

From Anger to Peace

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It's a wonderful thing to see you and to welcome you to our church here this morning as we open God's word together. We are a Christian church in the truest sense of that word. We gather together as those that have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, those that he has saved and caused to be born again to bring into his family ultimately to deliver them safe into heaven where we will worship our God forever and ever, amen. We will ever be grateful to Christ because it is Christ who has saved us, it is Christ who took the initiative, it is Christ who voluntarily laid down his life in order to lead us into God's family. And being in God's family means that you have put your faith in Christ for salvation, it means that you have been justified immediately, completely, before a holy God, you have been declared righteous in the sight of God as a legal matter, God has forgiven and pardoned all of your sin and imputed to you the righteousness of God so that he can freely receive you as one of his own. This is nothing less than what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. We are greatly greatly blessed, aren't we? And when he saved us, he caused us to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came to indwell us individually as believers as the seal, as the guarantee, the promise that what God has started in our lives today will ultimately be fulfilled in heaven; that we have received only a down payment, only the firstfruits of it, as it were, of a greater harvest spiritually yet to come. We have been completely and utterly saved. God has wiped away all of our sins. He has received us into his family. He has filled us with his Spirit. And yet Scripture would have us understand that that's just the beginning. The glory that awaits us is far greater than what we have tasted already, tasted barely a bit of an appetizer with a full banquet at the marriage supper of the Lamb yet to come. So we are here today with great hope, with great confidence, and with great love for our Savior, and I am so very grateful that you are here to share that with us, to share it whether you're visiting and sharing it with us for a day, we welcome you. For those of you that are a part of our church and share in the life of our church, we share together in something that is infinitely precious together, don't we, because we share in the riches of Christ together as we come to his word this morning.

Now, as his people, we come under the authority of God's word. We come under the authority of the word of Christ. And what we mean by that is that we don't simply receive these benefits from God in salvation and then go about and live any way we want to and if we want to live a sinful life, we can live a sinful life because, after all, the blood covers it all. That's not real salvation. That's not the true thing. True salvation is a recognition

that I have now come under the authority of Christ and his word to me is law. What he commands is what I must do. It is what I must respond to. When the word of God convicts me and compels me, then I am under moral obligation to respond, Not to earn God's favor, Christ is the one who has the favor of God, Christ is his beloved and he accepts us in Christ, but rather as a reflection of the life that God has given us, we gladly submit to him and would want to be what he would have us to be.

And we find so much of that in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6 and 7. I invite you to turn to Matthew 5, for it's the text that we're going through on Sunday morning. Matthew 5, and it just needs to be said that a man or a woman, a boy or a girl who would name the name of Christ and yet be a source of perpetual conflict to those around him, is somebody who should examine his heart to see whether he is saved or not because God has made it clear that one of the things that he does when he saves someone... the Holy Spirit, you see, the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of peace. The Holy Spirit is a reigning force in our heart who produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lives which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, and someone who is truly saved is someone who truly has the Holy Spirit dwelling within them. And if you truly have the omnipotent Spirit of God dwelling within you, it is inevitable and it is certain that in some manner or form, the nature of who the Spirit of God is will overflow in your life. And if that is absent from your life then, my friend, no matter what you said with your lips about Christ in the past, you need to examine yourself and re-examine your claim to know Christ because these things are inevitable, not because we suddenly do it, but it's because God has saved us, God has exercised his power over us, God has put his omnipotent Spirit in us with the intent to conform us to the image of Christ and true salvation can be seen and recognized by the overflow of that inevitable work of the Spirit of God in our lives and one of the aspects of that is peace. Peace with God judicially, yes, manifesting itself also in peace relationally with men.

So with a sense of reverence and an understanding and a gratitude toward God for our salvation, we turn our attention to Matthew 5, beginning in verse 21 where the Lord Jesus said,

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. 23 Therefore [there are consequences to what Jesus just said] if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25 Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

