

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT – MATTHEW 5-7

Anger, Contempt, and Reconciliation

Matthew 5:21-26

Faith Church of Linden

By Daniel Patz on June 21, 2026

TEXT — MATTHEW 5:21–26 (ESV)

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. 23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. 26 Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

— Matthew 5:21–26 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION

The history of humanity is, in no small part, the history of man against man. Nations against nations. Peoples against peoples. Families torn apart from within. And it has been this way from the very beginning — because of something that happened before the first murder. In the garden, Adam stood before God’s word and chose himself. He did not trust God’s goodness. From this point on man was fallen and wicked by nature.

Cain and Abel, the first siblings, were simply the first consequence. The older murdered the younger — and what drove it was not some sudden explosion of violence. It began with anger. With jealousy. With contempt that was allowed to sit and grow until it produced the act. And humanity has been living downstream of that ever since.

Wars. Genocide. Broken families. Churches split over pride. Marriages destroyed by contempt. Friendships ended by a word spoken in anger that was never taken back. This is the world we live in. This is the world Jesus is speaking into this morning.

If humanity truly obeyed we would have no more wars. We would experience something this world has never known. Peace from sea to shining sea. We would experience heaven on hearth – a true utopia. The earth filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. That is the biblical vision. That is where history is headed.

But we are not there yet. Until Jesus Christ returns in glory, this will not be realized in its fullness. We live between the already and the not yet. And yet — this passage is not

merely a future hope. It is a present call. And when God's people truly receive it, truly live it — revival follows.

CONTEXT: THE GREATER RIGHTEOUSNESS

Two weeks ago we saw Jesus set out the thesis for this entire sermon in verse 20: unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. And last week, Pastor Jason showed us something of what that means for those of us who come to Jesus as we are — wretched, needy, with nothing to offer. He meets us in our wretchedness. He gives us his righteousness — the very righteousness of God, credited to us by faith.

But there is a second part. And this is what the rest of the sermon unpacks. The righteousness Christ gives is also a righteousness he works — from within, by his Spirit, producing in his people a genuine inner transformation. A changed heart that begins to live differently.

Keep verse 20 in mind as we work through these six antitheses (21-47). And keep your eye on where this section ends — verse 48: 'You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Perfect here does not mean sinless in some abstract, impossible sense. It means whole. Undivided. Complete. An integrity that runs all the way through — inside and outside matching, the heart and the hand aligned. That is the vision Jesus is laying out. That is the righteousness he intends to work in his people.

Now Jesus shows us what that greater righteousness looks like in practice. He gives six examples — six antitheses (you have heard...but I say unto you) — and this morning we come to the first and longest. These are not an exhaustive list of every ethical scenario. They are illustrative. Jesus is teaching his disciples how to read the law rightly.

THE FIRST ANTITHESIS: WALKING THROUGH THE TEXT

Part 1 — What They Heard (v. 21)

When Jesus says 'but I say to you' — that would have been startling to anyone listening. Prophets said 'thus says the Lord.' Rabbis said 'Rabbi so-and-so taught.' Nobody spoke on their own authority like this. But notice carefully what Jesus is doing. He is not contradicting Moses. He told us that just a few verses ago — he came to fulfill the law, not abolish it.

What he is doing is cutting through centuries of false teaching that had reduced the law (at least the moral law) to its most minimal, external, manageable form — and restoring what God always meant. Sometimes, as here, Jesus quotes the law directly — 'You shall not murder' is the sixth commandment straight from Exodus 20. But in others he will quote something Moses never actually said — like 'hate your enemy.' That was a rabbinic addition, a human tradition not what God has said.

So Jesus is doing two things across these six: sometimes restoring the true depth of what God actually said, and sometimes correcting what was being taught that God never said at all. The congregation on that hillside knew this commandment. Of course

— you shall not murder. We know that one. We're fine on that one. Then comes verse 22.

