

DEALING WITH ANGER AND HURT
Christ's Keys for Successful Living
Matthew 5:17-26
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The Sermon on the Mount, the second message as we look at the theme Christ's Keys to Successful Living. Verses 17-26. In our first message from the Sermon on the Mount we explored the beatitudes and we said that Christ is first of all interested in spiritual formation. He is concerned about what kind of persons we become. Now from 5:17 through the end of chapter 5 he speaks to us about behavior and he's concerned to re-pattern our behavior. He's concerned about how we handle things like anger and lust and fidelity within marriage and contracts and verbal commitments and responding to people who don't treat us too well. This entire section on instilling right behavior patterns which runs through the rest of chapter 5 begins with some statements of principles that the Lord gives in verses 17-20. Like a good teacher he starts with his principles and then he gives illustrations.

Let's take a moment to look at the two principles which the Lord deals with that covers all the illustrations we'll be looking at for the next few weeks. Jesus first, in verses 17-20, seeks to let us know that he has not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. We recognize as we look just at the subject of the Old Testament law that there were various aspects of Old Testament law that Jesus came to fulfill. How he fulfills the law varies depending upon the aspect of the law that is involved.

For example in the Old Testament laws that had to do with civil government, the judicial system. Since Israel was a nation they had to make laws to treat offenders. Jesus fulfills that law not by forming a new political nation but by forming a new spiritual nation. The specific ways the law was applied in the Old Testament that you did something wrong and the punishment that was spelled out, that specific law has been fulfilled in the sense that Christ now fulfills its meaning, its underlying spiritual principle in our lives. But the literal application has ceased because there is now a new Israel of God, which is operated not by external code but by internal behavior.

He fulfills another part of the law, which is called the ceremonial or priestly side of the law. That was the law that had to do with sacrifices and the temple establishment and priests. The book of Hebrews tells us that Christ fulfills the law in himself becoming now our high priest. The need for sacrifices is over because Christ the better sacrifice is here. So he fulfills the law by in effect terminating those provisions and internalizing them and applying them to himself.

In Jesus' day there was a third aspect of the law. Scribal law. That was the rabbi trying to apply the law in everyday life situations and sometimes they became a little extreme.

For example the question of what constitutes work on the Sabbath? Many people worked hard on that. One of the particular rules that the scribes made was to deal with the idea that when you were wounded, if the wound was on the Sabbath, how should it be treated? It was finally determined you could be given enough salve or ointment to keep the wound from getting worse. But you could not be given enough salve or ointment to help the wound get better. The implication would be that it was work if you helped it get better. So the Sabbath allowed you to maintain the status quo.

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Jesus simply wiped aside scribal law and didn't pay any attention to it. Therefore he does not fulfill it because he's not concerned with it.

The fourth aspect of the law that was in existence in Jesus' day would be called the moral law – the Ten Commandments, the life principles. Jesus fulfills that aspect of the law by driving the external behavior that is sought in Ten Commandments into the internal behavior of the heart. He intensifies the law. If living in relationship to God in trying to be righteous by means of obedience to the law of God was frustrating in the Old Testament you better believe that when Christ gets done fulfilling the law and showing how it applies to our hearts none of us have a prayer of ever standing before God if it weren't for the grace of Jesus Christ.

The major first principle that Jesus states is he's come to fulfill the law. It might be noted in this context that Jesus says whoever relaxes or teaches contrary to one of these requirements shall be called least in the kingdom of God. Notice he does not say whoever does not keep one of these is going to be thrown out of the kingdom because that means makes the kingdom a matter of how well I behave. If I don't behave well, if I don't do my good works then I'm not right with God. Jesus simply says, if you don't do these things you'll be least in the kingdom. But the doorway to entering the kingdom is to start with the beginning. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" – the condition of poverty, which puts us in need of God's grace being applied to our lives.

So the first principle that Jesus gives in the general principles is that he's come to fulfill the law. The second major principle in verses 17-20 is that his disciples – we – are to have an exceeding righteousness. Our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in at least two ways.

First their righteousness was largely defined by a set of negatives. Do not do this, do not do that. I submit that it's easier to keep negatives than it is to keep positives. If you tell me Do not steal a person's car I can successfully do that. I'm not bothered in that area. But if you say to me Do not covet that car then I may have a little bit of problems with that. That's more internal.

If you say to me, Don't do wrong to somebody, I can avoid doing wrong but it's harder to do the positive – Love them. So Jesus, in the righteousness, which he requires, takes us past the sets of Do nots where many people always get stuck – external religion. Jesus takes us beyond that.

Then the second thing which the Lord does in regard to helping us have an exceeding righteousness is that the morality and spirituality from external into internal application.

He says that killing is an attitude not just an act. Adultery is a disposition of mind. It's not just physical. Divorce is not allowed for just any old cause but on one ground alone.

You must he says be true to your word just because it is your word and not because you're trying to go through legal contortions that get you out of contracts. He tells us to turn a cheek and go the extra mile instead of retaliating.

