

CURING BAD BLOOD (PART 1) MATTHEW 5:21-26

In the last part of John 17 Jesus is praying. He was fully aware that later on that evening He would be arrested and tried and beaten and flogged and handed over to be crucified. What do you suppose was going through His mind? What do you think He was praying about? Himself? The pain and suffering He was about to endure?

No. He was thinking about us. He was thinking about those who would believe in Him and who would be called His *Church*. And He was praying for us. And you know what He was praying for? He said, *“My prayer is not for [my disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message,²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one...²³ May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me”* (John 17:20-23 NIV).

When you read this you are forced to conclude at least two things. One, our relationships with each other are of utmost importance to Jesus. It is the longing of His heart that His followers be one—that we live in peace with one another and that we live in complete unity. Second, it is essential to the progress of the gospel that Jesus’ followers live in peace and harmony with each other. In fact, Jesus says that the way we relate to each other will prove to those outside the faith that Jesus is for real.

This emphasis on the relationships of God’s people with one another is nothing new. It’s all throughout Scripture. In fact, it is one of the fundamental reasons that the law was given through Moses. Many of those laws are expressed negatively, as in “Thou shalt not...” But the ultimate intent of these laws is positive—it is to honor and protect people and relationships. It is to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

In the passage we are going to look at today Jesus clarifies one of these laws—a law that is expressed negatively—by showing us its ultimate intent. He says in **Matthew 5:21-26**. *²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison.²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny”* (ESV).

We cannot appreciate or understand this passage apart from its context. Jesus just got through saying in **verses 17-20**, *¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

In this passage Jesus adamant declared that His message and His ministry did not oppose or contradict the Scriptures, nor did it diminish its authority or impact. On the contrary, His message and ministry actually clarify and complete the meaning of the Old Testament.

Just a few weeks ago, one of the preeminent evangelical pastors in America today told his congregation to “unhitch from the Old Testament.” One of the reasons he gave is that the Old Testament “...did not tell the story of Jesus.”

That completely contradicts what Jesus says in this passage and elsewhere, and what the other writers of the New Testament declared. When Jesus was talking to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus after He had risen from the dead, we are told, *“And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself”* (Luke 24:27).

The Old Testament *is* about Jesus. He came to *fulfill* it. Last week we talked about four ways in which Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets, what we call the Old Testament. One of those ways is that He clarified God’s intended meaning and goal for the moral and ethical law. And that is what Jesus is doing when He cites the command, “You shall not murder,” in verse 21.

But Jesus also asserted in verse 18 that every part of the Old Testament, down to the smallest letter, is God’s inspired Word, and as such is authoritative, reliable, and enduring. Not only that, but He said in verse 19 that all the moral commandments in the Old Testament, even the ones that were considered minor, are still valid, and He insisted that all His followers be committed to obeying and teaching them.

Finally, Jesus said that in our obedience to the Scriptures our righteousness needs to surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees, otherwise we will never enter the kingdom. That was a shock to His audience because the Jews had a saying in this day, “if only two people could go to heaven, one would be a scribe, and the other a Pharisee.” The scribes and Pharisees were considered by their peers as the most righteous people on earth, because they were so fastidious in their observance of the law. As a result they held sway over the lives of the common people, for they had mapped out what they considered to be the proper course for attaining righteousness through their interpretation and application of the Old Testament (Wilkins, 241).

But Jesus says, that won’t get you anywhere—and certainly not to heaven. Because the righteousness that Jesus was talking about was not mere external conformity to the letter of the law, but an internal righteousness—a righteousness that emanates from the heart and is expressed in motives, attitudes, reactions, even emotions. It’s not just keeping the letter of the law; it is an internal alignment with the spirit of the law.

And Jesus goes on to explain what that looks like in the rest of chapter 5. He takes six commandments, and He clarifies the meaning of those commandments by showing God’s original intent.

The first of those commandments is “You shall not murder.” He says in **verse 21**, *21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’*

Every person in Jesus’ audience would have known the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” and all of them would have been familiar with the passage in the Numbers which addressed the punishment that accompanied murder. It’s also quite possible that all

of them would have been able to say, “That’s a command I have kept. I don’t have to worry about any judgment with regard to this law. I’m safe.”

That’s because the traditional interpretation of this commandment was, “Do not commit the physical act of murder.” That’s what they had heard that it meant.

But Jesus goes on to say that this traditional interpretation is incomplete. It’s actually a faulty interpretation and it’s too narrow in its application, because it misses the original intent. He says in **verse 22**, *“**But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire**” (ESV).*

When Jesus says, *“But I say to you...”* He is not giving a *new* meaning of this commandment; He is clarifying the original meaning. He is saying, this is what God meant all along when He said, “You shall not murder.”

Remember, God has *never* been satisfied with mere external conformity to His laws. He has always been concerned about 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. It’s not just *taking* a person’s life, it is not wanting him/her to *really* live.