In this very practical passage, Jesus is giving us the first of six illustrations that help us understand that God requires an inner righteousness from his people, a heart righteousness, a righteousness of thought, motive and deed. God looks at the heart, not simply at mere externals as man is tempted to do. You know, there was a comedian one time long, long ago, I'm dating myself as I say this, but he said it is better to look good than to feel good. As long as you look good on the outside, the point was it doesn't matter whether you are sick and feeling crummy on the inside, and that's just a reflection of the way that man thinks about things. As long as things externally seem to be okay and things look pretty on the outside, then there is no reason to worry about what's on the inside, and what we need to see as the people of God is this, is that God views it in completely the reverse manner. God looks on the heart and Jesus is making this clear in his passage in verses 21 through 48, talking about different ways that God makes it obvious that he looks on the heart. He says, "It's not enough for you not to have committed murder, let's talk about your anger problem. Let's talk about your temper. Let's talk about the continual conflict that you inject in your family. Let's go there," Jesus says. He says, "It's not enough for you to simply maintain physical distance from another human being," he says, "let's talk about your adulterous lustful thoughts and the things that you ruminate on in private in your mind and in your imaginations, the things that you fill your thoughts with. Let's talk about that. Let's talk about the way that you look at people around you and the motives with which you look." Jesus says, "Let's talk about that, not simply the externals."

So as we are going through and beginning to walk through this passage in the last half of Matthew 5, we are in the presence of the great Physician of souls who is, as it were, putting us under the x-ray machine of the word of God and all that is there will be exposed as we submit ourselves to his word. Now, that's not always comfortable. You know, these things can be convicting but you can mark the reality of your own spiritual condition by how you respond to it. You see, Jesus made it plain in Matthew 5:6, that the one who is truly in his kingdom is someone who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, someone who desires the kind of inward purity that God calls us to. And when we come to the word of God as his people with a heart like that, then there is something inevitable that takes place. Whenever God's word convicts us of unrighteousness and calls us to a higher standard of righteousness, we don't resist that, we don't push against it, we don't close our ears to it. We would never do that. A true Christian would never ever ever ever ever do that because a true Christian hungers and thirsts for righteousness. So while it may be painful to be convicted by the word of God and to say, "Ew, there is a lot of ugliness inside me," the true Christian says, "Ah, but I'm grateful for it. While it's painful and repulsive to me to see what I'm really like under the searchlight of God's word, I'm grateful for it because the greatest desire of my life is to aspire after the righteousness of God. So when it convicts me, I respond. I don't reject it. I don't resent it. I don't suddenly find ways that I can disagree with the speaker and say that's just his opinion." Good grief, are you kidding me? To have the word of God explained and then just dismiss it and say that's just the opinion of the speaker, I'm not under obligation to respond? What kind of approach is that to spiritual life? That's just a man saying, "I'm on the throne of my life

and no one can assault the throne that I sit on." Not for us, beloved, we gladly come to God's word and let it speak to us.

So Jesus starts as he is expositing the theme of the inner righteousness that God requires, he starts with the sin of anger and we began this text on Tuesday, this past Tuesday. We looked at the first two verses. For those of you that were with us on Tuesday, there will be CDs out there where you can catch up with it. Let me just remind you of what Jesus said in these early two verses. He said, "You have heard that the ancients were told," verses 21 and 22, "'You shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'" The human emphasis of the teachers of that day was on the physical act of murder and on human accountability to the court that ruled over such things. In verse 22 Jesus says, "I want you to know that they are missing the whole point and what they say and how they limit the scope of the word of God." He says, "But I say to you," he says, "Let me tell you what that commandment really means." He says, "What that commandment really means is that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell." He says, "You may not have blood on your hands but if you have blood on your tongue, if you have blood on your heart, you are guilty enough to go to hell." That's what the sin of anger does. That is how seriously God views it.

You see, here's what you've got to understand: that because God looks on the inner man, because God requires sincere worship from a sincere heart from the inner man, from the internal attitudes and motives of our existence, because that's what God requires, he requires purity there. It's not simply a ritual purity that, "Oh, I went through the motions of sacrifices or I attended church or I did my quiet time," and having gone through those externals everything is okay. God says, "Well, let's brush that away and ask about your heart." And all of a sudden we realize, as I've said many times in teaching the Sermon on the Mount and which I will gladly say every opportunity I get until the Lord takes me home to glory: Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is teaching for keeps. He's talking about who you really are and he doesn't accept false pretense, he doesn't accept hypocrisy, and let's be more specific and more direct, he does not accept hypocrites into his kingdom. He is exposing hypocrisy in what he says here.

