

Matthew
The Deadly Sin of Anger (Part 3)

Matthew 5:21-26

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I want to begin by telling you a story that you have likely never heard about a man that you have likely never heard of. His name is Alvin Straight. Alvin was born in 1920 and died in 1996. He was a Korean War veteran, father of seven, and a manual laborer. To be honest, his life was unexceptional until two years before his death. In 1994, that summer, Alvin's older brother, Henry, who was 80 years old at the time, suffered a stroke.

Now, Alvin and Henry had been estranged. In fact, they hadn't even spoken for 10 years. But when Alvin heard of Henry's stroke, he decided to visit him and to make things right between them. Now, Alvin had bad eyesight, so he couldn't get a driver's license. He also didn't trust public transportation. So, at 73 years of age, he decided to drive the 240 miles from his home in Iowa to his brother's home in Wisconsin on a 30-year-old John Deere riding lawnmower. On July 5th of 1994, he hitched a 10-foot trailer loaded with gasoline, food, clothes, and camping equipment to the lawnmower, and he began his journey. As you might imagine, in the summers in the upper Midwest, he faced bad weather often, and because it was, after all, a 30-year-old riding lawnmower, numerous breakdowns. In addition to that, the mower's top speed was about five miles an hour, so the trip along the back roads took nearly six weeks. He finally arrived at his brother's home in mid-August. So from July 5th to mid-August, he was on the back roads on this riding lawnmower. And when Alvin finally arrived at his brother's home, he and Henry were fully reconciled. That's a remarkable commitment to repair a relationship!

But what we're going to see in "The Sermon on the Mount" this morning is that Jesus, our Lord, expects us to go to just such lengths to pursue reconciliation when anger has breached our

relationships. Now, just to remind you of context, in Matthew, chapter 5, from verse 21 down through verse 47, Jesus provides us with six illustrations of how the righteousness of His disciples radically differs from that of the scribes and Pharisees. Because their righteousness, that is, of His disciples, starts in the heart and then flows out to the conduct.

Now, we're considering the first illustration of the six in which Jesus talks about the link between murder and the anger from which it springs. Let's read again this paragraph, Matthew 5, I'll read verses 21 to 26. These are the words of our Lord to us. You follow along as I read.

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ 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. 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 be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 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.”

This paragraph tells us that in God's eyes, sinful anger violates the command against murder. As Jesus' disciples, we must never excuse our sinful anger, and we must reconcile quickly when anger has, in fact, breached our relationships. That's the message of those verses.

Now, Jesus' lesson here unfolds in four parts. So far, we've looked at three of those parts. Let me just briefly remind you. First of all, we've seen “The Law against Murder Quoted.” First part of

verse 21, “You have heard the ancients were told (And here's the Sixth Commandment.), ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER.’” Now, as we learned, that commandment expressly forbids two crimes, two sins. One of them is manslaughter caused by recklessness or gross negligence, and the other is murder. That's “The Law against Murder Quoted.”

But secondly, we saw in the second half of that verse, “The Law against Murder Misinterpreted.” Notice Jesus goes on to quote what they had heard, and you've heard this, “Whoever commits murder shall be liable to court.” You'll notice that's in small letters, not in all caps. It's not found in the Old Testament. The scribes had attached this statement about liability to the local courts to the Sixth Commandment, and in doing so, they had carelessly undermined God's real intention in the Sixth Commandment in three ways, and we looked at these: “They made this command solely a physical act,” instead of also dealing with the heart. Secondly, “They made it entirely a negative command,” don't do something, rather than the positive, “love your neighbor as yourself.” And thirdly, “They made it primarily a social crime,” that is a crime against other people rather than an attack on God Himself. That's “The Law Misinterpreted.”