Part 2 — The True Intention (v. 22)

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”

— Matthew 5:22 (ESV)

Watch what Jesus does. He takes the command — don't murder — and traces it back to its source. Where does murder come from? It comes from anger. It comes from contempt. It comes from the slow work of hatred in the heart that eventually produces the act. And God, Jesus is saying, has always been concerned with the inner person — not just physical violence.

He gives three escalating expressions of this. First, **sinful anger** toward a brother — liable to judgment. Then the **insult ‘Raca’** an Aramaic term of contempt, essentially calling someone empty-headed, worthless, beneath you — liable to the council. And then **‘you fool’** — which goes further still, a word that vilifies a person's moral character, that writes them off entirely — liable to the hell of fire.

Now someone will ask — didn't Jesus call the Pharisees blind fools in Matthew 23? He did. And in chapter 7 of this very sermon he will tell us not to give what is holy to dogs, not to cast pearls before swine. So Jesus himself makes sharp distinctions. He names wickedness plainly. He does not flatten everything into niceness.

But here is the difference. Jesus was never angry for himself. Never contemptuous to protect his own reputation or comfort. Every hard word he spoke came from love for God's glory and genuine concern for the people he confronted — even the Pharisees. The same Jesus who called them whitewashed tombs wept over Jerusalem. His anger and his grief came from the same place. Ours usually don't.

The same principle holds in chapter 7. We are not told never to make distinctions or never to confront. We are told to examine our own hearts first — get the log out of your own eye — so that you can see clearly enough to help your brother with the speck in his. Confrontation in the service of love, with a clean heart, is not what Jesus is condemning here. What he is condemning is the proud, dismissive contempt that writes a person off — that treats someone made in the image of God as worthless, as nothing, as beneath you.

The point of the escalation, from simmering anger to open contempt to outright vilification — is these things are under God's judgment. None of it is safe. It is not small.

And this cuts close. Because most of us will never commit murder. But anger? Contempt? The cutting remark? The dismissive tone? The conversation after the meeting where we say what we really think of that person? This happens in workplaces. It happens in families. And it happens in churches. Among brothers and sisters in Christ. We can dress it up as discernment or concern. Jesus says it falls under the same condemnation as murder.

Because our words come from somewhere. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The insult on your lips is a window into what is happening in your heart.

Part 3 — Application: Two Illustrations (vv. 23–26)

Notice what Jesus does not say here. He doesn't say: if you find yourself angry, stop being angry. He says something that demands far more. He says go. Pursue the relationship. Take action toward reconciliation even at the cost of your ego, your comfort, your pride.

He gives two illustrations, and together they drive home a single urgent point: reconciliation cannot be deferred.

First illustration — the altar (vv. 23–24):

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

— Matthew 5:23–24 (ESV)

This is striking. The person is already at worship — already at the altar. And Jesus interrupts it. Not because worship doesn't matter, but because real worship and unreconciled contempt cannot occupy the same heart at the same time. Leave your gift. Go. Reconciliation first, then worship. You cannot honor God while dishonoring the one he made in his image. Love your neighbor as an act of love to God.

Notice also the direction: the one at the altar is the one who has wronged his brother, or whose brother perceives a wrong. This is not about waiting for someone to come to you. Jesus puts the initiative on the one who caused the wound. This connects to but is distinct from Matthew 18, where Jesus addresses the one who has been wronged. Together they eliminate every excuse for passivity — whether you gave the wound or received it, you go.

Let me ask you something directly. Are there people in this room — or in your life — that you are simply not talking to? People you would avoid in the parking lot, sit away from, leave off the invitation list? And they are your brother or sister in Christ. You are going to spend eternity with them. What are you doing with that?

Are there people you are angry with — people you need not only to forgive but to pursue? Forgiveness is internal. Reconciliation requires movement. Jesus is calling you to movement.

Second illustration — the courtroom (vv. 25–26):

“Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

— Matthew 5:25–26 (ESV)

The legal imagery is urgent. Settle now. Don't wait for the courtroom. Because once the process is in motion, the cost multiplies — the judge, the guard, the prison, the last penny. The window of opportunity is closing. Delay is never neutral. Time does not heal unreconciled relationships — it hardens them.

