

# LIGHT YEARS PAST JUDGE JUDY

Matthew 5.21-26



Today as we return to Matthew chapter 5 and our series on The Greatest Sermon Ever Preached we find ourselves past the Beatitudes and the vivid and powerful pictures of salt and light. Jesus has already shockingly announced that he has come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it and today we begin to find out just what this means. For today we find ourselves faced with the first of six huge juxtapositions Jesus makes between external and technical righteousness and the internal life and freedom of the kingdom to which we now belong.

And if we are not shaken to our very core by what Jesus is about to say, we are not paying attention. Listen not to the word of God recorded in Matthew 5, verses 21-26:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire.

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 to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

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Have you ever wanted to kill anybody? I have.

I've told you about Monte before. You may remember he lived next door to me growing up, and every month or so he would beat me up. Even then I knew it was complicated. He was adopted and his parents (who weren't just neighbors but also members of the Assemblies church my dad served), to uses a biblical euphemism, didn't spare the rod. My bedroom window was only twenty feet from their side door so I heard the yelling and I heard worse. And Monte in time became good at sharing.

Our fights, if you even could call them that, weren't your typical childhood scuffles. Monte had five years on me. And while I was tall for my age and he was quite short... making us about the same height... he was coordinated and fast and angry.

In fact, the scenario always played out the same. He would attack, I would try to protect myself and fail, and then I would run in terror for our house with him pummeling me all the way. The first few times he attacked my mom called his parents, but before long she stopped. The retribution he received next door just made things worse and there were six hunting rifles in an unsecured rack in the hall outside Monte's door.

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.

Don't be mistaken: I'm not talking about Monte here, I'm talking about me. I remember screaming at my mom in our kitchen over and over again that I was going to kill him, shaking with rage and humiliation.

How about you...

### **DO YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT RAGE?**

Maybe, if you honest, you fight again fury that could explode into one more Columbine-style shooting or maybe, even now, you can picture bruises you've left on your spouse or kids. But even if you are in the clear to date on fury-acted-out, what about anger inside?



I ask because as Jesus begins to map out for us life in the kingdom to which we belong, here is his very first stop: anger.

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.

Apparently this is important. And get this... it is not just fury that Jesus challenges in us; it is also contempt and scorn. Jesus here challenges both rage and ridicule... which really is, if you think about it, just anger under refrigeration.

If you insult a brother or sister, [Jesus says] you will face the highest court in the land; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will face the hell of fire.

I want to say: Wait a minute, Jesus. Are you really serious that the kingdom minimum is not just external constraint—a rejection of anger acted out—but also the elimination of anger held in as rage (hot) or ridicule (cold)? And Jesus doesn't blink. "You have heard that it was said... but I say to you..."



And so we initiate containment. We go to work on our text today to minimize the damage... parsing meanings, looking for ancient Jewish practices that might give us wiggle room, identifying exceptions. In fact, one scholar suggests that nearly the whole history of commentary on this text is a "history of mitigation" ... a history of limiting the challenge it poses to our lives.

What about righteous anger, Jesus? What you did in the temple to the money-changers? What about that passage that says we can be angry but not sin? And hey, God seems pretty ticked in parts of the Old Testament? What about that?

When the reality is that Jesus isn't finished yet. More than just this impossible challenge to rage and ridicule inside us, he goes on to actually command more: a stunningly comprehensive standard for relationships that I believe must be called the **RECONCILIATION IMPERATIVE**.

So when you are offering your gift at the altar [Jesus continues]  
if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you  
[anything at all] Dale Bruner says in his translation of the Greek]

leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

And I don't know about you but I'm looking for any loopholes now. Like maybe we can at least limit the number of people we call brothers and sisters, but even as we try this, Jesus closed the door. His next sentence—the very next one—goes on to include outright enemies.

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison.

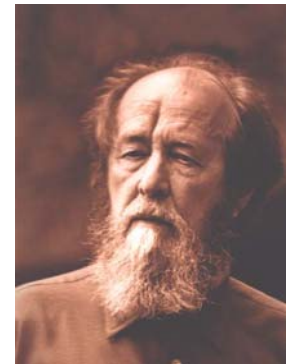
Do you hear how radical this rejection of anger is and how complete the scope of reconciliation? Not just external behavior... Christ's kingdom call goes so far beyond Judge Judy there is no standard for comparison.

And Jesus seems to fully aware that he is raising the bar far beyond what we can observe on our own or use self-righteously to disparage others.

Can I remind you of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn said upon emerging from the gulag prisons in the Soviet Union:

If only the struggle between good and evil were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.

But the line of good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?



Speaking specifically of anger, I heard from another pastor recently about a man who started counseling because his anger was out of control.

He would blow up at times, and he had finally admitted that this was affecting his work and his family life. After he acknowledged this with the counselor, she asked him a curious question, "What would your life look like if you got rid of your anger?"

The man was quiet for a long time before he said: "If I get rid of my anger, what will I have left?"

You have heard that it was said... but I say to you. We face a choice right here, right now... we can spend the rest of our time today trying to explain away what Jesus has just said, or we can seek to understand it and ask what if... in the kingdom to which we already belong... this is possible and we can reject rage and ridicule and we can embrace reconciliation.

I love this question **WHAT IF** in the face of hard texts. What if?

You have heard that it was said, but I say to you... WHAT IF?!

