

Stopping Anger Before It Kills

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Life As It Was Meant To Be

Matthew 5.21-26

Until 9/11 happened, what occurred in the city of Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999 may have been the greatest tragedy in America since the taking of the American Embassy in Iran two decades earlier. Almost all of us are familiar with the story. At about 11:30 a.m. on Tuesday, April 20th, the 110th anniversary of Adolph Hitler's birth, two teenagers, Eric Harris, age 18, and Dylan Klebold, age 17, entered Columbine High School through the back cafeteria door and began a rampage through the corridors of the high school that left 15 dead, including their own deaths through self-inflicted wounds, and 25 injured, some injured for life.

Eric and Dylan walked into the high school wearing long black trench coats that were the trademark of the small clique of students that called themselves "The Trench Coat Mafia." Underneath their trench coats, they carried semi-automatic weapons. They went up and down the halls of the first and second floors looking for students to hunt down and kill. Around Columbine High School they planted homemade bombs and explosive devices. And as students ran screaming from the high school, some of them injured, they said that Eric and Dylan were smiling as they carried on their killing spree.

The town was shaken to its core – and so was America as we learned more of the details in the days and weeks following this horrific massacre. Initially, the reports were that Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were just two average teenagers – intelligent and well-mannered. They came from good homes. Eric Harris had played little league baseball and was a Boy Scout. When Eric's parents moved to Littleton, he and Dylan became best friends. Before long, they linked their home computers and spent hours playing video games together.

As far as anyone knew, there was only one incidence of criminal behavior in their pasts. The previous year, the boys had been arrested on felony charges of breaking into a car and stealing some tools. But Eric and Dylan made such a good impression on the Juvenile Officers that there were offered to have their records cleared if they stayed out of trouble and participated in a diversionary program.

But it wasn't long before a very different picture began to emerge. It was soon discovered that Eric Harris had a website posted which openly expressed his anger toward the people of Littleton, especially teachers and students at Columbine High School. He began to express his desire for revenge against everyone who had irritated or annoyed him in the past. He began writing things like:

God, I can't wait until I kill all of you people. One day I am just going to go to some downtown area in a big city and blow up and shoot everything I can.

He posted that a year before he and Dylan went on their shooting spree.

A number of students began to come forward telling of incidents of where Eric and Dylan had bragged that one day they would get revenge on all the jocks at the school, whom they felt had ridiculed them in the past. They made a video as a school project, showing them walking through the corridors of the school wielding guns, killing all who stood in their way. They were disappointed when the teacher wouldn't allow the video to be viewed by the rest of the school because of its violence. Eric regularly used violent themes in his creative writing projects. Many of the teachers began to describe Eric and Dylan as "very angry young men" and "admirers of Nazism."

No action was taken, even though these signs were there in their lives, perhaps because of legal concerns and concerns about violating their rights to privacy. When the Harris' home was searched, the police found a journal in Eric's room indicating his and Dylan's intentions to kill as many as 500 people. The police also discovered lots of indicators that the two teenagers had been building home-made bombs in the garage. In addition, the police found a note written by Eric blaming the murderous scheme on parents, teachers, and students.

And whereas the town initially was sympathetic to the Klebold's and the Harris', the sentiment of the town quickly changed as people learned of the long-standing pattern of anger and violent expressions by the two boys. People said, "Why didn't their parents stop them?" In fact, the town reaction became so violent that the Klebold's and the Harris' were forced to move.

The upset didn't stop with the parents, but also with teachers at Columbine. Why didn't the teachers warn anyone when they saw these kids fascinated with Nazism, producing violent videos, and threatening other kids? Why didn't the police, who had a record of many of these things, do anything? Why wasn't anyone warned of the deadly effects of these kids' unchecked rage?

We've been doing a series on the Sermon on the Mount. And in the text that we are going to look at today, Jesus does what Eric and Dylan's parents, teachers, and the police department in Littleton were unwilling to do. Jesus warns us in the most unmistakable terms about the deadly effect of unhealed, unchecked anger. And so, as we listen to the words of Jesus, I've called today's talk, "Stopping Anger Before It Kills." Matthew 5.21-26.

