

Week 6 – If Thoughts Could Kill – Matthew 5:21-26

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:14-21

Introduction

The 2002 movie, *Minority Report*, deals with the world in 2054 when it becomes possible to know when a person is going to commit murder allowing a special police unit to swoop in to arrest and incarcerate them before anyone dies

Of course, the movie relies on science fiction mumbo jumbo to make the plot possible but consider what might happen if thoughts could kill; if your thoughts could be known by the police, would you be arrested as a murderer even if you hadn't actually acted on your thoughts?

Thankfully, our justice system still requires a person to actually be found to have broken the law before they can be found guilty and merely wishing someone dead isn't enough to get one convicted of murder

However, God reckons things just a bit differently

I am repeatedly amazed at how similar the people of Jesus' day were to us today and how people really haven't changed all that much

For the most part, they were content with external displays of goodness and righteousness and they believed that obedience to the letter of the law was sufficient – just as we are today

Believe it or not, I could be a bit of a stinker when I was a kid – I wasn't above stirring the pot

I can almost feel the wave of disbelief wash over me with that revelation

When I was grade-school age my family lived in a big, old Cape Cod style house that had two large bedrooms upstairs

One of the bedrooms belonged to my older sister and my younger brother and I shared the other

Now, my sister went through a phase around junior high age when she didn't want me or my brother to come into her room uninvited even when her door was standing wide open

So, what I would do is stand with my toes on the threshold just far enough in so that she couldn't shut her door and close me out – and I would just stand there as she wailed to our mom that I was in her room

Of course, I contended that I wasn't in her room and strictly speaking, I wasn't – I was fully outside of her room

According to the letter of law, I was innocent – at least I believed I could defend myself sufficiently according to the law

In a sense, that's the position we find the Jewish people in – although they weren't necessarily trying to skirt right up to the line of transgression as I was

Still, they had been taught by the religious leaders that obedience to the letter of the law was what God required of them – and in fact, the leaders even added to God's Law with rules of their own meant to protect the Law

But here Jesus came along and taught something completely different which is the theme of the sermon today and for the next five weeks

And we are going to see that what Jesus taught radically superseded the Old Testament Law and the Prophets without destroying them or even contradicting them

What Jesus taught was in perfect harmony with the Law but it added to it so as to complete it

Our passage this morning is Matthew 5:21-26 in which Jesus describes how a citizen of the kingdom of heaven conducts their relationships – and he uses the Law's prohibition against murder to make his point

If you are taking notes, our Roman numeral one is The Common Teaching, Roman numeral two is The Enhanced Understanding, and Roman numeral three is The Two Examples that Jesus uses to illustrate his point

So, if you haven't already done so, join me in Matthew 5 and follow along as I read verses 21-26 [**Matthew 5:21-26**]

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

I. The Common Teaching

As we begin, I want to point out a formula that we find in this and the remaining sections of Matthew 5

Each of the six sections begins with the words, “You have heard that it was said” or a variant of those words and then Jesus counters what was commonly taught with the phrase, “But I say to you”

Now we need to understand that Jesus was not finding fault with the Law – he had just affirmed that the Law was perfect as we saw last week

What he was finding fault with was the interpretation of the Law as propagated by the scribes and Pharisees

As a matter of fact, the thing his hearers had heard said was a direct quote from the Law as we read it in **Exodus 20:13**

And the additional comment, “whoever murders will be liable to judgment” wasn’t an invention or novel interpretation by the scribes and Pharisees; it was the biblical interpretation of the command found in Exodus 20:13

Look with me at **Numbers 35:30** where we read:

If anyone kills a person, the murderer shall be put to death on the evidence of witnesses

Plainly, this is referring to the act of murder which even in our legal system has traditionally been defined as the act of killing a human being unlawfully, willfully, and with premeditated malice

The teaching of the religious leader of Jesus’ day was that rigidly following a set of commandments and prohibitions made one righteous

And the implication that the scribes and Pharisees derived and taught from this combination of Old Testament passages is that the commandment referred to nothing more or less than the specific act of murder

In other words, if you refrained from committing the actual deed of murder; you would not only be free from judgment but that not violating the prohibition against murder made one acceptable to God

But along comes Jesus to question all of that

Jesus basically asks, “Is murder only the act of killing someone? Is there no guilt attributable to the person who sets out to kill his fellow man but who is prevented from killing by some circumstance beyond his control? Is the person who would kill but is afraid of being caught and punished or one who simply lacks the fortitude to carry out the killing truly innocent?”

That’s the way we reason isn’t it?

