

“Fightin’ Words”

Matthew 5:21-26; 38-48

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Of course, we live in a violent and conflicted world, but the Lord doesn't deal in abstractions. He brings it down to a personal level. And the question isn't whether we will ever be angry or have conflict. The question is: how we deal with anger and conflict when it comes.

Now, our culture is pretty obsessed with appearance. And a lot of times we're the same when it comes to God's laws as well, we only look on the surface. But the Bible says, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7). In our passage for today, Jesus takes a look at the heart.

This section of the Sermon of the Mount we look at is the "kingdom code." As members of God's family, we're called to live a new way, and it isn't supposed to be only skin-deep. Jesus makes the demands of the law deeper than that, because it's not a matter of the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. It's why he told his followers our righteousness has to go beyond that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. (Matthew 5:20) They were really careful to follow the demands of the law, but Jesus says it goes deeper than that.

In the next six commands Jesus gives, he says, "You have heard it said," and he quotes the Old Testament. He's not just adding one more interpretation of the Word of God. He's saying, "This is *my* Word. Because I am the communication of God, I can interpret it to you. Jesus is saying, I will show you the heart of the law."

So, with the six commands are also six contrasts between outward performance of the law and an inner obedience to the law. He's going to deal with anger, lust, divorce, lying, revenge, and hatred. That's heavy stuff, but Jesus intends to help us. He wants to help make us new from the inside out. Today we'll look at the first of these, anger, and see what Jesus tells us about overcoming conflict.

Jesus said, "You have heard it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder.'"

When Jesus said that, he was talking about the Old Testament law. Now, human legal systems don't pay much attention to the inside, of course, as long as you conform on the outside. How many times have you see a murder investigation on TV, maybe a detective show, where someone tells the police detective, "Sure, I hated the victim, everybody knows that. He was a terrible person. In fact, I'm glad he's dead; but I didn't kill him." But the only thing they can prosecute you for is for the physical act.

The experts in religious law in Jesus day were the same. As long as you didn't murder anyone, you could be sure you had kept this law. But Jesus takes us below the surface. "Anyone who is angry with his brother or sister will be subject to judgment."

Now, I have two reactions to that. The first is to say, “Lord, help!” Because when I see how deep he takes it, how radical the obedience is he calls me to, I see how desperately I need his mercy, and I’m driven to my knees.

But second, Jesus isn’t saying all anger is wrong. Jesus himself got angry. He threw over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple court, and chased them out. The Bible tells us he got angry with people who felt no compassion for those in need, like when his opponents wanted to see if he would heal on the Sabbath so they could accuse him of breaking their rules. They didn’t have any concern at all for the man in his need, only to bring down Jesus. The text tells us,

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. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3:5-6)

Jesus’ anger was directed at whatever caused harm or distorted God’s plan for people, for whatever brought harm instead of life. There’s a place for that kind of godly anger, and in fact if we never feel anger, there’s probably something wrong with our heart.

I’ve seen children in Guatemala who lived over city dumps, and little children fighting with a vulture over a scraps of food.

I’ve seen people living over running sewers and trash heaps in Cairo, right next to a four-star Hilton.

I’ve seen a man dressed in rags and bare feet in 10-degree weather in Pittsburgh, and people all around him eating and pretending like he wasn’t there.

If that doesn’t make you angry over how broken and ugly the world can be, something has hardened in your heart. There’s a place for righteous anger. The question isn’t “Will I ever be angry?” but is rather, “Will I get angry over the important things?” And “How will I deal with my anger?”

See, most of the time we get angry not because we see someone else hurt, but because we’ve been hurt, we haven’t got our way, our toes have been stepped on. Jesus is saying, don’t give in to the slow-burning resentment of someone, the kind of anger that makes you want to avoid someone, to wish they weren’t around, to wish they were dead.