Thirdly, we considered “The Law against Murder Explained.” Verse 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.” Now, I pointed out for you that those are not a progression of one level of anger to another. It's not that it's worse to call someone a fool than to call them a good for nothing. Instead, the progression is in the court system. Jesus' point here is that anger, both in the heart and that expressed in angry words, violates the command against murder. And if you become sinfully angry with someone, you are as guilty before God of murder in the heart as the person who carries it out is of physical

murder. And if God's law were enforced in keeping with its full meaning, every time you are angry, you could be found guilty in a human court for breaking the Sixth Commandment, and you could justly be condemned to the death penalty. And if that conviction were appealed, it could be upheld rightly all the way to the supreme court, all the way to the highest human court. But then Jesus ends verse 22 by saying it's not just about guilt before human courts; one episode of anger, whether you hide it in your heart or express it in a verbal assault, Jesus says renders you guilty before God and deserving of eternal hell. Jesus says when you stand before Him at the judgment, if you have harbored sin in your heart just once, or if you have expressed that in one angry outburst, it will bring sufficient guilt that He could justly send you to eternal hell. That's what Jesus says in verse 22.

Now that brings us today to the fourth part of Jesus' lesson about anger. In verses 23 to 26, we see “The Law against Murder Applied,” the law against murder applied. He's going to tell us how to deal with our anger. There are a lot of human views about how to deal with anger. The American Psychological Association website says this, “Anger is a completely normal, usually healthy human emotion.” So how do they say then we should manage our anger? Well, the site goes on to say this, “Expressing your angry feelings in an assertive manner is the healthiest way to express anger.” That's what man says. But our Lord here says that we're not to express sinful anger at all. We're not to manage our anger, we're to eliminate it. We're not to express it, we are to expunge it entirely from our souls.

Let me show you this, Scripture couldn't be any clearer about this. Turn over to Paul's writings, the letter to the Ephesians, in Ephesians, chapter 4. Ephesians, chapter 4, he's talking about relationships, and he makes this amazing statement in verse 31, look at Ephesians 4:31. Now, notice how clear he is, “Let all,” notice that word, “Let all bitterness (That's harboring

resentment for a real or perceived wrong.) and wrath and anger.” Now, those are two different Greek words for ‘anger.’ In English, we have one word. But if I were to sort of explain those two words, one of them is ‘clamming up in anger.’ When I was growing up, we called it ‘pouting.’ You were angry and you just shunned the other person; you refused to interact with them; you just walked away. That’s one form of anger. The other form of anger, the other word, is ‘blowing up.’ It’s an outburst of anger; it’s where you explode like a volcano and just spew the anger over everybody around. And he says, “Let all...of these be put away...and clamor,” that means yelling when you’re angry. “And slander,” that’s calling names, attacking the person with your words when you’re angry. “Let all...(of this) be put away from you along with all malice.” That is, malice is a desire to hurt somebody because you want to hurt them or you perceive they’ve hurt you. Paul says, “Let all of that; it’s not acceptable, Christian, for you to tolerate any of those sins in your life,” (Paraphrase), that’s what he says. In Colossians 3:8, Paul writes to the church in Colossae and says, “But now you also, put them all aside,” and he uses those same two words, “anger and wrath,” clamming up, blowing up, “malice, slander, *and* abusive speech from your mouth.” He says, “Let it all be put away;” not one bit of it is ever acceptable in the life of a Christian.

Now, in “The Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus demands that when we get angry, we immediately seek full and complete reconciliation. In fact, He sets a very high standard, doesn’t He? Paul says, and Jesus, our Lord is saying, “We must never tolerate sinful anger.” And let me just be frank, if anything short of total eradication of your anger is your goal, then it may very well mean that you’re not a follower of Jesus Christ at all. In other words, if you don’t hate the sin of anger, and if you don’t desire to cut that out of your life entirely, it may very well demonstrate that you’ve never been changed by the Holy Spirit. But Jesus does acknowledge, here in our

text, that even as His disciples, even though we hate anger, we want to cut it out of our lives, sinful anger will at times mar our relationships. And when it does, we must act immediately.

Now, this runs contrary to human nature. In fact, frankly, a lot of people who struggle with anger, they will get angry, there will be this massive outburst in which they vomit their anger over everybody around them, and then when they cool down, they just want themselves and everyone else to pretend like it never happened. Let's just move on; just act like that didn't happen. Jesus says, "No way! That's absolutely the wrong response."

So let's look at it. Verse 23, you'll notice, begins with the word, "Therefore," Matthew 5:23, because verses 23 to 26 apply what He has just taught. Because of how deadly anger is, here's how to respond. Jesus applies, now, His lesson on anger, using two illustrations or even parables that both make the same basic point. Everything in these verses makes this point, "When sinful anger enters our relationships, we must quickly seek reconciliation." Notice the urgency in these verses. Verse 24, "leave...go; first be reconciled." Verse 25, "quickly...while you're with him on the way." There's an urgency to this. Now, these verses apply regardless of the kind of sin.

