

RECONCILIATION

MATTHEW 5:17-24

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have not come to abolish these things but to fulfill them.

18 I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place.

19 So anyone who breaks one of the least of these commands and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever obeys them and teaches others to do so will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven!

21 “You have heard that it was said to an older generation, ‘Do not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders will be subjected to judgment.’

22 But I say to you that anyone who is angry with a brother will be subjected to judgment. And whoever insults a brother will be brought before the council, and whoever says ‘Fool’ will be sent to fiery hell.

23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you,

24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift.

The Scottish theologian, **Sinclair Ferguson**, has some interesting comments relative to our text:

"Jesus came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it. In fact...Jesus teaches that the Law of God is an essential diagnostic tool. Whether we break it or keep it, and whether we encourage others to break it or keep it, is an indication of our true spiritual condition. It is the standard for evaluation in the kingdom of God (**Matthew 5:19**), but **not** the standard for entrance into the kingdom. Rather than dispensing with righteousness, Jesus tell his disciples that unless their righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, they will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

In verses **21** and **22** our Lord makes it clear that as far as God is concerned, it is not only the person who commits the **act** of murder who is guilty; the person who is **angry** with his fellow believer is also guilty and liable to judgment. Later, in verses **27** and **28**, He will state that it is not only the person who commits the **act** of adultery who is guilty; the person who allows **lustful desire** to settle in his or her heart is also guilty.

As **William Barclay** states,

"Here was something which was entirely new, something which men have not yet fully grasped. It was Jesus' teaching that it was not enough not to commit murder; the only thing sufficient was never even **to wish** to commit murder. It was Jesus' teaching that it was not enough not to commit adultery; the only thing sufficient was never even **to wish** to commit adultery."

It may be that we have never struck a man; but who can say that he never wished to strike a man? It may be that we have never committed adultery; but who can say that he has never experienced the desire for the forbidden thing? It was Jesus' teaching that thoughts are just as important as deeds, and that it is not enough not to commit a sin; the only thing that is enough is not to wish to commit it. **It was Jesus' teaching that a man is not judged only by his deeds, but is judged**

even more by the desires which never emerged in deeds. By the world's standards a man is a good man, if he never does a forbidden thing. The world is not concerned to judge his thoughts. By Jesus' standards, a man is not a good man until he never even desires to do a forbidden thing. Jesus is intensely concerned with a man's thoughts."

Brothers and sisters, only Almighty God can correctly judge persons. We see only the **actions** of individuals, but God sees the **secrets of their heart**. And it is possible for a person's actions to be largely above the reproach of human beings, while at the same time, their inward thoughts are an abomination to God. There are many persons whose actions are celebrated in the court of public opinion, but whose motives are condemned in the supreme court of heaven.

The truth is that every one of us is guilty as it relates to our inward motivations. Even if we have lived lives of outward moral perfection, none of us can honestly say that we have never committed murder or adultery in our hearts.

In his expanded translation of the New Testament, the Greek New Testament scholar **Kenneth Wuest**, translates **Matthew 5:22** as follows: *"But, as for myself, I am saying to you that everyone who is provoked to anger against his brother shall be subject to the judgment. Moreover, whoever says to his brother, Raca, that is, you senseless empty-head, shall be liable to the Sanhedrin. But whoever shall say, Mōre, that is, you imprudent man without forethought or wisdom, shall be liable to the hell of fire."*

By saying, *"But, as for myself, I am saying to you,"* Jesus is claiming an authority that is greater than even the most venerable ancient Rabbis. The scribes in their teaching invariably referred to this or that Rabbi. But Jesus speaks as one having His own authority!

The ancient Rabbis said, *"Do not murder,"* and *"whoever murders will be subjected to judgment."* Our Lord says, *"If you have harboured ungodly anger in your heart, you are guilty."*

The Old Testament Law dealt with **outward actions**, but the **“Principles of the Kingdom”** deal with **inward attitudes**. In fact, the **attitudes** Jesus calls for in the **“Sermon on the Mount,”** can only be fulfilled by those who are citizens of the Kingdom of God, and are, *“filled by the Spirit”* (**Ephesians 5:18**). Otherwise, they are an utterly impossible standard which climaxes in the highest of all impossible standards: *“So then, be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (**Matthew 5:48 New English Translation**).

