

February 8, 2026

Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 5:21-32 (NIV)

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment*. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’[^] is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell⁺.

²³ “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

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

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

³¹ “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

* Meaning: found guilty by the Jewish court of the Sanhedrin.

[^] An Aramaic word that means “empty one”

⁺ the Greek word Gehenna is commonly translated as “hell”, though it refers to the Valley of Ben Hinnom south of Jerusalem, which was where Israel made child sacrifices (with fire) to false gods in the 8th Century BC. But when God allowed the Babylonians to conquer Israel as a punishment for this in the early 6th century BC, this valley was where Jerusalem disposed of their dead bodies.

Righteousness IRL

The good news we encounter in the scriptures this morning is that Jesus lays out a vision for us to become a presence of righteousness and safety in our personal relationships and in His Church that we can attain through Him. Well, last Sunday we jumped a week ahead in the lectionary to a section near the beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. There, He was casting a vision for the life of righteousness He wants to lead us into: where we *do right* by others, which means treating and engage with them as with the love God has for them and that they deserve from us as His children. Well, today we have picked up right where we left off in Matthew 5, where Jesus is continuing to cast that vision for us, but in some particular, concrete ways He would have us engage with others differently from the world.

Now, even before Jesus came, God had already *begun* laying out this vision of righteousness back in the Ten Commandments that He gave to Israel through Moses. But the *reality* was that the Ten Commandments alone were not sufficient for helping God’s

people to live righteously, because they're primarily focused on people's external behaviors, without addressing people's inner life or their hearts. After all, it is our spiritual hearts - our will and desires - where all our sin springs from in the first place. So, what we see Jesus doing in our passage today is turning our attention *toward* our inner lives, because it is only when we allow the Lord to shine His light there, that we can truly begin to grow in righteousness: to love others as Christ does in our attitudes *and* actions. The good news is that Jesus lays out a vision for us to become a presence of righteousness and safety in our personal relationships and in His Church that we can attain through Him. This is what He's up to in our passage today, but *to see this* I need to clarify what Jesus means with the ancient words that can easily be misunderstood. So today I'll draw on the scholarship of Dallas Willard, Cloud & Townsend, the Bible Project, N.T. Wright to uncover some of those meanings. #

So, what we'll see is Jesus taking a few of the Ten Commandments, but taking them to a deeper level by considering them from the perspective of our inner life. And He begins with the Sixth Commandment, "thou shalt not murder." Jesus teaches,²¹ "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." So Jesus has taken the sin of murder down to its root, which is the inner disposition of anger. And, it's true - if you think about it - literally *no one* has ever committed murder without first being angry. However, it's critical for us to understand that anger itself - the *emotion of anger* - is not a sin. Anger is the emotion that comes up in us when we perceive someone is treating us or someone else unrighteously; it alerts us to this so we can decide whether we need to impose a boundary.¹

So, anger itself is not a sin; emotions are not sinful. I printed Ephesians 4:26 in your bulletin today where Paul clearly makes a distinction between anger and sin, saying, "In your anger do not sin." In other words, "You're gonna get angry. Just, when you do, don't indulge it sinfully."

So, where we come up to the *line* of sin is *when anger arises* and we have a decision to make about what to do with it. Now, a righteous response to our anger, depending on the situation, might be to forgive them, share with the person who has provoked anger in us how they've affected us *when it is safe or possible to do so*, and putting in a boundary where one is needed. But, all too often we instead respond to our anger sinfully by choosing to embrace it and even act on it. This is what Jesus means when He says, "anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." This is not merely having the emotion of anger, but embracing unforgiveness and resentment. And

¹ Cloud & Townsend: "Feelings are... a warning signal telling us that we need to do something. For example, if you are angry at someone for something she did, it is your responsibility to go to her and tell her you are angry and why. If you think that your anger is her problem and that she needs to fix it, you may wait years. And your anger may turn to bitterness. If you are angry, even if someone else has sinned against you, it is your responsibility to do something about it. (224)

when we embrace unforgiveness and resentment, the impulse to retaliate is on deck. So when he speaks of saying to someone “Raca” or “you fool”, he’s talking about retaliating verbally by calling someone is worthless. “Raca” was an Aramaic way of saying “you are nothing” and in Jesus’ day calling someone a fool was a *high* insult on the level of you “bleeping-bleep” today. So, we may have heard it said (on the schoolyard), “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Jesus is saying that even when we indulge our anger in a way that isn’t to the level of physical violence, we are causing significant damage to both them *and* ourselves.

Now, thank goodness we have forgiveness through Christ for all of the ways we have broken this command. But remember, what constitutes sin is in no way arbitrary. No, God in His love for humanity wants to protect us from harm. And sins are attitudes and actions that harm us and others, whether we recognise it or not.