Unrighteous anger could get you brought before the court, if you were in a dispute with someone. Calling someone “Raca,” an expression that meant “empty,” like calling someone “airhead,” or whatever equivalent you can think of—that could get you brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court. And Jesus says, calling them “worthless,” and you’re in danger of the fires of hell. It’s the scorn behind the words. It kills relationships. And it can kill you, to spiritually cut you off from God.

Our relationships with others indicate what’s going on in our relationship with God. They aren’t trivial to our salvation. That’s why he says, if you’re coming to worship, and you realize you have this kind of anger, or someone has it against you—don’t wait, but do what you can to make it right. Take it seriously. Right relationships with other people aren’t something you can put off till later. They affect our relationship with God.

Is there any broken relationship in your life this morning? Is there anger you're holding on to, anyone you wish weren't in your life? If that's true for you, please don't take it lightly. The Lord tells us it's a soul issue. Don't take the easy way out and pretend it's not bad or just avoid the other person. Make the first move. If you don't, the danger is, you'll end up in spiritual prison. But even if we act, that doesn't guarantee it'll work out like we want. There will always be people who hurt us. And when that happens, what do we do?

Jesus says, "You've heard it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person." That was a part of the Old Testament law. It was meant to set limits for judges when they were giving sentences. "Eye for eye" was supposed to stop the cycle of violence of blood feuds between tribes and clans, like when Lamech said,

I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. (Genesis 4:23)

It wasn't ever intended to give individuals permission to take revenge when they've been hurt. But that was how some people took it. So a law designed to prevent revenge and spiraling violence was being used to cause it. When Jesus says, "don't resist an evil person," he means, don't take revenge. Don't retaliate. Don't break the relationship, or punish them for hurting you. Let the Judge do the judging—your job is to hate the sin, but love the sinner. Like Paul says in Romans,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

And that's when Paul adds a very important condition:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Paul's saying, in that shame-based culture, you can cause *good* shame, the kind that convicts and leads to a change of heart. Then he sums up by saying,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21)

Look what's best for the other and do it, even if it costs you something.

In Jesus' time, if you wanted to show great contempt for someone, you'd slap their face with the back of your hand. It would be like spitting in their face. So when Jesus was on trial, they slapped him, and the same thing happened to Paul when he was dragged before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 23:2) Jesus says, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Then he goes on, “If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your coat as well.” Losing your tunic, your shirt, was one thing, even for a Palestinian Jewish peasant. Most people had more than one. But your cloak was different. Most poor people only had one, and they could use it as a robe during the day and a blanket at night, like a cowboy carrying his bedroll. It was so important that the law said no one should ever be forced to give up their cloak.

That means, don’t cling to your legal rights. Focus on giving what you can. Like Paul tells us,

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who though he was in the very form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped onto, but emptied himself. (Philippians 2:5)

Then Jesus gives a third example of non-retaliation. The Romans, as an occupying power, had a custom where any Roman soldier could conscript a civilian to carry his gear for a thousand paces, about a mile. You can imagine how Jews in occupied Palestine would have resented this practice. But Jesus says, if anyone forces you to go a mile, go ahead and do two.

I bet disciples listening to Jesus might’ve thought, “You’ve got to be kidding. This is crazy, and it won’t work.” You know what, I’ve had that kind of reaction when I hear this. Is he saying, if someone hurts a weaker person, you should just accept it? No, he’s not, and I need you to hear this: Jesus is not saying a person should accept abuse or victimization. We know that because of Jesus’ defense of the powerless, and because of the way he got angry at people’s callousness.

Or if you’ve been taken advantage of, does it mean you don’t have the right to seek justice? No, I don’t think that’s what Jesus means. He’s just making his point that we need to use anger in godly ways, and he’s making the point strongly so we’ll get it. When the innocent are hurt and the weak are exploited, the most loving thing we can do is resist evil. But even then, we don’t lash out to hurt and destroy our enemies, and love, not law, should shape our response when someone hurts us.

Jesus sums up the passage in verse 48 when says, “But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.” What? How can he say that?