The word *“angry”* in verse **22** is a translation of the Greek word **orgizó: (or-gid’-zo)**, which means, “to provoke, arouse to anger; to be provoked to anger, be angry, be wroth.” **Orgizó** describes a brooding, simmering anger that is nurtured and not allowed to die. It is seen in the holding of a grudge, in the smoldering bitterness that refuses to forgive. It is the anger that cherishes resentment and does not want reconciliation.

The Jewish religious leaders taught that anything short of murder might be allowed. Jesus brings the Law back to the matters of the heart, teaching that the **danger** of anger was that it was expressive of a murderous **intent** in the heart, and a person who harboured such anger in his or her heart was in danger of the judgment. Jesus says that **anger** merits execution, because the fruit of anger is **murder**.

Orgizó is what we feel when we believe that we have been wronged by someone. It springs from resentment over an offense and results in an adversarial relationship that has the potential to disrupt fellowship and consequently worship.

Cain’s anger toward his brother Abel is a case in point. It was not merely Cain’s offering that was the problem but the attitude of his heart. In **Genesis 4:6-7**, God warned Cain about the state of his heart.

6 Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why is your expression downcast?”

7 Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must subdue it.”

(New English Translation)

Despite God’s warning and entreaty, Cain did not subdue his anger and his unsubdued anger led to him murdering his brother.

The words, “*Raca,*” that is, you senseless empty-head, and “*fool*” (**Mōre**), that is, you imprudent man without forethought or wisdom, are verbal expressions of the brooding, simmering anger that is nurtured and not allowed to die. Jesus is saying that in effect that these verbal expressions carry out the “assassination” of the person to whom they are directed. According to Jesus, these expressions are indicative of a murderous **intent** in the heart and a person who harbours such anger in his or her heart is in danger of the judgment and even the fires of hell!

Sinclair Ferguson states that, “We treat the damage we do with our lips very lightly because we do not see the corpses we leave behind. That is why Jesus invades our moral slumber by telling us how serious this is in the sight of God...Jesus is probably not placing these sins on a scale of seriousness in the kingdom of God; He is simply stressing vividly that they are far more serious than most of us assume. In fact, our insensitivity to their real seriousness is indicative of the dullness of our spiritual senses.”

In verse **22**, our Lord warned the citizens of the Kingdom about the danger of ungodly anger, referring to it as a species and degree of murder. In verses **23** and **24**, he informs us of the process by which our ungodly anger is to be dealt with. He says,

23 So then, if you bring your gift to the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you,

24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift.

In the context of verse **24** the “*altar*” refers to the one in the inner court of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is there, while engaged in worship, that the worshiper has a recollection of a brother who has something against him. Our Lord says that this recollection should cause the worshiper to take immediate steps to be reconciled with his brother. It is only when reconciliation occurs that formal worship is acceptable to God.

Brothers and sisters, when we consider the infinite distance that Jesus Christ had to “travel” in order to reconcile us to God, what distance would be too far for us to travel in order to be reconciled with those whom we have offended?

Our lord says that if while we are engaged in worship we remember that our brother, or sister has something against us, we should suspend our worship and seek reconciliation with the person whom we have offended. What would cause us to remember that a brother or a sister has something against us? More than likely it would be the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit that would prompt such a recall. We must then act on that truth and urgently seek out the offended brother or sister. We should not wait for him or her to take the first step.

Our Lord Speaks about a **brother** being offended. The word “*brother*” is a translation of the Greek word **adelphos**: (**ad-el-fos**’), which means, “one from the same womb.” It refers to a brother (whether born of the same two parents, or only of the same father or the same mother). **Adelphos** is used in the New Testament to refer to a fellow-believer in Christ, united to another by the bond of affection. It has reference to the new life unto which men and women are born again by the action of a common father, even God. So the word is used of believers in Christ who all partake of the same nature and are thus constituted a single family.

In these verses, Jesus is calling for the **offender** to take the initiative in the process of reconciling his or her brother or sister to himself or herself. Even if we have nothing against him or her, if he or she has something against us, we should do everything in our power to be

reconciled to him or her. Elsewhere, in **Matthew 18:15**, Jesus urges the **offended** party to make the first move. So we see that **both parties** have an obligation to work for resolution when there has been a conflict. Ideally, the two should meet each other *“in the way”* and settle their differences. Reconciliation is so important that it takes priority over everything else. It even takes precedence over worship. God would rather see us resolve our differences than receive our offerings!