Periodically someone will say if they're not a Christian as you witness to them, "I try to live by the Sermon on the Mount and do good." That's a wonderful time for you to whip out the Sermon on the Mount and say "Let's take some moments and look at what it means to live by the Sermon on the Mount." I'll guarantee you if you will go from verse 21 through 48 with a person

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by the end if they're not under conviction they have a seared conscious. It is rough to live by the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus is requiring an inward righteousness.

Having set the general principles Jesus then specifically talks about anger as the first illustration of the principles that he's come to fulfill the law and he's come to give us an exceeding righteousness. Jesus does not allow us to live by an external moral code, which only touches our outward actions. He says it's not sufficient just to abstain from killing a person. He says it's important to realize that anger is on a continuum. The end of the continuum is killing but it begins with attitudes. So he tells us that there are some attitudes we are not to have. Here are some actions we need to take.

He talks first of all about restrictions that he places on anger in our life. We want to look at these.

First restriction that the Lord places upon us in driving the Old Testament law of murder deeper into the heart by saying, Don't be angry is we cannot be angry with our brother. "Brother" here simply means fellow human being. It's not literal, physical, biological brother. Do not be angry with your brother. There are really two kinds of words for anger in the Greek language. One means the anger that is easily excitable. The anger that sudden, flares and gets real hot and then it recedes and cools off quickly. All of us have that. That is not an anger that is approved by the Lord but it certainly is of a different kind of anger than the word the Lord uses here in this passage. He uses a deeper, more intense word. It stands for a kind of anger that has a settled disposition that is determined to be an enmity with someone, that is determined to get even, that is determined to prove a point and determined never to seek reconciliation.

It's important to realize as we talk about anger that it's important to express anger. Suppressing anger can be very harmful and not all forms of anger are bad. The Lord himself expressed anger on occasion. But what the Lord is talking about here is the kind of anger that does not seek reconciliation, that is not satisfied until the other person has paid their last pound of flesh.

Jesus says that in the Old Testament the penalty for a person who killed was that he would be brought to the judgment. The judgment was normally a village counsel of seven persons. If you committed murder and you were brought to that counsel and they found you guilty the verdict was death. Jesus is saying that anger brings about the same result. If you are angry, if you have seething ongoing rage, it is going to bring you death. The irony is that no one else will pass the sentence on you, for the angry person destroys themselves. You cannot hold anger in your life without it destroying you. It may have some bad effect on the person you're angry with but it will eat you up. Someone has well said that anger is like a cactus. It may hurt the person you throw it against but it's going to tear up your own hands as you throw it. Jesus says you cannot be angry with your brother.

The second thing he says is we cannot insult our brother, our fellow human being. "*Whoever says Raca shall be liable to the counsel.*" The word *raca* is a kind of idiomatic term of Jesus' day and it's hard to translate. Probably the best we can do in our language is to say it might be "Brainless idiot! Lamebrain. Stupid. You're so dumb. Dummy! Blockhead!" That's *raca*.

Jesus is saying his people should avoid that.

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Those who take seriously the Lord's word about insults know that good sportsmanship can involve enthusiasm, rooting for the team. But it doesn't involve denigrating the referee. It doesn't involve the kinds of things that can happen in athletic contests where people are sore losers. That is a kind of form of insult. Contempt and insult are terrible things. Some have contempt for other people because of their race or their physical characteristics or their social standing or their lack of knowledge or skillfulness. Jesus says a disdainful attitude toward others will kill you.

Third, Jesus forbids character assassinations. He says anyone that says you fool will be in danger of gehenna or the hell of fire. The word for fool is the word from which we derive the word "moron." It differs than the word *raca* in that *raca* expresses contempt for a man's head – brainless idiot. But the other speaks of a man who plays the role of a moral fool. It is attacking that man's moral worth and character. Saying something about him or her that is a blemish on their reputation or character. It is to destroy their name and their reputation.

Jesus says the penalty for doing this is the hell of fire or Gehenna. Gehenna is the name for the valley of Hinnom in SW Jerusalem. In the days of the Old Testament king Ahaz introduced pagan worship of the pagan god Molech and had child sacrifices. When King Josiah came along he cleaned it up and after that it became the town dump. There was always a fire burning in Gehenna. Anybody who went out to the dump would see these loathsome looking worms that always seemed to survive the fire. That's why Jesus says "*Where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die.*" He's talking about the town dump and it being representative of hell. That's what hell is – the garbage pit of life. It's where the refuse is. When a person is being angry like that with somebody he's saying, You a dump. It's dumping on their name. And Jesus says if you dump on somebody else you're going to wind up in the dump as well. You'll have the death of the dump. That's the third thing the Lord says to us. He's telling us that when we destroy the reputation of another through character assassination we place ourselves in danger of being put in the same dump.

