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Sermon: November 16, 2014
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BUT I SAY: ANGER”
Matthew 5:21-26

If thoughts could take a life, how much blood would we have on our hands?

If looks could kill, how many would be dead because of us?

If words could slay, how many bodies would we have put in the ground?

■ Please turn to Matthew 5:21-22. The initial clauses of these verses are, respectively, **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago,”** and **“But I tell you.”**

“You have heard that it was said” refers to the content of the Hebrew Bible. We might paraphrase this as, ‘The Bible teaches...,’ ‘Scripture reveals...,’ ‘The Word of God announces...,’ or ‘In his Word, God declares...’

{Is 40:8; Dt 8:3; Nu 15:31} For those who know that **“the word of our God endures forever,”** who **“live... on every word that comes from [his] mouth,”** who trust that Scripture imparts **“the Word of the LORD,”** the phrase **“You have heard that it was said”** carries serious weight.

So for Jesus to follow it up with **“But I tell you”** is momentous. He is saying, in effect, that his interpretation, his teaching, and his application of Scripture are absolutely definitive. He is claiming authority over the eternal, life-giving Word of God.

★ His claim is legitimized by his divinely ordained mission. Just before this in verse 17 he explains, **“I have**

not come to abolish” “the Law and the Prophets” (the Old Testament) **“but to fulfill them.”**

Fulfillment of the Scriptures entails obedience and further revelation, but above all accomplishment. Messiah came *to achieve the ultimate purpose* of the Law and the Prophets, to *bring the Word to fruition*.

☑ {R.T. France; Scot McKnight} **“His teaching... is [the] intended culmination”** of O.T. revelation. Jesus **“fulfills... what the [Law] and...Prophets anticipated and predicted and preliminarily taught.”**

★ {Heb 1:3; Php 2:6} His claim is also legitimized by his divine nature. He is **“The Son”** (capital S-o-n), **“the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,”** hence he is **“in very nature God.”**

{1 Jn 1:1} How does the Gospel According to John begin? Recite it with me, if you will: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

“The Word” (with an uppercase W) is a title that fits Jesus alone, and it is packed with meaning. Among other things, there is this: the Incarnate Word of God, the Word of God made flesh, is Master of God’s written Word.

“You have heard that it was said...But I tell you.”

■ Back to verse 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.’”**

That sets the bar fairly low. (I assume we are all capable of abstaining from literal murder.☺)

■ The Lord Jesus is about to raise it uncomfortably high. Verse 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 Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”**

Let’s take a moment and allow that to sink in.

Some have seized on the phrase **“brother or sister”** as a way to soften this. They take comfort in the idea that we are accountable strictly for how we relate to biological family and spiritual siblings.

That is a questionable reading. It is more likely that Messiah is using **“brother or sister”** the same way he uses **“neighbor,”** as a generic term for anyone whose life intersects our own.

“I tell you that anyone who is angry with [a neighbor] will be subject to judgment.” Do you see what I mean about Christ Jesus raising the bar?

By the same token, the word **“angry”** brings it back down a bit. He might have said θυμoσ [thumos] for **“angry.”** That would include fleeting feelings that flare up and then quickly die down.

Instead he uses οργιζομαι [orgizomai]. This suggests brooding, hardened, ingrained anger.

Οργιζομαι is when a man fuels the flames of his wrath, lest it mellow. Οργιζομαι is when a woman nurses her grudge, lest it subside. Οργιζομαι is when we indulge in

fantasies of retribution, punishing speech, or deeds of vengeance.

{Jas 1:19-20} This is what James warns against: **“be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because our anger”** (our οργη [orgē]) **“does not produce the righteousness that God desires.”**

We might be tempted to take οργιζομαι lightly. Holy God takes it very seriously: **“anyone who murders will be subject to judgment,”** ενοχοσ εσται τη κρισει [echonos estai tē krisei], and **“anyone who is οργιζομαι with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment,”** ενοχοσ εσται τη κρισει. The terminology is identical!