Whatever the sin is, you need to be eager to be reconciled. But the primary focus in our text is on the sin of anger. When anger has breached one of our relationships, we must hurry to reconcile with that person.

Now, the first illustration comes in verses 23 and 24, and the first illustration is going to show us how this affects our relationship with God. It's going to show us the disastrous consequences of anger on our relationship with God. Jesus says when you have sinned in anger, "Reconcile First, before You Worship," reconcile first, before you worship. Look at verse 23, "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you." Stop there. The Greek word for 'altar' here can only refer to the altar at

the temple in Jerusalem. Now, this is where geography plays in. Remember where Jesus is teaching “The Sermon on the Mount,” He's preaching this sermon on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, some eighty miles north of the Temple, and three-days' journey in the ancient world. For those who were listening to Him, a trip to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice happened, typically, only three times a year for the three Jewish feasts required of Jewish males. So they would, on those three occasions, they would travel the three-days' journey from Galilee down to the Temple. And then once they got to the Temple, they took their animals and they stood in line to have that animal sacrificed. And they stood in line for a long time because all the Jews were gathering for that holiday. So Jesus says this, “Okay, here's the picture, you're standing in line at one of those festivals with your animal, waiting your turn with thousands of other worshippers, and as you're waiting there, you remember that your brother, that is any other human being, has something against you, He says you need to act immediately,” (Paraphrase)!

Now, the expression “has something against you,” that is used only two other times in the New Testament, both of them in Revelation 2. And there, Jesus has something against two of the seven churches. So in New Testament terms then, if someone “has something against you,” it means you have sinned against them. That's the idea; you've sinned against them. And in context, the sin is anger. So Jesus says, “There you are, waiting in line to sacrifice your animal, and you remember that you've been angry with someone in your heart, and perhaps express that anger in angry words, in some other sinful way,” (Paraphrase).

Now, let me pause here for a moment and clarify something. It's important to understand that He's talking about ‘sinful anger,’ because not all anger is sinful. There is such a thing as ‘righteous anger.’ For example, you know this, “God is often righteously angry with sin and sinners.” He was angry with Moses in Deuteronomy 1:37. He was angry with the children of

Israel, and I've given you several references, including Zechariah 1:2, Hebrews 3:17. So God is righteously angry. "Jesus our Lord became angry during His life on earth but did not sin." "He was angry with the buyers and sellers in the Temple" in Matthew 21:12. "He was angry with the Pharisees" who didn't want Him to heal someone on the Sabbath in Mark 3:1. In fact, Jesus even uses the term here, 'fools.' He uses it of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:17, and yet, He did all of that righteously. And the truth is, you and I can also be righteously angry at times.

So that, of course, invites the real question, and that is, "What's the difference between righteous and sinful anger?" To be righteous, "Anger must be because God has been dishonored or others are being treated unjustly—this is righteous anger." "Sinful anger, on the other hand, is about me, some personal offense or perceived personal offense, my perceived or real rights have been violated." You say, "Why would you say that? What's the basis for arguing that?"

Well, let's consider our Lord. Look at the times Jesus got angry, and I've done this; I challenge you to do it. You will discover that when Jesus got angry, as the perfect human being on earth, it was always about sin against God or injustice and wrong done toward others—always! How did He, on the other hand, respond to personal offenses? Think about that. I mean, can you imagine being perfectly righteous, the eternal Son of God, and having people say that you are a glutton and a drunkard? Having people say that you are in league with the devil himself, and on and on it goes. Our Lord was unjustly arrested; He was unfairly accused and tried; He was wrongly convicted: He was sinfully crucified; they mocked Him; they abused Him; they spit on Him. And how did Jesus always respond to personal offenses? 1 Peter 2, verse 23, "and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously." In fact, even on the cross, He prayed (What?), "Father, forgive them." You see, righteous anger is about God and others. Sinful anger is about me. So

let me put it bluntly, “You are only righteously angry when God has been sinned against, or others are being treated unjustly.” And that means, friends, that 99% of our anger is (What?) sinful because most of our anger is about us and how we perceive ourselves to be treated or mistreated.

