

Going Deeper: If Anyone Is Angry With A Brother or Sister...
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 10, 2021- AM Worship Service
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Matthew 5:21-26

So if you heard last week's sermon, you will remember that I told you why we called this sermon series Going Deeper. We called it Going Deeper, because in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus constantly pushes us beneath the surface of kingdom rules and rules commandments to the shape of a kingdom heart. In his sermon, Jesus calls us to obedience to commandments, but he wants that obedience to flow from a heart full of kingdom passions and kingdom inclinations. You will hear Jesus doing that very clearly in the passage I'm about to read. Listen to Jesus go deeper.

Of all the commandments, 'You shall not murder' is the one that most of us think we have covered. Some of the commandments pin us to the wall. You shall not bear false witness-most of us know we've lied. You shall not covet-most of us here know that we've coveted a thing or two. But murder...we haven't done that! Well that's at least one A on the report card! Jesus look at what a good person I am!

But then Jesus starts to go deeper. Jesus says, "Hang in there everyone, this commandment is about more than the act of physically taking someone's life. This is about anger. This is how you handle your anger towards the people in your life. Have any of you here ever been angry at a brother or sister? You will be subject to judgment. Have you ever called you brother or sister 'Raca?' You are answerable to the court. Have any of you ever called your brother or sister a moron? A fool? You are in danger of the fires of hell." Wow. Maybe we don't get an A on this commandment after all.

If your mind works like mine, when you hear Jesus go deeper, something in you starts looking for loopholes. You try to keep your good grade. Well maybe those names that Jesus is talking about are really terrible names. Maybe the Greek word for fool is a really, really bad word. Maybe 'Raca' is a terrible insult. Maybe these are swear words that would make Grandma blush. I'm here to tell you that they're not. Raca is a run of the mill insult. It's like calling someone a numbskull. A blockhead. And the word translated as fool here is the Greek word Morey. It's a little worse than Raca, but still not that bad. You can probably hear that Morey is the root of the English word Moron. These are not nice words, but the truth is: they are so ordinary that I don't have to bleep them out of my sermon.

Everyone in the crowd would have talked to their brother or sister that way. Everyone in in this crowd has talked to their brothers and sisters in this way. Jesus' strong words of judgment hang over us all.

So. our report card grade is changed. We go from an A to a C minus, or maybe an F. Let's take a step back, listen closely to Jesus words and see how we might raise our grade. As I've already said, Jesus goes deeper by showing us that this commandment isn't just about the physical act of taking someone's life, it's about how we handle our anger. It's about the path we give to our anger. *I think we all know that anger by itself is not necessarily sinful.* Jesus got angry. The Bible says God gets angry. So it's not simply getting angry that puts us in danger of judgment, *it's anger that's handled in a certain way, anger that takes a certain path.*

Jesus starts to tell us about the wrong path for anger with the word he uses. There are two words for anger in Greek. There is the word *thumos*. Thumos is anger that flares up in a moment.

Thumos is the initial spasm of anger that we all know so well. That's not the word for anger Jesus uses here. Jesus uses the word *Orgizominos*. Orgizimonos is sustained anger. Anger that we hold onto. Anger that we nurture. Anger that hardens into a sustained grudge, into simmering malice. Another player takes your place in the starting lineup on the basketball team when you've worked harder and proved your worth. Thumos is the fire you feel when your coach first tells you the news. Orgizominos is the seething dislike you develop for your teammate. The cutting comments you make to your friends about his character and his game. "He's so cocky. He plays terrible defense. That no good... fool!"

Why would anyone want to nurture their anger? Why would anyone want to hold it and cherish it and feed it? Well...because anger is seductive. Anger promises to give you things. Anger gives you power, especially in the short term. Come at someone with anger and most of us step back. Anger bowls people over and pushes people out of the way. Anger gives you community. When we are nurturing anger, we love to tell people our angry stories. And sometimes we find people who are angry about the same thing and we form little communities of anger. We gather around the same grudge. We form a society where we help each other grow and nurture our anger. Anger that is nurtured in communities is really dangerous. Anger can even promise to wash away your sins. I want to be careful with this one, because, as people like Rachel DenHollander have taught us, we need to hear the voice of victims. Victims need a chance to be heard and believed. But sometimes, your sense of being wronged becomes the center of your life. It becomes the animating principle of all your actions. Pretty soon your sense of being wronged is so strong that any action you take is justified. Start a riot. Threaten someone's life. Burn a building, by any means necessary. It's all good and justified and right because of what those people did to us. So anger is seductive and when it goes down the wrong path, it trends towards murder.

I don't know if you noticed, but Jesus' warnings map out a specific bad path for anger. His words have a downward trajectory. Jesus starts by saying if you are angry you are subject to judgment. Then he says if you call your brother 'Raca' (which is worse than just being angry) you are answerable to the courts. And then if you call your brother a moron-worse yet-you are in danger of the fires of hell.

Jesus is describing how anger turns into contempt. Contempt happens when we let our anger at someone define who that person is. You can only see them in terms of that thing that makes you angry. She didn't just do a foolish thing; she is a fool. She didn't just do a disgusting thing; she is disgusting. She's a blight on society! Someone to be cancelled. Someone to be swept away. Contempt is one of the dangerous paths our anger can take. Jonathan Haidt, who teaches at the University of Virginia tells us that in Rwanda before the genocide there, militant Hutus actively turned their tribal anger towards contempt for the rival Tutsis. They did it by doing the very thing Jesus warns against here. They didn't call them fools, they called them cockroaches. They nurtured this image until the Tutsis weren't humans; they were an infestation. And what do you do when a cockroach skitters across your kitchen floor. STOMP! One million people died. Throughout history when armies go to war, before they start shooting people on the other side, they give the opponent a demeaning name. Kraut. Gook. Haji. Grongo. Contempt makes killing much easier.