So the Pharisees, what we saw on Tuesday was, the Pharisees minimized this commandment of murder and just made it about the external act of which few people were guilty. Jesus comes and says, "No, let me tell you that the law prohibits not only the external act of murder, God's law prohibits the anger that leads to murder whether you actually kill somebody or not. If there is blood in your heart toward another person, then there is blood on your hands and accountability toward God." So Jesus takes us to what the law really taught, to what God really requires on this and says anger incurs eternal guilt, a standard which is unheard of in any discussion that the world would ever have about such things.

So Jesus now, that's a little bit of review of what we talked about on Tuesday, now as we go to verses 23 to 26, Jesus draws out the implications of what that means for how you

live. Notice the verse as it begins in verse 23, he says, "Therefore." What he's saying is, "Because anger is such a serious sin, because anger incurs eternal guilt on a soul, then because that's true, here's what you need to do. Here's how you should respond to the reality of the authority of God's word on the inner man." He says, "Therefore." This is the conclusion. This is what you should do in response. And what he's going to do is he's going to show us, he's going to show the people of his kingdom, those that are under his rule, he's going to show us God's way to deal with anger in a righteous way. Stated a different way: when there is conflict in your life, here's what you do with it. And he's going to tell us two main principles we can draw from this text in verses 23 to 26.

First of all, he says this, very simply, point 1: seek peace first. Seek peace first. As we come to this text, you need to remember something important: Jesus had already emphasized the priority of being a peacemaker in the Christian life. He says in Matthew 5:9, look at Matthew 5:9, he says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." It is the peacemakers alone who are truly in the family of God. Those who are perpetual fountains of conflict should not comfort themselves with any Bible verses they've heard or memorized in the past and think that they belong in the kingdom when an honest examination of their life says this is a man or a woman who is a perpetual flow of conflict in relationship. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they and they alone shall be called the sons of God." So when Jesus was talking about character in the Beatitudes in the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, he named this as one of the primary themes of true Christian character.

Now going along, he is expanding it. Having stated the theme in a general way in verse 9, now he is coming along and picking it up in verses 21 to 26 and expounding on what exactly that means and what exactly that looks like, what does it mean to be a peacemaker. Well, Jesus says that for those who are truly in his kingdom, the ones that truly belong to him, peace in human relationships is a priority. It is a matter of surpassing importance to them and this is what God requires. This is the kind of righteousness that God requires.

Now, when we talk about peace, we can think about it in two different ways and in our overly saturated emotional context of the world and even in the church at large, we would tend to think of peace in a sense of inner tranquility. My emotions, I'm calm inside and I feel good, like that. That's not the meaning that we are using here and it's not what Jesus has in mind as will be evident in just a moment. There is also a sense in which peace means that there is righteous harmony in relationships. When a nation is at peace with another nation, they don't feel good about each other but it's saying that there is no conflict between them and here Jesus speaks of peace in the way that it works out in harmony in human relationships.

So for those of you on the live stream listening in, for those of us here in the room, let me say this just as plainly and with as much care and compassion for your souls that I can: an angry temper or ongoing conflict in life breach the peace that God requires in the heart of his people. A man with an angry temper, with an explosive outrage that can be set off at the drop of a hat, so to speak, is not someone who is manifesting a heart that is

living out the righteousness that God requires. Jesus makes this plain. So as we come to that, we realize that for some of us, for some of you, this is really confronting you at the very level at which you live. Are you known as an angry person who everybody understands, "Don't cross him or you'll pay a price"? Well, if that's your reputation, if that's what you're known for, you should humble yourself before God in broken tears of repentance and say, "I'm not a peacemaker. I'm not at all what you require me to be." And with that said, for those of us that try to live with a tender heart before God but inevitably conflict comes and you're dealing with issues in relationships, Jesus here graciously shows us how to deal with that and he starts in verse 23. It's understanding the priority of peace that we have to come to grips with.

In verse 23 he says, "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first," do you see the priority? "First be reconciled to your brother, and then," second priority, "come and present your offering." Jesus says anger incurs guilt before God therefore seek to restore broken relationships and do it as a priority of life. And when he says this here in verse 23, when he says "you," it's very interesting the way that this works out. Here in verse 23, you know, "you" in the English language is a little bit ambiguous because we use the same word to refer to plural. I could say, "I'm speaking to all of you," plural, or I could say, "I'm speaking to you," plural, meaning that I am speaking to Sam in the third row. So "you" in English is ambiguous this way. When you look at the original language in verse 23, Jesus is using the singular "you" from the Greek language saying, "Therefore if you find yourself in this position, here's what you need to do." He is saying that it's very personal. We should especially feel the weight of his pronouncement and the seriousness with which he addresses this. God's word is not simply addressing us collectively in the room here today, he's addressing you individually with what he says. If you are in this position, you singular, here's what you need to do, God exercising his authority over the human soul with what he says here.

