

“Kingdom Living – Forgiveness and Reconciliation”

Matthew 5:21-26

November 25, 2001

Dr. Jerry Nelson

Mary’s parents died within two months of each other.

And it wasn’t until after their death that she discovered that, earlier, her sister with power of attorney, had transferred the bulk of the parents’ modest estate to the sister’s account leaving nothing for Mary or her other siblings.

When confronted, the sister said that the parents had treated her unfairly all her life and the estate was owed to her.

Mary never brought the subject up again but privately she grieved for her sister and prayed that God would forgive her.

Contrast that attitude with a startlingly different response as seen in an advertisement in our Denver papers very recently.

In a prominently displayed ad with Joanne’s picture were the following words:

“As the year 2001 draws to a close, Joanne Justus of Parker announces her divorce from Travis Justus of Larkspur.

I am using this unique format to thank all my family and friends for standing by me throughout this ordeal. I’m also grateful to those of you who may not even realize how meaningful your acts have been and are to me.”

(Denver Post Nov 2001)

Which woman would you rather have as a neighbor?

Can you imagine relationships in which forgiveness and reconciliation were higher values than self-vindication and personal justice?

Can you imagine a community in which truly caring for another person was of higher value than personally being treated fairly?

The woman who sought God’s forgiveness for her thieving sister unfortunately strikes many of us as naïve.

The woman who sought revenge on her ex-husband strikes many of us at first as funny.

And frankly we live in a world that can identify much more quickly and closely with the divorced woman's resentment than with the cheated sister's forgiveness.

We have grown accustomed to broken or breaking relationships.

We don't like resentment, and hostility when they are directed at us but we can't quite imagine a world without it.

We've grown so accustomed to it that we might even wonder if life would be boring without it.

It becomes the main fodder for our conversations – how so-and-so did such-and-such and what we did or might have done in response.

But Jesus calls us to a whole different mind-set and lifestyle.

READ Matthew 5:20-26

"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

^{MT 5:23} "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you,²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

^{MT 5:25} "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.²⁶ I tell you the truth; you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Instead of anger and estrangement Jesus calls us to forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is a “kingdom of heaven” lifestyle.

Let me explain that briefly for those who didn’t hear the earlier sermons in this series.

Our text for today is taken from what is known as the Sermon on the Mount.

It is called a sermon for good reason.

It is not a collection of unrelated thoughts but a carefully reasoned and crafted whole.

You can’t properly understand the later parts of the sermon if you don’t have in mind the earlier parts.

Jesus brought the good news that the “kingdom of heaven is near.”

He did not mean that the end of the world had arrived but that God’s kingdom presence and authority was now available to all of us.

We looked last week at one way of describing this.

The Bible refers to “this age” and “the age to come”.

We understand “this age” to mean the one in which we presently live and “the age to come” as the one ushered in when Jesus comes again.

We also think of “this age” as being ruled by sin and death (the kingdom of this world) and “the age to come” as being ruled by God – the “kingdom of heaven”.

But what Jesus came announcing was the good news that God’s kingdom has reached back into this age.

Jesus said the “kingdom of heaven is near” - it is right here available to us in Jesus.

If we are trusting Jesus then we are in the kingdom of God and that means we are in God’s loving presence and under his sovereign rule now.

There is another thing that we must bear in mind as we look at these instructions for kingdom living.

It is only by grace that we become part of the kingdom of heaven, here and now, **and** it is only by grace that we can live out the new lifestyle of the “kingdom”.

For centuries people have erroneously believed that if they were good enough God would find them acceptable.

But when confronted by the demands of God’s holy law, his standard of righteousness, we realize we are incapable of meeting the standard – we can never measure up.

On our own, we lack the righteousness, the goodness, to belong to God’s kingdom.

Jesus came to solve that fatal problem through his death and resurrection.

The Bible says, 2 Corinthians 5:21 “God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

By trusting in Jesus we are granted His righteousness.

That is, His goodness is credited to us so that we are eligible to be part of the Kingdom of God.

But being granted his goodness and living out his goodness are two different things.