THREE PRINCIPLES

These six examples are not an exhaustive ethical checklist. Jesus is teaching his disciples how to read the law — what God has always been after underneath the commands. This first antithesis is the longest and most developed because it is the model. Once you have it, you carry it forward. You learn to ask: what is the heart behind this command? What is it pointing me toward? What does love for God and neighbor actually require here?

Three principles live inside this passage — and inside every one of the six.

1. True Righteousness Begins in the Heart

God has never been satisfied with external compliance. Not under Moses, not under the prophets, not here. 'You delight in truth in the inward being' (Psalm 51:6). 'Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life' (Proverbs 4:23). Jeremiah saw it — the heart is deceitful above all things. And Jesus makes it plain elsewhere: out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, slander (Matthew 15:19).

The sixth commandment was always about the heart. The Pharisees reduced it to the act. Jesus restores what God always meant and so must we.

Think of a child obeying a parent. A parent doesn't just want a child who technically stays inside the boundary. They want a child whose heart is in it — who is learning to honor, to trust, to love, not just to comply.

This is why your anger matters. Your contempt matters. The thought you never say out loud matters. God is not impressed that you kept your hands clean if your heart is full of hatred toward your brother. True righteousness — the kind Christ is working in his people — begins inside, where only God can see.

Reflection: Where in your heart are you harboring anger or contempt toward someone right now — something you have dressed up as concern or discernment but is really pride?

2. God's Commands Point Toward Love, Not Just Away from Sin

Michael Horton writes of the sixth commandment: 'Negatively, the sixth commandment insists that we not kill another person by thought, word, gesture, or speech, much less in action.' But the Reformers also saw the positive side — every prohibition has a positive heart, a love it is calling you toward.

Don't murder — yes. But underneath that prohibition is a call to actively give life, to pursue peace, to love your neighbor with a love that crosses distances and absorbs cost. The command doesn't bottom out at restraint — it propels you toward love.

Horton tells of an exchange with a Jewish rabbi who said: ‘We believe you have to actually commit the physical act before it’s really sin. Otherwise we’d be sinning all the time!’ ‘We are,’ Horton replied. ‘That’s the whole point.’

God is really that holy and we are not. The law, rightly understood, doesn’t give us a lower bar we can clear — it shows us how far short we fall and drives us to Christ.

Jesus doesn’t just say stop being angry. He says go. Go pursue the relationship. The law (do not murder) sets a floor — but God’s intention is the ceiling: love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemy. Be reconciled to your brother. That is where the command is always pointing.

Reflection: Where are you settling for restraint when God is calling you to pursue? Is there a relationship where you have simply avoided the wrong without ever moving toward the good?

3. Love for God and Love for Neighbor Are Inseparable

Jesus says leave your gift at the altar — not because worship doesn’t matter, but because real worship and unreconciled contempt cannot occupy the same heart at the same time. The two great commandments — love the Lord your God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself — rise and fall together.

You cannot love God with your whole heart while writing off the person he made in his image. 1 Peter 3:7 tells husbands that a fractured relationship with their wife hinders their prayers. Psalm 66:18 — ‘If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.’ Isaiah 1 — God refuses worship from those whose hands are full of blood and who neglect justice toward their neighbor.

Obedience is greater than sacrifice, Saul learned too late. We cannot hide behind our spiritual activity — our Sunday attendance, our giving, our service — and think that covers over contempt and unreconciled anger toward a brother.

But this brings us to the most important question. Not just — am I loving my neighbor? But — where does that love come from? If it comes from duty or willpower or trying harder, it will not last. What Jesus is calling us to here is beyond our natural capacity. The only love that can sustain this has to come from somewhere deeper than us.

Reflection: Is there someone in your life — a family member, a church brother or sister, a colleague — with whom you have substituted religious activity for genuine reconciliation?