Is there anything positive I can do? These are things I'm supposed to stay away from. What can I do positively? The Lord goes on to give us a couple of positive actions that we are to take. He is saying to us that not only must we refrain from negative attitudes toward other people but we're to take positive action. He gives us two actions to take. One is toward a person who is at odds with us and maybe we're the innocent party. Jesus is going to lay some responsibility upon us as the innocent party to be spiritually strong and be the initiator of healing the breach. Too often we think I don't have to do anything if I'm not in the wrong. Jesus is saying to us in this illustration, You may be in the right but because the other person is in the wrong, they're hurting spiritually. They're hurting with me and there's something you need to do as the innocent party about helping them find their way back.

The second positive action the Lord will talk about has to do when we're in the wrong in a relationship. What we're to do toward it. First he says if you're in the right – at the altar and there remember that your brother, your fellow human being has something against you... The altar was the altar of burnt offering in the temple area. It was a big place where people would bring their goats. So we see this guy, he has a lamb on a tether and he brings it up. He's getting ready to have the priest take a knife and slay it and then he remembers! "Back in the village there is that person who has something against me. I cannot kill the lamb right now. Here priest, you hold the lamb. I'll be back." So he goes back and he find the person who has something against

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him and he attempts to be reconciled. Jesus says we have no responsibility after we attempt if the person refuses to be reconciled. There's nothing more we can do. We've done our part. But he says when you have made that attempt, when you have sought reconciliation then you can come back and offer your gift at the altar.

What the Lord is saying is there is a correspondence between worship and horizontal relationships with other people. This by the way is a tremendous thing we ought to keep in mind in respect to worship that Sundays in the time we regularly come to worship and as the week closes before we come on Sunday we ought to be looking in our life at our relationships and ask ourselves is there anybody that's hurting? Maybe I'm the innocent one but before I come to worship on Sunday I should seek to help that person so they could come with me and come to God. The Lord then goes on to say something additional. He says *"If somebody's going to take you to court, settle with them on the way before they get there and the judge delivers you to the officer and the officer delivers you to jail and you'll never get out till you pay the last penny."* That was debtors prison in those days that put people in who couldn't pay their bills.

What's he saying? He's talking about the person who's guilty and they're being sued. He's saying don't try to bluff your way through. Don't try to ignore the fact that you've been in the wrong. Don't try to play legal games. Get that thing settled before you get to court because once you Get in court you're going to be in trouble. So get it settled now.

How do we take all this and kind of look into our lives? Think about your relationship with people. Is there anyone with whom you are angry? Anyone you have contempt for? Anyone who's reputation you have harmed? The Lord tells you go to them. Tell them you have sinned against them. Ask for their forgiveness. Clear out. Cut out. Clean. If we don't do that certain consequences occur. Death occurs in our life. Anger has all kinds of manifestations. It brings about self-destruction. It brings about family destruction. It prevents a solution to the problem because spirits are not entreatable to one another. It doesn't change the other person it only makes them worse. It is contagious.

Therefore the Lord is calling us to take steps if there is anger in our life with another person. Then the Lord wants us to think about this. Who has been angry with you? Somebody at work? Somebody around the neighborhood? Somebody in family? Who has contempt for you? Who disdains you and really looks down on you? Who has sought to destroy your reputation? The Lord says, Be the strong person and seek to be reconciled with that person who has treated you as they have.

If you are the guilty party on the other hand, settle up before you face a judgment. Don't hold out expecting to prevail. Take care of it today. We must let this passage serve as a model for how the Lord has dealt with us. Heaven is a place of worship and the Son of God is endlessly worshipped in heaven. Heaven is even described as having an altar. I like to think of it in these terms. That one day in the eternal day Jesus left the altar of heaven where he was worshipped and said, "Mankind is estranged from me. This worship from heaven can no longer continue until I go and bring them into my Father's house and into my Father's love. So he leaves everything to come and seek reconciliation with us. Here God's behavior becomes a pattern for our own. The Lord is telling us to settle things with him and with other people. We're to open our heart to him. We're to stand in the grace and acceptance, which he gives us. We're to be reconciled to God and to other people to successfully deal with anger that may be in our life.

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Lord, all of us know what it is to be angry. I doubt there's a person in this room that hasn't had anger. Some have more successfully dealt with it than others. But perhaps there are people in this room for whom anger is a big thing in their life. The rage they feel, the injustice they've experienced, the hurt they've had at the hands of another is a kind of overpowering thing. You're saying to us today, here's some ways of getting hold of it. Here are some steps to take. Difficult steps. Hard steps. Some things you can do as My disciples. You're already forgiven. You're already established. You're already in my acceptance. Here's now what you need to do to get into acceptance with yourself and with others. And in a real tight relationship with Me. Lord, we receive this not as our word but as a word from you. As we examine our lives and as we prayerfully consider what you have said to us today we dedicate and renew ourselves in your presence. That we will carry out your word. Give us the Holy Spirit so that we may have the life of Jesus living in us to give us the power to do these things. In the Lord's name. Amen.