



Ministry of the Word

**Wednesday 25th November 2020**

by Vincent Gannon

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:21-26**Subject:** Part 26 – The King's Law : Murder

*“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. 23 Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hands you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.*

Last time Jesus spoke about true righteousness, which is first and foremost internal. In the next few weeks, we will see Jesus elaborating on some spiritual principles. In these verses we will see Jesus expounding the laws in the King's Kingdom. These are principles of law that govern our life in verses 21 to 32, laws that govern our lips in verses 33 to 37, and laws that govern love in verses 38 to 48. In verse 21, it begins with the law concerning murder. In verse 22, it reveals murder's source and Jesus speaks of the growth of anger when it's allowed to escalate and also the judgement that anger invites. In verses 23 and 24, we get an answer which is reconciliation with brothers and sisters in the Lord. In verse 25, we see the dangers such as postponing reconciliation, or holding onto bitterness or hatred or anger are highlighted, as it leads to judgement, as we see in verse 26.

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In verse 21, Jesus brings before us the 6th commandment (Exodus 20:13) and also the first crime man committed (Genesis 4:8). The prohibition of murder is found later in Genesis 9:6. It's not that it was ok up to this point, it was always wrong to do it and still is. When we look at Genesis 9:6 we see God's penalty, because it is so serious. The penalty was death for the killer and that was given on account of the fact that man is made in the image of God. God was also just when one was accused as we read in Numbers 35:30 and 31.

***“Whoever kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the testimony of witnesses; but one witness is not sufficient testimony against a person for the death penalty. <sup>31</sup>Moreover you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of death, but he shall surely be put to death”.***

The term is in relation to criminal murder, the intentional killing of another human being for purely personal reasons, whatever those reasons may be. Jesus made a clear statement in relation to Satan himself in John 8:44; He calls him a murderer from the beginning. But that does not excuse man, for man is accountable for his own sin, but every sin and every murder is inspired by Satan. These words of Jesus must have felt like a brick crashing through the window of their thoughts as they would not have believed they were guilty of murder. All legal system rule that murder is strictly limited to the act of physically taking another's person's life.

This is a crime that has taken Ireland by storm. I remember reading that in the states there are 25,000 known murders committed each and every year. They reckon that's 27 per day, and that's the ones they know about. And unless these murders are bizarre or concern a famous person, they rarely make the headlines in the States. If you were to add to this list, the pre-birth murders and self-murders, the figures would be staggering. It seems that we are following the same trend in this country in the race with regard to total disregard for human life.

Here, Jesus is not pitching himself against the Old testament revelation, but uses the expression 'You have heard the saying of old' or 'what the ancients were told' and he repeats this expression 4 times, in verse 27, verse 31, verse 38, verse 43. Jesus is clearly not rejecting God's law but calls into question the wrong application by the religious leaders. The Scribes and Pharisees who were referred to in the previous verse were only interested in the externals. The contrast is between what the law says and how the religious leaders

interpreted it. Jesus is explaining the real meaning of particular laws, just what God originally intended for the law to mean.

Even those who don't know a lot, or even nothing about the bible can quote 'Thou shalt not murder', and most people, I'm sure, thankfully agree that this is an important one. It was good that they consider murder a serious crime. While this commandment hasn't prevented or even prohibited the act, the unlawful taking of life carried the death penalty. And I'm sure, many listening that day, thought exactly like the majority of people today *'Well thank goodness I've never killed anyone, so far'*. If murder is the unlawful taking of a person's life, then by definition, the majority of people are not murders. The Bible has its own list of famous or should it be, infamous murders. No doubt Jesus' listeners were very much aware of this and that they too were repulsed by such heinous crimes. They were in favour of capital punishment of death for such offences. They were convinced that they were not guilty of such, or should I say they thought that they were in fact innocent of that particular crime. But before we all take a sigh of relief, remember Jesus just in the last verse said that righteousness isn't just something external but it is in fact, internal. Jesus is in fact saying that you've heard in the past that you should not kill another, but I'm going to tell you that in my kingdom, it's a sin to harbour murderous thoughts.

