

# **Matthew: On Earth As It Is In Heaven**

## **Anger \* Matthew 5:21-26**

Ok, today in Mathew 5 we are going to begin another miniseries, this time on the topic of conflict. And while I guess it is possible that you haven't considered our recent marriage, divorce, and remarriage series applicable to you, there is no way you can say this about the issue of conflict. That's because all of us experience conflict every single day. We experience it both in big ways and small ways. Some of us are experiencing relational conflict with a spouse or a child. Some of us have issues at work or with our finances. Some of us struggle with addiction. Others simply have minor conflicts with our homes and vehicles. And there are a few of you who even have a conflict about where you are going to have lunch today. The point is that the number of conflicts the people in this room are experiencing is nearly endless. And therefore, there is perhaps no more practical topic that we can address today.

So, before we begin I think it will be helpful if we all take a moment and consider where we are personally facing conflict. For some of us this will be easy, and for others it might be a little more difficult. But just take a minute and identify what conflict or conflicts you are struggling with. Got it? Ok, now let's go to the Lord and ask for His help in working through these conflicts in a Biblical way as we go through this series.

Now, just like with many other issues, there is a fair amount of misunderstanding about the nature of conflict, and so to get this series started let me clarify two important things.

### **1. Conflict in a fallen world is inevitable.**

Number one, conflict in a fallen world is inevitable. Conflict is a result of living in a world that is polluted by sin. However, we need to understand that having conflict is not a sin in and of itself. This is important because we are tempted to avoid conflict at all costs. The problem is that often when we try to avoid conflict we actually make it worse than if we had dealt with

it head on from the get go. What's more, on numerous occasions the Bible tells that there are times when we must address conflict. This means the real issue with conflict is not that we have it, but rather the way in which we react to it. And on this point we need to understand that most often the problem with conflict is our sinful response to it.

## **2. The problem with conflict is most often our sinful response to it.**

Note what the Apostle James has to say about this matter:

*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. (James 4:1-2, ESV)*

James gets right to it in this passage. What is the main problem with conflict? It's us. Fights and quarrels, not to mention murder, come when we don't get what we want. Jesus says something similar in Matthew 15:

*For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. (Matthew 15:19, ESV)*

And there is something huge we need to get from this. I like to call it the "look inside first" principle. Whenever we are faced with a conflict, we need to learn to "look inside first". Our natural response when there is a conflict is to look everywhere but inside. The first thing we tend to do however is blame our circumstances, someone else, or perhaps even God Himself when, most of the time, the real problem lies within our own heart. Furthermore, whenever we have a conflict, the only thing we can control is our response to it. You do realize this, don't you? I have to tell you that the longer I live the more the Lord shows me just how much I am not in control of pretty much everything but myself. But much of the time I worry about, blame, and fume over everything I can't control, and fail to address the one thing I can, and that is me. And so right as we begin this series on conflict, perhaps the most important thing we need to get is that when it comes to

conflict we need to look inside first and begin to work on the only thing we can truly affect – and that is our own sinful hearts. And we are going to find out that this is exactly where Jesus takes us in our passage today. Let's read it together. Matthew 5:21-26:

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 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. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny." (Matthew 5:21-26, ESV)*

Now, I have to admit that this passage kicked my butt this week. If you don't like that I just said that please don't get angry with me. It might not work out too well for you given what is coming. Anyways, here is how this passage kicked my butt. First, it reminded me that the way I treat other people is a reflection of my own relationship with Jesus. Remember, here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is describing for us what it means to follow him. And verses 21-48 of chapter 5, what we have come to know as the antithesis section, is completely dedicated to describing how a follower of Jesus relates to other people. It tells us that a relationship with Jesus changes the way we relate to everyone else. To put it another way, top to bottom demands left to right. If we truly have a vertical relationship with Jesus, it will impact how we relate horizontally with everyone else. Here is how the Apostle John puts it:

*If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. (1 John 4:20, ESV)*

And the reason this is so poignant is that we have a real tendency to separate these relationships and pretend that we can be good with God but at odds with someone else. However, Jesus makes it very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that this simply isn't the case.

Now, the second way in which this passage kicked my butt is that it has some hard things to say about anger, an issue that I have come to realize I struggle with more than I thought I did. What's more, I found that Jesus cares a lot more about it than I thought He did. Perhaps you will have the same experience today. Since I am quite sure you are all excited to hear this, let's dive in. Here are three things Jesus has to say about anger.

