

## Epiphany 6 Matthew 5:21-37

Today's gospel reading is pretty tough to hear, it's one of those readings that many have tried to justify somehow because at face value it is so damning. If we just have a quick read we could argue that it would seem to indicate that Jesus hates anger and warns us that it is the first step toward murder. And that is true. Jesus does say that. But that isn't all He says. If we're not careful we see Jesus telling us to be less angry and we do our best and accept that there will be occasions when we fail, Gospel lesson over. But in truth Jesus says, much, much more. For, not only does he reveal the dangers of anger, but He also yanks the carpet out from under everyone who foolishly believes that their outward conformity to God's law is enough to make them right with God.

Let's consider the context of this passage, it comes straight after the Sermon on the Mount with which we are all familiar. The Sermon on the Mount is the longest uninterrupted teaching we have from the lips of Jesus in all the Gospels. In this sermon Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer; He warns us about worry, about judging others, and practicing our piety publicly in order to be seen by others; He reveals that marriage is sacred, that His followers will be known by their manner of life, and that we should "go the extra mile" for others.

And then follows the revelatory cold shower from the Son of God—verse 20, the verse directly preceding our text: "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jesus is revealing that the righteousness which pleases God is not merely keeping to the stipulations of the Law, but involves a perfect obedience that springs from a renewed heart. And then He warns us about the dangers of anger, and how it is tantamount in God's eyes to murder, amongst other things, through the remainder of chapter 5. In other words, Jesus is raising the bar of what is acceptable obedience according to God's reckoning and reveals that God judges not just our outward performance but our inward motivation and thoughts as well. And anger/murder, are simply examples of that point.

Let's examine the most obvious principle first: The dangers of anger. Jesus begins in v.21 by reminding His hearers of what the Law of Moses said: "Do not kill," the sixth commandment. His audience knew very well what Jesus was saying. If I kill someone, or even if I utter a demeaning quip like "Raca," which was a common Aramaic term of derision meaning "empty-head," or "idiot," in Jesus' day, I will be liable for an appearance before the Sanhedrin and punishment. So far, so good. Next, Jesus, as the master teacher, imparts to His immediate hearers and us, a remedy for anger—both from God's perspective and from a human perspective.

Firstly, notice our anger from God's perspective. Jesus says that if you go to worship and to give and are reminded that there is something not right between you and another person you are to first go and try and work it out, then, return to God's house for worship. Now, in Jesus' day, offering a sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem was the apex of Jewish devotion. So you see the meaning of the words. God places a premium on forgiveness and reconciliation. More important than your sacrifices and offerings, He wants unity, love, and concord among His people.

Secondly, notice anger from a human perspective. Jesus admonishes us to go and search out and find the one we have had troubles with, and strive, even if it involves compromise on our parts, to work it out. "Agree with your adversary quickly," Jesus wisely advises us. If we don't, unresolved anger will turn to bitterness, bitterness to resentment, and resentment will lead to untoward actions or words which will make you liable for condemnation under the law.

But now we must go deeper and look more closely. The anger/murder teaching here, is merely a representative example of Jesus' main point, which is: The utter inadequacy of righteousness that only goes skin-deep. "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Let's make no mistake here, the Pharisees made it their life's ambition to keep every stipulation of the Mosaic Law perfectly. In Jesus' day the Pharisees quibbled about whether it was lawful for a Jew to eat an egg a chicken laid on the Sabbath, because the chicken had broken the law against keeping the Sabbath by laying the egg. They said that a man could not carry his clothes out of his house if it were on fire on the Sabbath—that's work—but he could put all of his clothes on and walk out of the burning building. The point here is that these people made the outward compliance to the Law the goal of their life. They were punctilious about every nuance of the Law down to the last detail. And that was just exactly why they were a failure in Jesus' words: They had substituted outward conformity of the law for a heart that loved and trusted and desired to obey God.

Jesus says that unless we have a righteousness that goes beyond the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees we will never see the kingdom of heaven. But we can't have an outward righteousness that exceeds theirs. That, too, is Jesus' point. Outward obedience and works do not a Saint make. Besides the outward law, God looks at the heart. And the heart is exactly where we fail.

Jesus uses the example of murder/anger as exhibit “A.” You’ve heard it said “You shall not kill.” “But God, I have never murdered anyone” we say. That’s great. The problem is that God is not simply evaluating our goodness by our outward conformity to the Law. He is also adjudicating the inward thoughts and intents of our hearts. You may not have murdered anyone, but every one of us has at one time or another harboured angry, bitter feelings toward someone else. Our trouble is that we sometimes have dispositions that incline more toward evil than good. And our human condition also gives us eye trouble—we see evil in everyone else but condone, ignore, or justify it in ourselves. Jesus is revealing to us that our state before the perfect justice of God is, from the human perspective, utterly hopeless. For even if I could somehow keep the Law outwardly, perfectly—which I can’t—there is still the selfish, wicked, rebellious heart of mine I can’t fix. And that heart, left untransformed, will condemn me.

The Gospel message is really quite simple: We did all the sinning; God did all the saving. It matters not how gorgeous you are, what club you belong to, how educated you are, or what you earn. Nothing outward or material has any bearing on what God thinks of us. The question is: How is your heart? You can’t get a new heart on your own, for spiritual renewal we all need Christ and Christ alone, and we each pray that God will by his grace make us worthy in a way that we cannot be made worthy by ourselves.