Anticipating how it would be possible for God’s kingdom people to live kingdom lifestyles, the Old Testament prophets wrote: In Jeremiah 31:33 “after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law **in their minds and write it on their hearts.**”

And in Ezekiel 36:27 “And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

God changes us from the inside.

As part of **his** “kingdom” and made able by His Spirit he calls us to a whole new way of living – “kingdom living”.

And that is what this text and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount will do – it will show us the awesome possibilities of kingdom living.

There is one more very important perspective we must have to properly understand these words.

We must remember who is speaking.

These strong words are from a person, Jesus.

Unless we appreciate that we will never accept these words or be able to live them.

What Jesus will now tell us about “kingdom” living is **not** a new set of even tougher rules by which we can earn his favor.

The point he made earlier in the sermon is that, by grace, he has already accepted us just as we are. We belong to him.

He now wants to speak to us about the great possibilities that can flow out of that relationship.

You and I must understand that the one speaking is the very one who loves us deeply.

His desire is only for our good and his wisdom is unimpeachable.

Like a surgeon who must wound us deeply to heal us, so Jesus’ words will cut deeply but they are to heal us and teach us a “kingdom” lifestyle.

And so Jesus begins to set forth the great possibilities of the kingdom.

And what an amazing life it would be.

And most amazing is how it would transform our relationships.

I’m indebted to author Dallas Willard, whose words I have modified to give an overview of the rest of Matthew chapter 5.

Jesus illustrates “Kingdom living” by citing six relational issues and the difference between the way we usually live compared with his high calling on our lives.

Situation	The Old way	The new way
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Situation # 1 – which we are looking at today:

Irritation with others

no murder

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Situation #2

Sexual attraction	no intercourse	Love instead of lust
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Situation #3

Unhappy with marriage	divorce	no divorce
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And you can see the rest::

Wanting to be believed	make vow to convince	truth with integrity
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Personally injured	retaliation	Help the one who injured you.
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You have an enemy	hate	Love and bless them
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And so we come back to the first of Jesus' illustrations of the greater righteousness of "kingdom living".

Matthew 5:21-22a

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment."

Jesus is not here arguing with the Mosaic Law nor with the interpretation of it as far as the interpretation goes.

He argues that the interpretation doesn't go far enough.

We knew we weren't supposed to murder but Jesus says it goes much deeper than that – we aren't even supposed to carry resentment toward another.

Lest we misunderstand how serious Jesus is about this, he uses the same phrase to note the same consequence of both murder and anger – they are both "subject to judgment".

We don't believe that do we?

In our thinking, we have created a hierarchy of sins, some are clearly more wrong (for example, murder) but others are not so bad (for example a little resentment).

But Jesus says resentment is absolutely contrary to a kingdom attitude.

He is calling us to something radically different.

But before talking about the “radically different”, first let **his judgment on anger** sink in!

“But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

Anger is subject to God’s judgment?

Now anger serves an important function in our lives.

It is a feeling that wells up within us when something or someone threatens us.

Like pain, anger alerts us to a potential threat but in anger’s case it is not an inanimate threat against my physical body but **a threat to my will** – something or someone is getting in the way of what I want.

But **what we do** with the anger aroused by that perceived threat is the problem.

If we indulge it, it grows.

It’s like fertilizing a tomato plant.

We may not act on it immediately but it builds within us.

The word “Angry” used here is an orgy of feeling, a temporary madness – interesting that we speak of anger as being “mad” at someone.

And the word carries the idea of a continuing attitude: “is being angry” “bears anger” “carries anger” or is “nursing a grudge”, **a continuing anger**, a prolonged, carried around anger.

Emil Bruner wrote, “It is this attitude of carried anger that Jesus confronts with judgment. This attitude must go. And this attitude is **not just an attitude** or an inner matter, an emotion that is not yet a deed; this carrying around of anger presupposes a decision to carry

it, and such a decision constitutes a deed, a decision for a way to live.” (Bruner 175)

Anger can be almost totally hidden as in a slow-burning resentment.

Or it can be very visible in an all-out search for ways to get back, to inflict harm, at least emotional harm.

Just watch some teen-agers to see it in its rawest forms.

The only difference between them and us is that some of us have learned a sophisticated anger.

My ego has been wounded.

I consider myself to have been unjustly treated.