So Jesus here supposes a Jewish worshiper approaching the altar to present a sacrifice and there he remembers before the sacrifice is offered, before he offers up his lamb for the sacrifice by the priest, he remembers, "Ah, I've got a conflict." It comes to his mind that, "I have a broken unresolved conflict in a relationship in my life." It's very practical, isn't it? You all know what it's like to come into church with unresolved conflict. You know, look, we're honest enough and we're not critical but we understand that people fight with each other on the drive to church and quickly turn their frown upside down as they walk through the doors and smile and everything's okay by outward appearance but inside there is this simmering conflict that goes on. Well, what do we do in times like that? How should we think, first of all, about those things? Well, the answer that Jesus gives highlights God's priority. Look at those two verses again. He says, "When you remember that your brother has something against you, here's what you need to do." This is the priority of peace in a Christian life, so important that you would leave your offering at the altar and go and find your brother and do what you can to resolve that conflict; that it's so important that you would step away from worship in order to resolve the human horizontal conflict that is at hand.

Now, beloved, what this does for us is so many things but one of the things that it does is it convicts us of our casual approach to worship and the casual approach that we bring to life. It's easy, isn't it, it's easy to separate what's happening in life from the manner in which you approach God, not just publicly but privately; to go to prayer with unresolved conflict and to say, "Well, that doesn't matter. Let me now worship God." Please. You know, when you come to worship God, you are presenting the entirety of your life, not simply your external presence or your words of the moment. You know, what's the entirety of your life say? Is there this commitment to peace of which God speaks? In 1 Peter 3, you don't need to turn there but in 1 Peter 3, it makes this point to husbands and says: husbands, you need to live with your wives in an understanding way, granting her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life lest your prayers be hindered. You know, a guy that lives in a perpetual broken state of relationship with his spouse should not deceive himself into thinking that he's getting anywhere in prayer with God in that circumstance when he is hardhearted toward his wife and unwilling to compromise and ask forgiveness and grant forgiveness. Now, let's just not play games. Jesus doesn't play games with us. We play the game but Jesus isn't sitting down at the board to join in.

So what Jesus does whether it's in private prayer before God or in public with the people of God, in this verse what he does is he cuts – watch this – he cuts our carelessness off at the pass and says, "Don't bring that here. Don't bring your conflict here and think that this is acceptable to me." So it just puts a big stop sign on us and says, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, what's happening in life here?" And says you must deal with these things in life as you approach God in worship and not think the two are separate and that you are somehow worshiping acceptably to God when you do that. He says you should seek resolution first before you worship. The greater priority is reconciliation. That's not what you would guess if you thought carelessly about God's word. It's not what you would guess if you didn't carefully study God's word. So what Jesus says when you're coming to worship, what you must do is you need to clear the air with men. Do it first. Make that your priority despite the inconvenience, despite the potential embarrassment that it might cause, despite the interruption it is to your plans, despite the fact that it will mean humbling yourself. You know, and basically what this does for us is it forces us to choose between our pride and a true worship of God. You say, "I don't want to humble myself. I'm too angry about that. This has been going on too long. I ain't gonna do it." To which Christ says, "Then let's not kid ourselves about your worship."

You see, here's where you see the seamless nature of the Sermon on the Mount coming together. For the true disciple of Christ, he longs for the presence of God. He longs to worship God in spirit and in truth. Those are the true disciples who worship in spirit and truth. And so because that is the supreme priority, because he seeks first his kingdom and his righteousness, Matthew 6:33 as the concern of his life, then it's easy for him to humble his pride, comparatively speaking. It is not a choice of equal competing priorities when Christ says, "Go and be reconciled." The disciple says, "Oh, that's painful but do you know what? That's what I'm going to do. Why? Because the supremacy of worship is more important to me than my pride. I'm willing to swallow the conflict. I'm willing to set aside what I was holding against that person. I'm willing to confess my angry temper before those that it has hurt. I'm willing to confess and forsake all of that. Why? Because

I've got to be in the presence of God to worship. Because I desire his righteousness. I desire his presence. Nothing is sweeter to me than the presence of Christ and I must have his smile on my life no matter what it costs me."