Naturally, we tend to blame all the external things, for example social deprivation, stressful situations, bad company or influences or any other external cause, as people do. They point away from themselves and not at themselves most times, for the reason of what they do. Regardless of the reason for what we do, we need to remember that sin is an act of the will. Paul brings this out very forcibly and clearly in Romans 1:18-32. I'm not going to read those verses out, you can do that in your own time.

Jesus also states in verse 21 that whoever murders will be in danger of the judgement. Which judgment, the human courts or heavenly ones? The answer is both! If you murder someone then we all know that there are consequences, even if you get away with prison, in this world, you will still have to face consequences, eternal ones. Remember Jesus' Kingdom is an eternal one, with no room for hatred or anger or murder in your heart.

The Scribes, and Pharisees confined murder to being merely a civil issue and had confined its prosecution to a human court. They had also confined its evil to the physical act.

In doing so, they flagrantly disregarded what their own Scriptures taught, they had obviously forgot 1 Samuel 16 verse 7 which says: The Lord said to Samuel, ***“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”***

And we know this because in verse 22 Jesus explains the seed of murder, which is anger. Let's just read that verse again.

***“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.***

Anger is one letter short of Danger. Jesus says ‘but I say to you, I know that the bible says please don't kill each other, but I'm saying to you, don't be angry with each other.’ *Why did Jesus say this?* Because anger is the root cause of murder. Now He says in this verse, ***‘whoever is angry with his brother without a cause’***, does that mean that Jesus allows anger with a cause? Well yes, and there is such a thing as justifiable anger or even righteous anger and I think that it's important to just underline this. The ancients knew this, even Aristotle said ***‘Anybody can be angry, that's easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose and in the right way, that is not within everybody's power, and it is not easy’***.

We need to know the difference, even Isaiah warned in Isaiah 5v20 -

***Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; Who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; Who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!***

There is anger where you sin, and anger where you don't sin. God created humans with emotion and there are legitimate purposes that anger can serve. Paul advised in Ephesians 4 v 26 ***“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath,***

The bible doesn't forbid anger but against sin, but we need to be careful where that anger is directed and if it's just. *When it is just?* Well when someone is being misuse, abused, wronged or mistreated for example. So then, *what has anger go to do with murder?* Sure wasn't God angry in the Old Testament? Yes, but look how justifiable He was. For example: Genesis 6 - God flooded the earth because He could no longer look at the incredible gross sin of the people at that time. Even though he was angry, he was also gracious to them, giving them 120 years of warning. Psalm 7: 11 tells us that ***“God is angry with the wicked every day”***.

*Wasn't Jesus angry?* Yes - but He too, like the Father, was justifiably angry. We can read of an example in John 2 verses 15 to 17, when Jesus was angry in the temple because He had zeal for His father's house (Psalm 69v9). Even in Mark 3 v 5 when the religious leaders were angry at Jesus healing a man with a withered hand because it was the Sabbath; Jesus was angry because they wanted Him to stop doing something good, helpful and compassionate for a person. *Do you see how Jesus was justifiably angry?* One was for God's honour and the other was to help a vulnerable person. Paul the apostle told us to "be angry and don't sin" in Ephesians 4:26. While the principle is often misapplied it is nonetheless possible to have a righteous anger. Faithfulness to Christ will sometimes demand it. For example, when we consider some of the unjust things believers have to face and contend with. Especially parents with children who are in ungodly schools or colleges. It goes right into the church sometimes when the Lord is being dishonoured, it is then right to be angry.

Jesus, in verse 22, states '*whoever is angry*'. This word for anger here has its roots in the Greek word to abide or to live, in other words, Jesus is condemning the constant or perpetual state or habit of anger towards a person. Just like saying that you are annoyed or angry or upset with a person day after day after day, and so on. This is an unrighteous anger that is being described by Jesus. It is the settled, simmering, stewing anger that is nursed inwardly, and fed continually. Jesus is teaching that you may have avoided physically killing someone, but you are in fact actually killing them in your heart. It is possible for a model, law-abiding citizen to be as guilty of murder as anyone on death row. It is possible for a person who has never been involved in so much as a fist fight to have more of a murderous spirit than a multiple killer.

