

CURING BAD BLOOD (PART 2) MATTHEW 5:21-26

I have a friend, a former pastor, whose wife left him after twenty something years of marriage. She didn't leave him for another man; she didn't leave him because *he* had been unfaithful. She left him because, in her words, she had recently discovered that she hated men.

She had grown up in a home with an abusive father but had suppressed the memories of that abuse for years, and during (of all things) a Christian retreat it all came back—all the memories and all the hurt. And the pain from those childhood memories was so devastating that she decided she didn't want to have anything to do with men any longer. She decided that her husband was part of a broader conspiracy by the male gender to control and dominate her, so she left him and their children.

My friend pleaded with her to come back, to get help, to be reconciled. She would have none of it. Broken and humbled, he searched his own soul and asked God to reveal any ways in which he might have contributed to her hurt, and then he went to her and asked for her forgiveness for those things. She refused to forgive him.

Several months after she left him, this man, no longer a pastor, attended a worship service at our church. After the service he met me up front and in the course of our conversation said, "Stan, I just don't get it. I went to a community worship service and there she was, singing heartily, eyes closed, hands raised, a euphoric expression on her face. I don't get it."

Let me ask *you*, do *you* get it? Does that incident at the community worship service bother you like it bothered my friend?

You might be thinking, "Hey, why don't you cut her some slack. You don't know the whole story. Maybe your pastor friend was a jerk and she needed to leave in order to preserve her own dignity and self-worth. Maybe she needs some alone time with the Lord before she can heal. And, at least she's worshipping. I mean, she could be doing a lot worse things than that, you know."

Let me assure you that I don't tell you this story to arouse disdain for this woman or to condemn her; nor do I minimize her hurt. I tell you this story to illustrate the folly of thinking that God is okay with our worship—that God accepts our worship—when there is tension or dissension between ourselves and another one of God's children.

Yet we all know people who are holding grudges and harboring resentment that go to church without skipping a beat. They sing, they pray, they take communion, and if you were to ask them how their relationship with God was they might very well tell you, "Great! Wonderful!"

It never occurs to them that there is a profound link between one's relationships with God's children and one's relationship with God. It never occurs to them that they cannot have peace with God if they have enmity towards one of God's children. Or, if it does occur to them, they have chosen to ignore it, or they have convinced themselves that it's no big deal, or that they are justified in feeling the way they do.

Do you know people like that? Are *you* like that?

Last Sunday we explored a passage which tells us that *God values His people so highly that He considers any hurtful attitudes, words, or behavior towards them to be murder and worthy of severe judgment.* That passage came in the context of Jesus informing His audience that He had come to fulfill the Old Testament, and one of the ways He was going

to do that was by clarifying and amplifying the intent of God's laws. In Matthew 5 He does this for six OT laws, the first of which is, "You shall not murder."

The commandment, "You shall not murder," was traditionally interpreted as, "Do not commit the *physical act* of murder." But Jesus tells us that this traditional interpretation is incomplete. God has *never* been satisfied with mere external behavior; He has always been interested in the heart. So for Him, murder is not just a violent physical act. It's a violent attitude—expressed in anger and name calling and slander and an unforgiving spirit. Murder is not merely destroying the physical life of a person. It's destroying a person's character, dignity, and honor. And this is a serious crime in God's sight. God values His people so highly that He considers any hurtful attitudes, words, or behavior toward those people to be murder, and worthy of severe judgment.

But Jesus continues to clarify and amplify the commandment, "You shall not murder," by telling us God's remedy when we break the law. If there is bad blood between us and another one of God's children—bad blood that is expressed in inappropriate anger, disgust, or calling a person derogatory names—it is not enough to just acknowledge or confess the sin to God and ask for His forgiveness. That may be the starting place, but it doesn't go far enough. God insists that we go to that *person* and repair the damage, and He insists that it be our top priority.

Look at what Jesus says beginning in **verses 23-24**. *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.*

Verse 22 begins with "so" or "therefore," which means that what Jesus is going to say in verses 23-26 emanates from what He just said in verses 21-22. Jesus has just finished telling us that murder in God's eyes is inappropriate anger towards or disgust with a person. When He says "so" or "therefore" He is giving us the antidote for this kind of anger and disgust. That antidote is reconciliation.

And this reconciliation is so important to God that it even trumps our worship. Jesus says, *"...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.*

The life of the average Jew in Jesus' day revolved around their religious activities. They wouldn't think of missing a Sabbath service at the synagogue. They wouldn't think of missing one of the three festivals that God required them to attend in Jerusalem every year. During each of those festivals they would pay their tithes and present their gifts to God at the temple altar so their sins could be atoned for. Presenting those gifts, either doves or sheep or goats, was no small matter. They stood in long lines, holding their restless, frightened animals, waiting their turn to meet the priest at the altar so that he could sacrifice the animal on their behalf.

But as uncomfortable as it was to stand and wait and try to keep the animals calm, those few moments at the altar with the priest were *the* highlight of the week-long festival for each family.