That's the truth. This is what God requires. Beloved, it's a command from Christ. On what basis would anyone say, "This doesn't apply to me. I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing." No. No, you may keep doing what you're doing but you won't do it with the sense of self-deception that that's pleasing to God in light of this word that Jesus has spoken. So do it first, do it as a priority despite the inconvenience, despite the interruption, despite the embarrassment that it may cause you. And I know that for some of you you know that this word is convicting you and you're at a crossroads in what you're going to do with life in response to this, whether you'll maintain the pretense of being a Christian while you hide your conflict in public and manifest your temper in private, or whether you will repent and become what God calls you to be, because according to Christ, you cannot please God with worship if you present it with a bitter heart toward another man.

This isn't the only place that Jesus said it, just in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at Matthew 6 in what we commonly call the Lord's prayer. The Lord's prayer, not because he needed to pray it but because it's the prayer that he prescribed for his disciples as a pattern for their own praying. And, oh my, does this reinforce what he said earlier, further proof of the internal harmony of the Sermon on the Mount and the fact that he preached this on a single occasion rather than something that was stitched together by a subsequent editor.

Matthew 6:9, Jesus says, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.'" Establishing that vertical priority of prayer. "God, I worship you. God, I seek your will. God, I seek the furtherance of your kingdom as I approach you here this morning. God, I come in a spirit of dependence." Verse 11, "Give us this day our daily bread." And, "God, I come knowing that I come with guilt and forgive us our debts. Amen." Wait a second. Wait, what do you mean, amen? I confess my sin. Jesus wasn't done there. "Forgive us our debts as, in like manner, to the way that we also have forgiven our debtors."

Look at verses 14 and 15, he says, "For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions." At the very core, beloved, of the way the Lord taught us to pray is that as you are confessing sin, that you would do so having examined your life first because he says, "forgive us our debts as we have already forgiven our debtors. God, I come to you not harboring resentment and bitterness toward another man in my heart. I've been wronged yes, but, Father, I forgive them. I have sought to the extent possible, I have sought reconciliation with them. I hold nothing against man as my fellow man as I come to you, O God, and therefore I pray, Father, forgive me of my sins against you, in like manner, in the way that I have tried to deal with men myself." Jesus intimately links your spirit of forgiveness with whether you are in a position to ask forgiveness for your sins from God or not. That's why he says you seek peace first. You come to God and remember you've got something against your brother, stop. Kind of like

when your clothes are on fire, what is it that they tell you? Stop, drop and roll. You come to God with sin in your heart toward another man, stop, drop what you're doing, and roll over and do what you can to resolve it.

Now, for some it may be that it's just impossible to get that reconciliation. You know, someone in your past has sinned against you and now they are dead. There's nothing you can do about it. You can't go and find them or they are removed geographically and it's been 15 years and you have nowhere to find them and you are not able to literally carry this out with a face-to-face meeting. Okay, God is gracious, God understands that, but at least you can work it through in your heart and say, "God, they did sin against me but I'm not going to hold onto the bitterness of that any longer. Why would I hold bitterness against someone in my past, Lord, when in the present you have been so gracious to me and you are guiding my life through all of that? Therefore I'm just going to trust you for it and, Lord, to the extent that I have been bitter in the past over these things, please forgive me and wash my heart and make it clean because I know that bitterness is not acceptable before you." But especially if it's someone in your immediate life and you do have access to them and it's a daily matter, look, you need to do the hard spiritual work of sitting down with that person and saying, "I've been wrong."