Jesus’ statement, “But I tell you...” introduces two ways of taking a person’s life besides the physical act of murder. The first is anger. *“...Everyone who is **angry** with his brother will be liable to judgment.”* Jesus identifies the ultimate source of murder as anger. When we are inappropriately angry at a person, we destroy their value and dignity as a creature made in the image of God.

Jesus is also explaining what it means, verse 20, that one’s righteousness must surpass that of the scribes and Pharisees if one is to be admitted into the kingdom of heaven. As it relates to the sixth commandment, that righteousness does not merely mean that you refrain from taking a person’s physical life; it means that you refrain from getting inappropriately angry at a person. Anger is a murderous attitude, and it’s worthy of judgment.

The Greek word translated “angry” refers to a slow, meditative anger that has settled in the soul. It’s the kind of anger that is nursed by fantasies of revenge or retaliation. It’s the kind that makes your blood pressure rise at the very mention of a person’s name, or compels you to inadvertently shake your head in disgust at the thought of that person. It’s the stuff that grudges are made out of. It broods, it simmers, and it almost always results in bitterness.

It’s not hard to understand what Jesus is describing here because this kind of anger is everywhere in our world. We see it between nations, between races, between political parties, between genders, between spouses, between colleagues and classmates. We see it at work, at home, and when we’re driving on the road. We see it in every kind of social relationship and institution. In fact, it is so commonplace that we may be tempted to think, “It’s not that big of a deal—it’s just part of life. As long as no one gets hurt.”

Jesus says, think again. It is this very common, very “human” kind of anger which constitutes a very serious crime in God’s sight.

By the way, did you notice that Jesus is not interested in *why* we get angry? That’s always our question, because we are looking for reasons to justify our anger. “I have a right to be angry! She treated me unjustly. He did this, she did that.”

Jesus is not concerned with the reasons; He is concerned with what anger reveals about the heart of the person who possesses it. Anger reveals a violent spirit. Anger

exposes a desire to destroy. It is wanting harm to befall on someone, and that *wishing* and *wanting* is the thing that grieves God and makes one guilty of breaking His Law.

Here's the point: God values His people so highly that He strictly forbids any attitudes, words, or behavior that damages people. But it's not just that He forbids it. He will judge it. He says that if anyone is angry with his brother he is liable to judgment. That is a reference to *God's* judgment. And He is not addressing unbelievers here, He is talking to believers, and their relationships with other believers.

Another way of taking a person's life besides the physical act of murder is by defamation. Jesus says in the second part of verse 22, "*...Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council.*" This phrase is literally, "Whoever says to his brother, 'You idiot!' will be liable to the council. The Greek word ("Raca") is a transliteration of an Aramaic word meaning, "Empty-headed." It would be similar to us calling a person an airhead, or a loser, or stupid. In Jesus' day "Raca" was a terrible insult. It was a word people used when they wanted to express their utter contempt for a person's intelligence.

And Jesus said that in using this derogatory term one was committing murder, because they were killing a person's honor and dignity. And He said that it was worthy of severe punishment. He said they are answerable to the *council*, a reference to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court in Jerusalem who tried only the most serious offenses, and had the authority to pronounce the most severe sentences, including the death penalty.

Jesus' reference to the Sanhedrin here demonstrates how serious it is to belittle or insult someone. In fact, Jesus goes on to say that some derisive comments that are intended to demean are serious enough for a person to go to hell. Look at the last part of **verse 22**. "*...And whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*"

The word for "fool" is the Greek word "μωρη" from which we get the word "moron." It literally refers to someone who has no morals—a person who lacks moral integrity, a person who lives like there is no God. For a Jew to call another Jew a "moron" was to attack his character in the most vicious way.

A person who resorts to such name calling is, according to Jesus, in danger of the fires of hell. That word translated "hell" ("gehenna" in the Greek), would have created a mental picture in the minds of those listening to Jesus. They had, in a sense, seen the fires of hell firsthand. The Valley of Hinnom or "Gehenna" was the name of a deep ravine south of Jerusalem that had a very ugly history. It was the place where a couple of Israel's most wicked kings had offered human sacrifices to pagan gods. During Jesus' day it was the official city dump where the residents burned their rubbish, and where the smoke and stench rose night and day.

Jewish apocalyptic writers began to call the Valley of Hinnom the entrance to hell. By the time of Jesus, the term *Gehenna* had become a full-blown euphemism for hell, the place of eternal torment.

A lot of people might ask, "Why such a severe penalty for such seemingly harmless outbursts of anger? What's so bad about calling a person a name? Sure it's mean, it's rude, it's insensitive. But is it worthy of hell? Why not just send them to an anger management course? Why not send them to a psychologist who can find the root cause of their anger?"

Again, we've got to understand what's going on in the heart of a person who resorts to this kind of behavior. When someone calls another person a derogatory name, it reveals a violent spirit. It reveals a cruelty, a carelessness, an utter disregard for the inherent honor and dignity of that person. In that sense, it's like murder.

Remember, God values His people so highly that He strictly forbids any attitudes, words, or behavior that damages people. And words can do a lot of damage. Whoever said, "Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me," didn't have a clue. Words can do horrible damage. They can destroy a person's dignity, honor, character, and self-worth, and these things constitute murder in the eyes of God.

