The Constitution of the Kingdom

A 33-Session Journey through the Sermon on the Mount & the Sermon on the Plain

SESSION TWELVE — Anger and Reconciliation

Part Three: The Greater Righteousness · Texts: Matthew 5:21–26; Luke 12:58–59

The Texts

> **Matthew 5:21–24** *You have heard that it was said… 'You shall not murder'… But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment… So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled… and then come and offer your gift.*
>
> **Luke 12:58** *…on your way to the magistrate, make an effort to settle the case, or you may be dragged before the judge…*

The Commandment We Were Sure We'd Kept

Of all ten commandments, this is the one most of us feel safest about. "You shall not murder." Well — there is one I have managed. I woke up this morning, got through the day, and killed exactly no one. Six down. On the sixth commandment, most of us walk around quietly innocent, even a little proud.

And Jesus, in the first of six great teachings we are about to hear, walks straight up to that comfortable innocence and takes it apart. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you…" — and then he does something that changes everything. He follows the crime back upstream. He traces the corpse to its source, and the source turns out to be startlingly close to home: in the anger we nurse, the contempt we harbor, the demeaning word we spit at a brother. Murder, Jesus says, is just the last stop on a road that starts in the heart — and a great many of us have been traveling that road for years.[1]

Let's search the Scriptures together.

"You Have Heard… But I Say"

First, the form, because we are going to hear it six times: "you have heard that it was said… but I say to you." These are sometimes called the "antitheses," and the name can mislead — as if Jesus were setting himself against Moses, correcting the old commandments with better ones. We spent all of last session making sure we do not read him that way, and we will not start now. "But I say to you" is not "Moses was wrong." It is the voice of the authoritative teacher driving the commandment down to its root, revealing what it was always aiming at underneath. This is the "greater righteousness" he promised in verse 20, and now he shows us

[1]Unless noted, Scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition (NRSVue), the base translation for this course. This is the first of six "antitheses" (Matthew 5:21–48). Luke has no parallel block, but Luke 12:58–59 preserves the "settle with your accuser" saying (Matthew 5:25–26).

what it looks like: not new rules replacing old ones, but every old rule opened up to its beating heart.[2]

Deeper Than the Corpse

So watch what he does with "you shall not murder." He says: if you are even angry with your brother or sister, you are already in the territory this commandment was guarding. If you say "Raca" — an old word of contempt, something like "you empty-headed idiot" — you are answerable. If you say "you fool," you are in danger of the fire.

Now hear what he is and is not saying, because this matters. He is not saying that the flash of anger is the same crime as homicide, or that feeling angry makes you a murderer. Scripture itself can say "be angry and do not sin" — and Jesus himself burned with anger at injustice, and never once apologized for it. Anger at what is wrong in the world is not the target here. What Jesus is tracing is something colder and more settled: the contempt that writes another human being off. The word that reduces a person to nothing. Because that — that dismissal, that reduction of a living soul to an obstacle or an idiot or a nobody — is the very root from which murder grows. Murder is just contempt that finally got its hands on a weapon.[3]

Do you see what he has done to our comfortable innocence? The commandment was never only about corpses. It was always about the sacredness of the person — all the way down to how you regard them in your heart and name them with your mouth. And by that measure, none of us gets to feel quite so proud. We have all committed this one.

When Worship Has to Wait

Then Jesus does something that should stop every religious person cold. "When you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother has something against you — leave your gift there. Go. First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Sit with the audacity of that. You are at the altar. You are in the very act of worship, about to give your gift to God — and Jesus says stop. Put it down. The worship can wait; the reconciliation cannot. In one sentence he makes it impossible to be right with God while you are wrong with your neighbor and doing nothing about it. Your vertical devotion and your horizontal relationships are not two separate accounts; they are one.[4]

This is the oldest prophetic truth in Israel, and it beats at the very heart of who we are as The Confluence. "Let justice roll down like waters" — our own anchor verse — comes from a

[2]The "antithesis" form—"you have heard that it was said… but I say to you"—is not a contradiction or abolition of Torah (see Session Eleven) but an authoritative intensification, driving each command to its root and intended purpose: the "greater righteousness" of 5:20. See W. D. Davies and Dale Allison; and Glen Stassen and David Gushee, Kingdom Ethics, who read these as "transforming initiatives" rather than mere higher ideals.