We even get angry with someone when all we know is that they are angry with us, even if we don't know why.

Willard wrote: “All our mental and emotional resources are marshaled to nurture and tend the anger... Energy is dedicated to keeping it alive; we constantly remind ourselves of how wrongly we have been treated. And when it is allowed to govern our actions...its evil is quickly multiplied in heart-rending consequences and in the replication of anger and rage in the hearts and bodies of everyone it touches.” (Willard 150)

And Jesus goes on to drive home his point in the rest of verse 22:

Matthew 5:22b “Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Like most kids I was so woodenly literal in my understanding of Scripture that as a child I thought if I called my brother a “fool” I would go to hell.

I thought there was something inherent in the word “fool” itself that meant you “didn't pass go and didn't collect \$200” but went straight to eternal jail.

We aren't even certain what the word “Raca” means except that in context it is derisive.

Together with the word “fool” it indicates an insulting contempt for another person.

The problem is not so much in the word as in the heart.

The words of contempt only express the boiling over of our hearts.

Jesus’ interpretation of the law goes beyond protecting life, it goes **to protecting the person.**

God judges words that take away from another person’s honor.

In “kingdom living” every person is made in the image of God and is worthy of our love.

And God is deadly serious about this.

For in these verses he says this anger, resentment and contempt are subject to “judgment”, the “Sanhedrin” and to the “fire of hell”.

Using repetition with this variation, Jesus is driving home the point that active disregard of another person is unacceptable in the kingdom of God.

As I said last week, “Grace doesn’t mean that obedience doesn’t matter!”

Brunner wrote:

“We do not do the Master of Love any honor by omitting references to judgment... The holiness of God is at war with all bitterness and hatred and hurting. And where His holiness collides with our hostility the crash is called the wrath of God. God’s wrath is God’s war of love against everything that unnecessarily hurts others... The wrath of God is the proof of the love of God.” (Bruner 177)

Chrysostom wrote, “It is love that warns of hell.” (Chrysostom 1:15:7)

Does this mean that if I harbor anger toward someone – I am going to hell?

Without intervention we would!

That is how serious this sin is.

It is wholly inconsistent with a kingdom lifestyle.

Nothing but the death of Jesus is sufficient to mitigate the divine penalty against that sin.

Don't make the sins Christ died for so abstract as to say the "sins of the world" without also making it very personal – my sins, my sin of anger toward (and fill in the name).

"Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God should'st die for me.

"Died he for me who caused his pain, for me who him to death pursued."

If what Jesus said is true, then his words drive us to despair of ourselves both for our liability to judgment and our helplessness to be different.

It is my sin that drives me to grace.

I stand forgiven not because I deserve it but because Jesus died in my place.

I am called to a new way of treating others, by the same grace shown to me.

And Jesus' Spirit promises to empower me to want to and to do his good pleasure.

Philippians 2:12-13 "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

And so by God's grace working in us we choose to forgive instead of resenting.

Crying out for God's help, we make the choice. And we keep making the choice and act out that choice in refusing to think what we used to think, refusing to say what we used to say, and acting in a whole new way toward the one we formerly resented.

That is forgiveness – that is kingdom living.

When Marietta Jaeger's seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped from their tent during a camping trip in Montana, her initial reaction was one of rage:

She wrote: “I was seething with hate, ravaged with a desire for revenge.

I said to my husband and I meant it with every fiber of my being
 “Even if Susie was brought back alive and well this minute, I
 could kill that man for what he has done to my family.”

Marietta soon realized that no amount of anger could bring her daughter back.

She wasn’t ready to forgive her daughter’s kidnapper but she wrestled with God.

She finally surrendered and deep down inside she sensed that forgiving the man was the only way she could ever cope with her loss.

She began praying for the kidnapper over the months that followed and her prayers became easier and easier.

Exactly one year, to the minute, after the abduction, she received a phone call – it was the kidnapper.

The man’s voice was smug and taunting and so Marietta was surprised at the genuine feeling of compassion she had for him.

It was yet months later before the man was apprehended and Suzie’s body was found.

Marietta writes, “By then, I had finally come to learn that Jesus did not come to hurt but to reconcile.”