Contempt is a growing problem in our world. It feels to me that we are being trained to turn our anger into contempt. Increasingly, we aren't just angry with people who have different ideas from us, we have contempt for them. We have names for them. Radio commentators, late night comedians, podcasters from the extreme right and the extreme left form communities of shared

anger. They attract listeners and get laughs by slinging contempt. When we listen to these people and watch these people day after day, it forms us. We participate in their liturgies of contempt and we learn the habits of contempt. It leads our anger down the evil path Jesus warns us about here. You know what it is, it's anger porn. Just as looking at pornography takes a good and healthy sexual urge and perverts it into lust, listening to these people take honest anger and honest disagreement and twists it into contempt. This sort of stuff is everywhere. It's forming us and its forming our children. It's tearing our society to pieces.

Lately we've even tolerated it when our country's leaders use contempt as a political tool. When you talk about your opponent, you don't just use his name, you attach a demeaning adjective to it. That's not innocent political fun. That's contempt. It's exactly what Jesus warns about here. We should not smile at it or treat it as an innocent political game. It's not. It's a violation of the 6th commandment. We have to do better than this. We have to find a different path for our anger. And the change starts here, with God's people here in the church. Our world needs us to show them a better path for anger!

So far I've spent a lot of time talking about the wrong path for our anger, the negative path, but what about the positive path. What's the godly path that Jesus wants our anger to travel? Let's look at three phrases from our passage that will help us see the right path for anger.

First the words 'brother and sister.' If contempt wants to call your adversary a fool or a cockroach, Jesus repeatedly refers to your adversary as a brother or a sister. Part of that is because he wants this behavior to start within the church, but he's also saying this because if you view another person as a brother or a sister, you are telling a story about who they are. If I am angry at you, but I call you my brother and see you as my brother, I still see you as God's child. I still see you as part of God's family. I still see you as someone who will stand with me in the new creation before the throne of God. However angry I am with you, you and I could be bunkmates in heaven (shout out to Linda Nagel), so I'm inclined to work this out. Don't call your adversary a name, call her sister, call him brother.

The next phrase is 'settle matters quickly.' When we follow Jesus' positive path for anger, we try to settle matters quickly. Go to your brother or your sister before you go to the altar. Paul has a similar suggestion in Ephesians when he says, "don't let the sun go down on your anger." It's a consistent teaching of Scripture. Don't put off the work of reconciliation because the longer you put it off, the more it's likely to simmer. If you keep putting it off, the heat of your initial anger will cool and harden into contempt. This is especially hard for people like me who don't like conflict. I don't want to deal with the problem because it will be stressful, but delay will harden the differences I have with the other person. When you let an old anger between you and another person just sit there, you send them the message that, I don't really care that much about working things out with you. My relationship with you isn't that important to me. When you act quickly to resolve your differences with another person, you send the message that you really care about them and you want to be reconciled.

Third phrase: "go and be reconciled to him." That suggests a face to face meeting. Don't send a letter. Don't just send an email or a text. Go to see that person face to face. At a distance, it's easy to imagine the worst about people's motivations and feelings. Someone has made you angry and, as you sit at home and stew, you imagine terrible thing about them. They did this with a cold heart. They probably do this all the time. She's obviously this cold, unfeeling person! But then you see that person in the flesh and you see different emotions in her face. She is uncertain. She's hurting. She is in pain. The depth of another person's feelings and motivations can only be

experienced face to face. One of the best tools to deal with anger is to sit down face to face with your adversary and listen.

Obviously none of these three strategies produce perfect results. You can go to your brother right away and share your feelings, but instead of moving towards reconciliation, your brother might lash out at you, or he might ridicule you or he might deny everything. That happens. If that happens reconciliation might not be possible, and you will have to move to other things. But Jesus describes the path that we must try.

Actually the best instruction for the proper path of your anger isn't found by listening to Jesus' words in this passage; it's found by *watching the path of his life*. How did Jesus work out his anger? Jesus moved towards the people who hurt him. Human beings are the source of this anger. We are the ones who hurt him. But Jesus doesn't stay in heaven and rage, he moves towards us in love. Comes to Earth at Bethlehem. Confronts us with what we've done. Offers mercy and forgiveness, a new path! And then when we turn on him, when we lash out at him, he keeps coming towards us, he never gives up. 'How long I've longed to gather you under my wings but you were not willing.'

Finally, our anger overflows and we grab him and we beat him and we spit on him and we nail him to the cross. The crowds hurl insults at him-call him names, pour out contempt, but he never stops pouring out grace. "Father forgive them; they don't know what they are doing."

If you are a follower of this man, if you walk in his paths, your anger may lead you to speak hard truths to other people and to stand up against evil in this world, it may lead you to confrontation in the name of truth, but it will never lead to contempt. Contempt cannot stand before the cross. Because when you stand before the cross, when you turn your face towards it, the heat of his grace burns it away, burns it away not just from the surface, but all the way down to your heart.

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