Not all anger is sinful. In fact, anger can be the most appropriate response to immorality, injustice and idolatry. Christ Jesus became angry more than once.

Nevertheless, a word of caution is in order: the line between θυμοσ and οργιζομαι is thin and easily crossed. How many times has our anger started out as valid, even righteous – but then, rather than deal with it constructively and in a timely fashion we obsessed over the offense, replaying it in our minds, allowing hurt and resentment to take root? Bitterness, hatred, alienation and, in extreme cases, violence lie at the end of that road.

Many of us never go *that* far. We treat ourselves to a bite or two of that bittersweet poison and leave the rest. We don’t dive headfirst into the

pool of seething rage; we merely dip our feet in it. We limit ourselves to snarky comments, crushing insults, and character assassination. Shall we pat ourselves on the back?

■ Verse 22b: **“Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”**

📖 Ῥακα [rhaka] is **“blockhead”** or **“fool.”** It expresses ridicule mixed with anger and contempt.

📖 Μωροσ [mōrós], **“You fool!”** is the word from which our English **“moron”** is derived.

Messiah’s point is not to single out these insults as the worst or make a list of unacceptable put-downs; it is that verbal battering is a grave offense with dire consequences. If we do not repent of this sin and live by God’s grace, we will be subject to God’s judgment.

If our thoughts could take a life, how much blood would be on our hands? If our looks could kill, how many would be dead? If our words could slay, how many bodies would we have put in the ground?

{Ge 4:7} Οργιζομαι, and with it abusive speech, **“is crouching at [our] door; it desires to have [us], but [we] must rule over it.”**

To that end, the Savior provides us with a couple of strategies. He might have said more, but these are enough to point us in the right direction.

■ In verses 23-24 he calls us to pursue reconciliation. The conditions reveal that he puts a premium on this.

★ First, **“if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you... go and be reconciled.”** Either party can make the first move; but it is powerfully restorative when the wrongdoer humbly takes the initiative to seek mutual healing and restoration.

★ Second, **“if you remember”** this as you are worshiping **“leave... the altar... go and be reconciled... then come and offer your gift.”** Reconciliation takes precedence even over worship! Why? Wrong relationship with other human beings inhibits right relationship with the Living God, but right relationship with others facilitates right relationship with God!

Do you find it unnerving? Do you want to contest this teaching? Take it up with the Son of God.

{Col 1:20-21; 2 Co 5:18} He has established reconciliation as the normative goal. For his Father **“was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood.”** Not only so, God has **“[given] us the ministry of reconciliation.”**

■ Of course, reconciliation is not always possible. In that case, in verses 25-26 the Lord Jesus advises us to negotiate a truce. This requires readiness to compromise and willingness to satisfy our adversary’s reasonable demands. Those of us who are unyielding might end up paying a much higher price than necessary.

“You shall not murder,” harbor unrighteous anger, or injure another with your words. It would be so easy to fall into self-defeating idealism or soul-crushing legalism. How shall we avoid these dangers?

Remember, the Sermon on the Mount is a portrait of Jesus and an invitation to share his life.

☑ As N.T. Wright puts it, it **“is about discovering the living God in the loving, and dying, Jesus, and learning to reflect that love ourselves into the world....”** To conform to any part of the sermon is to think, speak, behave and relate like the Son.

Frankly, I cannot live this way on my own. Neither can you.

{Lk 18:27; Php 2:13} The Good News is, we don't have to! **“What is impossible with [us] is possible with God.”** **“It is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”**

When the Messiah became angry on earth it was never a symptom of fear, pride, or selfish ambition. By the power of Christ in us, we can be righteously angry at the things that anger God!

When the Messiah became angry on earth he never sinned against others, not even his enemies. By the power of Christ in us we can conduct ourselves rightly!

Matthew 5:21-26 is the word of the Lord.