## **1. Anger = Murder**

Number one, Jesus says that anger equals murder. Look again at verses 21-22:

*"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 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." (Matthew 5:21-22, ESV)*

In verse 21 Jesus quotes the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment and then adds a passage from Deuteronomy regarding its consequences. And I am pretty sure we all accept that murder is wrong and deserves to be punished. Pretty much every society that has ever existed has accepted the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment and has instituted punishments for breaking it.

However, Jesus takes it a step further here. He says that simply being angry with someone is equivalent to murder. Once again, Jesus is showing us that He is concerned with more than physical acts. He is ultimately concerned about what is going on in our hearts. He's pointing us toward the truth that a disciple not only follows Him on the outside, but on the inside as well.

Now, let's take a moment to talk about anger. You might get the idea from Jesus' statement here that anger is always wrong. However, we have to remember that a) Jesus Himself got angry and b) there are passages in Scripture that tell us that there are times when we should get angry too.

- **There are times when we should get angry.**

In fact, take a look with me at Ephesians 4:26-27, which will be an important supplemental passage today. You might even want to turn there and keep it bookmarked for later reference.

*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, ESV)*

So, this is pretty clear. As believers there are times for us to be angry. Primarily we should be angry at sin and the devastation it causes. We should be angry when we hear what abortion doctors like Kermit Gosnell have done to children, both born and unborn. We should be angry at the realities of sexual abuse, poverty, AIDS, and political corruption. We should be angry with false teachers and false religions leading millions of people astray. In short, there are many things in a fallen world that should make a follower of Jesus angry. In fact, I actually think as disciples we should get angry about such things more often. I believe that one of the greatest needs in the church today is for followers of Jesus to get angry enough about sin and its consequences that they rise up and decide to do something about it.

- **Anger is dangerous.**

That said the Bible puts a big warning label on anger. That's because although it can be good it can also be extremely dangerous. Anger is much like fire. It has good purposes, but if not used correctly it can create incredible damage. Note how James warns us about this:

*Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. (James 1:19-20, ESV)*

The reality for most of us is that we rarely use anger in the right way. Instead of being slow to anger we often get there way too fast. And even when we get angry over the right things, we often express it in sinful ways. For example, it is right and good for me to be angry when my children disobey. There is nothing wrong with that. However, my tendency is to get angry way too fast and then proceed to sinfully respond to their disobedience. Ever done this, parents? Unfortunately this is probably how I express anger about 99.9% of the time. That's what James is getting at when he says the anger of man doesn't produce the righteousness of God.

Now, there is another way in which we misuse anger, and that is what Jesus is focusing on here in Matthew 5. Not only do we get angry too quickly and proceed to express it in the wrong way, but we also have a tendency to hold onto it way too long. And this is ultimately the biggest problem with anger, the fact that it can easily turn into bitterness.

- **Anger can easily turn into bitterness.**

The word that Jesus uses for anger in verse 22 does not actually refer to a single moment of anger or rage but rather to remaining anger, what we might call nursing a grudge.<sup>1</sup> A good translation would be resentment or bitterness.

Jesus is referring to the everyday anger we carry around over things that others have done to us. Now, we might even have the right to be angry about these offenses, but instead of responding correctly, we let our anger turn into a bitterness and refuse to let it go. Let's go back to Ephesians 4 for a minute to understand how this works:

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Dale Bruner. Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12 (p. 208). Kindle Edition.

*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, ESV)*

So, be angry and do not sin; in other words, deal with your anger quickly and correctly. More on how to do that in a minute. The point here however is that when we don't deal with our anger correctly, we give the devil an opportunity and he quickly turns our anger into bitterness. I actually prefer the NIV translation of verse 27 better where it says, "Do not give the devil a foothold." You see, when you get angry and don't deal with it correctly, the devil comes in and gets a foothold in your life. And you know what, the devil is never satisfied with a foothold. If you give him an inch, he will take a mile. Unfortunately, many of us have and are giving him an inch. In fact, we might be giving him a whole lot more than that. And while we might think that we are justified in our resentment and bitterness, Jesus wants no part of it. He says that if we are resentful in our hearts we are as guilty of murder as any criminal on death row. Note what 1 John 3:15 says:

*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. (1 John 3:15, ESV)*

Now, this is hard, but guess what, it gets even worse. The second thing Jesus tells us about anger is that it is often revealed in our words.