Let me also say that even when we're righteously angry, it begins righteously. For us who are sinful, that can quickly turn into sinful anger. That's why Paul says in Ephesians 4:26, “Do not let the sun go down on your anger.” Deal with anger quickly; don't let it sit there and fester in your soul because even if it started for the right reasons, it can easily and quickly become sinful for us.

Now, let's go back to our text. Jesus says, “If you've become sinfully angry against someone and you're there about to offer your sacrifice, you remember that they have that against you, that you got angry with them, (verse 24) leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother and then come and present your offering,” (Paraphrase). Jesus is making this one main point, “There must be human reconciliation before there is worship.” Anger is so serious to God, whether it's in your heart or you've expressed it in words, that it produces a disastrous breach between us and God. Why? Because anger is not merely an attack on the other person, it's an attack on the image of God in them, and therefore, God takes it as an attack on Him. Jesus says, “Before you offer your sacrifice, leave your offering there, go, first be reconciled to your brother, then come present your offering,” (Paraphrase).

Now, think practically about what Jesus is telling them to do. It's possible they're there in Jerusalem to offer their animal and the offended party has traveled to Jerusalem as well, so they're a little easier to get to. It's also possible that the person they sinned against was still in Galilee. Jesus was telling them, “If necessary, you travel the three days back to Galilee to be

reconciled, and then you travel the three days back to Jerusalem to offer your sacrifice, and then you return home to Galilee over another three days.” You say, “Wow, wouldn't it have been easier just to say, ‘Hey, when I get home, I'm going to make that right?’” Of course, but Jesus is making a point here! He's saying, “be reconciled to your brother first.” This is crucial to do because it matters to God. It's an attack on God because you're attacking the image of God, but it also is a lie about God. If you're a follower of Jesus, when you get angry at petty personal offenses, you are lying about God. You're saying God does too. And on the other hand, if you don't seek reconciliation, then you're saying God doesn't either, which is exactly the opposite of the truth. 2 Corinthians 5:19, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.” God is easy to be entreated.

Now, don't misunderstand here. Jesus is not saying that your relationship with people is more important than your relationship with God. No, what He's saying is this, “God won't accept your worship until you have addressed your sinful anger.” He's saying what Psalm 66:18 says, “If I regard wickedness,” the word ‘regard’ means ‘to cherish,’ or ‘to harbor.’ “If I ‘cherish or harbor’ wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear.” 1 Peter 3:7, “You husbands in the same way, live with *your wives* in an understanding way, as with someone weaker, since she is a woman; and show her honor as a fellow heir of the grace of life, so that your prayers will not be hindered.” Sometimes we find ourselves in a spiritual desert because we've refused to reconcile a relationship breached by anger, and God won't accept your worship until you do.

You say, “OK, Tom, so I'm supposed to go. What do I do when I get there?” What does reconciliation look like? Let me just give you a brief lesson. First of all, you “Go to the person privately—you take the initiative.” Secondly, you “Name the sin.” In other words, you handle it just like you do when you seek forgiveness from God. You name the sin. You don't say, “Well,

you know, I got a little irritated with you.” No, you say, “I got sinfully angry with you, and I sinned against you in that way.” You “Accept full responsibility.” You know, our “apologies,” are so lame. We go to people and say, “Listen, I’m here to apologize. I’m here to, you know, seek your forgiveness, but really, you’re the one who made the biggest mess. I’m just trying to initiate this and make you feel guilty.” No, you accept full responsibility. “I did this. I got angry with you, and I’m responsible before God.” And then you “Ask for forgiveness.” Again, we often say, “I apologize.” You don’t say, “I apologize” to God. What do you do with God? You say, “Here’s the sin, God, and I’m asking you to forgive me.” That’s how you reconcile with humans as well. And then, “Don’t blame them if there are consequences of your sin,” especially, “If anger is a habit in your life,” don’t blame them, “If it’s hard for them to believe that your repentance is genuine,” if you’ve done this again and again and again; take that as a consequence of your sin. It’s your fault, not theirs. Or it may be that you have sinned often enough, and in such ways in anger, that you’ve breached the trust between you and them, and it may take time for that to be rebuilt. Don’t blame them for that. That’s just a consequence of your sin.

