

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Who Is a Murderer?

Scripture: Matthew 5:21-26

Code: 2214

I want to share with you tonight from Matthew chapter 5, the next in our sections of the study of the sermon on the mount. And I want to spend as much time as I can in really looking at the text, so without any preliminaries we'll just dive right in. Matthew 5:21, and I'd like to read through verse 26.

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath anything against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out from there, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.”

Let's pray together and ask God's blessing on our study. Father, right now I pray that You will open our minds and hearts to comprehend and understand what it is that our Lord Jesus meant in this passage. Give us insight. Help us to see beyond our own minds, beyond what we can perceive in and of ourselves. As the Spirit of God is our teacher, may we see the deep spiritual realities behind those things on the surface. And may the Spirit of God speak to my heart and the heart of everyone here in convicting us to be obedient to that which our Lord says. We thank You for this time, and we offer it to You to be used to Your praise in Christ's name, Amen.

I've titled this passage tonight "Who is a Murderer?" because I really think that's what our Lord is talking about. This week I noticed – well, actually last week - that the Los Angeles Police Department had done a preliminary indictment on a man who, they say, had murdered at least 10 young girls, whom he apparently assaulted, and then murdered, and this seems to be the man who was known as the "Hillside Strangler." It wasn't very long ago that we remember the Skid Row Slasher, a man who went along with a knife cutting up derelicts on Skid Row.

I just returned from Chicago where a man by the name of John, I think his name is Gacy, assaulted homosexually little boys, and young boys, and then murdered them, stuffed them in plastic bags, and buried them under his house. And at this point they've dug up 33 such bodies. We all remember the

Manson murders. We all remember the people killed by Juan Corona and buried in the ground in places in Central California.

I vividly remember reading the account of a mass murder in an Arizona beauty shop. Not just a day ago, we read in the newspapers about a man in San Antonio, Texas, who decided to take out a rifle and just start shooting people, and he wounded at least 44 and killed at least 2. Not too many days ago, I picked up the newspaper and I read that a 15-year-old boy waited until his father had come home from work, gotten comfortable in his easy chair, and then took out a gun and pumped a bullet through his brain and killed him.

Some months before that, I remember a couple of teenage kids who hired a hitman to murder both their parents. And the police files can go on and on like this. That's just rather current. And they tell us that at least 25,000 murders occurred last year, and those are the ones they know about. It took a long time to discover the 33 bodies buried under the ground in plastic bags, and who knows but what other victims may lie in other places undiscovered.

Now if there are 25,000 murders, that's got to be nearly 100 murders, at least 70 to a 100 murders every day in our country. Last year in the city of Los Angeles, we had 421 murders. The last recorded year, and in the first nine months of the next period of time 460 murders. It's on the increase. Richard Hines told me today that in the last two days he has had to inform prisoners at the prison where he is of 5 family members that have died, and out of the 5, 2 of them were murder victims.

Murders come in all kinds of ways. They come through violent crimes. They come through domestic squabbles. They come through homosexual love triangles, as well as heterosexual love triangles. They come through gang warfares. They come as a result of arguments, and fights, and conflicts, and misunderstandings. They go on all the time. In fact, murders are so commonplace in our city that they don't always make the newspapers, unless they're bizarre or multiple.

Murder is really a very serious problem in our world, getting worse all the time. And that doesn't say anything about another form of murder, which is suicide. Recently in our own church within the last year, and even within the last month, two young men killed themselves. That's a form of murder, taking a life. That doesn't account for abortion, either, and since abortion was legalized there have been at least 6 million babies murdered.

Now notice what our Lord says in verse 21, "Ye have heard it said by them of old, Thou shalt not kill." Where did that come from? Well if you know anything about the Revelation of God, you know it came basically from Exodus chapter 20, when God gave the Decalogue and said, "Thou shalt not kill." But Scripture has a lot more to say about murder than just that.

In fact, if we go back even in the Book of Genesis, we find in the 9:6 this statement, “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.” Genesis 9:6 instituted capital punishment as a penalty for murder. And the reason is given in the same verse, “For in the image of God made he man.” To take the life of a human being is to assault the image of God He created in man, and that brings about serious penalty. And so Genesis 9 authorizes capital punishment for those who shed blood, because man is made in the image of God.

Now if you were to study Exodus 20, you would find that the word “thou shalt not kill,” means “murder.” It means murder. It does not refer to capital punishment. That is taking a life under divine allowance. It does not refer to a just war. There were times in God’s economy of Israel. There are times in God’s plan for history when there are conflicts on a national level, carrying out certain exercises of the will of God in judgment upon some nations, where there might be an allowance for killing, and it would not be considered murder.

I do not believe that the text of Exodus 20 has anything to do with self defense. I think that we have the right to protect the image of God in our lives, and the lives of our families, and those about us when they are assaulted and attacked by those who would kill us.

But what the Bible is talking about is murder, murder, planned, plotted to some degree murder. In Exodus 21:14 we read this. “But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; - ” or deceit “ - thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die.” Again, God reiterates the punishment of capital punishment or death for the one who presumptuously comes in a premeditative way to take the life of his neighbor.

In Numbers chapter 35 we have some further Word from God about this. Says, “If he smite him with an instrument of iron, so that he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death.” In other words, if a man takes an instrument of iron and crushes the skull of another, he’s a murderer. He is to die. “And if he smite him with throwing a stone, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. Or if he smite him with a hand weapon of wood, wherewith he may die, and he die, he is a murderer: the murderer shall surely be put to death. The avenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer.”