Jesus says, "As important as that is, there is something even more important than offering your gift—something that takes precedence over that profound act of worship." He says, "If, after waiting in that long line, you finally get *your* moment at the altar, but while you're there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift

there, tell the priest you've got some urgent business to attend to first, then go and find the person with whom you have unresolved conflict, make it right with him/her, then come back and present your gift to God."

Jesus is telling us at least three things in this statement. First, reconciliation is to be our top priority, even taking precedence over worship activities.

The average Jew in Jesus' day considered their worship and their sacrifice on the Day of Atonement to be the single most important event of the year. It was their opportunity to be forgiven and cleansed of their sin. But Jesus said there is something that takes precedence over that. If you have unresolved conflict with one of God's children, you have no business participating in that worship experience until after you have made things right with that person. And I believe Jesus is suggesting that God is not going to accept your gift at the altar *until* you are reconciled. Your gift is not pleasing to Him, and your worship is a sham.

For us who are part of the New Covenant, the theological equivalent to offering a gift at the altar is taking communion. When Paul was giving instructions about the Lord's Supper to the Corinthian church He warned them about taking it in an "unworthy manner," which He describes as sinning against the body and blood of the Lord and which brings judgment on the person who does it.

Taking communion in an unworthy manner is in the context of being dismissive of and divisive with others in the church. The people who comprised the church are the *body* of Christ, and He says if you have contributed to disunity and dissension in that body you had better think twice before you take communion. He says that's why some are weak and sick among you, and some have actually died. It's the Lord's judgment.

The point is reconciliation is to be our top priority, taking precedence over even the most important worship activities. And there is a very simple reason for this. God wants His kids to get along. God wants His kids to live in peace. God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately.

In our family, whenever someone has a birthday we have a tradition of pronouncing a blessing on the person who is being celebrated. Everyone in the room will say one thing that they admire or appreciate about the birthday boy or girl. That is a special time—the pinnacle of the birthday celebration.

One year, on my birthday, something happened or something was said that made a couple of my kids really mad at each other. And the tension was thick. When it was time for them to gather around me and pronounce their blessings, I said to those two, "Look, I don't care what you've prepared to say, I'm not going to enjoy it one bit unless you guys get things right with each other."

That's how God feels when His kids are mad at each other. So when those estranged siblings gather to celebrate Him at church or in a worship service, their tributes and their praises don't bring Him a bit of pleasure. How can they? When two of His kids that He loves equally are not getting along with each other, they are grieving Him and disrespecting Him because they are disregarding what really pleases Him. What really pleases Him is when His kids live with each other in love and peace and harmony.

And if our relationships with each other are not right, our worship is a sham, because we're not thinking about Him and what *He* really wants and desires. It's actually an insult to our Father. That's why Jesus would say, "leave your gift at the altar and go and make things right, and then come back and worship."

Please understand that God is not going to meet you until you first go and meet that person and make peace. Be aware that when there is a wall between you and someone else there's also a wall between you and God as well. Your service, your sacrifice, your worship is not acceptable.

The second thing that Jesus tells us in verses 23-24 is that *reconciliation is such an **urgent** matter that it must be pursued without **delay***. Look again at **verses 23-24**. ***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.***

Do you sense the urgency in Jesus' instruction? He is saying, "Don't procrastinate! Do it immediately! Even if it means postponing or interrupting the activities you consider to be most important.

I've talked to many people who are living in conflict with others, and I've heard lots of them say, "I'm just waiting for the right time." And it gets delayed and delayed and delayed. I've heard people say, "I'll do it when I come home from work," or "I'll do it after I've had a good night's sleep," or "I'll do it when I'm not so busy or when things settle down..." or "I'll do it the next time I see him or her."

I heard a good definition of a procrastinator. A procrastinator is one who won't take "now" for an answer. Jesus expressly prohibits procrastination when there is conflict in relationships. He says, "Don't delay! Do it now!"

When Jesus said these words He was speaking in Galilee to people who lived in Galilee, but He was describing a worship activity that took place at the Temple in Jerusalem. Traveling on foot from Galilee to Jerusalem took a minimum of a six days. So Jesus was saying that if you are offering your gift at the altar in Jerusalem, and you remember that there is tension or dissension between you and a brother, you need to walk back to Galilee (if that's where he is) and be reconciled to him, and then come back and offer your gift. That's a twelve day journey at a minimum!

You say, "Well, that's not practical! Why don't you just offer your gift and then go?"

Don't you see Jesus' point? Your gift at the altar is meaningless until you first go and take care of business with that estranged brother or sister. Practicality or convenience has nothing to do with it. It's God's protocol!

Do whatever it takes to make things right with your estranged brother or sister, and you do it now. God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately.

But there is something else in Jesus' statement in verses 23-24 that is noteworthy. Not only is reconciliation to be our top priority, even taking precedence over worship activities; not only is reconciliation such an urgent matter that it must be pursued without delay, but the responsibility to pursue reconciliation belongs to both parties in the conflict, even if one of the parties is not at fault. Jesus says in verse 23, ***²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you...***

We know from other passages in both the Old and New Testaments that when we have been offended by another person we need to go to him or her and address it. Here Jesus is saying that when you are aware that *you* have offended another person, either intentionally or inadvertently, *you* need to initiate.