[3]"Raca" (an Aramaic term of contempt, roughly "empty-head") and "fool" (Greek mōros) are words that dehumanize; Jesus traces murder to its headwaters in contempt — the anger that writes a person off. This does not condemn the emotion of anger as such: Scripture can say "be angry and do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26), and Jesus himself showed anger at injustice. It condemns the settled contempt that denies another's humanity.

[4]Jesus interrupts worship for reconciliation (5:23–24): the gift is left at the altar until the neighbor is made right. This stands squarely in the prophetic tradition that refuses worship divorced from justice and right relationship — Amos 5:21–24 (the source of this course's anchor verse), Isaiah 1:11–17, Micah 6:6–8.

passage where God says he cannot stand the people's worship precisely because they will not do right by each other. Amos, Isaiah, Micah all say it: God will not accept the song of a people who will not be reconciled to their neighbor. Jesus is standing squarely in that line. Worship that steps over a broken relationship on its way to the altar is worship God does not want. And notice the direction: "if your brother has something against you." The burden is on you to go — even when you are the one who caused the hurt, and especially then. Do not wait to be pursued. Go.

Settle Quickly

Then a final, practical word, and Luke preserves it too: "come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way." Settle it fast, before it lands you in court, before it hardens into something that costs everyone far more. It is wisdom as much as command: broken relationships left to fester do not stay the same size. They calcify. They escalate. The estrangement you could have mended with a phone call this week becomes, a year from now, a wall neither of you knows how to climb. Go while the going is easy. Reconcile before the breach turns to stone.[5]

Freedom for Others

Put it to our thread, and it is almost the whole passage. This teaching will not let me keep my innocence while I quietly hold a person in contempt or leave a relationship broken. Its entire concern is the dignity of the other — the brother I reduced with a word, the sister who has something against me and whom I have been too proud to go and find. So ask with me: whose humanity have I quietly written off — filed under "idiot," "enemy," "lost cause" — so I do not have to love them? And who has something against me right now that I have been avoiding? *Freedom for others may cost us our pride and our sense of being the innocent party — what can we lay down?*

Around the Table — For Discussion

- Be honest: did you feel fairly safe about "you shall not murder" until today? What does it do to you to hear Jesus trace it back to contempt?
- Jesus distinguishes settled contempt from the emotion of anger — even holy anger at injustice. Where is the line for you between anger that's honest and anger that has curdled into writing someone off?
- Jesus interrupts worship for reconciliation. What does it mean that God would rather you leave your gift and go make peace with a person?
- Who has "something against you" — and what has kept you from going to them?
- Freedom for others may cost us something. Whose dignity have you reduced with a word or a grudge — and what would it take to restore it?

[5] "Come to terms quickly with your accuser" (5:25–26; Luke 12:58–59): reconcile before estrangement hardens and escalates beyond repair. It is practical wisdom as much as command.

This Week — A Practice

Two movements. First, go. Name the one relationship where someone has something against you — or you against them — and this week take the actual step toward mending it: the message, the call, the conversation you have been putting off. Do not leave your gift at the altar; go be reconciled first. (And the same care we have named before: if the relationship is one that endangers you, reconciliation may mean truth and safety, not a return to harm — go wisely.) Second, watch your contempt. Catch yourself, once this week, reducing a person to a category — idiot, enemy, waste of time — and deliberately regard them instead as a whole human being God loves. Refuse the demeaning word. Then bring back what you found. This Kingdom, like all the rest, is learned in the doing.

Looking Ahead

Next session, the second contrast, and Jesus turns from how we treat one another in anger to how we regard one another in desire: "you have heard 'you shall not commit adultery' — but I say to you…" We'll follow him again past the surface act to the root, and ask what it means to see another person as a whole human being and not a thing to be used — a word our own moment badly needs, and one we'll handle with honesty and care.

Benediction

So go this week and let Jesus take away your easy innocence — it was never doing you any good anyway. Go and find the person who has something against you, and mend it before it turns to stone. Guard your heart against the contempt that writes people off, because that is where the real murders begin. And when you come to worship, come with clean hands and a reconciled heart — or come by way of your neighbor's door first. Blessed are those who will not let a broken relationship stand, for they are doing the deep work the commandment was always about.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Blessings,
Pastor Mick Finch

SESSION TWELVE

Introduction Video Script

Single presenter, to camera · target 5–6 minutes · warm, steady, unhurried

[Begin still.]