SLIDE

Mt 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,’¹ and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’

Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Mt 5:23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

Mt 5:24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

Mt 5:25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

Mt 5:26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

I want to remind you again of the context of Jesus’ words. The context of Jesus’ words is that he is preaching and demonstrating the kingdom of God.

SLIDE – Matthew 4.23-25

Mt 4:23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Mt 4:24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.

Mt 4:25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,⁷ Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

SLIDE – Matthew 5.1-2

Mt 5:1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,

Mt 5:2 and he began to teach them.

What Jesus is saying in the Sermon on the Mount is that when God grabs hold of someone, when the kingdom of God breaks into a person’s life, something happens. You can’t remain the same person, if you have truly touched the kingdom of God. So many church people don’t understand this principle. They say, “I’ve prayed the prayer; I went forward at a church service. I touched my TV just like the TV preacher told me to, but nothing happened.”

Friends, the Bible never says that if Christ comes into your life that you will necessarily have an immediate experience. You are not promised that you will feel something immediately, or that you will tingle all over. The mark of being born again, the mark of entering the kingdom of God is not that you will necessarily feel overwhelming joy in the moment, or feel incredible relief, or feel

this sense of being loved from head to toe. Many people do experience these things – I did – but not everyone. Just as many people experience incredible things when they first kissed their spouse. For me, it was like standing under a giant church bell, but our temperaments and wirings are all different. Not everyone on their initial encounter with Christ or their spouses feel overwhelming feelings.

Feelings should come, by the way. Don't get me wrong. Experience is normal. But sometimes the experience of the love of God, the experience of joy or relief, or freedom comes later. Sometimes those experiences come quite unexpectedly – when you aren't looking for them. Or they come in times of great crises, when you are desperate and you entirely give up your own control and look for God's outside intervention. Sometimes people have incredible experiences of God's presence in times of crises.

But the mark of God's kingdom breaking in on a person is not a certain level of feeling. The mark of God's kingdom grabbing hold of you is life change. Saved people are changed people. If you aren't changed – if your attitudes, your life's goals, your priorities and values, if there isn't a reordering and redirecting of your whole life, if you aren't changed to the core of your being, then it is likely that you have never come under the sway of the kingdom of God.

You may be on the way. You may be taking steps towards God. But if you don't see life change, if it is likely that you have not yet entered God's kingdom.

So, let me just pause here and ask you: Do you see change in your life as a result of you receiving Christ? Can you say with all sincerity, "I used to be like that, but when Christ broke into my life, he remade me and now I am like this." Can you say, "For me, it is more than church going. It is more than me trying to maintain family harmony, or please my boyfriend for girlfriend, or my spouse. For me, it is more than just trying to be a good person or a moral person. It is more than religious activity. It is more than even a set of things I believe. I am really different in the core of my being because Jesus broke into my life." Can you honestly say that?

This is what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. It is about the change that happens when people come under the sway of God's kingdom. And if you are outlining the Sermon on the Mount, verses 1-16, I've called the Beatitudes. They are about the character of kingdom people. Verses 17ff are often called by Bible teachers the Do-attitudes. They are about the behavior of kingdom people. So for the rest of chapter 5, we are going to be considering the Do-attitudes, the behavior of kingdom people.

What we learned last week is that in verses 17-20 Jesus is drawing out the radical implication of the commandments of God. God announced his law through Moses 1400 years before Jesus came. By the time Jesus walked on the

earth, the religious teachers had made obedience to God's commandments easier by restricting the demands and extending the permissions. As the great English Bible teacher, John Stott, puts it, the religious teachers made God's demands less demanding and God's permissions more permissive.

But Jesus reverses both. Jesus refuses to accommodate God's law to us. He refuses in any way to lower the bar of God's holiness. Jesus refuses to smooth off the sharp edges of God's law. Jesus refuses to make God's commandments more palatable, more acceptable, and friendlier to our ears. What we hear from Jesus in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is radical demands, uncompromising standards, no accommodations to our preferences, or our opinions whatsoever. What we are hearing is from God, not from the latest public opinion poll. We are hearing the voice that doesn't sound like any other voice – the voice of God telling the people of his kingdom what he expects of them.

