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First Baptist Vancouver
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Text: Matthew 5:21-26
Title: "As Quickly As Possible"
(Series: Following Jesus into His Sermon on the Mount)

I love the preacher on the mount. I love Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth. There is simply no-one else like Him. So do most of you in this room. Immanuel, God-with-us, Messiah, living Lord, Savior, the Healer. Friend of sinners. I love Him. For many reasons. Chief among them, of course, is that He loves me! Long before I came to love Him, He loved me. And you. Long before you came to love Him, He loved you. We love Him because He first loved us. He loves me and wants a relationship with me. Imagine that! The great Preacher on the Mount loves me and wants a relationship with me. He loves you and wants a relationship with you. And, therefore, a relationship with His Father and with His Spirit as well. He wants this relationship so much that He does everything that needs to be done to make it possible. He deals with all the obstacles to relationship. He especially deals with the greatest obstacle; He deals with my sin and with your sin.

On another mount, Mount Calvary, He does everything that needs to be done...on the cross. "It is finished," He cries. Everything that needs to be done about my sin so that He, the Holy One, can be in relationship with me has been done. It is the great fact we joyfully celebrate together around the Table. **"This cup is the New Covenant in My blood."** He says to us again ... because we need to hear it again. "My shed blood takes care of everything that needs to be done in order for us to be in relationship." As we sang earlier in the service today: "He to rescue me from danger interposed His precious blood."

I love Him. I love the Preacher on the Mount. Because He first loved me. And I love Him because in this love relationship He has established that He watches over my soul. He pays attention to the movements of my soul. He attends to the inner-workings of my soul. He wants to heal my soul. He wants to restore my soul. He wants my soul to thrive. So He speaks to my soul. And to your soul. And to everyone's soul in this city. He speaks into my soul.

"You are to give Him the name 'Jesus'," the angel told Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father. Why the name 'Jesus'? "For," says the angel, "He Himself will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) Jesus ... the name means "He Himself will save His people from their sins." On the cross, yes. But He is also speaking. Jesus speaks to save us from our sins. Jesus speaks to heal our souls from our sins. Which is what He does big time in His Sermon on the Mount. He loves me. He loves you. In His love He wastes no time. He gets down to saving us from our sins. He grabs hold of our souls and starts healing them. That is, He starts to bring us into the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven.

In Him and because of Him the long-awaited kingdom of heaven is breaking into upon the earth. The kingdom is all about “righteousness.” Which I tried to show last Sunday is a relational word. Righteousness is all about relationship. Righteousness is “right-relationship,” “right-related-ness.” In His Sermon Jesus is revealing one of the deepest passions of His heart. He comes to make righteousness happen. As the apostle Paul declares: the Gospel is all about God’s way of righting all relationships. Our relationship with God. Our relationship with the earth. Our relationship with ourselves. Our relationships with other human beings. Jesus’ passion is to bring us into the full-orbed right-related-ness for which we were originally created. So He speaks. He speaks to heal our souls. He speaks to restore our souls. “You have heard it was said ... but I say to you” six times in His Sermon. “You have heard it was said ... but I say to you.”

And each time what He says stops us in our tracks. That is putting it mildly! Each time what He says unsettles us, unnerves us, in some cases, un-does us. Why? Why then does He say it? To heal us. He loves us and goes right to the heart of the matter. He un-does us to heal us, to move us into the relational wholeness of the Kingdom of God.

“You have heard it was said, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you, whoever is angry with their brother or sister ...” He says what He says to save us from our sins and heal our souls. Before grappling with what Jesus goes on to say in the text before us today, I want you to know that I am aware of many of the challenges Jesus’ words raise for us. In particular, I am aware of the many “but, what if” circumstances that can be raised regarding what He tells us to do. “What if I really ought to be angry, very angry?” “What if the other will not acknowledge there is a problem?” “What if the other will not respond to my emails and phone calls?” “What if the other has moved far away?” “What if the other has died?” I, sadly, have a number of strained and broken relationships about which I have tried to do what Jesus tells us to do. I, sadly, have a number of such relationships about which I have not yet tried hard enough; because I am afraid of the potential explosion of anger, in the other or in me! But I do not want to miss out on the reason why Jesus says what He says. I do not want any of the “but what if” get in the way. I do not want to miss out on my soul being healed. So let us follow the Preacher on the Mount deeper into His Sermon on His Mount. To help us do so, let me simply start making a number of observations.