Now, it may be as you attempt to worship today, there are serious breaches in your relationships with others. You’ve sinned against them in anger. You’ve nursed that anger. You refuse to be reconciled. If so, brothers and sisters, let me just be blunt with you. Jesus says, “God is not accepting your worship today.” And He won’t accept it until you’re willing to make that relationship right. Maybe you need to find someone before you leave here. Maybe you need to make a phone call. You need to write an email or a letter. You need to visit someone to make things right. Maybe you need to “get on your John Deere and take a trip.”

Or maybe anger is destroying your marriage or your family. Men, let me talk to men. This can happen with wives as well, but it tends to be a greater challenge with men. If you are

consistently angry and bitter toward your wife, God has stopped hearing your prayers, period, end of paragraph! And He won't hear them until you start making that right. Now, obviously, Jesus knows how God responds to anger, right? Can we agree on that? And He says God doesn't want your worship until you're first willing to be reconciled with your brother. And you say, "Tom, you know, look, I have tried." And I want to acknowledge that there are people who have really, truly humbled themselves, have really gone accepting full responsibility, sought to be reconciled to the person they sinned against, and the other person simply refuses. That does happen. If that has happened in your case, then let me just say that God takes your efforts as if you had done that. Romans, chapter 12, verse 18 says, "If possible, so much as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." In other words, if you can stand before the Lord and say, I've done everything I can, as God knows my heart, I've truly humbled myself, I've really sought that reconciliation. Then that's all God expects of you.

Now, let me hasten to say that some people who struggle with anger say, "Yeah, well, I've done that. You know, I've sinned against this person for years. And I said, 'Please forgive me, and they didn't. Oh, well.'" No, you haven't done everything you can to pursue the reconciliation of that relationship. That's an excuse. But if you have, then God accepts it. But unresolved sinful anger breaches our relationship with God. That's the point of the first illustration.

Now, Jesus' second illustration shows the disastrous consequences of anger on our relationship with each other. In the second illustration, He teaches us to "Reconcile Quickly before the Full Consequences of Anger Are Settled." Look at verses 25 and 26, "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you're 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." Now, let me make sure you first of all know what this doesn't teach. This doesn't teach what Roman

Catholicism says, purgatory. This doesn't teach some sort of supposed doctrine of purgatory. That's true for several reasons but let me just give you one obvious one. In Roman Catholic doctrine, the opponent in this verse is the devil. But Jesus here tells us to be reconciled with our opponent. It's ridiculous! As Calvin put it so well, "To find purgatory here, Roman Catholics must first become friends of the devil." That's absolutely right; this doesn't teach the false doctrine of purgatory.

So what does Jesus mean here? Well, let's start with the key expression, "opponent at law." That Greek word always refers to an adversary in a lawsuit. In this illustration, the disciple isn't angry. Or let me personalize it. As Jesus was talking to you, you're not angry; you haven't gotten angry. Rather, your opponent has gotten angry at you. You see, the point of this illustration is that by our sinful behavior, we have somehow provoked someone to be angry with us. We did something to provoke their anger. Let me be clear. Biblically, you can never say, "That person caused me to be angry," as if it's not your responsibility. God holds you responsible for your anger. At the same time, it is true that we can provoke someone to anger. We can tempt someone else to anger by sinful or thoughtless actions. And the Bible says that provoking someone to anger in that way is also sin. For example, Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 4, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." To provoke others to anger by our sinful or thoughtless words or actions is a sin in and of itself. They're still responsible for their anger, but we're responsible for provoking it.

So what's the story here in this illustration in verse 25? The picture that Jesus paints was actually a common one in the first century. You see, in an agricultural society like that, if you needed money, you didn't go to the bank. Instead, you went and you borrowed it from a friend or a family member. And because of the relationship, if you had trouble making the payments, then