(Seventy Times Seven by Johann Arnold 48-49)

That is a kingdom of heaven attitude, possible **only** by the grace of God – but **possible** by the grace of God.

Again from Emil Bruner:

“It is important to know, first, that we DO break God’s command so that we will be disabused of self-righteousness... But it is just as important that we know that we CAN KEEP God’s command, at least retroactively, by immediately seeking reconciliation with those whom we have hurt... Jesus is not content with just showing us up and bringing us down. He concludes his command by teaching us what to do when we go wrong.” (Bruner 178)

So “kingdom living” calls not only for forgiveness for those who offend us **but it calls for reconciliation with those we have hurt** – whether we meant it for hurt or not.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Jesus here gives no indication of whether it was anything we actually did or not – the source of the wrong is not in view here, just that SOMETHing is wrong.

Jesus is even saying if we are the injured party we have obligation to seek reconciliation.

He says reconciliation is a higher priority than worship.

All the religious activity in a lifetime doesn't negate the command to reconcile.

We must not think that our efforts for the Lord in other areas compensate for our holding a grudge.

Psalm 66:18 “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”

“The Lord does not want to talk with a disciple who does not want to talk with a brother” or sister. (Bruner 178)

What if the offended person won't forgive me?

That is her concern with God.

I am only responsible for me and my attitude – am I willing and will I continue to be willing to reconcile?

Nobody is “written off” in the kingdom.

It wasn't until later that I recognized it for what it was.

I was angry.

No, intensely angry.

My anger usually only shows in very civilized, controlled ways.

I don't rant and rave and hit things.

I just become quiet. I was very angry.

A man, who had been a very good friend, had been actively slandering me for several weeks.

He sought out people to tell about the way I had supposedly injured him and his family.

His actions and words began coming back to me from many people.

I went to him to apologize for any hurt I had caused and said and meant that such hurt was truly unintended.

But I received only further angry charges and an unwillingness to reconcile.

He left our church to attend another one but kept making the same angry, slanderous charges including a misrepresentation of my attempt to reconcile.

That's when I got mad (interesting use of that word in light of the fact that the Greek for anger is a word that connotes "out of our minds").

I remember thinking, so wrongly, "I maybe had to put up with that when he attended this church, but now that he has gone, there is no reason for me to take it any longer."

For days I seethed.

I couldn't help thinking about it.

This man with whom I was so angry, was now controlling my life.

I imagined all kinds of things to say to him, of how to make him see how wrong he was, of how to give him some of his own medicine, how to punish him for daring to treat me that way.

I called him on the phone and I let him have it.

I even threatened to call his new pastor and tell the whole story if he didn't cease and desist. And then I hung up!

After the phone call I felt good for about 30 seconds before the Holy Spirit went to work on me.

I wrestled with God for a couple of days before calling the man again and asking to come and see him.

Surprisingly he let me come.

I apologized fully, with no excuses, for treating him the way I had in that phone conversation.

He listened and then with a biting voice said, "It's about time you came."

Again, I almost lost it.

God and I had a great struggle right then and there.

I wanted so badly to lambaste him again for his part in this whole sordid affair.

But on the way over God reminded of his Word that I was only responsible for my actions not the other man's. He was God's business not mine.

I have continued to hold out an olive branch but as of yet it has not been received. That too is God's business.

The possibilities of "kingdom living" are so much greater than merely obeying the letter of the law.

And it finally comes down to a decision – do we want to live a kingdom lifestyle?

Do we want to act toward others in a forgiving and reconciling way?

Are we willing?

No sermon or preacher can make you want to live that way.

Only grace can do that.

he King's laws drive us to grace and then grace calls us to the King's laws.

Please don't attempt to live by the King's laws without the King's heart.

Oswald Chambers wrote: "The test Jesus gives is not just to determine the truth of our manner but the temper of our mind. Many of us are wonderfully truthful in manner but our temper of mind is rotten in God's sight. What Jesus alters is the temper of mind... We have to fulfill the law, and the only way it can be done is by letting Jesus alter us within, and by remembering that everything He tells us to do we can do. The whole point of our Lord's teaching is, 'Obey Me, and you will find you have a wealth of power within.'" (Chambers 33)