## **2. Anger is often revealed in our words.**

Look again at the end of verse 22:

*Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*

Jesus is not, as some have taught, giving different degrees of anger in verse 22. Rather He is saying that our words often reflect an angry heart. The word *insults* could also be translated as stupid, idiot or jerk. The word *fool* is the equivalent of moron. The idea behind both words is a demeaning of another person because we look down upon them in our hearts. Now I

don't know about you, but when I think about how many times I have called people these names, both to their face and behind their backs, there is nothing else to feel but guilt. Jesus is stepping on our toes big time here. And it is easy to shrug this off and think that Jesus is being just way too picky, but we have to understand why He is so serious about this. You see, when we demean another human being, we are actually demeaning God Himself. Let me take you to Genesis for a moment. Note what we find in Genesis 9:6:

*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image. (Genesis 9:6, ESV)*

The reason that murder is wrong is that man is made in the image of God, and so an attack on human life is an attack on God Himself. And Jesus is telling us here in the Sermon on the Mount that this is true whether we attack another human physically or just with words. When we insult someone we are actually insulting God Himself. And while this might be surprising to us, God does not take being insulted lying down.

### **3. Anger can have serious consequences.**

This leads to the third thing Jesus tells us about anger in this passage. Anger can have serious consequences. Take a look at verse 22 one more time:

*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."*

Just as Jesus is not describing different degrees of anger, He is also not describing different levels of punishment. Instead He is making one primary point: holding on to anger can lead to final judgment. To put it another way, when we hold onto anger it can lead us to hell. And I hope we, once again, understand how serious Jesus is about this. He's not messing around. If we continue in resentment and bitterness towards others, and refuse to

let go of our anger and forgive them, it may very well reveal that we have never been forgiven ourselves. Later on in this series we are going to spend a whole message talking about forgiveness, but let me just point you to what Jesus says in chapter 6:

*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15, ESV)*

So, this issue is absolutely huge. Our feelings towards others do matter. The names that we call other people do matter. These are not simple shortcomings or harmless weaknesses. Jesus says they are grievous sins and we must do everything we can to rid ourselves of them.<sup>2</sup> As Frederick Bruner states:

*We think anger and dismissive words relatively trivial and unimportant – “no big deal.” Anger carried and vented, according to Jesus’ astonishing assessment, is [a] Last-Judgment-and-hell deserving crime.<sup>3</sup>*

And so let me say if you are harboring anger in your heart, you must learn to let it go. To not do so would be catastrophic.

## **Overcoming Anger**

Now, at this point I would normally attempt to point us towards some application. However, I’ve got it easy today because in verses 23-26 Jesus gives the application for us. In these verses He gives two illustrations that show us how to overcome anger. Look at the verses with me:

*So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 211

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 211

*your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.*

## **1. Make reconciliation a priority.**

In these verses Jesus instructs us to do two things to overcome anger.

Number one, we should make reconciliation a priority.

What Jesus says in verse 23 is startling. Look at it closely. "If you remember that your brother has something against you." You would think that He would say it the other way around, given His earlier comments about anger. However, I think He is trying to drive home the point that regardless of how our relationship with someone else gets messed up, we need to make reconciliation a priority. I actually think Jesus' statement here is plastic enough that it includes any reason our relationship with someone is broken, even if they are angry with us for no reason at all. And we know that Jesus wants this to be a priority because He says that we should pursue reconciliation before we come to worship Him. Do you get that? One of the most important things we need to get from this passage is that Jesus cares an awful lot about His disciples' relationships with other people. He cares about it so much that He says He would rather have them pursue reconciliation than come and worship Him. Why is this the case? Well it goes back to what we saw earlier in 1 John 4. If our horizontal relationships aren't right, neither is our vertical one. If we aren't right with one another, we can't be right with God. And let's make some very practical application to the here and now. In just a few moments we are going to participate in communion together. However, we need to realize if we have a relationship with someone that is broken and we haven't done everything we can to reconcile that relationship, we need to forget about communion and go seek out the one who we are separated from.

Now, that said, let me clarify that it is not always possible to be reconciled to others. We have to read verse 24 in the context of what the rest of

Scripture says about this issue. There are times, perhaps many, when reconciliation isn't currently possible. It takes two to tango as the saying goes. And so in these cases we need to remember Romans 12:18:

*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.  
(Romans 12:18, ESV)*

In other words, we need to do everything we can to be reconciled with everyone. However, we can only do what we can do. There will be times when reconciliation isn't possible, and in these instances we need to turn the situation over to the Lord and rest in His mercy and grace.