it was simple to work out new terms on the loan. But in this story, in this illustration, you have provoked anger in your friend, the one from whom you've borrowed money. And he's become so angry that he refuses to work out new terms for repaying your debt and, instead, has chosen to take you to court. Now, in the first century, this was serious because if you defaulted on the debt and the creditor took you to court, you could be thrown into debtor's prison. That's exactly what this creditor in Jesus' illustration now has in mind. He says this has happened to you. Notice, "on the way to court," Jesus says, you and the one that you angered run into each other, perhaps accidentally. Or since in the first century, creditors could physically force their debtors to court, he may be physically dragging you there. But either way, whichever Jesus has in mind, He tells you to seize that moment and quickly make friends with your legal opponent while you're on the way to court. Why? Because if you aren't reconciled, verse 25, when you get to court, your opponent may hand you over to the judge. That's a technical expression for handing someone over into legal custody. And then the judge hears your case, and the judge may find you guilty of breach of that loan and hand you over to the officer of the court who will then throw you into debtor's prison. Now debtor's prison is a bad idea because you couldn't earn money in prison, right, to repay the debt. So what was debtor's prison about? It was about putting pressure on the family and friends to sacrificially come up with the money so they could get the person out of prison. But that's what's unfolding here.

Now there are two lessons from this second illustration. First of all, there's one at a human level. Jesus is saying, in verse 25, "Be reconciled quickly before the human consequences of anger come to pass," before they come to fruition. "Be reconciled before anger permanently destroys the relationship," (Paraphrase). You see, anger is so destructive that unresolved, it turns a friend into an enemy. Sadly, there are some of you sitting right here in this room who have

experienced that all too clearly in your life and experience. That's what Jesus is saying. In the first illustration, our own anger threatens the relationship, and Jesus says, "Go and be reconciled." But in this second illustration, we have sinned in some way that has provoked someone else to anger. And even if their anger is sinful, we are still commanded to go and to attempt to be reconciled. Jesus is saying, "Listen, as My followers, you not only have to avoid anger in your heart and displaying anger, you have to avoid provoking other people to anger as well." But when we do provoke others, we must quickly seek to be reconciled before the consequences of their anger come to pass and destroy the relationship. Again, let me just stress, you know, sometimes when there's anger between two people, one of the people will just go, "Oh, let's just," they won't say this, they'll just act like this, "Let's just pretend that never happened." Jesus says, "No, go, go and seek to be reconciled!"

Now, there's another lesson in Jesus' second illustration, and it's a more sobering one, "Be reconciled quickly before the ultimate divine consequences of anger come to pass." Jesus ends this second illustration in a very interesting way. Notice verse 26, "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent." Now, I think Jesus is still, in one sense, talking about the damage to the human relationship. Jesus is saying the consequences of allowing someone else's anger against you that you've provoked to grow and to fester will, in the end, completely destroy the relationship on a human level, and I think that's true. Sadly, you know, if you struggle with anger, you may think that things will just go along like they always have in those relationships. Let me tell you, there's going to come a time when you have permanently destroyed that relationship, and the other person's not going to be interested in reconciliation.

But I think Jesus means something else here. The way He introduces verse 26 implies more. Look at how He begins in verse 26, “Truly I say to you,” you know that's Jesus' familiar way to introduce a saying with real gravitas, with real serious import. I think Jesus is playing off of the end of verse 22 where he said, “Anger makes you guilty before God,” and I think here He's saying, “Provoking anger in others renders you guilty before God's court.” There's something more going on here than on the human level. And by the way, not only do I think this, but most commentators think this. Here's another way to say it from a commentator named France. He says:

The inclusion of ‘I tell you truly,’ alerts us to a more ultimate purpose than avoiding imprisonment. Like the other parable of debt and imprisonment in Matthew 18, it is a pointer to the divine judgment on those whose earthly relationships do not conform to the values of the kingdom of heaven.

Let me put it a different way. Failing to seek reconciliation when anger has breached the relationship may show that you don't belong to Jesus at all, and you will face eternal judgment. Now with that in mind, read verse 26 again, “Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent,” which in spiritual terms, eternal terms, means ‘never.’ D. A. Carson writes, “Jesus insists on immediate action. Malicious anger is so evil, and God's judgment on it so certain that we must do all in our power to end it.” Let me ask you today, and this is not a rhetorical question, I really want you to think about this in your own heart as I've had to do in my own heart, “Do you tolerate your own frequent outbursts of anger as a little thing? Do you often provoke others to anger? Do you excuse your anger because you feel it's justified based on what others have done or not done?” If you live in a state of frequent anger, and you don't bother to seek forgiveness from and reconciliation with those you've sinned

against, every display of anger, even in your heart, makes you guilty enough for God to cast you into eternal hell. That's what Jesus says right here. And friend, let me just say to you, "Continue unchanged from who you are today, and that's exactly what will happen."