In other words the, the society was to protect itself by taking the life of the one who indiscriminately, premeditatively took the life of another. And it goes on in Deuteronomy chapter 35 to discuss other such situations where murder occurs.

Now if you know anything about the Bible, you know that this was the very first human crime. In Genesis chapter 4 it says this, “And Cain talked with Abel his brother: it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and murdered him.” And of course God said, “What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother’s blood cries unto me from the ground. And now

art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand."

And so it is that from the first human crime, murder, on through the Revelation of God, murder is a biblical issue. Now if we study the Scripture, we know how God feels about it. It is forbidden. It is punishable by death. We learn other things about murder in the Bible. For example, we learn that murder is a crime authored by the devil himself. John 8:44 says the devil is a murderer. And murder is basically authored by Satan.

We find something else about murder in Matthew chapter 15:19, for example, we find that murder is a manifestation of an evil human heart. Matthew 15:19 says, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies."

Now listen to me. Murders, thefts, and all that other stuff do not happen because of social deprivation. They happen because of a degenerated human heart. Murder does not happen because of stressful situations. It happens because it's authored by Satan himself. In Romans 1:29 it says that man has been "given over to a reprobate mind, -" and as a result of a reprobate mind, he is " - filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, -" et cetera. Man is a murderer because he has a reprobate mind that has been given over to evil because he rejects God. So that murder is a crime authored by the devil. It is a crime that comes out of the evil human heart.

In Galatians 5:21 Paul tells us that murder is an act of the flesh. It is a deed done by unregenerated human nature. We learn also in the Bible that murder is an abomination to God. In Proverbs 6:16-17 the Bible says there are "six things that the Lord hates: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: -" and it lists this " - hands that shed innocent blood." Murder is abominable to God. Murder is an act of an unregenerated human flesh. Murder is a manifestation of an evil heart. Murder is authored by the devil himself. Murder is punishable by death because it is an intrusion into life, which is created in the image of God.

And to show you how seriously God views murder, it says in Revelation 22:14, "Blessed are they that -" wash their robes " - that they may have right to the tree of life, and enter in through the gates into the city. For outside are dogs, and sorcerers, and fornicators, and murderers." The kingdom of God and the eternal state is not a place for murderers.

Now the list of biblical murderers is long, and we could spend all night and all through the night talking about them. The Old Testament lists a lot of murderers. I'll suggest a few for your memory: Cain, Lamech, Pharaoh, Abimelech, Joab, the Amalekites, David, Absalom, Zimri, Jezebel, Jehu, Athaliah, Joash, Manasseh. The New Testament lists some others: Herod, Judas, and the high priests, Barabbas, Herodias, her daughter, and that's a partial list.

Now biblical history and modern history are literally filled with murderers. From Cain to today, right now, we've had murderers in human society. You know when you think about a person who is a murderer, when you think about the kind of a man who could homosexually assault 33 little boys, stuff them in plastic bags and bury them in the ground, you shudder because it's almost an inhuman thing. We can't hardly relate to that.

We may relate a little easier to somebody who in a heated argument takes a gun and shoots somebody. We may relate a little more to a fight where somebody gives someone a blow that takes their life. But it's all the same to God. We shudder, frankly, at the thought of murder. We're afraid of it. We don't like to walk the dark streets of certain towns or of our own city in certain places. We worry about getting double locks on our doors for fear somebody might come and kill us.

I know what it's like to have the experience of having your life threatened and I know what it's like to have people say they're going to take your life. And perhaps you've lived through some anticipation or fantasy like that, or even a reality like that.

Now if we are sort of sick inside to think about such a crime as murder, we identify well with the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus is speaking to. For in Matthew 5 through 7, our Lord is addressing the scribes and Pharisees on a hillside in Galilee along with the rest of the multitude. But here in particular, He refers to their approach to life. Look again at verse 21.

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old, Thou shalt not murder; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgment." Stop right there. Now Jesus is saying, "You know, you believe that it's wrong to murder because if you do you'll be in danger of judgment." And at that point the scribes and the Pharisees would have said, "Amen, Amen. We're against murder. We have been taught by them of old by the rabbinical tradition that murder is an evil thing." In fact, the thought that they did not murder - now listen to this. This is the key. The thought that they did not commit murder was one way in which they convinced themselves they were righteous. We would not murder. We would never murder anyone. And consequently, we must be righteous. We have kept the law of God, 'Thou shalt not kill.' We wouldn't murder anyone. And so their not murdering was one of their favorite ways to justify themselves.

Another favorite way we'll find in verse 27, they took the law of God, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." And because they didn't commit the overt act of adultery, they convinced themselves that they were holy. And so if we reject the idea of murder. And if we say to ourselves, "Why, that terrible breed of humanity. That indescribable vileness that characterizes murderers, they're a different kind of person than I am. I don't murder. I'm not that kind of person. I wouldn't hurt anybody.

And we would identify with the Pharisees at that point. But, this is precisely where Jesus wants to attack them. Back up to verse 20. He says, "For I say unto you that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in no case enter the kingdom of heaven." They said, "if we don't murder, we're righteous." Jesus said, "Your righteousness has to exceed that. Not murdering is not enough." And when He said "your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees," He then proceeded from verse 21 to verse 48 to give six illustrations of how our righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

And this is only the first one, only the first one. And Jesus gives them a teaching here about murder that's literally shocking. It is devastating. And it affects them in three ways, and this is the outline I want you to watch tonight. And it affects us the same three. Number one, it affects their view of themselves. It affects their view of God. And it affects their view of others. It affects their view of themselves, God, and others. What Jesus is going to say is so dramatic it'll shatter all of their comfortable categories. They had convinced themselves because they didn't kill anybody they were holy, they were righteous. Jesus blows that concept to bits.