You know, and I remember a time, I want you to know that I don't speak this in a condescending way, not speaking down to you except in the sense that I'm physically elevated on a platform. I remember a time long ago, 20 years or more in my marriage with Nancy which has been a very happy marriage, 29 years in July. But I remember a time, the details are not important, this is very long ago, I remember that there was something that had upset me and I didn't do this and I carried that bitterness for a good long while in my life toward my wife and I wouldn't speak about it with her. She'd say, "Is everything okay?" "Everything's okay." Eventually as God does things, eventually it came out and eventually I had to say, "Yes, this happened and this is what I was upset about," and I'm in the humiliating position of having carried that for months in the way that I had conducted myself in our marriage. I am ashamed of that as I look back on it, but ultimately what provides the power, what provides you the motivation to drop your pride and to confess these things and to be transparent about it is this: ultimately you realize this is hindering my fellowship with Christ. I'm not right with Christ when it's like this. I'm living out the warning of 1 Peter 3:7. And because Christ is precious to me, you say to yourself, because I must have a clear conscience before God because that's the priority, then I'll deal with the human aspect of this. And once you deal with that honestly a time or two or three, all of a sudden it has a sanctifying impact on your life in this way: when you're tempted toward anger, you say, "I don't want to go there. I'm just going to let this go now. I'm going to drop the quarrel now before it breaks out because I don't want to be in the position where I have to go through that again." And the sting of past repentance and the past ways that you have failed motivate you to keep short accounts in relationships now because – it's always about the because, beloved, it's always about the reason: because the great desire of the redeemed heart is to live closely with Christ and to live closely with Christ means you let the human conflict go. You forgive people for the way that they have wronged you. You trust Christ for that and you let it go and you say,

"I'm not going to be upset about that any longer," and you guard your heart going forward because this is a priority to your holy God.

So, beloved, this is something that you do on a one time basis, not to establish it as a pattern of your life, I'm saying this as a Christian pastor, as an ordained minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in what I'm about to say: it would be better for you to reconcile a relationship on a Sunday morning than to be here knowing that you're still hardhearted about it. Don't go through the motions. Don't insult God. Don't stain the fellowship of his people with hypocritical worship where you know you're bringing a hard heart into the worship center and you are refusing to reconcile a relationship. Better to just stay away, in one sense, and at least your absence from the people of God would convict you that you're not living righteously. But the supreme thing, what God would really have you do, what Christ would really call you to, is to take the opportunity to go and make peace. Better not to do it on Sunday morning but do it quick. Go and take care of it now. That's what Christ is teaching us here because sin in the heart nullifies the worship of God. You're wasting your time if that's not your heart approach to life.

Let's look at a couple of Old Testament passages that would help us see the general principle. Look at Psalm 66 which we have on the horizon on our Tuesday night studies. This Tuesday we will be studying Psalm 60, for those of you that will be with us and you want to read it in advance. But today, this morning we turn to Psalm 66 for just a simple verse. In verse 18, Psalm 66:18 the Psalmist says, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear." And in Proverbs 28, look over at Proverbs 28, just past the Psalms for those of you that are still getting acquainted with your Bible. Proverbs 28:9, "He who turns away his ear from listening to the law, Even his prayer is an abomination." You see, we are all tempted to think that just because we're doing something in worship, just because we're praying it's automatically acceptable to God and Scripture makes it plain that's not the case. Scripture says what's going on in your heart as you pray.

So in light of that priority, Jesus says you seek peace first. You seek that as the priority of life and realize that this needs to be elevated as an ongoing commitment and principle by which you live. Seek peace first. It's the greater priority over formal worship. Not to say worship is not a priority, of course, it's just that there are conditions to acceptable worship before God that we need to honor with our lives. So seek peace first as the priority.

Secondly, what else can we say that Jesus teaches us here in Matthew 5? We said seek peace first, secondly, seek peace fast. Seek it fast. Don't wait because the matter is urgent. Look at Matthew 5:25 and 26. Jesus says, "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent." Jesus says, "Do it quickly." In other words, don't wait. Act on this and say, "This is what I'm going to get up and do now."

You see, beloved, what I'm about to say is a true principle of all of spiritual life and matters in other areas, not just this matter of anger. Here's the thing: when the word of

God convicts you about something, about an area of obedience that you need to pursue or a sin that you need to confess or a thing that you need to say and you are convicted about that, these words are lethal to your spiritual life, they are lethal, "I'll do it later. Not right now. Yeah, that's important and I'm committed to doing that a little bit later." As soon as you accept in your heart that immediate obedience to Christ is something that can be postponed to be done on your timetable, you have just skated onto very thin ice. You see, because for the true disciple of Christ, obedience to Christ is the preeminent priority of life. That is what matters and so whatever the consequences of obedience are, is secondary to the fact that, "I must obey," you say to yourself. "I must do this."