Many people, in the corners of their hearts, have anger and hatred to such a degree that their true desire is for the hated person to be dead. The fact that fear, cowardice, or lack of opportunity does not permit them to take that person's life does not diminish their guilt before God.

All anger is incipient murder. "*Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer*" (1 John 3:15); making all of us guilty at some point because, *who has never hated another person?* In light of the context, John used the term brother in the sense of a fellow believer. But Jesus' emphasis was wider than that.

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Most of those who heard the Sermon on the Mount made no pretence of belief in Christ. He used brother in the broad ethnic sense of meaning, in other words, any other Jewish person in that culture, or even any human.

Jesus strips away every vestige of self-righteousness. Not only did He sweep aside all the rabbinical rubbish of tradition, but He also sweeps aside the self-justification that is common to all of us. His indictment is total. The worst of men try to exonerate themselves and they all have the attitude that natural man has of himself. *"I may have done some bad things, but deep down, I'm not really bad."* Comparing ourselves to a bloodthirsty criminal makes us seem very good in our own minds. Like the Pharisee in the Temple, we feel proud that we are ***"not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers"*** (Luke 18:11). What Jesus says in the present passage is that we are just like those other people. Even if we do not take someone else's life, even if we never physically assault another person, we are guilty of murder.

Now there may be someone thinking *'Oh are you going to be the thought police?'* and the answer is no, I'm not going to be, but Jesus as King reserves that right to be the thought King. *Do I know what's really going on inside your heart?* No, But Jesus knows what is going on inside your heart and mind. It matters a great deal what you think about. We as Christians often need to learn to be patient, kind and long-suffering. *For what reason?* For knowing that we ourselves are sinners, 1 John 1v8. We can't live in a constant state of anger and unprovoked anger. It has no place in the Christian's heart.

*How many people do you think died this week because they allowed anger to go unchecked?* Verse 22, Jesus is talking about when anger is allowed to escalate and Jesus describes anger and it's stages.

Anger is bad and it escalates to name calling. 'Raca' as given in verse 22, was a word of the common language of that day. It's Aramaic and means 'worthless or empty one'. Just like when we would say someone is worthless or empty headed. In most Bible translations it is simply translated as a term of malicious abuse, derision, mockery, abuse, contempt, even slander. It was a word of arrogant contempt. David in Psalm 140:3 describes such people who uses such words in the following manner: ***"They sharpen their tongues like a serpent; The poison of asps is under their lips. Selah"***.

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It was the type of word that the soldiers would have used to mock the Lord, as they placed the crown of thorns on His head and led Him out to be crucified (Matthew 27:29-31).

Jesus says they could be in danger of the council of seventy which was the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, the court system, who tried only the most serious cases and handed down the severest penalties including death as we see in Acts Ch6:12 to Ch7:60. Today we have libel laws and slander laws. We're not talking about just a slip of the tongue, but we're talking about a person who accuses someone and they could present evidence in a court of law. It's verbal abuse, and that leads to and can constitute criminal behaviour, which deserves punishment.

We've all heard 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but name never hurt me' and we all know that's a lie. Words can and do hurt, especially if you are at the end of those hurtful words. A burning resentment in the heart can lead to saying something with your mouth. One person calls another worthless or empty head.

Jesus continues on saying that unchecked anger can lead someone to say 'you fool', and 'they shall be in danger of hell'. The word for fool is translated from the Greek word 'morose', where we get the English word 'moron'. The word means dull, stupid. But here it could mean more, as in a moral fool, that is, they express the desire that that person would be dead. It was used in secular Greek literature of an obstinate, godless person. It was used to call someone both stupid and godless. David tells us in Psalms 14:1, 10:4 and 53:1 that *"the fool said in his heart there is no God"*. The book of Proverbs is full of instructions and warnings to fool. When on the road to Emmaus Jesus used a less severe term when He called the two men *"foolish men and slow of heart"*. Jesus is referring to a person who slanderously calls a person a fool out of anger and hatred. Such an expression of malicious animosity is tantamount to murder and makes the person who so uses it guilty enough to go to hell.