The first point, Jesus' words to them affects their own self-righteousness. They thought they were righteous because they didn't kill. Now, it was rabbinic law that they adhered to. Notice again in verse 21. "You have heard that it was said by them of old." Now Jesus here is reminding them of rabbinic tradition. He's not referring to the law of Moses. He's not referring necessarily to the Word of God. "Them of old" were the rabbis. This was a common formula referring to their past rabbinical teaching.

"Your religious system," is what He's saying, "your system of Judaism, your traditional system, your teaching says, you are not to kill, because if you do you're in danger of judgment. You've been taught that. That is the tradition that's passed down to you."

And you remember that I told you last time that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus were totally dependent upon this tradition. Because the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, remember I told you that? The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. They did not any longer speak Hebrew. Since the Babylonian captivity and following, they spoke Aramaic, and so the Hebrew Scriptures were lost to them, in a sense. When they came back from captivity, rather than the rabbis and the scribes and the rest of them as the time went on providing a Scripture in their own language, they kept them in ignorance. And so they couldn't really read and understand the Hebrew for themselves.

And so the rabbis, the scribes, and the Pharisees, and the others would tell them what it meant. And this gave them a tremendous power over the people because the people couldn't verify whether it was true or not.

You'll remember that when they came back from captivity, you remember, and they picked up the Scripture in Ezra and Nehemiah's time, and they read the Scripture. It says that "They read the

Scripture to the people, and gave the sense of it," it says in Nehemiah chapter 8. They had to give the sense of it cause the people couldn't understand it. And it continued even till Jesus' day. So that the people were not people of the Book. They themselves did not read the Word of God, the Old Testament. They listened to what the traditional rabbis taught, and they twisted and perverted it to their own ends.

But every now and then, the things they taught did have a biblical scriptural base, such as this. You look at verse 21 again and it says, "Thou shalt not kill." Now you know that is biblical. That is biblical. They were right on at that point. They got that from Exodus 20.

Further, you'll notice it says, "Whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgment." That's true also. I read you Numbers 35:30-31. It says right in there that when someone commits murder, they're to die. So this rabbinic tradition was true. They were right on at this point. That was alright, it was basically scriptural.

But the point that Jesus is making here is it doesn't go far enough. That much is true, but there's so much more. You have taken part of God's law. You have interpreted it only partially and then satisfied yourself with keeping your partial interpretation, and therefore justifying yourself. And you'll notice interestingly enough it says that "whoever does this shall be in danger of judgment." And by the way, the term "judgment" here refers to the local court, the local court. Now I want you to think about this. What He is saying is this. Your teaching says, "You must not murder - " now watch " - because if you murder, you will be in danger of being punished by the civil court." Did ya get that? Now what's wrong with that? It doesn't go far enough, does it?

Their full interpretation of the 6th commandment of the decalogue was this. Don't kill because if ya do, you'll get in trouble with the law. But what about God? Well, what about God's holy character? Oh that didn't even enter into the discussion. They had made this so mundane they didn't even mention God. They didn't even mention divine judgment. They said nothing about inner attitudes. They said nothing about the heart. All they said was, "Don't murder or you'll get in a lot of trouble." Very superficial. Their interpretation stopped short. And because they didn't murder and didn't get in trouble, they decided they were self-righteous, self-justified, perfectly happy about themselves, justified before God. We don't kill.

But listen, they forgot to read the rest of the Old Testament. Because the rest of the Old Testament says that God - watch this - "desires truth in the inward parts," Psalm 51:6. The rest of the Old Testament says that "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all their heart, soul, mind, strength, thy neighbor as thyself." The rest of the Old Testament says that "God, who knows the hearts, and tries the hearts of men, will judge." In other words, the part of God's law they left out was the internal part. It wasn't enough for you not to kill. God was concerned about what was going on inside. They had restricted the scope of God's commandments to an earthly court. They had restricted the scope of

God's commandment to an act of murder.

And that's why Jesus goes on in verse 22, and says this, "But I say unto you - " Let Me tell what God really meant by that word in Exodus. Let Me give you the right interpretation. " - whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause - " and by the way, in the King James it says "without a cause." It's not in the best manuscripts. Let's leave it out. "Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."

Jesus simply says, it isn't the issue of murder alone, it's the issue of anger and hatred in your heart. You cannot justify yourself because you don't kill. Because if there's hatred in your heart, you are the same as a murderer. And so I say the first point in this statement is that Jesus' words affected their own self-righteousness. It affected how they viewed themselves, how we view ourselves.

We do this all the time. And we say, "Oh, you know, that category of people that murder, I would never do that." And yet sometimes we get so angry on the inside with someone. We mock people. We may curse people. We may feel bitterness toward people. We may nurse grudges toward people. We have unreconciled feelings toward people. And our Lord Jesus is saying, "That is the same as murder." Because God looks at the heart.