I bet you know personally the hideous damage caused by rage and ridicule in your life and you've seen it in the lives of others as well. You might not have been beaten up by your neighbor growing up, but I bet you know the destruction anger can cause.

Why, consider us as a church... right now I am deeply grateful for all that is working well... brilliantly even. John has been here eight months and I think they have been a great eight. But you know what?

Some of us are still angry at Beverly. She stepped out of her role as our interim head of staff a year ago this month, but mention her name in some circles here and watch what people's faces do.

Others of us are angry at how Beverly was treated here: the angry letters, the attacks, the questioning of her personal faith, the jokes about the pitch of her voice. And why stop there? Some of you are mad at the folks who are back now but who disappeared during the interim. Or maybe you are still nursing a burn at session for dissolving Steve Goodenburger's job. Or furious either at Woody or how we treated Woody. Are you mad at the presbytery or our national church? Now you are probably mad at me.

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. If you insult a brother or sister, you will face the highest court in the land; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will face the hell of fire.

Now we can pretend all that is past, but it seems to me that much of our pain still walks these halls as barely-contained anger and cutting contempt and scorn, and this would suggest we've stopped short of reconciliation.

Is it time we stopped playing church and became the people of God who no longer see reconciliation as a possible option in limited circumstances but as our overarching imperative?

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has anything at all against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Any guess as to why Jesus sets this call for reconciliation in the context of the temple in Jerusalem? It is because for those listening to him preach on that mountainside nothing was more sacred and central than the altar. Nothing was more sacred and central until now. Today something is, and it is reconciliation.

Some students of this text would say I've gone too far. That Jesus in this passage is only calling us to address specific instances where we are unquestionably at fault and our anger has become sin and caused damage. And clearly this is central in the text: we need to seek immediate reconciliation in every relationship where our anger has flared and burned.

But both the early Church Fathers and scholars far more astute than me agree that there is also a bigger imperative to reconciliation here. Read the text carefully and you'll see that Jesus seems to call for us to seek reconciliation even when we are the ones wronged. How is that even possible?

This past weekend we hosted the **Step Into Africa** exhibit and a number of you entered the life of one of the four children whose stories the exhibit told: Emmanuel, Babyrie, Matahbo, or Kombo. Today as we wrestle with anger and reconciliation, I want to take you back to Africa... to Rwanda... and the genocide that ravaged that country. The story I want to tell you is of a woman who survived.

She survived; but her only son didn't, and in the days that followed her hearing of his brutal death, she was consumed by both grief and anger. "God," she prayed, "reveal my son's killer."

What happened instead was that she dreamed she was going to heaven. But there was a complication: in order to get to heaven she had to pass through a certain house. She had to walk down the street, enter the house through the front door, go through its rooms, up the stairs, and exit through the back door. In the dream she asked God whose house this was.

"It's the house," God said, "of your son's killer."

She dreamed the road to heaven passed through the house of her enemy and she woke up shaken. It was only two nights later that there was a knock at her door. She opened it, and there stood a young man. He was about her son's age. "Yes?"

After a moment's hesitation, the young man said, "I am the one who killed your son. Since that day, I have had no life. No peace. So here I am. I am placing my life in your hands. Kill me. I am dead already. Throw me in jail. I am in prison already. Torture me. I am in torment already. Do with me as you wish."

Now remember, the woman had prayed for this day, but now that it had arrived she didn't know what to do. To her surprise, she realized she did not want to kill this young man. She didn't want to throw him in jail. Or torture him. In that moment of reckoning, she found she only wanted one thing: a son.

So as he stood there awaiting judgment she heard herself say something that stunned them both: "I ask this of you. Come into my home and live with me. Become the son I lost." And so he did.

You have heard that it was said "do not murder" but I say to you that the life in the kingdom means so much more. It means a rejection of rage and ridicule and the embrace of reconciliation as an imperative at a level simply unbelievable and completely impossible without the Holy Spirit coursing through our lives.

Mark Buchanan, the man who wrote about the Rwandan woman who adopted her son's killer suggests that as we live into the kingdom we are called to do what God himself has done... making family out of bitter enemies... blazing a trail to heaven straight through their front doors.

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not murder,' but I say to you...

Where will this begin in your life?

## **CLOSING CHARGE**

Where will reconciliation begin in your life?

Two caveats... there are two words for anger in the Greek... one more closely linked to the simple emotion of anger which suggests the image of a flame in dry straw... that would be flash in a pan anger. That is not the word in our text today... the anger Jesus speaks of here is anger we hold on to, we carry, we nurture and protect, anger we stoke. In the larger context of all of scripture it becomes clear that even here Jesus is not condemning the emotion of anger but our choice to carry that anger and damage others with our rage or ridicule. That is caveat number one.

Number two relates to Christ's call to radical reconciliation, and it is about your safety. If you don't feel safe in the relationship you know is broken, don't attempt this at home alone. Instead, seek out others here—faithful and kingdom-committed friends—to pray with you and explore with you how reconciliation might begin.

With those to caveats, here is our charge: we must reject and run from **RAGE**. We must reject and run from **RIDICULE**. And embrace **RECONCILIATION** as our imperative at a level simply unbelievable outside the power of the Holy Spirit and the freedom and life of the kingdom.

On our own it will be impossible, but in him who is able to amazing more than we would ever ask for or imagine, it isn't. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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Spokane First Presbyterian Church  
Kevin Finch