Let me tell you a story. I got this story from a Christian law professor at Yale Law School named Stephen Carter. He wrote a great book on religion and politics called *God's Name In Vain*. There was a hero of the Civil Rights Movement that many of you may not have ever heard of. Her name was Fannie Lou Hamer. Fannie Lou Hamer was the founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In the summer of 1964 the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenged the credentials of the lily-white Mississippi slate of delegates to the Democratic National Convention. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party offered an integrated slate of delegates, many of whom, like Mrs. Hamer, tried to register to vote in Mississippi, but were punished for it. In fact, Fannie Lou Hamer was jailed on a number of occasions and tortured in jail for doing such outrageous things as trying to register to vote.

Well, this conflict between the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the white slate of delegates selected by the Mississippi Democratic Party was threatening the Democratic National Convention. President Johnson didn't want the controversy so he sent his Vice President in waiting, Hubert Humphrey, to visit Mrs. Hamer and to try to get her to back off.

Humphrey went with his typical happy style thinking he would be talking to a normal human being. He asked Fannie Lou Hamer what she wanted.

But Fannie Lou Hamer was a woman who had been taken hold of by Jesus Christ. And Fannie Lou Hamer responded by saying, "What I want is the beginning of a New Kingdom right here on earth."

Humphrey didn't know how to deal with that statement. So he tried to explain things in political terms. He wanted Fannie Lou Hamer to understand that if he and Johnson were nominated, that they would work hard for Civil Rights. So she should compromise now and not push her slate of delegates.

Here's Fannie Lou Hamer's response:

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Senator Humphrey, I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs for trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County. Now, if you lose this job of Vice President because you do what is right, because you help MFDP, everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take the nomination this way, why, you will never be able to do any good for Civil Rights, for poor people, for peace, or any of those things you talk all the time about. Senator Humphrey, I'm going to pray to Jesus for you.

See, the scribes and the Pharisees spoke the language of Hubert Humphrey, reasonable, practical, in-touch with current political realities. Jesus always speaks the language of Fannie Lou Hamer – radical, uncompromising, prophetic – a voice unlike any other voice. Have you heard the radical voice of Jesus lately?

There is a repeated phrase in what folks call the Do-attitudes, the section of scripture about the behavior of kingdom people. It is “I tell you...” verse 18,

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Mt 5:18 Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Mt 5:20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister ² will be subject to judgment.

Mt 5:28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

You see the same thing in verses 32, 34, 39 and 44.

Let me translate this phrase for you. In essence, what's going on is Jesus is saying, “You have heard the practical, reasonable, realistic, politically savvy, ‘this is the way the world works’, Hubert Humphrey voices all of your life. The voices

of nice, well-meaning, and moral people. But I, the radical Jesus, tell you something entirely else.”

Again, let me ask you: Have you heard the radical, uncompromising, prophetic voice of Jesus speak a world-shattering word to you? A word that might have sounded like, “Yes, I know that no one can fault you for getting a divorce. You certainly have given your marriage more than a fair shot. It is not working. Good people are telling you to throw in the towel. Well-meaning people are offering you comfort and shelter. But I tell you I want something radical from your life. I want you to be a living testimony to the faithful fulfillment of your marital vows.”

“Yes, I know that everyone expects you to keep moving up in your career, to play it safe, to make all the prudent moves. But I tell you I am calling you to leave your job and give your life to world missions.”

“I tell you to turn down that promotion and to not move to stay put and to put your family and ministry above job satisfaction.”

“Yes, I know the Hubert Humphrey practical voices say: Give God 10% of your money and spend 90% on yourself. But I tell you that I am calling you to something way more radical than that. I want you to give 50% of your income.”

Friend, have you heard the radical, disturbing voice of Jesus? (In any area have you heard the utterly impractical, unrealistic, jump off the cliff without a parachute trusting in Jesus’ voice?)

Maybe most other singles, even Christian singles, express their affection with the girlfriends and boyfriends physically. Let’s be realistic. This is the 21st century. You are not 14 years old. But I, Jesus, tell you I want you to be radically clean. I don’t want there to be anything other than total holiness in your life.

It is with these ears, then, that we listen to Jesus’ statements in the Sermon on the Mount. He begins with the 6th Commandment’s prohibition of murder, verses 21-22.