And so when He says, "I say unto you," He swept aside all the rabbinical rubbish, and He put the emphasis where the emphasis belonged. He stripped them of their self-righteousness. He said, in effect, "Who is a murderer? I'll tell you who is a murderer. Anybody who is angry with his brother, anybody. You're a murderer." That's pretty straightforward, isn't it? Pretty devastating. It strips the Pharisees bare, and it doesn't do a bad job on us either, frankly.

Anger is murder's root, and our Lord says anger and murder merit equal punishment. In verse 22, He is saying, "You're in danger of the judgment. You're in danger of the council. You're in danger of hell fire."

Now what's our Lord doing? And I want you to get this, it's so important. Our Lord is saying this, that what's going on in the inside of you is what God judges. You may hate more than a murderer hates. You just don't have an opportunity to kill. And even a less violent hatred than that, even anger with a brother to any degree, is the same in God's eyes as murder. And so frankly, who is a murderer? The answer is all of us, all of us.

Listen to 1 John 3:15. "Whosoever hates his brother is a murderer." Did you hear that? "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer." And brother here is used in a broad and generic sense in, in terms of social relationships, people in your life, not your spiritual brother because nobody listening to Jesus at that point would understand the brotherhood of believers. You have hatred, you're a murderer. You

have anger, you're a murderer. And in God's eyes, it's no different than a man who goes out and does the crime.

You know, it's amazing to me how we justify ourselves. Everybody does that, even the worst of men justify themselves, you know that? Even the worst of men justify themselves. On May of 1931, the city of New York witnessed the capture of one of the most dangerous criminals that that city had known until that time. He was known as "Two Gun Crowley."

Two Gun Crowley, they said, would kill at the drop of a hat. He brutally murdered many people, even finally brutally murdering policemen. What did he think of himself? We know what he thinks of himself or what he thought of himself, because finally he was captured in his girlfriend's apartment after a long and arduous gun battle involving at least 100 policemen. And when they finally got him, there was a bloodstained note there, because he was severely wounded, and this is what the note said. "Under my coat is a weary heart, but a kind one, one that would do nobody any harm."

You say, "That's absurd." Yeah, but, you see, that's the depth to which a human heart will go to justify itself. Here is someone who would do nobody any harm? Who's he kidding? He was later executed in the electric chair.

You see, even the worst of men exonerate themselves, to say nothing of the best of men, who would think, "Oh, I would never put myself in that category." And Jesus strips us stark naked of our self-righteousness and says, "If you're angry with a brother, or if you hate somebody, you're a murderer." Pretty serious. Jesus is saying, "Even if ya don't do the killing, if your heart is full of anger and hate you're a murderer."

By the way, sociologists and psychologists tell us - and I just recently found this out - that hate - as I think about it it has to be true - hate brings you nearer to murder than any other emotion. And hate is merely the extension of what? Anger. Anger, hatred, leads to murder. It is the common source of killing. And by the way, hatred and anger can even kill you, because it can eat you alive on the inside.

And so Jesus strikes hard to show us beloved listen to this, what He's trying to show is that even the best of men, if the truth were known, are the worst of men. You and I sit so smugly and we think that because we don't commit these kind of crimes that we're righteous before God, and Jesus says, "If you've ever been angry or hated, you're a murderer." And He uses three illustrations to reveal this sin in verse 22. Three. Let's look at them.

First one. "Whosoever shall say to his brother." Well, let's go back to the first one. I don't want to get to the second one. "Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause," and as I said that's left out - there always will be a cause. That doesn't even appear in the better manuscripts. I don't know why I keep reading it. Preacher of habit. "Whosoever is angry with his brother shall be in danger of

judgment.” Now that’s the first illustration. Jesus says, “You want Me to show you how serious this issue is? Whoever is angry with his brother is in danger of judgment.”

Now let me say this. Now I think there’s a righteous anger that we need to talk about, but that is not what Jesus means here. You know, there were times when Jesus took a cord, right, and started throwing people around. There are times when God’s indignation reaches its absolute limit and explodes. There are times when the vengeance of God bursts loose and people lose their lives for a time at eternity.

And there are times when a believer has a right to be angry. In fact I believe that the holier we get, the angrier we get about some things, right? And I think we need a little more of that, you know? In a day when everybody wants to talk about love, and let’s all get together, and don’t say anything against anything, we begin to get so mealy-mouthed about everything that we won’t stand for anything.

Now I think maybe that some of us ought to learn a little bit about righteous indignation and start getting mad about some things. There are lots of things going on in our country we ought to be mad about, or be angry about, with a righteous indignation. There are some things going on in our schools that we ought to be angry about and have righteous indignation over. Some of the things our children are exposed to we ought to be angry about. Some of the trends in our society we ought to be angry about. Some of the things that come waltzing into our homes on that ridiculous boob tube we ought to be angry about.

We ought to get angry about some things. We ought to have righteous indignation. We ought to be angry, Ephesians 4:26 says, with the kind of anger that is not sin. He says, “Be angry, and sin not.” There is a right kind of anger.

But here He’s talking about selfish anger. You’re angry with a brother. Something has happened and you’re really hopping mad. You’re angry. And it can be a slow burn or it can be a flaring thing. The word is *orgizesthe* and the, the root is *org* and *org* is a sort of a brooding, nursed anger that is not allowed to die. It’s just a smoldering, long-lived kind of thing for the most part.

And when you hold a grudge against somebody, when you hold a bitterness against somebody, when you hold anything no matter how small against somebody, you are as guilty, says Jesus, as the person who takes a life, and you deserve the same judgment. If you are angry with your brother, you are in danger of judgment. There shouldn’t be any difference. It’s just as serious.