Turn to Galatians, chapter 5. Paul is so clear here, Galatians, chapter 5, verse 19, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident." In other words, we can look at someone and see by their deeds if they're in the flesh, that is, if they're unregenerate, if they've never been changed, if they have a sinful heart that's never been changed in the new birth, "The deeds of the flesh are evident." He starts with sexual sins. If their lives are marked by immorality, impurity, sensuality, if they commit sexual sin, if they live in sexual lust, we'll talk about that next week. If they live in a sensual life that's given over to that, or idolatry, something has replaced the place of God in their lives. Sorcery, that's the Greek word from which we get our word, pharmacy. It speaks of drugs to induce a connection with the other world. Then he gets to relational sins, "enmities, strife, jealousy, (Here it is.) outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, partying, and things like these." He says, "Listen, this isn't an entire list, an exhaustive list, these are just representative." And He says, "...I forewarn you, (Oh, and by the way.), just as I forewarned you (before this), that those who practice such things (It's an important word, not those who commit these on occasion, but those whose lives are marked by the practice of these things.) will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul says, "You're not a Christian, you're not getting into heaven if these things mark you as a practice."

On the other hand, verse 22, the fruit of the Spirit. How do you know if you're a Christian? How do you know if you have the Holy Spirit? Because rather than marked by those things we just read, here's how your life is marked, by "love, joy, peace, (instead of outbursts of anger, you're) patient with people, you're kind, you're good, you're faithful, you're gentle, you exercise self-

control,” (Paraphrase). You see what Paul is saying? He's not saying that Christians never get angry. Jesus has just instructed us on what to do when we do. What he's saying is, “Look at your life and ask yourself this question, ‘Which most marks your life? The people in your life who know you, would they look at your life and say, “Your life is marked as an angry person?” Then you're not a Christian. If on the other hand, you do occasionally get angry, but your life as a whole is marked by “love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and gentleness, and self-control,” and when you do sin, you hate it, and you go to make it right, then you're in Christ. If you're unwilling to reconcile, then it may very well mean you're not a Christian at all, and your sinful anger will lead to eternal punishment. Don't kid yourself. Don't say, “Well, you know, everybody in my life thinks I'm an angry person, but I think I'm a Christian.” Paul says, “No way. You're not going to inherit the kingdom of God!” Instead, here's how you can know if you're going to inherit the kingdom. Your life is marked by the fruit that the Spirit produces, not perfectly, but in direction.

So what do you do? The only way to erase the divine record of your anger is to fall on your face before God, and to ask Him to forgive you, to be reconciled with you, even though He has every reason to be rightly, justly angry with you, and ask Him to change your heart, to give you a new heart, to put His Spirit within you so that you can manifest the fruit of the Spirit like we just saw, so that your life is marked by those things and not by the things that mark unbelievers. So that you can now truly humble yourself and be reconciled to others. That's what you need, and that's my appeal to you today.

If you're here this morning and you're in Christ, Jesus says to you, my friend, “You must never tolerate anger in your life. Don't ever get comfortable with it. You must hate it, and you must seek to put it to death in your life. And if you don't, if you're truly His, God's going to chasten

you if you belong to Him.” And what do you do with your anger? You don't express it. When you're angry with someone, or you provoke them to anger, you quickly seek reconciliation, obviously with God, but then with them, you seek reconciliation before you worship, and you seek reconciliation before the consequences of anger destroy that relationship. That's what Jesus calls us to.

Let's pray together. Father, we admit that too often we are influenced by the mindset of the world around us and think we can justify our anger, think that it's a little thing. Lord, I pray that after our study of this passage, not one true believer will ever think that way again. Lord, help us to hate this sin and to make every effort to cut it out of our lives.

And Lord, for those here this morning who claim Christ, but everybody who knows them thinks of them as a person who's given in to the practice of anger, Lord, don't let them leave here deceiving themselves. Help them to see the truth that they are not Christians, and they will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. And help them today to throw themselves on Your mercy and cry out for You to forgive and change them. We pray that You would do that for the glory of Your name and Your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.