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Mt 5:21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,’¹ and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’

Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Jesus is speaking here like Fannie Lou Hamer using radical, uncompromising language. He tells us that the sixth commandment against murder was not

simply designed to prohibit the unlawful shedding of blood. It is not enough in your obedience to the sixth commandment: refrain from stopping another person's heart from beating. The sixth commandment was lovingly designed by God to thoroughly protect people: To protect the offender of the deadly consequences from undealt with anger, to protect the victim from all types of killing and woundings – the wounding of reputations by slander and character assassination, the wounding of our spirits by sarcasm and put-downs, the killing of our relationships by contempt and disdain.

Jesus is sounding a warning that the parents, teachers, administrators, police and the city of Littleton did not sound. He is dealing with the beginning stages of murder. The beginning stages of murder, Jesus says, has to do with unhealed, undealt with anger. The sixth commandment against murder, according to Jesus, wasn't designed just to protect people's bodies. God intends the sixth commandment to protect us in our full humanity – to protect our reputations, our feelings, and our self-respect.

Now, we need to understand what is prohibited and what is not prohibited by the radical Jesus. Because few verses in the Sermon on the Mount have been more misinterpreted and have led to more psychological damage than the mishandling of verse 21-22.

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Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,'³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell

Throughout history, many sincere Christians have twisted themselves into emotional pretzels trying mightily to never get angry. We practice denial. We play word games: I'm not angry; I am frustrated. I'm not angry; I'm hurt. I'm not angry, this is just righteous indignation. We stuff our feelings. I am not allowed to feel angry, so we repress our anger and it blows out sideways in a host of physical symptoms – headaches, stomach cramps, and backaches, weird immunological and hormonal reactions. We are not allowed to get angry with our moms, spouses, kids, or bosses, and so we displace our anger and channel it into over-aggressiveness at work, or over-aggressiveness in sports, or over-sensitivity, or over-reactions to a weaker person.

In verse 21-22, Jesus is not urging the denial of anger or the repression of anger, or the displacement of anger. Indeed, verse 22 does not prohibit anger at all.

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Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister ² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' ³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Now, how do we know that verse 22 is not an absolute prohibition against anger? How do we know with a very high degree of confidence that we are almost certainly misinterpreting Jesus' words if we read them to forbid all anger by one of his followers?

Let me briefly share with you a few basic rules of Bible interpretation. You know, people can wrench a phrase or verse from the Bible and twist it in lots of different directions. We can make the Bible say what it never was intended to say. How can we be confident that our interpretation of the Bible is likely a correct one? Let me share with you three basic rules of interpreting the Bible.

First of all, Bible verses should be interpreted consistently with the practice of Jesus. You know, Jesus didn't just speak his teachings to us; he modeled his teachings. Jesus embodied his teachings. Unlike the Pharisees who said one thing and did another, Jesus' teaching and life were a whole cloth. What Jesus taught and what he did were consistent. There is one thing that no one can charge Jesus with and that is hypocrisy. With Jesus, it is not just, "Listen to my words;" it is "Follow my example. Do what I do."

It is absolutely plain from the gospel records that Jesus got angry. It is an absolute lie that if you became more Christ-like, if you were more like Jesus, that you would never become angry. In fact, when we look at the real Jesus in the New Testament, not this made up image of Jesus, the movie-version, or the painting-version, Jesus is not always meek and mild. One of the most commonly expressed emotions in the life of Jesus Christ is anger. We read in John 2 about Jesus putting together a whip of cords and driving the money changers out of the temple. Here is what it says in Jn. 2:16-17,

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Jn 2:16 To those who sold doves he said, **"Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"**

Jn 2:17 His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me."

He was angry on God's behalf that people turned worship into a money-making venture. What do you think Jesus would say today about those who market Christianity for the sake of personal profit, or folks who manipulate people's

emotions and take up 3-4 offerings, or live extravagant lives off of tithe money? What do you think he would say?

Do you think Jesus gets angry when the Christian faith is simply turned into a business and sold for personal profit? Jesus was angered by the greed of the religious leaders in his day. He was angered by the religious leaders lack of compassion for those who were sick. We read in Mark 3.5,

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Mk 3:5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored.

Death angered Jesus. We see that in John 11.

So, Jesus is certainly not teaching us one thing and doing another. Bible verses should be interpreted consistently with the practices of Jesus.

