

Anger Management

Matthew 5:21-26

‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago.’ So begins Matthew 5:21, setting the scene not only for this section of teaching on the subjects of anger and murder but also the rest of chapter five, with Jesus addressing a number of issues where he encourages his disciples to go beyond adherence to external rules and allow God to change our inner attitudes. For example, the Old Testament command not to commit adultery becomes an exhortation to refrain from any impure desire and the command not to take oaths is extended to a call to be more honest and transparent in our day to day interactions.

In this week’s reading, Jesus begins by asking his disciples to reflect on the sixth of the ten commandments, ‘You shall not murder’ (Exod 20:13). But instead of limiting his focus to the offence of taking another life, he extends the scope of this command to any incident where people bear anger or animosity towards each other.

Some commentators have noted that one of the first stories of sin recorded in Scripture is that of a murder, Cain’s taking of Abel’s life in Genesis 4. Gerard Kelly notes that, ‘When Cain is eaten up with jealousy of his brother Abel, the question God puts to him is, ‘Why are you angry?’ It is anger that festers in the soul of Cain and ultimately issues in violence and murder. Even then – back before the law was given – it was clear that the issue was anger, even if the outcome was murder.’¹

The examples Jesus provides of inappropriate attitudes extend to the way we speak of each other. Jesus warns those who insult the intelligence of others – the best English equivalents of the Aramaic ‘Raca’ are words like ‘blockhead’ or ‘nitwit’ while the Greek word for ‘fool’, *mōros*, provides the basis for the word ‘moron.’ These are not just throwaway insults, according to Jesus. Utter these words, and your soul could be in danger. You might find yourself in the fires of hell (5:22).

Jesus completes this section of teaching with what could be thought of as two short parables about reconciliation. In the first (5:23-24), someone bringing their gift to the altar is told to make right a relationship before offering their worship. Some scholars suggest that Jesus is envisaging someone living in Galilee, where he’s preaching, having to make a journey of 80 miles back from the Temple in Jerusalem to put right a relationship. To us this seems far-fetched, but maybe the implausible nature of the illustration tells us all we need to know about how much this issue matters.

The second parable (5:25-26) speaks of another situation which would have been familiar to Jesus’ listeners, many of whom feared the imprisonment which could come from indebtedness. As Dick France notes, ‘This little cameo is designed, like many parables, not to give practical advice for legal disputes (no indication is given as to what sort of settlement might be possible if the money is not available) but

¹ Gerard Kelly, *Humanifesto: A Rough Guide to the Sermon on the Mount*, 2001, 27

simply to reinforce an ethical message: do not allow bad relationships to remain unresolved.²

For discussion

1. In Matthew 5, Jesus' teaching on a number of subjects emphasises that internal attitudes matter more than outward appearances. How do you think this compares with the priorities of most evangelical churches?
2. Can you think of any occasions when you've experienced conflict with someone else? What impact did you discern that conflict having on your walk with God?
3. The language used by Jesus when addressing this theme of anger shows how seriously he takes the issue. And yet some of the examples he cites are ones which we might come across on a daily basis – verbal putdowns or unresolved disagreements. When we decide which sins we think of as more grave than others, do you think we attach enough significance to these kinds of issues?
4. In what ways do each of us prepare ourselves for worship on a Sunday morning? How might these preparations make more space to consider our relationships with other people?
5. Can you think of people you've known who have been affected by their failure to forgive someone else? What lessons do you think Matthew 5:25,26 can offer for situations like this?

² RT France, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 2007, 203