

Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 5:21-26

“Who Is a Murderer?”

Five years ago, following the death of Nelson Mandela, the first black President of South Africa, the following remarks were shared as a eulogy describing his impact as a Christian leader: “This week, we lost a true hero of our time; some would call him ‘a man for the ages.’ He was an activist who took an unwavering stand for justice and truth. A leader who championed the immeasurable value of every human being, regardless of ethnic background, age, or class. A visionary who led from a servant’s heart ...through tireless efforts toward reconciliation and peacemaking. A man of incredible personal forgiveness and humility.”

Nelson Mandela inspired millions all over the world to be a voice against evil, to change our world for the better. Mandela, who died at age 95, is affectionately remembered as South Africa’s “Father of the Nation.” Yet he was not just a towering figure within the political arena.

Mandela’s legacy of reconciliation and forgiveness is at the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. After several lifetimes of tyranny, oppression, poverty and complete lack of educational opportunities in South Africa for all black people, segregation was dismantled, paving the way to elect the majority’s popular leader as President. When the opportunity for revenge presented itself after 27 years in prison, Mandela turned the other cheek and, instead, sought peace and reconciliation. As the first black South African President, Mandela invited to his inauguration the very same regime members who imprisoned him nearly three decades earlier. Believing that “forgiveness liberates the soul,” Mandela sought to use his leadership for restoration and hope. Rather than being overcome by evil, he chose to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Nelson Mandela chose not to hold on to vengeance.

With today’s lesson from the teaching’s of Jesus, we hear about the damage lingering anger can bring. [READING Matthews 5:21-26]

²¹ “You have heard that our ancestors were told, ‘You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment.’ ²² But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court. And if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell.

²³ “So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, ²⁴ leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

²⁵ “When you are on the way to court with your adversary, settle your differences quickly. Otherwise, your accuser may hand you over to the judge, who will hand you over to an officer, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶ And if that happens, you surely won’t be free again until you have paid the last penny.”

Jesus begins a pattern that He repeats five more times in some form or the other: “You have heard that our ancestors were told...” and He recites one of God’s laws. But then Jesus adds something that would have struck them as strange, “But I say to you...” and He takes that law just recited and refines it.

“You shall not murder.” Of course the people understood that. The identity of ancient Israel was formed around the Law of Moses given by God at Mt. Sinai.

We know the Ten Commandments. Many of us memorized them earlier in our lives.

The law against murder is the sixth commandment, (Exodus 20:13; Deut. 5:17). It was given to protect life! Life is precious and sacred! No life is to be taken – and unfortunately we don't have time to go into questions or exceptions today that would include the taking of life through self defense, warfare, capital punishment, abortion, or suicide.

We're going to keep the focus with the passage, "'You must not murder...'" But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment! If you call someone an idiot, a fool ...or if you curse someone, you are in danger of the fires of hell."

Have you ever been angry?

It would have been very easy for the black people of South Africa to rise up and attack their former oppressors with violence! Anger and resentment ran deep! But President Mandela chose to lead his people away from hatred so that they might experience forgiveness and reconciliation.

What is Jesus saying to humankind about anger? He is saying that we have a problem because we have misunderstood God's law. We can read God's law against murder – and look at ourselves, and say, "Hey, I'm okay here. I'm not a killer!" We apply it to the outward act of committing a murder, taking a life. But we fail to look within, to what may cause the murder.

It's not impatience or stress that causes murder. It's anger. It is in the mind that the crime is first committed. Our earthly court system cannot take action against an angry thought, but the heavenly court can – and does! God is more concerned with what is going on in the inside of my heart and mind. That defines who I am! And the interior life is the standard by which God judges me! The Bible says: "**From the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you.**" (Matthew 15:19)

Who are you?

Well, tell us, what are you like *inside*?

This is where Jesus takes us, to look within our own mind and heart.

The Pharisees in the crowd around Jesus said that righteousness consisted of performing certain rules, but Jesus said righteousness centered on the attitudes of the heart. The Pharisees had a list of external actions that were sinful, but Jesus spoke to the internal – what's going on inside – and He didn't say that anger *leads* to murder; He said that anger *is* murder. Because when we are angry we lose sight of the person that God loves. We stop thinking of someone else as a special child of God. In our anger, they become a lot less!

Let's remember an important point we heard last week, **Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.** (Matthew 5:20)

The Scribes and Pharisees were focused on the external practice of religion, but with what Jesus has said, we now have to take a look *at our hearts*.

And so Jesus said, "It's not just the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law that matters. ***I say to you...!***"

I say! What I say – matters!

Do you remember how the Gospel of John begins? John wrote this beautiful poetic piece to introduce Jesus to his readers: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with**

God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us... (John 1:1-2, 14)

Who was with God? Who was in the beginning? The Word! And so the *Word* that was presented in the commandments now preaches on the Mount from the place of absolute truth! The same Word that spoke creation into existence, “Let there be light!” now leads us to the light of salvation: “**But I say, if you are even angry with someone, you are subject to judgment.**” Yes, anger is the early warning system in your life that alerts you to the corruption you need to confess and from which you repent!

No one can earn justification from the Judge by their own actions! Jesus’ voice is the authority they’ve waited for! So when Jesus said, “I say to you...” this is tremendous. He says, “**I** tell you what God’s law is,” because He is God’s Word! This literally blew up their minds! They couldn’t handle this. But He is the living Word; the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end! He came not to abolish the Law or the prophets, but to fulfill the Law!