Bible verses should also be interpreted consistently with other Bible verses. In other words, the same Holy Spirit that inspired one part of the Bible, inspired another part and he doesn't contradict himself. When we compare scripture with scripture, we should try to read verses consistently with other verses, if possible. And we read in Eph. 4.26,

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Eph 4:26 “In your anger do not sin”: ⁴ Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,

Literally, Ephesians 4.26 reads:

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Be angry, but do not sin.

The Holy Spirit is not saying to us in Eph. 4.26, “Be angry,” and in Matt. 5.22, “never be angry.” Our interpretation of at least one of these verses will have to be faulty.

The third rule of Bible interpretation is this: Bible verses should be interpreted consistently with their grammar and meaning. Now, it is here regarding the grammar and meaning of the words that we gain insight regarding what Jesus was sounding the alarm about. What is he warning us against in a radical way? Matt. 5.22

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Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister ² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' ³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Now this verse doesn't contain any commands or imperatives. Rather, Matthew 5:22 is best translated this way:

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But I tell you – that anyone being angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

Being angry. The Greek is a present participle. Jesus is talking about a settled state of anger – what we might call holding a grudge. This on-going, long-term state of bitterness. The present participle, being angry, suggests that the anger is something you just won't let go of, or get over.

Even the word translated "angry" communicates to us the same thing. There are two words in Greek that are used for anger. One is

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Thoumos – Thoumos is anger that is easily ignited and quickly extinguished.

The second Greek word for anger is

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Orge – Orge usually means anger that is long-lived. It is carrying and nursing anger.

It is this being angry, an on-going settled state of bitterness, this holding of a grudge, that Jesus wants us to stop because it has deadly implications.

Let's bring this down to earth. How can you tell if you are nursing a grudge? How do you know if you are carrying around the sulfuric acid of unhealed, undealt with anger in your soul that is killing you and is in danger of spewing out and wounding other people?

Let me share with you a few tests of how you can tell if you are nursing anger. They all start with the letter "R." Here is how you know that you are not letting go of your anger, but that you are nursing it.

The first thing you will note is that there will be RESENTMENT. You can't think about the other person positively. You may not necessarily be exploding in anger towards them. You might not even think about them very much. But if you are holding a grudge, it will color your view of the other person, so that when they do come to mind, you cannot think about them positively or warmly. Resentment means that you don't even like hearing positive things about them.

Is there anyone in your life who when you hear their name and someone is praising them, it causes you to wince? That is a pretty good indication that you have unhealed, undealt with anger towards them.

And then there is REVENGE. You have a desire to get even with them because of what they have done to you. You feel like they owe you. You may get even by gossiping about them. You may drop hints to everyone around about their flaws or the way they hurt you in the past. You are inclined to color people's view of them. "Did you notice the size of house he bought?" "WOW, her kids are totally out of control." "Does it seem to you that she's changed over the last few years? She's certainly been putting on weight."

You know, you can exact revenge in a million ways. If you are married, you can withhold sex. If you have a roommate, you can pout. With a co-worker, with someone in the church you can extract revenge by sharing confidentially with a few dozen friends about your burden for so-and-so, just for the purpose of prayer support. Some married people go out and have affairs because they want to get even with their spouses for what they've done. Maybe your spouse had an affair, so you are going to get them back. Revenge.

And third is REMINDERS. You know that you are nursing a grudge towards someone when another person, who is in a similar position or another who has similar characteristics, but has done no wrong to you, also makes you angry. For example, every time you encounter someone in authority, you get angry; if you really have problems with every teacher, every boss, every pastor; if every time you are in a situation where someone over you says "no," if you hate being told what to do and that stirs a response of anger in you, then I can bet that you are nursing a grudge likely towards your parents, but maybe towards a former teacher, pastor, or leader.

I've seen this issue of difficulty with authority in so many folks. People who have unresolved anger towards their parents almost always struggle with authority in the future. They struggle with authority in the church, with authority in school, authority in the military, sometimes with authority on the job. Do you see this in your life, friend? Do you struggle with authority? You just don't like being told what to do. You can't hear the word "no."