By the way, the judgment at the end of verse 21 that the civil court would give would be execution. And He says the same thing right here. If you’re angry, you are in danger of execution. Capital punishment should belong to you for anger just as much as for murder. Now this is a tremendous

statement, devastating, because it forces us inside. It isn't what we do so much as what we are and what we feel.

I don't know a civil court in the world that would give the death penalty to somebody for getting angry. They may give it throughout history for murder, but not for anger. But if God's calling the verdicts, and God's sitting on the throne, He is saying in effect that the one who is angry is as guilty as the one who kills.

Now I want ya to notice the second illustration He uses in verse 22. "Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council." Now what does this mean? Well, this person is also condemned as a murderer. This is another person who ought to go before the council and get the same death penalty. He's saying to the Jews, "You're afraid of the death penalty for murder? On God's terms, it ought to be the same penalty for anger, and there ought to be the same penalty for saying 'Raca' to somebody."

Now Raca is an interesting term. It's very hard to translate. It is an untranslated epithet. In other words, it doesn't mean anything. It was sort of a term of derision that doesn't really translate. It meant something in that time and they all knew what it meant. It is a malicious term. Some have said it means "brainless idiot." Some have said it means "worthless fellow, silly fool, empty head, blockhead, rockhead." And commentators go all over every place with it. But what it is is a verbal expression of slander against the person. Maybe more directed toward his personality, and toward something in his character, or something in his looks, something of that sort. It is a word of arrogant contempt. It is a word of despising. You know, it's when you cut off a guy, and he rolls his window down and says it to ya. In our language it's different, but it's basically the same thing, or he can do the same thing by making gestures with his hand or whatever. It's the same thing. And I've heard it a few times in my life. It didn't come out "Raca" but it was "Raca." But the person who does that is the same.

It's the poison under the tongue, like the adders poison of Psalm 140. It's that malicious, slanderous verbiage cast in somebody's teeth as they did to Jesus. And it says in Matthew 27:29, "they bowed the knee before him, and they mocked him." They mocked Him. "You worthless fellow, you silly fool, you stupid idiot," that kind. It is a word used by someone who despises another.

There's a tale told about a certain rabbi whose name was Simon Ben Eleazar, and Simon Ben Eleazar was coming from his teacher's house, and he'd just had a lesson at the feet of this great teacher, and he was feeling uplifted in the thought of his own scholarship, and he was so pleased with his own erudition, and he was so thrilled with his own righteousness, and his own goodness, and his own holiness. And as he was walking along he came across a very low, rather ugly common man who passed by and greeted him. And the rabbi did not return the greeting, but said, "You Raca, how ugly you are. Are all the men of your town as ugly as you?" To which the man replied, "That I do not know, go and tell the Maker who created me how ugly is the creature He has made."

Contempt, says our Lord, is murder in the heart, and the death penalty is equally deserved. Beloved, what Jesus is saying is what you feel - now listen to me - what you feel inside is enough to damn you to eternal hell as much as what you do on the outside. Do you hear that? That's the message.

There's a third illustration in verse 22. "Whosoever shall say, Thou moron - " from which we get our word moron " - shall be in danger of hell fire." Now apparently this was even a worse thing to say to somebody. It seems as though there's a rising level. If you notice the word moron, from which we get moron, comes apparently from a Hebrew root, marah. And marah means to rebel. And in the Hebrew Bible, a fool was one who rebelled against God. And so to call someone a rebel against God, now if it's true, you did him a favor. But if you're doing it as a epithet of hatred, then it is a sin. Let me show you the difference.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, "You fools," you morons. Only it wasn't wrong for Him to say it because it was true, wasn't it? They were fools. They had rebelled against God. "The fool has said in his heart, There is no God," it says in the Psalms. "The fool - " according to the Proverbs " - lives against God." The fool lives a life set against God. He lives a life of self-will, and self-design, and you do a man a favor to go and say, "You're a fool to live like that."

Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus said to those disciples, "Fools and slow of heart to believe." There is a time when we do people a favor to say, "You're foolish." And what Jesus is trying to do, and He does it very well, is absolutely destroy the system of self-righteousness. It can't stand that kind of examination. And so our Lord gets to the core of the matter.

Now you notice the word "hell fire" at the end of verse 22? It's a very serious word, the word "hell." The Greek word translated "hell" here is the word gehenna, and I want to tell you about it. It's fascinating. Gehenna is a word with a history. Gehenna is used and translated "hell" very commonly. It's Matthew 5:22, 29, 30, Matthew 10:28, Matthew 18:9, 23:15, and 23:33, Mark 9, Luke 12. It's used in James. It's a very common word. It means "hell." But gehenna - now listen - is a reference to Hinnom, gehenna is a form of Hinnom. It means the valley of Hinnom.

When we were in Jerusalem, it was pointed out to us where the valley of Hinnom was. It is southwest from Jerusalem. It's very easy to see. It's there today. It is a notorious place. I'm going to read you a little of its history. It was the place where Ahaz had introduced into Israel the fire worship of the heathen god Molech to whom little children were burned in the fire. "He burned incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and he burned his children in the fire." Says 2 Chronicles 28:3. Further, Josiah the reforming king had stamped out the evil worship of Molech in the place of Hinnom, and ordered that the valley should be forever after an accursed place. Because of what had gone on, because it had been defiled, because in the valley, there had been the fire of Molech.