## **2. Pursue reconciliation as quickly as possible.**

So, the first thing we can do to overcome anger is to make reconciliation a priority. And the second thing we can do is to pursue it as quickly as possible. Look at the text one last time. Verses 25 - 26:

*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. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:25-26, ESV)*

Jesus' point here is that the longer we wait to pursue reconciliation, the greater the consequences. Therefore, we need to seek to work out our differences with others as quickly as we can. The phrase 'truly, I say to you' in verse 26 indicates that what follows is true and important. And what Jesus says next is that if we fail to pursue reconciliation there will be no way to avoid the severe consequences of not doing so.

Maybe putting it this way will help. I believe Jesus is trying to get across to us that anger is so dangerous that we must do everything in our power to get rid of it as quickly as possible. Let me take you back to Ephesians 4 one more time.

*Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. (Ephesians 4:26-27, ESV)*

I know I am being repetitive here, but the importance of this issue calls for it. When we don't deal with anger quickly – either someone's against us – or ours – it turns into resentment and the longer the anger is held onto the greater the consequences. And so Jesus says deal with it quickly so that it doesn't get out of control and create incredible damage.

Now, perhaps you are still wondering why this reconciliation stuff is such a big deal, especially in instances where someone is angry with you. I mean, why does it really matter all that much? Well, for the answer to that I want to take you to 2 Corinthians 5. And this is so important that I want you to turn there with me. 2 Corinthians 5, let's pick up in verse 17:

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:17-21, ESV)*

## **The Importance of Reconciliation**

In these verses Paul gives us two reasons that reconciliation is so important.

### **1. Jesus died so that we could be reconciled to God.**

First, Jesus died so that we could be reconciled to God. Verse 21 is perhaps my favorite verse in the entire Bible. On the cross God took our sin and placed it on Christ, and took Christ's righteousness and placed it upon us so

that we could be made new and restored to a relationship with Himself. Forever. Are you thankful for that today?

And let me just take a moment to speak to those today who aren't so sure about what all this means. As human beings we are all born sinners, and therefore from birth are separated from God. However, because of His great love for us, God sent His Son to die so that our sin could be taken away and we could be restored to a relationship with Him. And there is only one thing we have to do to receive this wonderful gift – we simply have to believe that this is actually true. We have to believe that the Son of God, Jesus Christ, came to earth, lived a sinless life, and died on the cross for our sins, and three days later rose again. When we believe this truth and give our lives to Jesus, God makes us a new creation and restores us to relationship with Himself – which ultimately leads to living with Him, in heaven, forever. That is the wonderful offer God makes to everyone of us today.

## **2. Disciples of Jesus have been given a ministry of reconciliation.**

The second reason reconciliation is so important is that disciples of Jesus have been given a ministry of reconciliation. Those who have been reconciled to God have, in turn, been entrusted to be His agents of telling others about His offer of reconciliation. And we have talked about this in great detail previously, so let me just bring out the point that if people are going to believe us when we tell them God wants to be reconciled to them, we have to be living lives of reconciliation ourselves. What I mean is that we can't tell people about God's offer of reconciliation and yet fail to live in reconciliation with others. When we don't live in pursuit of reconciliation our witness is severely hampered. On the other hand, when we seek to live at peace with others, we point directly to a Savior who was crucified so that the world could be reconciled to God.

Now, let me finish with this. I know that what Jesus calls us to in the Sermon on the Mount is incredibly difficult. And it's difficult because there are a lot of stupid people in the world today, right? No, you're not supposed to agree with me on that! Let's just say there are a lot of difficult people in the

world today. There are a lot of people who cause us grief. What's more, there are a lot of people who have done us wrong. Some of us have been hurt in unimaginable ways. And so trying to apply what Jesus says about anger and reconciliation may very well seem impossible. And you know what? On our own it is. In fact, that is one of Jesus' primary goals in the Sermon on the Mount. He wants us to understand that on our own following Him is impossible. We very simply can't do it. However, He also wants us to know that with Him all things are possible. Do you remember Matthew 19:26:

*"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26, ESV)*

What Jesus is trying to do in the Sermon on the Mount is drive us towards the Beatitudes, specifically the first one. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* It's those who recognize they can't do it on their own and call out to Jesus for help who receive the power they need to do what He has called them to do. So, today, if you are like me and you struggle with anger, what do you do? If you have unresolved conflict but don't desire to pursue reconciliation, what do you do? If someone has hurt you deeply and you struggle to forgive, what do you do? Admit that you can't do it on your own, throw yourself on the mercy of Jesus, and ask Him to do what you cannot do.

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