Sometimes the reminder concerns a whole class of people, a whole category of people. Maybe as a result of unhealed, undealt with anger over a sexual assault, you have a problem with all men. Or you have a problem with intimacy and boundary violations in your relationships with people of the same sex.

Maybe you have written off an entire race, or an entire ethnic group. You have problems with all whites, or all blacks, or all Jews because you were put down, assaulted, you experienced discrimination at some point in the past.

But you know, whenever we make someone else pay a bill that they don't owe, that is a good indicator that we aren't listening to Jesus' warning in Matt. 5.22 about the deadly effects of being angry.

Here is the fourth thing: REACTION. If you over-react to a small provocation, you are probably nursing a grudge. When you see in yourself a small spark creating a huge explosion, you know there is gas underneath the surface, friend. If there was no gas, there would be no explosion. When you blow up over nothing, it is really time to pause and ask yourself: Where did that come from? Who or what am I really angry at?

Five: RESOLUTIONS. I know someone is carrying around unhealed, unresolved anger when they've made an internal vow. Do you know what I mean by an internal vow? It could be:

- I will never allow myself to be fat like my mother.
- I will never be like my dad in this area. I will be hyper responsible unlike his irresponsibility.
- I will never be dependent upon anyone.

Friends, are you controlled by any inner vow? Have you made any inner vows? If you trace the vow to its origin, it may be a mask for you nursing a grudge. You may have undealt with hurt or anger towards someone.

Do you see RESENTMENT, REVENGE, REMINDERS, REACTIONS, or RESOLUTIONS then you are the person Jesus is speaking to in these verses.

You know, the ultimate indicator of holding onto a grudge is not found in the five "R's" that I talked about. Rather it is found in one huge "C": Contempt. Let me share with you a little story. It is a story of a fascinating psychologist named John Gottman. His work is briefly captured in a great new book called *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. If you want a great read, pick up *Blink*. We have it in our bookstore.

Gottman has what some people call a "love lab" at the University of Washington. What he does there is videotape married couples. He asks them to discuss a subject that has become a point of contention for them: money, in-laws, sex lives.

For one couple, Bill and Sue, the point of contention is Sue's dog. They live in a small apartment and just got a very large puppy. Bill didn't like the dog and Sue did. So, for 15 minutes on videotape they discuss what they ought to do about it.

Gottman takes the videotape and he analyzes them using a complicated mathematical formula. Gottman proved something incredibly remarkable. If he looks at an hour of a husband and wife talking, he can predict with 95% degree of accuracy whether that couple will still be married 15 years later. If he watches

a couple for 15 minutes, his success rate is about 90%. He can look at only 3 minutes of a couple talking and predict with a fairly impressive degree of accuracy who is going to get divorced and who is going to make it.

What is Gottman watching for in the discussions between husbands and wives? Gottman says that he can find out much of what he needs to know by focusing on what he calls the “Four Horsemen of Death for a Marriage.” The Four Horsemen of Death for a Marriage are:

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- Defensiveness
- Stone-walling
- Criticism
- Contempt

Among those Four Horsemen there is one emotion that he considers most important of all – Contempt! If Gottman observes one or both partners in a marriage showing contempt towards the other, he considers it the single most important sign that the marriage is in trouble. Let me quote from John Gottman:

You would think that criticism would be the worst because criticism is a global condemnation of a person's character. Yet contempt is qualitatively different from criticism. With criticism I might say to my wife, "You never listen, you are really selfish and insensitive." Well, she's going to respond defensively to that. That's not very good for our problem solving and interaction. But if I speak from a superior plane, that is far more damaging, and contempt is any statement from a higher level. A lot of time it is an insult: You are garbage. You are worthless. You are fat. You are scum. You are stupid. It is trying to put that person on a lower plane than you. It is hierarchical.

That is what Jesus is getting at in verse 22 – this issue of contempt.

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Mt 5:22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister ² will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' ³ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell

Standing over another person and disdaining them – communicating to them that they are worthless. Jesus says that you are violating the sixth commandment when you do this and you are subjecting yourself to the judgment of God.

Is there anyone, friend, that you have contempt for? Anyone you stand above and relate to like they were garbage – worthless? Have any of you been treated with contempt by someone close to you – a parent, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a spouse, a sibling. Have you been treated like you are worthless?

