

Sunday, 12 February 2017

[Anger- Mat 5](#)

[Matthew 5:21-37](#)

The Sermon on the Mount ([Matt 5-7](#)) is where Jesus defines what it looks like to be his disciple. He is describing life in the Kingdom of God. He is describing the character of someone who belongs in that kingdom. In the Sermon Jesus describes a person who is not controlled by the divisive force of anger; who treats lust as seriously as adultery; who doesn't abandon and leave vulnerable a person they have been married to; a person whose word can be trusted without extra oaths and contracts; who doesn't seek revenge; who even loves their enemies; who gives to the needy secretly without needing to be recognized for it; by using money as a tool to be used rather than a master to be served; by the reality of God in our lives eclipsing the anxieties about the necessities of life; who doesn't judge others when they still have so much wrong with their your own lives. What Jesus is describing in the Sermon is life as it was meant to be. He is describing the characteristics of someone living in the kingdom of God- a person as they were created to be.

The alternative starts to look hellish in comparison. The opposite of the Sermon on the Mount is a life controlled by anger, and filled with unbridled lust. It is a life of broken relationships and lies. It is a life full of the desire for revenge, the constant need for people's approval and reassurance. It is a life of service to money, and full of anxiety about the necessities of life. It is a life full of judging, hoping we can ignore our own failings. That sounds like a hellish life. It is the opposite of the kingdom life Jesus describes.

To show how seriously Jesus takes this Kingdom character, at the end of the Sermon Jesus says,

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matt 7:21-23).

Jesus is saying that we can do miraculous things like cast out demons, or prophesy, or other miraculous works of power, but if we are not marked by these kingdom characteristics then it was as if we didn’t know Jesus as all, or worse, as if he didn’t know us. The Sermon on the Mount cannot be ignored if we want to consider ourselves followers of Christ.

For the last couple of weeks parts of the Sermon on the Mount have been read as the Gospel reading. This week the Sermon on the Mount continues as Jesus teaches about anger, lust, and lying. I want to focus on anger today. Lust is very pervasive in our culture and it is important to talk about, but there is still a sense of shame attached to it that causes us to resist lust to a degree. It is still embarrassing, at least for Christians. I should say that Jesus is not talking about a sexual thought that pops into your mind. It is about holding onto that thought rather than letting it go. Lying still has a sense of shame attached to it as well. We would be embarrassed to be caught in a lie. Generally we strive to be honest people. Anger doesn’t seem to have been given the same kind of attention in the church so we will look a bit more specifically at anger this morning.

Jesus says,

"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." (Matt 5:21-22).

Jesus is getting to the heart of the Law about not murdering. How do you not murder? ... How many murders would happen if people didn't allow their anger to take control of them? ... Very few if any. So the heart of the Law telling us to not murder has to do with anger and contempt.

Just to define what we are talking about, Anger is a natural emotion. Internally there isn't anything wrong with anger that sparks up in us. It lets us know that something we value has been violated. Anger arises when something gets in the way of our will. Anger is often evidence of a wounded ego. There is often a self-righteousness that is part of Anger. Anger is self-justifying. No one feels angry and sees both sides clearly. In anger one side is right and the other side is wrong. Anger becomes sinful when we hold onto it and allow it space in our minds. We turn over the event that made us angry and allow ourselves to grow angrier and angrier. Anger that becomes normalized can become contempt and resentment. Contempt is the feeling that a person is worthless, or deserving of scorn. When this anger or contempt is turned outward in action or words it becomes wrath. Wrath is an act of destruction towards someone motivated by anger.

We can see an intensification in what Jesus teaches here. First, he says holding onto anger makes you liable for judgement. Then it gets a little stronger. If you insult someone by speaking contemptuously to them you will be liable to the council. Here he uses the word "raca", which might come from the noise used to gather saliva before you spit on someone. Then it gets even more intense. If you say "you fool", which in the ancient world was about the most demeaning, dismissing, contemptuous thing you could call someone, you are liable to the fire of hell (Matt 5:21-22). This isn't about avoiding those exact words, "you fool" or "raca". We completely miss the

point if that's what we think. This is about the outward and attacking expression of contempt and anger. You can see that the next step in his list here might be murder, and it all starts with holding onto anger. So hopefully we can begin to see why Jesus and his disciples and the many Christians who followed told us to beware of anger. In the letter to the Colossians it says, "But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth" (Col 3:8). I could go through many examples of the early church fathers warning against anger here as well. With very few exceptions they thought outward expressions of anger were to be avoided. Those who left a little room were very selective about the circumstances where it might be okay.

To give ourselves permission, we sometimes want to turn to examples where we think Jesus or God are angry. My belief is that Jesus is able to hold anger in a way we are not. He has the character to use it in a way that isn't sinful. Likewise God's anger is not a human anger. God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8). So any time we talk about God's anger it is really by analogy, but they aren't necessarily the exact same.

We want to hang onto our anger for a variety of reasons. We feel very justified and righteous in our anger. The bad person needs to be dealt with. We feel like our anger is about justice. If I don't hold onto my anger justice won't be done, or they will get away with what they did. The problem is that scripture speaks directly against that. The letter of James says, "for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). So according to the Bible, whatever we think we are accomplishing with our anger we should ask ourselves if we can't actually accomplish it better without anger. Anger turned outward is destructive. You can feel hurt just knowing someone is angry at you. You might even get angry at them for their anger towards you. Paul tells us in the letter to the Ephesians that holding onto anger is to give the devil a

foothold in your life (Eph 4:26-27).

So what do we do? (really this could be a whole series of sermons) We don't just repress it (that's another way of holding onto it). We have to find ways of transforming it. Jesus teaches that our main motivation must be a strong and persistent love. It doesn't mean we start there, but that is where Jesus wants us to get to. That is the destination. So maybe we start in small ways, dealing with minor annoyances as we prepare for the bigger causes of anger that come our way.

To transform our anger we can learn to stop when we feel that first burst of anger arise in us. We breathe, and recognize the anger. ... Then, perhaps, we focus on the life of Jesus, especially his crucifixion, and we can see him forgiving his enemies from the cross. If, through prayer, we can really enter into that moment, then it might put into perspective our anger at the person who cut us off in traffic. Of course we build up from those trivial sources of anger to more intense and personal causes of anger. We might also recall times that we have done something careless, or offended someone, and others have been gentle and patient with us. We could ask what value our anger is adding to the situation. Might it be better to use this situation as an opportunity to practice patience? Is there any other way to learn patience? Are we assuming we know the motivations of the other person? Is there a possibility we are mistaken? We can practice surrendering our will to God when things don't go our way. We can practice focusing on thanksgiving to God rather than complaining that things aren't how we think they should be. Thomas Merton once said,
"We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God."

So dealing with anger is really about our whole lives with God. It is about dealing with who we are and who we think we are. It is about

getting to the root of how we view other people, how we view God and how God runs things, and why we feel things should go the way we want them to.

When we learn to live in cooperation with God's Spirit living in us and working through us, then we can allow anger to be transformed. Like I said earlier, it's not wrong to feel that initial burst of anger, but our reaction to that initial burst is what matters. We can allow anger to rule us and we can throw things and yell and scream, or we can choose to breathe and slow down. We can recognize that we are feeling angry, but we don't have to let it rule us. We can allow it to float through our minds and leave us, but that takes practice and it takes a continual training our minds on God. It is about God's kingdom being established in our lives. Amen.