Welcome back to the table. Of all ten commandments, this is the one most of us feel safest about. "You shall not murder." Well — there's one I've handled. I got up this morning, got through the day, and killed exactly nobody. Most of us walk around quietly innocent on the sixth commandment. Even a little proud.

And Jesus — in the first of six great teachings we're about to hear — walks straight up to that comfortable innocence and takes it apart. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not murder.' But I say to you…" — and then he follows the crime back upstream. He traces the corpse to its source, and the source turns out to be startlingly close to home: the anger we nurse, the contempt we harbor, the demeaning word we spit at a brother. Murder, he says, is just the last stop on a road that starts in the heart — and a lot of us have been on that road for years.

[The form.]

First, the pattern, because we'll hear it six times: "you have heard it said… but I say to you." People call these the "antitheses," and the name can mislead — like Jesus is setting himself against Moses, correcting the old commandments. We spent all of last session making sure we don't read him that way. "But I say to you" is not "Moses was wrong." It's the authoritative teacher driving the commandment down to its root — showing what it was always aiming at underneath. That's the "greater righteousness" he promised: not new rules replacing old ones, but every old rule opened up to its beating heart.

[Deeper than the corpse.]

So watch what he does with "you shall not murder." He says: if you're even angry with your brother, you're already in the territory this commandment was guarding. If you say "Raca" — an old word of contempt, something like "you empty-headed idiot" — you're answerable. If you say "you fool," you're in danger of the fire.

Now hear what he is and isn't saying. He is not saying a flash of anger is the same as homicide, or that feeling angry makes you a murderer. Scripture itself says "be angry and do not sin" — and Jesus himself burned at injustice and never apologized for it. Anger at what's wrong in the world isn't the target. What he's tracing is something colder — the settled contempt that writes a human being off. The word that reduces a person to nothing. Because that dismissal — reducing a living soul to an idiot or an obstacle or a nobody — that's the root murder grows from. Murder is just contempt that finally got its hands on a weapon. And by that measure, none of us gets to feel so proud. We've all committed this one.

[Worship waits.]

Then Jesus does something that should stop every religious person cold. "When you're offering your gift at the altar, and you remember your brother has something against you — leave your gift there. Go. First be reconciled, and then come and offer your gift." Sit with the audacity of that. You're at the altar, in the very act of worship — and Jesus says stop. Put it

down. The worship can wait; the reconciliation cannot. In one sentence he makes it impossible to be right with God while you're wrong with your neighbor and doing nothing about it.

And this is the oldest prophetic truth in Israel — it's the beating heart of who we are as The Confluence. "Let justice roll down like waters," our own anchor verse, comes from a passage where God says he can't stand the people's worship because they won't do right by each other. Amos, Isaiah, Micah all say it: God won't take the song of a people who won't be reconciled to their neighbor. Worship that steps over a broken relationship on the way to the altar is worship God doesn't want. And notice — "if your brother has something against you." The burden's on you to go. Even when you caused the hurt — especially then. Don't wait to be chased. Go.

[Settle quickly.]

And one practical word, which Luke keeps too: settle with your accuser quickly, while you're still on the way. Fast — before it lands you in court, before it hardens into something that costs everyone more. Broken relationships left to fester don't stay the same size. They calcify. The estrangement you could mend with a phone call this week becomes, a year from now, a wall neither of you can climb. Go while the going's easy. Reconcile before the breach turns to stone.

[The thread and practice.]

So here's our question this week — freedom for others: whose humanity have I quietly written off — filed under idiot, enemy, lost cause — so I don't have to love them? And who has something against me that I've been avoiding?

Two things to practice. First, go — name the one relationship where someone has something against you, or you against them, and take the actual step this week: the message, the call, the conversation you've put off. And the same care as always: if the relationship endangers you, reconciliation may mean truth and safety, not return — go wisely. Second, watch your contempt — catch yourself once this week reducing a person to a category, and deliberately regard them instead as a whole human being God loves.

Next time, the second contrast — "you have heard 'you shall not commit adultery' — but I say to you…" — where Jesus turns from anger to desire, and asks what it means to see another person as a whole human being and not a thing to be used.

[Slow. Land it.]

For now, go and let Jesus take your easy innocence — it was never doing you any good anyway. Find the person who has something against you, and mend it before it turns to stone. Guard your heart against the contempt that writes people off — because that's where the real murders begin. And when you come to worship, come by way of your neighbor's door first.

Love, practiced — not just professed — reveals the Kingdom among us.

Let's search the Scriptures together.

Blessings, Pastor Mick Finch.