Now in consequence of this, the valley of Hinnom bore that curse throughout all of Israel's history. It became a place where the Jewish people dumped their garbage. The valley of Hinnom was the garbage dump of Jerusalem. And what they had there was a public incinerator that burned all the time, all the time, all the time, never went out, never went out. And when Jesus referred to gehenna or hell and described the eternal state of the wicked as gehenna, what He was saying is it is an eternal, never ending fire, in an accursed place, where the rubbish of humanity will burn and be consumed. Vivid language.

Always, says the historian, the fire smoldered in Hinnom, and a pall of thick smoke lay over Hinnom at all times, and it bred a loathsome kind of worm which was very hard to kill. That is what our Lord refers to in Mark 44, "where the worm dies not."

So gehenna, the valley of Hinnom, became identified in peoples' minds as a filthy, vile, accursed place where useless and evil things were destroyed, and Jesus used it as a vivid illustration of hell. And He says if you're even angry and if you ever say a malicious word to sort of put down some person, or worse than that if you ever cursed them as it were to hell, you are as guilty and as liable for eternal hell as a murderer is. And so Jesus attacks the sin of anger, the sin of slander, and the sin of cursing, and with it He destroys their self-righteousness.

His words have a second effect in verses 23 and 24. They affect not only their self-righteousness, but they affect their worship of God. And I want you to see this. This is really powerful. It's very simple. Now, Jesus moves from the Pharisees, and the scribes, and the people to Himself. And for us, He takes us to the area of worship, and I want you to see what He says.

Worship was a major issue with scribes and Pharisees. Their whole life was worship. They were in the temple all the time doing their thing, worshiping God, making sacrifices, carrying out the law. Their life was a circumscribed life of worship. But our Lord here condemns that very worship.

Look at verse 23, "Therefore," in other words, the "therefore" means since God is concerned with internal things, since God is concerned with attitudes toward others, how you feel about your brother, how you speak to your brother, and whether or not you curse your brother, since God is concerned with internal things listen to this. "If you bring your gift to the altar - " here you come for worship " - and there remember - " when you get there, you remember " - your brother has anything against you; Leave there your gift before the altar, go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift." In other words, reconciliation comes before worship. Boy, what a powerful point. I hope we can get this.

Every Jew would understand this scene. The Jews knew the standard of worship. The idea of sacrifice for them was very obvious, very simple. If a man committed a sin, what happened? A breach

came between himself and God. The relation was disturbed. How was that to be remedied? It was to be remedied by a contrite and broken heart, and a man was to confess his sin, and a man was to manifest repentance, contrition and brokenness. And then in order to manifest outwardly that inward feeling, he was to bring an animal as a sacrifice. The animal wasn't the issue. The attitude was, you see? You see, obedience in the heart is better than sacrifice. The sacrifice was merely an outward symbol of a repentant obedient heart. And so when the breach came, and the man repented and in sorrow asked forgiveness, and set things right with God, he then brought a sacrifice.

And so the picture here is perhaps even the day of atonement, and the Jew is coming because he wants to be apart, and he has his own sacrifice to bring, as well, and he comes and he offers the sacrifice to the priest. He walks through the outer part of the courtyard, and he walks into the inner part of the courtyard, and finally he comes to the court of the priests and he has to stop there because he can't enter. Only the priests could go in there.

And so he takes the sacrifice and gives it to the priest, and then he's to lay his hands on it to identify with it. And the priest takes it in and makes the sacrifice. And the man gets all the way there, and he's got the thing in the hands of the priest, and he puts his hands on it, and the identification is going on, and all of a sudden Jesus is saying to him, "Stop right there. You remember you have your brother? And the brother has something against you. Leave that altar. Don't make that sacrifice until you make things right with your brother. Settle the breach between man and man before you settle the breach between man and God."

This isn't anything new. They knew this. This had always been God's standard. In Isaiah 1:11, God said to Israel through Isaiah, "For what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?" What good are they all? "says the LORD: I am full of your burnt offerings, the fat of rams, the fat of fed beasts; I delight not in the blood of bullocks, and lambs, and he goats." I don't want any more of your vain oblations. "Your incense is an abomination unto me; your new moons and your feasts my soul hate: they are trouble unto me; I am weary of the whole thing." Why? "Your hands are full of blood. Seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow." He's saying, "Don't you dare come to Me with your religion until you've made your life right with the poor, and the oppressed, and the orphans, and the widows." In other words, deal with your brother, and then deal with Me, see? Ah, it's a tremendous truth.

Isaiah wasn't even done with that theme because it came again in 58:5. "Is it such a fast that I have chosen? A day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head like a bulrush, and spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to deal bread to the hungry, and bring the poor that are cast out into thy house?" In other words, don't come to Me with your phony worship until you've met the need of your brother.

That's what our Lord is saying. This isn't anything new to them. They knew the breach between a man and a man came before the breach between God and a man could rightfully be settled.

Jeremiah 7:9 He said, "Will you steal, will you murder, will you commit adultery, and will you swear falsely, and will you burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods; And then come and stand before me in this house?" Get out of here, He says. Till you make right the relationships. That's what He's saying. The picture's very vivid. He says, "If you Pharisees and you scribes and you religionists, you come in with all this worship paraphernalia. I don't want any of it. Go away. Go away until it's right with your brother." That's what the Lord is saying.