1. The first has to do with the word translated “angry.” Verse 22 – “whoever is angry with their brother or sister.” The NT uses two different Greek words which we render as “anger/angry.” One is “thumos.” William Barclay tells us that the Greeks said “thumos” is “like the flame which comes from dried straw;” easily ignited, but also quickly extinguished. The other word is “orge.” About this word William Barclay says it is “anger become inveterate ... long-lived anger ... the anger of the man who nurses his wrath to keep it warm” [*Matthew*, Vol. I, 130].

It is this second word – orge – that Jesus uses in His Sermon. Actually, He uses it in the verb form; in the present tense participial form (orgizamenes). Meaning that He is referring not to a moment of anger, but to living in a state of anger, carrying anger, nursing anger [Dale Bruner, 175]. Jesus is not saying that anger is always wrong. There are often good reasons to be angry. As we know, Jesus Himself was angry on a number of occasions; very angry. The issue is what we do with the anger. Jesus is speaking about anger that is allowed to stew. He is talking about anger that morphes into holding a grudge. He is talking about anger that soon wants to see the one with whom we are angry somehow hurt. The Apostle Paul understands the distinction Jesus is making. In his letter to the Ephesians (4:26-27) he says, “be angry, but do not sin.” How? “Do not let the sun go down while you are angry.” The person Jesus says is subject to judgment is the person who is allowing their anger to linger past the setting of the sun. He is speaking about the inner decision to let the anger stew and fester.

2. The second observation has to do with the word “Raca.” Verse 22 – “whoever says to their brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ ... The word is likely related to an Aramaic word which means “empty.” Thus some translate ‘Raca’ as “empty-headed,’ or ‘idiot,’ or ‘stupid.’ To use the word “Raca” of another human being is to call into question the person’s mental competence. To use the word “Raca” is to insult the person’s intelligence, with the implication that we think we *are* intelligent; that unlike the other, we *are* mentally competent.

3. The third observation has to do with the phrase, “You fool.” Verse 22 – “whoever says ‘You fool’.” It is the Greek word “more” from which we get the English word “moron.” It had both religious and moral connotations. It was used of those who denied the existence of God and lived immoral lives. Some scholars suggest it is related to a word that means “rebel” or “outcast.” To use the word “more” of another human being is to call into question their moral competence. To use the word “more” is to insult the person’s character, with the explanation that we think we are morally competent, that unlike the other, our character is exemplary.

The 19th century Biblical scholar A.B. Bruce summarizes the linguistic facts best: “‘Raca’ expresses contempt for a man’s head = you stupid! ‘More’ expresses contempt for his heart = you scoundrel!” [*Synoptic Gospels*, 107] Ok, so what is the big deal with saying these words to another human being? The fourth observation ties the others together.

4. There is an *escalation* in what Jesus is developing: there is a moving from serious to more serious. As many have observed, there is an escalation from serious attitude to more serious attitude; from serious act to more serious act, and from serious consequences to more serious consequences [Pinches Lapide, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 49]. Jesus starts with the decision to nurse our anger. He then moves to the causal sarcastic remark, ‘Raca,’ ‘empty-headed.’ Then He moves to the deliberate public insult, ‘You fool!’ Is that not how it goes in our souls? Jesus understands us! We begin by nursing our

anger. We then make off-hand sarcastic comments. And then we insult the other – publicly. Now, what arrests us is that along with the escalating seriousness of attitude and act is the escalating seriousness of the consequences. To be more blunt: Jesus says there is an escalating degree of judgment. Staying angry, says Jesus, makes one subject to judgment before the city council. Uttering the causal sarcastic remark makes one subject before the supreme court. And speaking the overt insult make one subject to the judgment of hell! [An aside: Jesus speaks of hell more than anyone else in the Bible. He who loves us takes hell seriously. A subject we can tackle another time.]