C.H. Spurgeon says, “We must never imagine that God can accept an offering from us while we harbor any enmity in our hearts. Perhaps, after reading this passage, you say, ‘If **I had anything against my brother**, I would go to him at once, and seek to be reconciled to him.’ That would be quite right; but you must go further than that, for Christ says, *‘If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that **thy brother hath ought against thee**.’* It is much more easy to go to the man who has wronged you than to the one whom you have wronged. Yet the second is evidently the clearer duty, and should be attended to at once: neither can we expect the Lord to attend to us unless we attend to this duty.”

The point that our Lord is making is that ungodly anger affects our relationship with God. As long as there is **internal** sin in our hearts, our **external** acts of worship will not be acceptable to God. Reconciliation must **precede** worship because unresolved conflict has **priority** over worship and therefore must be dealt with first. Jesus is saying in effect, “Settle the breach between you and your brother before you try to settle the breach between you and God!”

Brothers and sisters, the principle that Jesus outlines is not difficult to appreciate. Solving problems now saves trouble later. And delayed reconciliation usually means increased animosity. Jesus is speaking about the priority of reconciliation. Reconciling with an offended brother or sister is more important to God than attending church in order to participate in worship. It is more important than giving sacrificially in

the offering. It is more important to God than any other “church” activity that we may participate in.

Our Lord says, “**First** go and be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your gift.” The Greek word translated “first” is **prótos**, which means, “first, either in time or place, in any succession of things or of persons.” Here Jesus speaks of the priority of reconciliation over worship.

The word “reconciled” is the translation of a Greek word which means, “to change; to change the mind of anyone, to reconcile; to renew friendship with one.” In the Bible, the words “reconcile” or “reconciliation” imply the restoration of harmonious relations between people, nations, groups or individuals and God. Reconciliation first of all involves a removal of that which caused the enmity in the first place. Reconciliation is impossible until the problem that caused the separation between the persons or groups has been dealt with. Therefore it is impossible for reconciliation to occur until sin has been dealt with.

Brothers and sisters, it is very important that we understand that what we are before God involves how we are related to others. In **1 John 1:6-7** we read,

6 If we say we have fellowship with him and yet keep on walking in the darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

(New English Translation)

If we are at enmity with others we are deceiving ourselves if we believe that God will accept our hypocritical offering. In **1 Samuel 15:22** Samuel says to King Saul, “*Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as he does in obedience? Certainly,*

obedience is better than sacrifice; paying attention is better than the fat of rams” (**New English Translation**).

The principle is clear: a right relationship with others is part of the meaning of the sixth commandment, *“You shall not murder.”*

G Campbell Morgan writes that, “God seeks and values the gifts we bring Him—gifts of praise, thanksgiving, service, and material offerings. In all such giving at the altar we enter into the highest experiences of fellowship. But the gift is acceptable to God in the measure to which the one who offers it is in fellowship with Him in character and conduct; and the test of this is in our relationships with our fellow men. We are thus charged to postpone giving to God until right relationships are established with others. Could the neglect of this be the explanation of the barrenness of our worship?”

It is noteworthy that in **Matthew 5:23-24**, Jesus does not inform us as to who exactly the guilty party is, or who is responsible for the broken relationship. His point is not to assign blame to any particular person, but to make the situation right as quickly as possible. Taking the first step in reconciliation is our responsibility as believers. We often try to justify our failure to be proactive by arguing, “I don’t have a problem with him or her. He or she has a problem with me. He or she needs to come and talk to me.” But our Lord rejects such attempts at self-justification.

God wants us to do everything we can to remove barriers and offenses between us and other believers. Otherwise, our acts of worship are meaningless to Him.

We will conclude our Lesson this evening with a quote from **John MacArthur**: “Obviously we cannot change another person’s heart or attitude, but our desire and effort should be to close the breach as much as is possible from our side and to hold no anger ourselves even if the other person does. Regardless of who is responsible for the break

in relationship-and often there is guilt on both sides-we should determine to make a reconciliation before we come before God to worship. True worship is not enhanced by better music, better prayers, better architecture, or even better preaching. True worship is enhanced by better relationships between those who come to worship. Worship may be improved by our staying away from church until we have made things right with those with whom we know our relationship is strained or broken. When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart there cannot be integrity in our worship."