Next week we have coming up in the morning service, I'm very excited about this, we have a baptism that we're going to do on Sunday morning, right at the start of the service. It reminds me and makes me think maybe for some of you, you have postponed baptism and said, "I'll do that later. It's not urgent. Yes, I've come to Christ," but wait a second, on what basis when Christ said be baptized do you say, "I'll do that later, Lord"? You need to seek that and saying, "I'll do it later," does this, that attitude that says, "I'll do it later," does this, it's lethal, it would be better to drink arsenic than to make that the pattern of your spiritual life. I'm not recommending arsenic for your personal consumption in saying that. I'm just making a point. When you condition your life to say, "I'll do it later," you are dulling your conscience to the piercing power of the word of God and you deceive yourself into thinking that delayed obedience is not disobedience. It teaches you, that attitude teaches you to become comfortable with sin. "I'll do it later. Okay, nothing happened. This is okay. I'll do it a little bit more later." And later and later, before all of a sudden you're in a cesspool of life that you never dreamt you'd find yourself in all because at some point you compromised on timing and said, "This isn't urgent enough to command my immediate attention. I've got better things to do than obey Christ right now." Wow, really? I know you'd never say it that way in your words but that's what you're saying in life. "I've got better things to do." Please. Let's not disgrace Christ. Let's not dishonor him with an attitude that says, "I'll do it on my timetable, Lord. I'll do it when it fits me," to which Scripture replies, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do what I say?" "I plan to, Lord." It's kind of self-condemning when you see it in that light, isn't it? When you say, "I'll do it later," it just allows time for things to fester and worsen.

Bringing it back to the point of this conflict matter, go back to verse 25, Jesus says, "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way," and he's talking about it in the context of conflict. His real point isn't actual legal litigation, he is using that as an illustration because the point, the larger point he's making is about anger and broken relationships and conflict. So his point is here's what litigants do on their way to court, they resolve things before they get there. He says that's the kind of attitude you need to have with conflict in your life. You deal with it before it can get worse.

And here's the point. I can speak about this with just a measure of understanding. In the realm of court litigation when parties are in a lawsuit with one another, lawsuits always settle more rapidly the closer the trial date gets. Always. Sometimes they don't settle but settlement is always more urgent between the two conflicting parties as the trial date gets

closer. Why is that? It bears on the point that Jesus is making. When you go into court with a lawsuit, all of the sudden it's out of your hands in the way that it gets resolved. The judge might rule against you. The jury might agree with your opponent and rule against you and you lose everything that was at stake in the lawsuit rather than agreeing beforehand and saying, "Hey, I'll give a little if you give a little and we'll find a halfway ground and we can both walk away happy." Lawyers do that, their clients do that so that they can control the risk, so that all of a sudden they are not subject to things that are outside of their control. We know that we're going there, we know that there is a problem here, we know that there is a lawsuit here, let's settle it because we both win that way.

Jesus pictures that kind of situation and applies it to your personal conflict. He says, "This is urgent for you to do quickly." Why? Because God disciplines his people and if you don't resolve your conflict now while it's in your control to do, it may burst out into the open. There may be consequences. People may know, God may severely discipline you simply because you didn't resolve the conflict in the first place. So that, think about it this way, a married couple has a little conflict somewhere in the course of their marriage that they never resolve and it just starts to expand and expand and expand and more gets added onto it and if it's in the church, it becomes known to the whole church, maybe a matter of church discipline. Or it spills out and becomes a matter of public record in a divorce court and all of a sudden the consequences of where your conflict go are out of your hands. It's out of your control. Wouldn't it have been a whole lot better when the problem was the size of a thimble to just deal with it then? That's Jesus' point, "Do this quickly before it gets out of hand, before it gets out of control, and then someone else is deciding your conflict for you."

He says there in verse 26 and he talks about, he's picturing a debtor being taken to debtor's prison and says, "You know, you need to settle this before someone else takes you and throws you into prison." He says in verse 26, "I'm telling you, you won't come out of there until you've paid up the last cent." You know, your creditor might have accepted terms but because you wouldn't resolve it, now you're in prison and you've got to deal with it and now everything has to be paid. With regard to that setting, one writer explains it this way, he said and I quote, "In Jesus' day as in recent centuries, a person who defaulted in his debts could be thrown into a debtor's prison until the amount owed was paid. Of course while he was there, he couldn't earn anything, but his friends and loved ones who were eager to get him out might well put forth sustained and sacrificial efforts to provide the cash." The idea being that this forces the issue to be resolved. You're in prison, now it is forced to be resolved and you're not going to get out until it is. Jesus' point is that before your conflict gets to that level, deal with it. Deal with it while you can seek the Lord's grace on your humble efforts to resolve it rather than waiting until God's discipline becomes more severe. Spiritually speaking, Jesus is saying in the simplest terms I can put it: your anger is sinful therefore resolve it before you incur greater discipline from God. In this life, to be sure, possibly his eternal discipline in hell for those who were never born again and it manifested in their perpetual angry spirit.