So, what is harmful about indulging anger in these ways? Well, most often we use anger to control. We perceive anger as an easy way to get things done, in particular what we want done. So, we may use words of anger or even just a harsh look to get people to comply with what we want them to do, or if we’ve lashed out at them enough then just the threat or their fear of our anger might keep a person complying with our desires. But what using anger like this communicates is that our selfish goals - our will being done - is more important than they are as a human being. And this is toxic to people’s souls.

And yet, Jesus is teaching that indulging our anger doesn’t only victimize others; we also victimize ourselves. When Jesus says, at the end of verse 22, that anyone who treats someone as worthless will be in danger of the fire of hell, he actually isn’t actually talking about the afterlife, or if He is it is secondary. The word translated “hell” is actually a literal place on the south side of Jerusalem, also known as the Valley of Ben Hinnom. Now, I don’t wanna get too deep in the weeds here, but the historic significance of this valley is that it was a place where God’s people committed atrocities and then later experienced God’s punishment for those atrocities in that very same location. So this is Jesus’ creative way of teaching that the more we indulge our anger and become angrier people, we are making a living hell for ourselves. The Bible Project summarizes Jesus’ warning this way: that “If you’re going to bring fire and destruction to others... that fire will be the thing that ultimately undoes you.”²

But, as we all know, it is one thing to have a vision for responding to our anger righteously. It’s a-whole-nother thing to make that choice when we’re in the thick of being angry. The reality of our sin is that it is more powerful than us. We cannot overcome this sin-sickness on our own; if we could, we would’ve never needed Jesus in the first place. And only He is stronger than our sin. So, when we find ourselves angry at someone - or when we realize we’ve already crossed the path into resentment or revenge - the best thing we can do is turn to God and name it before Him; and admit our powerlessness over

² they read Jesus’ whole teaching about anger here as Him saying, “(Sure,) you never murdered anyone, but everybody in your life hates you, because you belittle them and devalue their contributions... You think you’re better than everybody else, and you’re mean.’ In Jesus’s mind, that is a human being who’s honestly just as distorted as a murderer.

it. And then ask God to take our anger away, give us the grace to forgive, to give us discernment about what we need to do about it, such as be honest with the offender or put in a boundary with them or ask *their* forgiveness if we retaliated.

And quite often that may be enough to overcome our anger. But when it isn't, a next step is to turn to another believer for help. They may be able to empathize with us or also give us some different perspective that allows us to view the situation in a different way, because our perspective is limited and our anger can blind us a lot. Or they may even help us to discover that what has us angry now is really about something else we're angry about that's much deeper. The good news is that Jesus lays out a vision for us to become a presence of righteousness and safety in our personal relationships and in His Church, which we can only attain through Him. #

So, that's already a lot, but let's go ahead and talk about sex, too. The other Commandment Jesus takes to a deeper level here is the Seventh Commandment "you shall not commit adultery". So this is the prohibition of having sex outside of the covenant of marriage. But in verse 27 Jesus teaches, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Now, I should say that if Jesus' phrasing seems a bit one-sided here from a gender perspective, He's not meaning to suggest that women are immune from lust. Rather, we should remember that Jesus is giving this Sermon on the Mount to His inner circle of 12 disciples who are all men.

But Jesus has taken this Commandment on adultery to its root, which is the inner disposition of lust. But it's critical to understand that sexual desire is a God-given instinct, so simply having sexual desire or attraction come up in us is not a sin. Verse 28 is translated well - which it isn't in every version of the Bible - that it isn't noticing that another person is sexually attractive is a sin, it's taking that next step of lustful intent, of fantasy or covetousness. Because sexual desire is a gift meant for a husband and wife to celebrate and deepen their bond, and of course potentially to reproduce. So, beyond that boundary, we're going to be causing harm.

The harm of lust - from fantasy or covetousness to using pornography, all the way to physical adultery - all of it is that we are taking something that is not ours. Lusting after someone objectifies them, essentially saying - "you are here for me, for my use." And lust is the opposite of love, because it disregards God's best for them, which is to only be engaged sexually within the trust and safety and commitment of the marriage covenant. But lust is also never private. Even if one's lust is completely in their imagination or "in the privacy of their own home or computer screen", it still objectifies certain people and it's going to spill out in all sorts of toxic ways when we do engage similar people we are in relationship or community with.

Now, again, thank goodness we have forgiveness through Christ for all of the ways we may have broken this command! However, Jesus's suggestion for us to deal with any lust is disturbing to say the least. He teaches, "²⁹ If your right eye causes you to stumble,

gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” Now, sadly, there have been a few people who have taken this literally(!). But we know Jesus doesn’t mean it literally because someone with no eyes or hands is still *just* as vulnerable to lust as someone with them, since lust is an inner disposition (of the heart and mind).

