and betrayed. Why? To take into Himself all of your being hurt and slapped in the face and lied about and betrayed. He came to take all your own sins of anger and hatred onto Himself and be punished for it instead of you. He came to be condemned. He came to be abandoned, forsaken, and unfriended – so that you would never be alone, never forsaken, and would be wrapped in His love and surrounded by a multitude of saints, angels and fellow Christians who only love you, the blessed communion of holy ones.

Why does Jesus speak about these sins? Because unlike the unbelieving world, He does not ignore these sins or say they don't matter. Because He actually loves you. He deals with the sins, just as He did not shrink from them but dealt with them on the cross. He teaches about these things so that you repent, so that when you can't forgive someone, you bring that sinful inability to Him. When you tell Him the truth and that you are sorry, then He tells you the greater truth: He has put away these sins completely. You are forgiven.

He pours His forgiveness into you, and gives you the strength to forgive, to love, and to trust Him with everything, which builds the ability to trust others again. Jesus teaches the commandments so He can powerfully speak your sins away, powerfully speak the Gospel into you, and make of you His new creation. Amen!