Later, at the end of this sermon, at the end of these three chapters, they said of Him, “**He taught as one having authority, and not as their Scribes.**” (Matthew 7:29)

We better talk about that problem with anger. Sociologists and psychologists tell us that hate brings you nearer to murder than any other emotion. And hate is merely the extension of what? Anger.

But there are times when a Christian believer has a right to be angry. After all, anger is a human emotion created for us by God! The believer must be angry with injustice and cheating and evil. There are things that go on in our country we ought to be mad about. There are trends in our culture that ought to make you angry. Maybe some unfair practices in our schools or our places of work that we should be angry about. Because without anger, we may not be aroused to right a wrong and create necessary change.

But let’s remember what the Bible says: “**Don’t sin by letting anger control you.**” (Ephesians 4:26-27)

Anger can bring harm, too; this is obvious. Too often anger can create hurt feelings for those with whom we are closest: husband and wives; parent and child; neighbors or friends. As Christians, the Bible instructs us, “**Now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.**” (Colossians 3:8) This suggests I have a choice – to rid myself of anger. Yes, because I can! Asking God in prayer, the Christian has the Spirit of God working within them, flushing away the dangers of anger, resentment, things like that.

Maybe you have been abused or mistreated; someone has treated you unfairly, you may have a strong disagreement with someone. Anger can become so strong it overshadows and overshadows the plea to forgive or “let go.”

Let’s remember, anger – holding on to anger – is a choice. You can let it simmer, fantasize about your misfortune, and the anger stews! You make a choice to let the pot stay hot to boil – or to forgive and move on.

Because anger is a matter of the heart, as is worship, because anger is expressed through relationships, as is worship, Jesus offers a remedy to set things right. **If you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has some-**

thing against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.

“Presenting a sacrifice” was a chief part of worship for God’s people who were taking in this sermon on the mount. If you come to worship and you intend to present your gift to God on the altar because you’re asking for God’s forgiveness, and you remember that someone has something against you – can you really worship the Lord in spirit and in truth?

We heard what Jesus said: It’s okay to be late for worship if you’re restoring a broken relationship. He has reflected the lesson from Micah: It’s not the burnt offering or a thousand rams that God desires. **He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

Again, it’s not the appeal to God through an offering; it’s the humble attitude. King David wrote about worshipping God in Psalm 51: **The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.** (vs. 17)

Are you really loving God if you are at odds with one of God’s other children?

If I ask now, according to the biblical teaching of Jesus Christ, “Who is a murderer?” can we agree – *I am!* It’s all of us!

In a sense, we’re all guilty of murder. We’ve all sinned and come short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is what? Death. And so you say, “Well, how do we escape? I mean if we’re all murderers and no murderer will inherit the kingdom, if we’re all murderers, and we all deserve death and hell, then how do we escape?”

And this is where Jesus wants us to be. First, to know that I, myself, am without excuse. And secondly, Jesus wants me to know that everyone else is just like me! I’m no better and I’m no worse than anyone else. Thirdly, it takes a humble heart to say, “It’s me, it’s me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer!”

When we consider that the anger or the lust within us condemns us, this is right where Jesus wants us to be, because everything He says here drives me to my knees, confessing that I am inadequate – and there’s nothing I can do! Jesus presents this Christian life, and I have to say: “I can’t do this, Lord! I can’t be this... perfect person!”

And that’s right. None of us can. But Christ! Jesus wants you to address who you are on the inside – so that you will ask Him to help you and heal you on the inside! And He will do this when you surrender Lordship of your life to Him, and submit your heart and mind to learn from Him!

Two things happen when we surrender to Jesus Christ! 1) Through faith in what Jesus Christ has done on the cross for me, the judgment on my legal documents in heaven are changed from *Guilty* to *Redeemed!* There is a real change in my standing before God! He no longer sees the rotten filth on the inside of my life! Instead, He sees the righteousness of Jesus Christ covering me and covering you! We stand before Him in the righteousness of Christ! **For our sake God made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.** (2 Corinthians 5:21)

2) God begins to make everything inside of me and you brand new! As though born again, the Bible **If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!** (2 Corinthians 5:17) The work of Christ will trans-

form your thoughts and your heart if you give Him access to your life.

Are you in His Word? Are you reading the New Testament? Do you make time for quiet time with God and prayer?

As we think about the disciples whom Jesus called, it hasn't been that long ago that they began to follow Him. Here we are in chapter 5 of Matthew, and they are listening, watching, learning, and following. I wonder if they're still trying to decide, is this the Man we are to follow?

As you listen and learn from Jesus ...is this the Savior to whom you would give your life to follow?

So what's next for you? Is there someone with whom you have been angry? Who do you know that has something against you? Who do you sense is frustrated with you; impatient with you; or just can't seem to get on the same wave-length with you? Is this where God is leading you today?

PRAYER: Thank-You Father, for the power of speaking Your Word into our lives again today. Before You the deepest secrets of our thoughts and hearts are laid open; You have prepared the way for our healing and salvation! Once again, You've unmasked the foolishness of our thoughts and excuses so that we might know more fully the power of Your grace and kindness. Come into our heart and minds, and give us courage to say "Yes" to You! We want to be faithful and true to the opportunities You've given so that we might be filled with Your Spirit – so pester us until we complete our responsibilities to the work of Your Spirit in us. In Jesus' name. Amen