We can have the thought, formulate the plan, and even load the gun

But unless we pull the trigger and actually kill the object of our wrath we excuse ourselves and we believe ourselves to be innocent of the crime of murder

Now Jesus comes along and he says, “Hold on. You haven’t truly understood the intent of God’s prohibition against murder.”

And beginning in verse 22 Jesus lays out an enhanced understanding of what God means when he says, “You shall not murder.”

II. The Enhanced Understanding

Let's read through verses 21 and 22 again to get the context [**Matthew 5:21-22**]

You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

The statement that Jesus makes in verse 22 is rather startling in its scope and its strength

Not only does he say that unjustified anger is forbidden but that anyone who is guilty of uttering a contemptuous statement against his brother is guilty enough to be condemned to hell!

That is a strong statement indeed and we need to feel the full force of it before we rush to rationalize our way out of it by looking for exceptions to it

See, Jesus knows that murder doesn't spontaneously spring forth from nothing and out of nowhere

Murder is a process and it finds its genesis in the thoughts and attitudes of the murderer – murder is first a matter of the heart

We see that to be true in Genesis 4 when the first murder is recorded as Cain killed his brother, Abel

Cain's heart was bad so God rejected his offering while accepting Abel's which made Cain jealous so that, in anger, he slew Abel

But Jesus goes even further when he says even to insult one's brother makes one liable to judgment

Unfortunately, but we miss some of the force of what Jesus is saying here when the text is translated to English

The phrase, "*insults his brother,*" is actually the Aramaic word *Raca* which means "empty" and it's an expression of complete contempt – literally, it means to call him "empty headed"

Several modern equivalents have been proposed by translators such as: numbskull, bonehead, nitwit, blockhead, jerk, or idiot

Then the Greek word behind the phrase, "You fool!" indicates a flaw in the person's character that causes them to behave unwisely

And Matthew's other uses of this same Greek word in other places within his gospel gives the strong indication that it describes someone who is unsaved

Look with me quickly at **Matthew 7:26** from the parable of the men who built their houses on the rock and on the sand

Or Matthew 25 where Jesus tells the parable of the virgins where the foolish ones didn't bring oil for their lamps

When we consider those passages there is a strong indication that Jesus is pointing out that saying to someone, "You fool!" is tantamount to calling him unregenerate and consigning him to hell – serious stuff indeed

A. B. Bruce [**Bruce**] was a 19th Century Scottish theologian who summarized the two expressions by saying the first expressed contempt for a man's intellect and the second expressed contempt for his character – declaring him first to be stupid and then a scoundrel

Some Bible commentators view anger, and the two insults, "Raca" and "You fool" as incremental steps that lead to the increasingly harsh punishments of judgment, the council, and the hell of fire

But it seems unlikely that Jesus was really splitting hairs between calling someone a bonehead and calling them a fool

It's far more likely that Jesus was simply multiplying examples to drive his lesson home and to cause his hearers to feel the full weight of what he was saying

And we need to consider the full force of what Jesus was saying

Now, I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume that no one here this morning has actually committed murder and so we might well all feel that we are safe when it comes to the whole "You shall not murder" command

But have you never hated anyone? Have you never wished someone were dead? Have you never stooped to the use of contemptuous words toward someone verbally or even mentally? Have you never maligned someone's character?

In this teaching, Jesus condemns all manner of angry contempt along with animosity, malice, and hostility

I would dare say that there isn't one of us who hasn't lost their temper, who had ill feelings toward another, who hasn't harbored a grudge, or who hasn't torn someone down verbally

So, according to Jesus' definition, none of us is innocent of murder because we have already committed murder in our hearts even if we haven't actually committed it with our hands

Jesus is saying that we must not think that we are safe because we haven't shed someone else's blood because we are guilty enough to receive punishment even if we've only felt contemptuous anger toward someone

Some of you may well be thinking that Jesus himself got angry at times and he certainly called people fools from time to time and that's true – not all anger is equal and Jesus isn't speaking against all anger here

There is a time and a place for anger toward other people and there is a righteous anger that actually pleases God

Jesus did become angry when he witnessed sin and injustice

But he never became angry when someone insulted him or treated him badly

And if we're perfectly honest we will admit that we are far more likely to get angry over a personal slight or offense than we are over sin and injustice in the world – in those cases we are more likely to become philosophical and to rationalize

The point is, yes, there is a time and place and a way to be angry with someone else and not have it be sin

But the problem is we are so rarely capable of such anger because we have or pride and or ego that gets in the way and we wind up mucking it up an allowing our anger to become personal

And it's anger that comes out of personal relationships that Jesus says is forbidden

We will see that plainly illustrated in the two examples Jesus uses in verse 23-26 to illustrate his point

III. The Two Examples

We find the first example in verses 23-24 where Jesus uses the occasion of worship