So what should we do? In virtually all the examples of kingdom people, Jesus provides a way for us to fulfill his radical, uncompromising, prophetic demands for those of us who want to be part of his kingdom. Verses 23-26,

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Mt 5:23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

Mt 5:24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

Mt 5:25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.

Mt 5:26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Jesus uses two illustrations for the way for us to move forward out of this position of holding grudges. How can we be transformed? How do we get changed?

One of the examples is drawn from the world of religion when we are in worship. The other is drawn from the world of business. I think we get two principles from his examples:

First, we have to have a will to reconcile. Jesus is not saying you have to want to reconcile, or that you look forward to reconciling, or that you even desire to reconcile. You have to have a will, a choice, that insofar as it rests with you, you are going to choose to do what is necessary to get right with this other person. You may be rejected. You may be misunderstood, but you are choosing for right relationship. That is the first thing.

The second thing is a preventative measure. So that you never get to the place of nursing a grudge, so that you don't harden in your perception of another person, here is the second thing that will keep you from the deadly effects of unhealed, undealt with anger. Quickly deal with the little issues. In verses 23-24 we read,

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Mt 5:23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you,

Mt 5:24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

You know that word “something” in verse 23 is a tiny word in Greek. The tiny word for something is

SLIDE *Ti*

It is interesting that this word is so small because there is a spiritual principle here seen in the text. Quickly deal with things when they are small because little things allowed to fester can cause a rupture in your relationship. *Ti*, the little thing, may be something for which you aren't to blame. All that matters is that there is something between you and another person. So when you are worshipping God, you are coming before the Great Reconciler, the Great Peacemaker. You are coming when we take communion each week to the cross. You are saying, "God, I want peace." And as you come to the Great Reconciler and as you come to the cross, the Holy Spirit may cause you to remember that there is something between you and a brother, you and a sister, you and another person. Especially in worship, when you are singing your heart out, and some person comes to mind with whom we have tension, it is not necessarily the case that the enemy is trying to distract you so that we put those thoughts away. It may be the Holy Spirit causing you to face what you may not want to face.

Jesus loves us. He wants to protect you and me from the deadly, killing effect of anger. He is telling us that when a relationship goes wrong, in 9 out of 10 cases, taking immediate action and desiring to reconcile will fix the relationship.

So, what should you do?

1. Invite the Lord to put his finger on your relationships. Do you have any broken relationships? Is there something, some little *Ti*, this little thing between you and another person? Lord, show me is anyone angry with me? Am I angry with someone else? Go through the 5-R's and the 1 C – resentment, revenge, reminders, reactions, resolutions, and contempt. Ask the Holy Spirit: Do these apply to me?
2. Confess to the Lord that you are afraid of this exercise. You are afraid of another person's anger. You are afraid that if you go to them, it won't work. You are afraid of trying, of opening up your heart. You are afraid.
3. Say: Nevertheless, I will to reconcile. Then ask for God's help. "God, I'm doing your will. I ask you to help me. May I act quickly. May I do something immediately to resolve this."

Amen.

Stopping Anger Before It Kills

Rich Nathan

February 25-26, 2006

Life As It Was Meant To Be

Matthew 5.21-26

I. The Radical Voice Of Jesus

A. The True Mark Of Jesus' People (Mt. 4.23-5.2)

B. The Radical Words Of Jesus (Mt. 5.18)

II. The Radical Meaning Of The Commandments (Mt. 5.21, 22)

A. The Meaning Of The Commandment Not To Murder

B. The Meaning Of The Commandment Not To Be Angry

1. Bible Verses Should Be Interpreted Consistently With
The Practices Of Jesus (Jn. 2.16, 17)

2. Bible Verses Should Be Interpreted Consistently With
Other Bible Verses (Eph. 4.26)

3. Bible Verses Should Be Interpreted Consistently With
Their Grammar And Meaning (Mt. 5.22)

C. The Meaning Of The Commandment Not To Hold A Grudge

1. The Five "R's"

a. Resentment

b. Revenge

c. Reminders

d. Reaction

e. Resolutions

2. And One Huge "C": Contempt

III. The Radical Call To Get Rid Of Anger (Mt. 5.23-26)

A. A Will To Reconcile

B. An Urgency To Deal With The Little Issues