Drawing it back from that to this: beloved, isn't it true, isn't it verified by your experience that many broken relationships could have been saved if there had simply been

communication and humble interaction at the right time? Isn't that true? Well, apply that to your life then. Jesus says the right time for you to act on your conflict is as soon you are conscious of the fact that you're at odds with a brother. We need to resolve matters when they first come up and not stew on it until you're so upset that the conflict erupts unexpectedly.

Beloved, when your private disputes come out into the open, when that happens in the life of people in their personal relationships, it's because they have disobeyed Christ's command here in Matthew 5. The problem increasingly grew in their mind, they justified themselves, they accused others and then it's too late to do anything about it. And let me say one final thing about this. It is not a solution to the problem to run away from it without talking about it. It's not a solution to run away from your marriage because there is conflict in it and say, "I'm not going to talk about it." It's not a solution if you've got a problem at work to just clam up and ignore it and whatever. It's not a solution in the church to say, "I'm unhappy, I'm leaving, I'm not going to talk to anyone about it." That is a direct violation of Matthew 5. That is sinful for us to live that way because Christ says if you have conflict, go and seek to resolve it, and you resolve it not through avoidance but through a humble interaction about it with the person that's at stake.

Sinclair Ferguson, whom I love his books, his writings, his preaching, Sinclair Ferguson kind of puts a bow on this for us when he says this, he says, "Animosity is a time bomb. We do not know when it will go off. We must deal with it quickly before the consequences of our bitterness get completely out of control. Most human relationships that are destroyed could have been preserved if there had been communication at the right time. Jesus says the right time is as soon we are conscious that we are at enmity with our brother."

Beloved, do you need to apply this in your personal life? Your family life? Does it speak to you about the inner condition of your temperament? Will you use these principles, I plead with you, will you use these principles to help protect the unity of our church? Seek peace first and seek it fast if you are angry with someone and pray that God would bless you as you seek to honor his work.

Let's go to him in prayer.

Our Father, surely your word has searched us this morning and, Lord, surely there are some with very tender consciences who would need the protection of your Spirit not to despair under what your word has said, those that are peacemakers but find that they are associated with those who won't make peace no matter what they try to do. Father, for those like that, put the tender hand of your Shepherd love upon them and comfort them with your grace.

Perhaps for others, Father, who just see the beginning seeds of things like this beginning to take root, let them thank you for the grace and deal with the matter quickly and be swift to meet them with your grace with unexpected resolution and tears of peace and

repentance and hugs with others that because this has come out and been resolved. Bless in that way, Father, as you apply your word by your Spirit to your people.

And Father, for those that are hardened and entrenched in an angry temper, so much so, Father, that they are probably even blind to it and just think that this is the way that life is and this is the way my dad was and therefore it's the way that I am and that's just who I am, as though experience was a justification for their violation of your word, for them, Father, we would also pray for an act of grace that would penetrate through the power of your Spirit to the core of their heart that they would truly repent to recognize the ugliness with which they have lived their lives, and with brokenness and confession before you, to name it for the sin that it is, and having been reconciled to you through faith in Christ, to go and spread the harmony with confessions of repentance and a seeking of forgiveness with those that their lifelong demeanor has harmed so deeply. Yes, Father, we would pray for that kind of great fruit coming from your word today as well.

Father, I have spoken openly about my own failures in this way, Lord, I pray that you would forgive me for those things, once again. And for others, Father, where we recognize that we need too have been guilty of that, Father, we confess our sins. We thank you for the rebuke of your word. Though it is painful, Father, it is a healthy pain. And now we pray that we could go forth and carry it out, Father, and that as a result of being under your word today, our lives would change and that our lives would greatly please you as we respond with a willing spirit to the wonderful words of our wonderful Savior found in this wonderful passage in your wonderful word. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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