Now we can better understand why Jesus says what He says to us. He is drawing out the original intent of the 6th of the 10 Commandments. Last Sunday we worked with Earl Palmer’s suggestion that Jesus looks at the 10 Commandments as an arc. What Jesus is doing in His “You have heard it was said, but I say to you,” is drawing the arc around into the circle. The 6th commandment: “You shall not murder.” Many have called the 6th commandment “God’s protest against inhumanity.” Jesus takes up the protest. Jesus heightens the protest. Jesus deepens the protest. “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall not murder,’ but I say to you ...” Now here we need to be careful. Jesus is not saying that nursing anger and uttering sarcastic and insulting words ARE murder. Anger is anger, sarcasm is sarcasm, insult is insult. Anger is not murder. Sarcasm is not murder. Insult is not murder.

Yes, as John Stott points out, “anger and insults are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of somebody who is in the way” [*Christian Counter-Culture*, 85]. And yes, sarcasm and insult are forms of “character assassination.” And yes, as the Jewish Talmud reminds us, when someone is shamed in public the color of their face recedes and, like a dying person, they become pale [Lapide, 50].

But Jesus is not making a one-to-one correspondence between anger, sarcasm, insult and murder. Rather, He is drawing the arc into the circle. He is drawing out the fullness of God’s “protest against inhumanity.” And in the process, He is healing our souls. He is telling us that behind, underneath and, prior to act of murder, is the decision to nurse anger, which leaks out in sarcastic remarks and insulting words. He is telling us that homicide – the ultimate act of inhumanity – comes out of the deep reservoir of unresolved anger. He is actually saying even more. He is saying that just as murder is displeasing to God, damaging to relationship, and deserving of judgment, so too is nursing anger. He is saying that just as murder is displeasing to God, damaging to relationship, and deserving of judgment, so too is the uttering of sarcastic remarks. He is saying that just as murder is displeasing to God, damaging to relationship, and deserving of judgment, so too is publicly insulting a brother or sister. “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” Not so? Names hurt badly.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it best: The ancient law – “you shall not murder” – tells us that the other person’s life “is a boundary which we dare not pass.” Jesus the Lawgiver-in-the-flesh says, “even anger is enough to overstep the (boundary) mark, still more the causal angry word (Raca), and most of all the deliberate insult of our brother” (‘Thou fool’) [*The Cost of Discipleship*, 143].

“Righteousness.” Right-relationship. Right-related-ness. Jesus speaks what He speaks to bring us into righteousness, into relational wholeness. “Therefore,” He says. Verse 23. “Therefore.” And goes on to give us two examples from real life both showing us the way to deal with anger. Showing us the only way to deal with anger. What is it? Deal with it. As quickly as possible. Deal with the anger ... as quickly as possible. Because you do not want the sun to go down on our anger and find it messing with your soul. More accurately, deal with the person as quickly as possible. Still, more accurately, *will* to do it as quickly as possible. The first example comes from the religious realm of life, the second from the secular. Both teach the same thing: do whatever it takes to get right ... and do it as quickly as possible.

Listen again to the first example. Verses 23-24. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother and sister. Then come and offer your gift.” Leave worship? Note the phrase – “your brother or sister has something against you.” The word “something” is the little Greek word “ti.” If there is some “thing,” even if a very little some “thing” between you and the other, “go, be reconciled.” Why? Because if the little thing is allowed to fester it can cause a break in the relationship. “But Jesus,” we say, “What if I did not do anything wrong.” “But Jesus,” we say, “What if it is not my fault.” “But Jesus,” we say, “They do not get it ... they should come to me!” “I know,” says Jesus. “But some ‘thing’ is wrong ... and I want you to go and start to get it right.”

“If you are at the altar and there remember ... leave ...” Leave? Leave worship? Is not worship the greatest of human acts? Is not the chief end of humanity “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever”? Can any ‘thing’, however noble, take precedent over worshipping God? “Leave ... first go ... and be reconciled ... and then come back.” There may be a time when He wants us to literally do so. But He speaks this way to get our attention. “Leave ... first go ... be reconciled ... and then come back.” Why? Because as long as we are not willing ... that is the key ... as long as we are not willing to reconcile authentic worship is being hampered. Jesus is unfolding the mystery of righteousness. All our relationships are profoundly inter-wined. Our relationship with the living God is profoundly intertwined with our relationships with others. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” Jesus teaches us to pray. If I am not willing to seek peace with you I am injuring not only my relationship with you; I am injuring my relationship with God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer again: if I am not willing to seek peace with you I am not only erecting a barrier between you and me; I am erecting a barrier between me and God. Dale Bruner: “The Lord does not want to talk with a disciple who does not want to talk with a brother or sister” (178). Walter Luthi: “God protects the other so categorically that He will only be reconciled with you when you have sought reconciliation with the fellow human being who has something against you” (40). Verses 25-26: “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still

with him on the way, or ...” The key word is “quickly.” Settle matters quickly. While still on the way.