The word for “perfect” is *teleios*, whole, complete. He’s saying, don’t just show love to your friends, show it to your enemies, too—lavish it on everyone. When he says “be perfect,” he’s saying, “be complete, and be perfect in the impartiality of your love.” Give it to everyone; don’t hold it back.

He’s not saying we have to feel warm and affectionate towards our enemies, but that we choose to do good to them. It works.

Abraham Lincoln had a political enemy named Edwin Stanton. Stanton hated Lincoln and used every opportunity to degrade him in the public eye, calling him an incompetent and an imbecile. When Lincoln was elected President and was looking for someone for Secretary of War he chose Stanton. Even though he knew what Stanton had said, Lincoln chose him because Lincoln thought Stanton was the best man for the job. The concern and respect the president showed changed Stanton. Their relationship was

never easy, but Stanton came to appreciate Lincoln. The story's told that when the President was assassinated, Stanton said, Lincoln was "one of the greatest men that ever lived." Jesus also said, "Pray for those who persecute you." That's a test of whether we're willing to show love to someone, asking God to bless them.

Do you get the feeling that dealing with our anger in righteous ways is really important to the health of our soul, and also to the Christian family? It's critical in the Christian life. It's so crucial that Paul writes,

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. (Ephesians 4:31)

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing. (1 Timothy 2:8)

And James the apostle says,

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.(James 1:19-20)

It's funny, but in a sense we can be "perfect," or complete or whole, even as we're perfect people with lots of room to grow. Even though we still struggle with sin, we can still run to Jesus for more of his forgiveness, more of his power to grow into who he wants to make us.

So, I want to close with some practical advice, things I'm trying to learn about how not to sin when I'm angry. These are things you know well, I think, but the text reminds us today.

First, anger is an alarm.

It's a warning light. Treat it like that, and find out what's setting off the alarm. Something is wrong, and we have to pay attention. When you feel anger rising in you, ask, "Why am I upset? What's bothering me, really?"

Second, wait.

You know this, the "count-to-ten rule." Breathe deeply. When we're in the heat of anger, it's a bad time to try to deal with the problem. Let the emotions cool.

In the first church I served in, I got in a conflict with my senior pastor. I felt like the conflict was his fault, and I still feel that way today. But when I tried to communicate my concerns to him in anger, it backfired. And I came to see that even though what I was saying to him was right, I was wrong! I could have avoided a lot of pain if I had waited until we cooled down a little to express what I needed to say.

Commit yourself to keep from acting in anger, because we do things we wouldn't if we were calm. Don't let anger control you, you control it. Paul, in Galatians 5, describes the harm that comes from trying to get our own way, what he calls "indulging the sinful nature," and he says the results are "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage," among other things. (Galatians 5:20) He says those who live that way won't inherit the kingdom. Isn't that what Jesus said, when unrighteous anger puts you in danger of the fire of hell? But the fruit of the Holy Spirit, among other things, is peace, gentleness, and self-control. So, when you get angry, wait.

Three, speak without attacking.

Sometimes the hurt and anger is too much to let it drop, even if we try. There's still something we need to work out. So talk with the person, and don't attack, just explain. Don't use accusing language, with "you" messages—you know, the kind that say, "You always...", and "You never..." Instead, give "I" messages, and take responsibility for your feelings. And be willing to listen.

Four, forgive.

Of course, there's always the chance your adversary won't listen to you or respond in a good way when you do express your feelings and concerns. Even so, there's something you can do—forgive them.

That's not just doing them a favor, either, but it's caring for ourselves, too. The more we indulge our anger, the more it consumes us, warps our perspective on life, ruins our other relationships, eats away at our health, and turns us into bitter people.

Unrighteous anger is a sin. And like all sins, it destroys us. The reason God tells us to stay away from sin is because he doesn't want us to hurt each other or to be hurt ourselves.

The issue isn't *if* we're going to get angry or have conflict. We're going to have times when we get angry. But it's what you do next that really matters. Because whenever you harbor anger in your heart, whenever you refuse to forgive or refuse to reconcile, the life that's really in danger is yours.