Of course, you know what that means, don't you? There are killers among us right now. In fact, I think it is safe to say that all of us are guilty of murder. If you have ever been inappropriately angry, if you ever held a grudge, if you have ever called a person an idiot or an imbecile, you are a murderer. What is more, if you have an anger *problem*, if you are in the habit of nursing grudges or calling people demeaning names, you are serial killer. And that's no joke.

Again, keep in mind that Jesus is showing us what the Law really means. He's showing us that God is not just concerned with our external acts, He's concerned with what is going on in our minds and hearts. He's concerned about our thoughts, motives, attitudes, and words.

You say, "Well then, I'm guilty." That's right. So am I. We all deserve to go to hell. But I have two bits of good news.

Jesus knew, when He said what He said, that every person in His audience was guilty, and He wanted everyone to know that they were guilty. But Jesus was not merely interested in showing them their guilt; He wanted to provide a solution. That solution begins with Him. He came to fulfill the law, and part of what that means is that *He* obeyed it perfectly. He never violated it by becoming inappropriately angry with someone. Yes, He got angry on occasion with those who were exploiting others and dishonoring God, but never because His own pride was injured or because He wanted to harm someone. Even when they beat Him, and spat in His face, and nailed Him to a cross, He said, "Father, forgive them."

The only one who is not guilty of murder is Jesus. And the way our own guilt is absolved is by trusting in the innocence of Jesus. Believing that because He was completely innocent that He was qualified to be our Substitute by bearing our guilt and our sin on the cross, believing that the punishment He endured there was on our behalf, so that we wouldn't have to be punished. Believing that He is God's provision for the forgiveness of our sins, and that when we put our faith in Him, God transfers His righteousness to us so that we can be acceptable to Him.

But the second bit of good news is that when we put our trust in Jesus we are born again. We are given a new nature—a new operating system who is God Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit. And because the Holy Spirit lives in us and gives us His power and His enablement, we are able to obey the original intent of the law.

That is, we are able *not* to be angry with each other, we are able *not* to hold grudges against each other, we are able *not* to call each other names, even when our brothers and sisters in Christ disappoint us, even when they do something really dumb, even when they hurt us. What is more, Jesus *expects* us to not be angry, or hold grudges, or call one another names. In fact, He *insists* that we not be angry, hold grudges, or call each other names, and if we do there will be serious consequences.

Why? Because we all belong to Him. We are all valuable to Him. He purchased each and every one of us with His precious blood. And because He has enabled us *not* to do those things, by giving us His Holy Spirit and enabling us to live under the influence of the Spirit.

By the way, please don't go home today and resolve that you're going to try really, really hard not to get angry anymore, or that you're going to try really, really hard not to be disgusted with people and call them idiots or fools. You might be able to refrain from doing these things and have a righteousness that is only as good as the scribes and Pharisees, which did not impress God in the least. Because it's not merely about external behavior.

If you want to obey Jesus' words, you need His help, which is the Holy Spirit living in you. You need to start by saying, "Holy Spirit, I cannot do this without your help. Would you fill me and take control of my mind and heart? Would you help me to see people as you see them, as persons created by you in your image with inherent dignity and honor? Would you fill me with your love for them? Would you take control of my faculties to the degree that you express your fruit through me, which are not only love and joy, but peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? And would you give me the same passion for peace and harmony as Jesus?"

I entitled this message "Curing Bad Blood." We haven't talked much today about the cure for bad blood, because those cures are found in verses 23-26. We will look at them next week, Lord willing.

As we conclude I want to go back to what I said in the very beginning. Jesus places extraordinary value on the relationships of His followers to one another. It is the longing of His heart that we be one—that we live in peace with one another. Jesus loves peace, and He hates division, hostility, strife, hatred. He is intensely grieved when there is bad blood between us. He is intensely grieved when we say things to each other or about each other that are demeaning or destructive.

He also demands that when there *is* bad blood, that we do something about it immediately.

We have already learned from verses 21-22 that God values His people so highly that He strictly forbids any attitudes, words, or behavior that damage people. In verses 23-26 He expands. God values His people *and their relationships* so highly that He strictly forbids any attitudes, words, or behavior that damage those people *and relationships*, *and insists that any damage be repaired immediately*.

“Curing Bad Blood” **Matthew 5:21-26**

Main Idea: Since God values his people and their relationships with each other so highly, he strictly forbids any attitudes, words, or behavior that damage those people or relationships, and insists that any damage be repaired immediately

Clarifying the command, “Do not murder” (21-22)

The traditional understanding and consequences

The physical act of murder

The judgment for this offense is severe

The intended meaning and consequences

Anger is murder because it kills a person’s dignity

Defamation is murder because it kills a person’s dignity

Calling a person an “Idiot”

Calling a person a “Fool”

Prioritizing conflict resolution (23-24)

Precedence over worship

Procrastination prohibited

Diffusing conflict ASAP (25-26)

Containment of the issue

Ensuring that bridges are not burned