In the kingdom of God we are to seek reconciliation before having to go to court. We are to go to great lengths to find a settlement before having to involve a judge. I think Jesus is also saying that if we expect Him to help us in the court room we are to do all we can before hand. It is better to humble ourselves outside the court than to be humiliated inside the court! Quickly. I like how Eugene Peterson renders Jesus’ second example in *The Message*: “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. Make the first move; make things right with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail.” Quickly. Make the first move. As quickly as possible.

A story about two identical twins illustrates the pain of not acting quickly. I first heard it from Anglican pastor John Claypool. From the earliest days of their lives the twins were inseparable. They dressed alike, went to the same schools, they did all the same activities. They were so close neither chose to marry. When their father died they took over the family business and became known as a model of “creative collaboration.”

One morning a customer came into the store and made a small purchase. The brother who waited on the customer put a dollar bill on top of the cash register and walked to the customer to the front door. Some time later the brother remembered what he had done, returning to the cash register to find the dollar bill gone. He asked his twin if he had seen the bill and perchance had put it into the register. The twin said he knew nothing about the matter. “That’s funny,” said the first brother, “I distinctly remember placing the bill here on the register, and no one else has been in the store since.”

Had the matter been pursued and settled nothing would have come of it. An hour or so later, this time with a clear hint of suspicion in his voice, the first brother asked again: “Are you sure you didn’t see that dollar bill and put it in the register?” The twin picking up on the subtle accusation, flared back in defensive anger. Thus began a breach in the relationship, which because it was allowed to simmer, grew wider and wider. New charges and countercharges ensued, until the poison caused them to dissolve the partnership. They built a partition down the middle of their father’s store, and entered into a 20 year angry competition. The bitterness spilled over into the community, each of the brothers enlisting allies for himself from other business owners.

Then one day a car drove up in front of the store. A well-dressed man got out and went into one of the sides of the building. He asked how long the merchant had been doing business in that location. When he learned it was over 20 years, the out-of-town stranger said: “Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score.” “Some twenty ago,” he said, I was out of work, drifting from place to place. I happened to get off a train boxcar in your town. I had no money and had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in and saw a dollar bill on top of the cash register. Everyone else was in the front of the store.

I had never stolen anything before. But I was so hungry that morning I gave into the temptation, slipped through the door and took the bill. That act has weighed on me ever since. I have come back to make amends. Would you let me now replace the money and pay whatever is appropriate for damages?" The stranger was surprised when the old man hung his head and beginning to weep. When the man – one of the brothers – got control of himself, he took the stranger by the arm and said: "I want you to go next door and repeat your story." The stranger did. Only this time there were two older men, who looked remarkably alike, both weeping uncontrollably. 20 years of recrimination and hostility ... for nothing [Claypool, *The Preaching Event*, 37-40].

"Quickly," says Jesus. "Before the sun goes down on your anger," says Paul. As far as it is possible for you ... do it quickly. Or our heart becomes a poisoned pool of orge, unresolved anger. Out of which comes sarcastic remarks and insulting words. Which are just as displeasing to God, just as damaging to relationship, and just as deserving of judgment as murder. Jesus says what He says because He loves us. He says what He says to save us from our sins. He says what He says to heal our souls.

Let us pray.

I invite you to ask the Lord to put His finger on the relationship He is calling you to do something about. I invite you to tell the Lord you are afraid to be first to make a move. Tell Him what you fear. "I am afraid of their anger, Lord." "I am afraid of even great rejection." "I am afraid I will feel even worse." I invite to you to then say to the Lord: "But as an act of my will, I will do it." Or if you cannot say that, say: "But as an act of my will, I will to will to do it." And then say: "Please help me do whatever it is You want me to do. If you will help me, I will do it."