We often hear people damning people to hell or calling on God to damn a person, a people, a government, a country, a team, competition, or whatever. People who do this are calling on God to consign that person to hell and here's what Jesus is saying that such a person is placing themselves at great risk of judgment of hellfire. The word is Gehenna, which is the place in Jerusalem where rubbish was thrown out which was in the Kidron valley and the rubbish was continually being burned. Now it was also a place that if a person died on their

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own, no family or friends or even means of burial then they threw the body in the dump where it would be also burnt. That would happen when someone is deemed worthless. Jesus is saying that you can't do that, the person who calls another person a fool, will one day answer to God. Let's put those thoughts together so far. Anger according to Jesus contain the seeds of murder, abusive language contains the spirit of murder, cursing language express the desire for murder and so in the world where Jesus is reigning in his Kingdom, He is saying, I won't allow and I don't want the seeds of murder, the spirit of murder, or the desire of murder.

The right response such be *'there's something wrong inside of me, in my heart, how can I change my heart?'*. You might even think, but I'm a good person, I only hate people who deserve to be dead, really? Note what Jesus says in the escalation of anger, there is the escalation of punishment, there is the judgment, the council, and hell fire.

Jesus will deal with sin according to the severity of the sin. *Is Jesus saying that anyone who has been angry that they are going to hell?* No, but unchecked and unjust anger itself can result in punishment. To slander or mock a creature made in God's image is to slander the Lord Himself and it is equivalent to murder. Jesus says contempt is murder of the heart. Jesus shatters that complacent self-righteousness by beginning with the accusation that a person is guilty of murder even if he is angry with, hates, curses, or maligns another person.

This leads us to verses 23 and 24, let's just re-read them:

***"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift".***

There is no doubt anger affects our worship of God. What does it mean to *'bring your gift'*? Well, in Jewish culture and society when you go to the temple you would bring a lamb or perhaps a goat, doves or money. It means to bring an offering to God. William McDonald put it this way *'If a person offends another, whether by anger or any other cause, there is no use in bringing his gift to God, The Lord will not be pleased with it. The offender should first go and make the wrong right, only then will the gift be acceptable'*

*Does God appreciate your gifts and your offerings?* The answer is yes! *What value are our sacrifices to God if we neglect unity, love and peace?*

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As long as there is internal sin, outward acts of worship are not acceptable to God. Jesus focuses on the point already made that hatred against someone who is a brother in the broadest sense, reconciliation must be made and that it must proceed worship. Jesus is saying leave your offering, and go reconcile with your brother; then come back and offer your gift. It's imperative. It's actually a command and we need to attempt to rectify the situation. The word means that you must make a conscientious effort to make sure that the problem is resolved, it's dealt with. Unresolved conflict has priority and must be settled. Settle the breach between you and your brother before you try to settle the breach between you and God. Not to do that, is to be a hypocrite by asking for forgiveness without repenting. That has always been God's requirement. He had told Israel, Turn to Isaiah 1v11,16-17

*“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. ‘I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of cattle. And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs, or goats. . . . Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless; defend the orphan, plead for the widow’”* (Cross reference 58:5-7 and Jeremiah 7:9-10).

Go back all the way to Genesis 4, the first murder. It was motivated by burning anger of one brother toward another brother, and it was in the context of worship. The Lord asked Cain after his offering was not accepted, ‘why is your countenance fallen, why are you so upset, don't you know that sin is crouching at the door and its desire is for you, why are you angry and upset? That is what happens, when we are angry, sin is crouching at the door and we need to be careful, maybe it's time to ask yourself, *why are you so upset, and who are you so upset with, is it habitual, or do they really get to you when they do something, anything wrong? You may think that's it justified, but is it really?* John Mac Arthur said ‘*When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart, there cannot be integrity in our worship.*’

That's what anger does, it hurts us as well as the other person. Anger and hatred hinders worship. But if you seek the Lord's face and His will, well then You will pray, you will praise, and the Spirit of the Lord will prompt you to reconcile.