So what does Jesus mean with this metaphor of the eye and hand? Well, scholar Lucy Peppiatt points out that the eye and the hand are not only the two primary means by which a human takes something,³ the eye and hand are also the “two of the most indispensable parts of a functioning human life”. If you had to choose between keeping your hand or your foot, you’re gonna pick your hand. If you had to choose between keeping your sight or your smell, or even your hearing, you’re gonna pick your sight. And so, what Jesus really means with this metaphor is that if we grasp the seriousness of the impact lust has on us and others, we will want to go to any means necessary to put that sin to death in ourselves (with the help of God and others).

And this really applies to *both* issues Jesus is addressing, both lust *and* anger. Because the steps toward overcoming lust are really the same as anger. Start with admitting to God our powerlessness over the lust and ask Him to remove it from our hearts for that time. Though, I’ll add a parallel strategy is to pray for that person you’re tempted to lust after. It’s hard to pray for someone and lust after them at the same time. But then, in instances when none of that is enough - and that temptation or sin continues to rage - we can look to another for help. Their empathy or insight or just connecting with another human appropriately can be what it takes, or we could even need counsel toward another step. It’s by taking steps like these that we can go to any lengths necessary to not succumb to the living hell of being consumed by wrath or lust, not to mention being hell to be around for others.

So, these are ways we can be prepared to respond when anger or lust arise within us. And we’re going to need them. But instead of making it our aim to not do things that are harmful, what if we instead focused on the capacity we have to bless: the potential each of us have to create relationships & environments of safety from the toxicity of anger and lust, which will allow people to be freely themselves and not have to live on the defense, and we miss out on the good and wonderful people they are?

What happens when we use anger to control our spouse, a friend, or family member, is we create an environment where it is unsafe to be themselves, so the potential for the interaction to be a blessing is doused. Or when we engage another person filled with lust toward them or others, they’re not going to be able to safely engage us in the manner of blessing God intended.

³ And, of course, the right hand is what the vast majority tend to use to take, given it is the dominant hand for most.

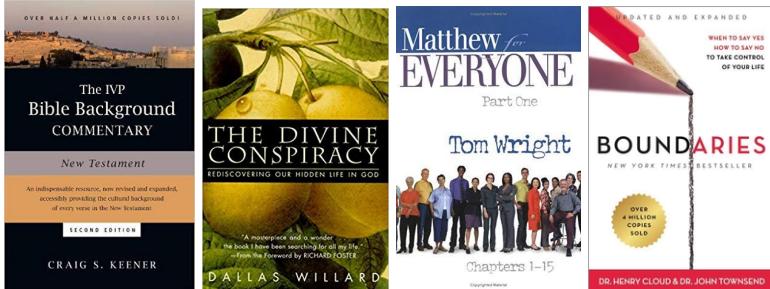
And sadly, these dynamics are only amplified in situations where we have more power than the other. When we persist in using anger in parenting or toward an employee under us - when we use anger to control at the expense of their emotional safety - the potential for us to be a blessing to these people under authority is gonna plummet. They're just gonna be trying to survive.

Just briefly, in verse 31 the reason Jesus addresses the question of divorce by framing his hypothetical scenario as the man divorcing the woman, is because this was the common practice *in Judaism* in those days for men to divorce their wives for any reason whatsoever. Some scribes argued scripture required infidelity for divorce, but others argued a man could legitimately divorce his wife for burning the toast. So, again, think of that disposition: it discards the woman as valueless, believing "my wife is here for me". And, by the way, women *couldn't* do this to the husband because in that society being divorced meant impoverishment. So, it's not this imbalanced in our day, but in Jesus' day when it came to marriage and divorce, the men had the power and the women had none. And when the man embraced this dynamic, both would miss out on the blessing of marriage altogether. If the man was intent on being a selfish husband, then they never had a prayer of enjoying the deeper blessings God has for in the marriage covenant.

So, there may be some situations we may have more power to impact than others, while in other situations the power dynamic may be more equal. But the larger vision for us to catch is to make it our mission in every relationship and community we are a part of to be a presence of safety - through Gd's help to engage people righteously even in our hearts by valuing them as He does, and not living like everyone is there for us. This is how Jesus entered every interaction He had, which freed people to be who they truly were with Him, and He wants to help us do the same. The good news is that Jesus lays out a vision for us to become a presence of righteousness and safety in our personal relationships and in His Church, and we can get there - we can become that - as far as we're willing to follow Him into it.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

SOURCES USED:



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