A. Worship

[Matthew 5:23-24] *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

This illustration concerns the person who is in the temple to make a sacrificial offering but who has also wronged his brother and as he is about to make his offering the wrong he did comes to his mind

And Jesus says that it is far more important for him to go and make things right between him and his brother than to fulfill his external religious obligations

As much as we might prefer to tend to the external and to substitute ceremony and regular attendance at worship and faithful giving; those things will never produce the kind of righteousness we need

And God desires our obedience far more than our practice of those activities that we think should satisfy God as we see in **1Samuel 15:22**

And Jesus insists that all outward religious observance is nothing more than a sham and a pretense when the worshipper knows they have behaved in such a way that their brother has legitimate reason to be upset with them

You simply cannot worship God with integrity without having a clear conscience and right relationships with your brothers and sisters

The truth is that God is more concerned with the heart of the giver than he is with the giving itself

2Corinthians 9:7 tells us that *God loves a cheerful giver* and our text calls us to be peacemakers before we come to be worshippers

And when our prayers sometimes seem to bounce back off of the ceiling it might just be because we know we have done something to offend a brother or sister and are unwilling to do anything about it – **Psalm 66:18** reveals that truth

It's even true in our own households as we see in **1Peter 3:7**

It's inescapable; strained or broken relationships adversely affect our relationship with God so it is absolutely necessary we do what we can to make them right

The second illustration Jesus uses deals with a case from what we would call civil court in verses 25-26

B. Lawsuit

Matthew 5:25-26 –

Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

In this example, Jesus uses a legal metaphor and his advice is to do whatever you can to make amends, and to do it quickly

Things are different in our day, but when Jesus lived it was possible for a person who defaulted on a debt to be thrown into debtor's prison until the amount was paid

And, even if the debtor had friends and relatives who were eager to get him out, it could take a very long time for them to pay off the debt on his behalf in order to have him released

We would be stretching this example beyond the breaking point to apply this metaphor to teach that God will condemn people to hell only until they have paid off their debts because Jesus is talking here about personal relationships, personal offenses, and personal reconciliation - not eternal life and death

And what he is saying is, take care to work things out before a matter goes too far – move with urgency to make amends

Settle now to avoid added sorrow and difficulty because the longer you wait, the more severe the consequences are likely to be

Romans 12:18 is instructive in both of these illustrations and it helps shed some light on Jesus' teachings

In that verse we read – *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all*

That tells us we are responsible only for what others have against us when it is because of our own real sin or carelessness – in that case we must own it and do what we can to reconcile it

Also, we are responsible to *pursue* reconciliation but not to make reconciliation happen – should the person resist reconciling in spite of our earnest, most sincere efforts; we will have to live with the consequences

There are times when a person has something against us that is of their own making and we really and truly aren't responsible for whatever grudge is being held

And there are times when a rift exists that cannot be smoothed over no matter how sincerely we want it to be and no matter how many times reconciliation is attempted

Still, Jesus' teaching in these verses should prompt us to ask ourselves a very important question:

Am I responsible for any grudges, any anger, or any bitterness that a person has against me?

If the honest answer is yes, then we must do something about it to try to put the matter right

Because it is the height of hypocrisy to say you are in a right relationship with God when you are not in a right relationship with others

Remember the seventh Beatitude from **Matthew 5:9** – *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*

God has called those of us who have experienced reconciliation to be reconcilers in so far as we can with others

And, while it will certainly require humility and often reaching out of your comfort zone to attempt to make amends that you would probably simply wish to ignore, you will discover it is worth the effort because it must be done

Conclusion

Again, we see that Jesus demands a different kind of righteousness

One that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees because it is more than an outward adherence to rules or refraining from outward sin – it's an inward righteousness of the heart

And the conclusion we all must come to when we hear these words of Jesus is that we are all the same as murderers

Each of us has committed countless murders in our hearts even if we haven't actually shed anyone's blood

The reality is that God's judgment is looming and his justice will be done and it's quite sobering when we consider that even the person who is contemptuously angry with his brother will be subject to judgment

The reality is that we cannot keep from "murdering" on our own because our hearts are defective – God must provide us with new hearts

But the good news is that we can be transformed and our minds can be renewed so that we might see things as God sees them as we read in **Romans 12:2**

And **Philippians 2:12-13** tells us that, as we work to conform ourselves to God's will he is working in us to make us successful

And finally, we can cling to the promise that God made to Ezekiel and which we have recorded in **Ezekiel 36:26-27** where God told him –

...I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules

If you are a true follower of Christ, God has put his Spirit within you so you do not labor alone and he has replaced your former heart of stone with a new heart that is sensitive to his leading

You only have to exercise it

Let's pray