*Does it mean that you have to track down everyone you've had a problem with?* I think we'd be in so much trouble if that was the case.

But if you are praying and praising God and a person comes into your heart, then I'm going to suggest to you that maybe the Lord does want you to go and put it right with them.

Let's just say what it's not with this example a Pastor gave in relation to what happened to him: A lady came up to him at the end of the service and said 'I need to talk to you, for years I've been harbouring anger towards you. You've annoyed me, rubbed me up the wrong way and I've often, if not mostly thought that you are a complete idiot for the past 4 to 5 years. Can you forgive me?' Well she went off feeling a lot better, but guess who felt worse?'

This passage isn't that Jesus wants you to make life miserable for everyone. It's not about digging up old hurts and putting people into awkward positions, but it's about being obedient to the leading of the Spirit and rectifying the relationship that he wants you to deal with, in his time.

People can deal with anger in 3 ways - They can 1. Clam up, or 2. Blow up or 3. Grow up. So if you are clamming up or blowing up, then you can know that this isn't the answer. So then how do we grow up? We need to define the problem in terms of the goal in relation to our reconciliation which is to be at peace and have unity with the other. Anger can give you sufficient energy in order to resolve a problem or solve/deal with it. What often happens is people use that energy to stick their fingers in people's faces or shout that the other person is the problem, but that's not what the bible teaches, it's saying that we resolve our problems in biblical terms and that is how we grow.

When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart there cannot be integrity in our worship. Nearly a thousand years before Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount the psalmist had declared in Psalm 66 v 18, *"If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear"*. Even before that Samuel said in 1 Samuel 15:22, *"Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams"*

The subject shifts to the subject of judgement as we come down to verse 25, let's reread that to get acquainted with it once again: *Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hands you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.*

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Here Jesus is teaching us to agree with your adversary, as in a court adversary. It doesn't just mean anyone that you're angry with, or who's angry with you. It is about someone who's initiating criminal charges against you, or who is going to make a complaint on the basis of loss or injury, and the implication is that the suit is going to go forward if reconciliation isn't made. Jesus is saying agree reconciliation quickly, in the sense, *why would you allow a spirit of antagonism to continue if you have the power to come to an agreement?*

According to Roman law in the 1st Century, the injured party had to track down the offender and physically, even forcibly bring them to face the judge. The two themselves could settle the matter on the way, before the court became involved. So if someone has hunted you down, and is dragging you before the judge, Jesus advises - settle it, make a deal, find a solution, apologise whatever it takes. Jesus isn't asking you to admit to something that you didn't do, but if you did do it, and you go before the judge you may pay a hefty fine, if you go before him, he may not believe you, and you may even go to prison. Jesus is saying - if you are wrong, admit it and if you are right fight it.

If you remain unrepentant or self-deceived, be sure that your sin will find you out which is what verse 26 says:

*Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent.*

A Cent or as some translations put it, a penny, as we know is the smallest copper coin in circulation. Jesus is basically saying, don't wait to be found out, if there's something really wrong, make it right, and in effect saying unresolved anger is costly.

*What can we do?* Someone once said '*that the person who refuses to forgive his brother destroys the very bridge which he himself must walk across*'. Sinful anger must be dealt with honestly, confessed to God, and we have to go to our brother or our sister to sort it out. It doesn't say that they have to come to you, that's not what the bible says - it says that you should leave the altar, go to them. Remember Matthew 6 verses 14 and 15 -

*For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

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## **Conclusion**

There is an anger that leads to judgement and prevents worship. That anger contains the seed of murder, there's abusive language that contains the spirit of murder, cursing contains the desire of murder and so Jesus says that it's not good enough that you've never physically killed anyone. It's important that there's no seed, or no spirit or desire of murder in your heart. Love contains the seed of life, wholesome speech and love contains the spirit healthy growth and blessing contains the desire for reconciliation and peace. And so, it's o.k. for you to say I want peace, I want blessing. Confession, repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation are all tools that you will need for the rest of your life, and will need to learn to use those tools in a way that honours the Lord. Now we can understand this passage.

**Amen.**