Now, the Lord brings us to a very fascinating point. Look at verse 23 again. "If you bring your gift to the altar, and you remember that your brother has something against you." Did you see that? It isn't even that you're angry, it is that he's angry at you, amazing. Do you see how important it is that we have right relations?

Now I believe that the implication here is that the one offering the offering has caused the anger or contributed to the anger of this other one. But, you see, in verse 22 He says if you're angry, you're in danger of condemnation. And in verse 23 He says if anybody's angry at you, I don't want your worship. Go away. "Leave your gift, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift." Our Lord shows His holiness in the fact that He's not even dealing with the anger of the one worshiping. That was dealt with in verse 22. He is dealing now with anger against the worshiper.

You know you may know that somebody's upset at you. You may know that somebody has something against you. You may not feel anger toward them. You might - I have people say this all the time. "You know, I don't understand why they feel like they do. I don't feel anything about that. I don't have any - I'm free from any animosity. I don't feel any anger." If they do, you better go and settle that. God doesn't want you angry - get this one - God doesn't want anybody angry with you. That is rendering you guilty of murder. That's pretty strong stuff folks, pretty strong stuff.

If you come to Grace Church to worship the Lord and you're angry with somebody, leave, leave, and stay away till you've made it right. If you come to Grace Church and because of something that happened somebody's angry with you and you have never made it right, I don't care who that person is, go and make it right and don't come back until it's right.

You know, I want this church, as I said this morning, to be everything it can be. And sometimes we sit around and say, "How can we make our church more what it ought to be?" Oh, you know people say, "We need greater - " People ask me this sometimes they'll say, "How can we increase our worship? How can we have a more worshipful time?" And you know, they think, well, maybe if we had more of a certain kind of music, or maybe if we had more aesthetics around us. Maybe if we had better

hymns, or better special music, or better sermons, or whatever it is.

Listen, if you want to enhance worship, then everybody who's got something against a brother, leave. And come back when it's right. Then we'll see the power of the Spirit of God in our midst, amen? Thank you, both of you. It's hard. This is where we live, isn't it? Pretty tough, pretty tough.

You say, "John, in the morning you tell us to come, and at night you tell us to leave." But I had to get you here to tell you to leave. Listen. People who discuss what we can do to increase the worship always miss the point. The way to increase the meaningful worship is to get the people out who don't have any business being here, because there's something wrong. You know, I believe that every Sunday there are people who come here, husbands and wives who have bitterness between the two of them and they try to worship God, and God doesn't want anything to do with it. I believe there are families that come where there's animosity from the kids toward the parents or the parents toward the kids and God isn't interested in their worship.

I believe that there are times when we come to church and there is a feeling against somebody else in the fellowship, or a neighbor in the street or somewhere, and we know there's a bitterness. We do absolutely nothing about it. There's a fellow Christian that we don't particularly care for and something has happened, and we let that thing settle in a bitterness. And the Bible says, "Go away. You offer nothing to God. He is not interested in your worship. It's a sham."

Psalms 66:18 says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." First Samuel 15:22 says, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offering and sacrifice, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken is better than the fat of rams."

You say, "John, how do I find that person who's angry with me?" Well, I think the implication of the text is that you know this person's angry with you. I mean, obviously, there are people angry with me. I don't even know it. I can't run around just asking everybody. And there are other times when I know somebody's angry with me and I try to reconcile with them, and I do my best, and I ask their forgiveness, and I try to make it right, and they don't forgive me. But I've done the best I can. There's nothing more I can do. Then I am free to worship God.

I try to be reconciled with some people. It's very hard. There are some people I should reconcile with but I don't even know that they feel that way. But listen, when I do know it and when I can do something I must, says Jesus. And so Jesus' words are devastating. They affect our own self-righteousness and they affect our worship of Him.

Finally they affect our relations with others. He's already introduced that in verses 23 and 24. He's already said that. And now He gives a specific example in 25 and 26. He says Now that you've taken care of the worship part and you've left, here's what to do. Now that you've left to get it right so you

can worship God, "Find your adversary, agree with him quickly, while you're in the way; lest that any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. And truly I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out from there, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing." "The last quarter of a cent," the Greek is.

Now what's He saying? The imagery of our Lord is graphic. He is saying you better go and get it right with your brother. And He uses an illustration borrowed from the old legal method of dealing with debtors in Jewish society. The idea is that you're here worshiping and you've got a debt. And it's come to the place where you're actually being dragged into court over this debt. This is a very important thing.

And the key on it is in verse 25, "Agree with thine adversary quickly." Immediately, now. I mean you've left your gift. Go, do it now. Say, "You know, I'm just gonna work that out when the right time comes, and I'm going to say something." Now, immediately. Time for reconciliation. Because tomorrow maybe too late is the implication. You'll be cast into prison and you'll have to be stuck there without the possibility of ever paying back that debt, and it'll be too late.

Now here our Lord – watch - focuses on the guilty party. In 23 and 24 He's saying, essentially, you're there at the altar. You're there, and you know somebody hates you, somebody is angry with you. And now He moves to deal with the factor of guilt. There may be guilt on both sides, but the guilty party is in view, if it's both or if it's one. And He is saying, "Settle your case out of court." That's what He's saying. Don't let this thing continue and continue until you're on your way to court, and then somebody will lose and get thrown into prison, and never be able to pay it back. That's what He's saying. Settle it out of court.