And the real issue is, when you are *aware* that you have offended another person. I offend people all the time by virtue of my position as a pastor. A couple of weeks ago I had

the unpleasant experience of learning that about half a dozen people were offended with me, because of something I said from the pulpit, or because of something I did that disappointed them, or because I said or did (or didn't do) something that was interpreted as hurtful. And prior to that I had not been aware of any of those offenses.

That was a hard week because I spent quite a bit of it meeting with these people in order to reconcile, meetings that I had to initiate. But that's what Jesus asks us to do. Because God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately.

Jesus goes on to give another illustration of what this looks like in real life. Look at **verses 25-26**. 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."*

I believe Jesus is telling us at least two things in this scenario. First, *going public with the conflict displeases and dishonors the Father of the family*. Throughout Scripture God has mandated that His kids keep their conflict contained so that as few people as possible are involved. In Matthew 18 Jesus says that if you someone has sinned go to that person privately. If they don't listen, take one or two others. And it's only after they refuse to listen to those two or three, that you make it public. Containment preserves a person's dignity. Containment prevents an issue from unnecessarily escalating and causing irreparable damage—not only to the persons directly involved, but to the reputation of their heavenly Father.

Which is why Jesus tells us to make out-of-court settlements when there is a legal matter. Don't publicize your conflict. Don't get others unnecessarily involved. Swallow your pride, defuse the volatility of the conflict by resolving it quickly and privately. Because God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately.

The second thing that Jesus is telling us in verses 25-26 is that *drawing out the conflict may have adverse consequences*.

In the world of Jesus' day the law allowed for citizen's arrest. For example, if a person defaulted on his debts, the one to whom he owed money could arrest him, drag him to court and let the judge pronounce a sentence. But that was really a "no win" situation for both parties because if the debtor was thrown in prison, he couldn't make any money to pay back his debt. And once that matter went to court, it was out of their hands.

Jesus advocates out-of-court settlements because it is advantageous to both parties. But the real point of this illustration is that Jesus is promoting immediate resolution. Do it before it gets real ugly. Do it before others have to get involved. Do it before you burn your bridges. God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately.

So, can I ask you a couple of questions? Do you understand what Jesus is saying in these verses? Have you grasped the priority of peace in our relationships? Do you understand how meaningless our worship is to God if we are estranged from His children?

The next question is, what are you going to do about it?

You might be thinking to yourself, "Well yes I see it. It's pretty clear what Jesus meant in these verses. But I'm just not good at that kind of stuff. I get all tongue tied when I'm dealing with conflict, or I get pretty emotional and I'm afraid I'll burst into tears."

You know what? It's going to be a hard conversation. It *might* get emotional. It might be awkward at first. So what? Jesus didn't make exceptions for poor communicators or overly emotional people. If you belong to Him, do it. But know this: You *will* bring Him pleasure by doing it. And He will help you do it by the Spirit He gave to live in you.

Others might be thinking, "I'm scared. I'm afraid the person that I'm estranged from is going to yell at me, or tell me what a horrible person I am, or just plain refuse to talk to me."

Jesus did not say, "Go and be reconciled, unless you think the person might get really mad at you, or unless you think the person won't be receptive." There are no exceptions in Jesus' mandate. Yes, there is a risk that your attempt at reconciliation might be rebuffed or might not go well. But not only is it a risk worth taking, we have no alternative but to take it. We are commanded to try. Paul said in Romans 12, "As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." We are responsible to try to make peace, we are not responsible for the results.

Others of you might be thinking, "I'm so glad we live in an age of grace. Yes, I hear what Jesus is saying in these verses, and yes, I do have a couple of relationships where there is unresolved conflict. But hey, I've confessed it to God and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses me from all sin. Besides, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I'm loved and accepted unconditionally by God, and seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. So I'm content to *not* go and pursue reconciliation."

Don't let your skewed theology get in the way of simple obedience to your Master, Jesus. You can use your theology to talk yourself out of it, but you *will* suffer the consequences described in verses 21-22. Go and be reconciled. Yes it's hard. Yes, it's humbling. Yes, it's risky. But God values His children's relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately. That's an order from our Master.

“Curing Bad Blood” (Part 2) Matthew 5:23-26

Main Idea: God values His children’s relationships with each other so highly that He insists that any damage in those relationships be repaired immediately

Clarifying the command, “Do not murder” (21-22)
The traditional understanding and consequences

The intended meaning and consequences
Anger is a murderous attitude

Defamation murders a person’s dignity

Prioritizing conflict resolution (23-24)
Reconciliation is to be our top priority, even taking precedence over worship activities

Reconciliation is such an urgent matter that it must be pursued without delay

The responsibility to pursue reconciliation belongs to both parties, even if one is not at fault

Diffusing conflict ASAP (25-26)
Going public with the conflict displeases and dishonors the Father of the family

Drawing out the conflict may have adverse consequences

Application