THE LOVE THAT MAKES THIS POSSIBLE

1 John 3. Verse 14:

“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”

— 1 John 3:14–15 (ESV)

John is doing exactly what Jesus did. He traces hatred to its end and calls it murder. The presence of genuine love for the brothers is evidence of something that has happened — of a passage from death into life. And the absence of it is evidence of something else entirely.

But then John tells us where that love comes from. Verse 16:

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.”

— 1 John 3:16 (ESV)

He laid down his life. That is where love is defined. Not in our best moments. Not in our most generous impulses. But at the cross — where the Son of God, who had every reason to hold us in contempt, who had every right to write us off as enemies, chose instead to lay down his life for us.

Now go to chapter 4. Verse 19:

“We love because he first loved us.”

— 1 John 4:19 (ESV)

That is the answer to every demand Jesus makes in Matthew 5. We love — not because of willpower, not just because it is the right thing to do — but because something happened to us. We were loved first. We were loved when we were enemies. And that love, when it lands on a soul, when the Spirit drives it deep — it produces something. It produces people who love.

Verse 20:

“If anyone says ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

— 1 John 4:20 (ESV)

The person who claims to love God and carries contempt toward his brother — that claim is not credible. The love of God received genuinely always moves outward.

A PORTRAIT OF CHRIST

I want you to see him for a moment. The one who gave these commands.

He was never angry for himself. Never contemptuous to protect his own name or comfort. When people insulted him, he did not retaliate. When they mocked him, he did not threaten. When they drove nails through his hands, he prayed for their forgiveness. He showed patience with twelve men who failed him repeatedly. He showed mercy to people everyone else had written off — the leper, the tax collector, the woman caught in adultery, the thief dying on the cross next to him. He absorbed every cost. He laid down his life not for his friends — but for his enemies.

That is who is speaking in Matthew 5. And he is not standing at a distance handing you a list of demands. He is the one who fulfilled what he is demanding. He lived the greater righteousness perfectly. And he died to cover/pay for every failure of it — every moment

of contempt, every act of cruelty, every unreconciled relationship, every word spoken in pride — he bore all of it in his body on the cross.

CONCLUSION AND INVITATION

I want to speak to everyone in this room.

If you are a believer — if you know this Christ — then hear this passage as a description of what he is working in you. You will fail at this. You will find anger rising in you toward people you are supposed to love. When that happens — do not despair. Go back to 1 John 4:19. We love because he first loved us. Come back to that. And then go — go to your brother, go to your sister, go to your spouse, go to the person at work...

If you are here this morning carrying unreconciled anger toward someone — a broken friendship, a family wound, a church hurt that has been sitting for years — hear Jesus. He welcomes you to freedom — the loving pursuit of obedience, forgiveness, pursuit of reconciliation.

And if you are here and you do not yet know this Christ — if something in you is stirring this morning — hear what is underneath everything Jesus is saying in this sermon. There is a war. Not between you and your brother. Between you and God. Every one of us came into this world as an enemy of God — not indifferent, not neutral, but at war. And God, rather than responding with the contempt we deserved, sent his Son. Sent him into our hostility. Sent him to absorb the judgment that belonged to us. Jesus did not wait for us to come to him. He came to us. He laid down his life for enemies.

That is the gospel. And it is an offer being made to you this morning. The war does not have to continue. Peace has been made — at the cross, in the body of Christ, by the shedding of his blood. The invitation is open: be reconciled to God. Come to him empty-handed, trusting what he has done and not what you can do — and he will receive you.

He saves us not only from the penalty of sin but from its destructive power in our hearts — the bitterness, the lovelessness, the slavery to anger that warps us from the inside. That is what he came to undo. And he is still doing it.

So I want to close with this. What Jesus lays out in this passage is not primarily a higher standard of morality to strain toward — though it is a higher standard, and we should feel the weight of it. But it is not merely that. It is never something we can do in our own strength. What Jesus is doing here is laying out a vision — a vision of what he intends to do in us. A vision of whole people. Undivided people. People whose inside and outside match. People freed from the old bitterness and the old anger, who love the way their Father loves.