In Jewish law when a man was adjudged guilty and he was adjudged to be the debtor, he was handed over to the court officer, the huprets by the way, the under rower is the term used, sometimes called a praktr in Luke 12. He's handed over to the court officer, and the court officer, then, tries to exact from the individual the payment to the creditor. The adjudication says that this man has to pay this man so much. The court officer tries to get it, if he can't get it, he takes the man who defaults, slams him in prison, and he has to stay in prison till he can pay it back. The point is if you're in prison, you can't ever pay it back. Can't be done. Jesus here is saying, settle it out of court, reconcile before it's severe judgment and you can't reconcile at all.

Now what does He mean here? Does He mean that the time will come when the person will die and you'll never made it, be able to reconcile? Does He mean the time will come when God will chasten you and judge you, and it'll be too late? Possibly both of those things. He doesn't really explain that. But what He does say is this. You can't worship Me unless your relations are right. So hurry, hurry and make them right. Don't let them go to the place where there will be a civil judgment made and somebody loses in the end. Don't let it go too far is the idea. Don't let it go to the place where God in,

in judgment, moves in. Act before then.

And I believe in the final analysis, He's saying that God is the real judge, and hell is the real punishment. And if you don't make things right, you may find yourself in an eternal hell with a debt that never could be paid.

Now what He is saying, let me sum it up right now. You Pharisees and scribes who are depending on your own self-righteousness, just because you don't kill, you think you're holy, let Me tell you something. If you're angry, if you've ever said a malicious word about somebody's character, if you've ever cursed anybody, you're like a murderer. If you've ever come to an altar to worship God and had something against your brother, you are in danger of such judgment, such hypocrisy would be enacted in your worship that you leave that gift and run to make it right.

And when you get into a conflict with somebody, immediately, as fast as you can, resolve that issue because you, too, are in danger of hell. The point He's telling them is this. The fact that you don't murder is a little piece of the iceberg. You've got grudges that you've never settled. You worship in hypocrisy. You curse. You malign. You're angry. And the same judgment comes upon you for that. Death and hell are what you deserve. That's what He's saying.

And so does Jesus speak to their self-righteousness, speak to the issue of worship, and speak to the issue of relationships with others. He devastates their comfort, their confidence, the smugness of their self-righteousness - now watch - by setting a standard so high that nobody keeps it.

Listen. Who is a murderer? Ask yourself, who is a murderer? Have you ever been angry? You ever called anybody a name? Maybe your wife or husband or child? Somebody under your breath? Have you ever cursed anybody? Have you ever come to church to worship while you had bitterness in your heart? Such hypocrisy. Have you ever had a grudge with somebody and you dragged it all the way to the court and you never settled it? And you weren't faithful? Then you're the same as a murderer because you allowed conflict, bitterness, hatred, anger to enter into your heart.

Let me ask a second question. First question, who is a murderer? Second question, who deserves death and hell? Who does, who deserves death and hell? You do, I do, 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? I mean we've all worshiped in hypocrisy. We've all been angry. We've all said malicious things. We've all thought a curse, or said a curse. We've all been unreconciled to a brother. We've all done that. What are we going to do?"

And that is exactly what Jesus is after. He wants to drive them to the fact that they cannot be righteous on their own, which will drive them to their knees at the foot of the cross to accept the imputed righteousness that only Jesus Christ can give. You see? Everything that He says here is to drive them to frustration and inadequacy so that they come to Him.

He died our death. He entered our hell that we might have righteousness. You deserve death. I deserve death. You deserve hell. I deserve hell. We're all murderers. All the Pharisees were, the scribes were, and everybody is, and so Jesus went to the cross, died our death, suffered our hell, and offers us the gift of His own righteousness. That's the meaning of the gospel, see?

And by the way, this is just one crime we've committed. There are myriad more. So we are brought again to the fact that by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified. But the righteousness that we desperately need comes as a gift from God. Paul calls it "the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to us."

Let me close with this. God had every reason to be angry with us, didn't He? God had every reason to hate us, righteously to hate us. God had every reason to hold us in contempt. God had every reason to curse us, righteously. God had every reason to send us away because we were murderers. But you know something? Even though we're as foul as the Mansons, and the Coronas, and the slashers, and the slayers of the world, He loves us, He forgives us, He pays our debt, and wonder of wonders, He seeks to reconcile us to Himself in His eternal kingdom because He wants to have fellowship with us. Is that incredible?

Now listen to me, if an absolutely holy God can so desire to be reconciled to vile murderers like us, can we find it in our hearts to be reconciled to our brothers? He sets the pattern. Let's pray.

Thank You, Father, again tonight for a strong word. Oh, we are feeling the power of the Lord Jesus. His words tear us apart. They unbare the deepest secrets of our hearts. They strip us of our self-righteousness. They unmask the foolishness of the thinking that says we've arrived spiritually. We are redeemed, and we are saved, most of us, but we are still evil and sinful. Thank You for Your grace. Thank You that You've covered us in a righteousness not our own. Thank You that You died already for us so we don't have to pay the penalty that we deserve.

Oh, Father, help us to live the kind of life that we should live. Now that You have given us Your righteousness, You've also given us Your Holy Spirit. We have the power to overcome anger. We have the power to overcome hypocritical worship. We have the power to reconcile with a brother. We have the power to settle our differences in Your Spirit. And so we pray that we would do that following Your example with us, that we might so live as sons of the kingdom, to give glory to the King, whom we love and to Whom we owe everything. Amen.

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