

STICKS AND STONES

SERIES: THERE HAS TO BE A BETTER WAY

Danny Hall

We have a fascination with murder. Agatha Christie's many murder mysteries have been popular for years and years. The leading television series over the last decade has been *Law & Order*, which is primarily about murder. The current number 1 show on American TV is *CSI*, also about murder. Perhaps murder appeals to a dark side somewhere deep within us. More likely, if we objectify the idea of murder, distance ourselves from it, it is easier for us to say, "Above all things, I am not a murderer."

Murder is a prominent theme in the Scriptures. Cain slew his brother Abel in Genesis 4:1-8, very early in the unfolding of the human experiment. It became a paradigm throughout the rest of Scripture for discussion of human sinfulness. The Cain and Abel story is prominent in our theology about the very nature of man. The sixth commandment is "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13). Jesus too has things to say about murder, and what he says is the topic of this message.

We have been studying the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus challenges the assumptions that the Jews of the first century had about what it meant to be a good follower of God. Over their history they had allowed the Law that they had received from God to be surrounded by more and more layers of specific rules about external actions, and their allegiance to God had been replaced by allegiance to these rules, to Torah. Jesus paints a portrait of the kind of person who is a true follower of God. Then he tells them, "I am the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets. They were pointing to me." He begins the process that will go on throughout this sermon of transferring the idea of what it means to be a true follower of God from loyalty to Torah to loyalty to Jesus himself. He makes the case that submission to his lordship will mark the true follower of God. His final statement before the text we are going to study is that the righteousness of his followers must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees.

We will see what Jesus means by that as he now launches into a section we will begin in this message, giving six practical examples. Sometimes people call these the six antitheses. Jesus postulates something and then makes an antithetical, clarifying statement. "You have heard that it was said...but I say...." Now, it was common among rabbis to quote the comments of other rabbis and then debate them, bringing in other points of view. But Jesus' teaching is radically different. He claims for himself the right to interpret the Old Testament Law and apply it to life. He is the one who will explain what God meant when he gave the Law and the Prophets.

These six antitheses are more than simply a contrast between external and internal righteousness, or false interpretations of the Law and correct ones, although those are part of what he is discussing. These antitheses are about what it means to follow Jesus, about what it means to live like a true kingdom person. Matthew 5:21-26:

You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, "You good-for-nothing," shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, "You fool," shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and

present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

Jesus takes the command that they have heard all the way back in the Ten Commandments and uncovers what God really intended in that.

Words that kill

What we are often wont to do is objectify that commandment to its ultimate application, taking another human life, and say, "Well, I haven't done that." But Jesus wants us to understand that behind that commandment is something deeper about God's view of man that we need to consider. When we see it from that perspective, new applications emerge that we ignore at our peril.

Jesus says the command is about more than an outward act. It is about an inward disposition toward another. A person is more than a body. If someone were only a body, then the idea of murder would be confined to taking their physical life. But connected with the body is an eternal soul created in the image of God.

Therefore, there are ways of attacking a person other than physically. Now, we all recognize this truth, although it is sometimes easy for us to ignore it. Remember the old children's saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." When we were children we would throw that out at someone who was mouthing off at us. But do you know why we said that? Because we knew it wasn't true! It was just a defense mechanism, because as we have all experienced, words are powerful weapons for injury, for killing the soul of another human being. That is where Jesus takes us in this teaching. The true nature of this command includes attacking through spoken words the very essence of who someone is.

Behind all of this is an understanding of God's attitude toward us. Jesus' explanation shows us that at its heart this command against murder is about esteeming those created in the image of God. God loves each individual person he has created, unconditionally and completely. When you and I engage in the assassination of another person's character through our words, when we go after the essence of that person, we are failing to esteem someone whom God highly esteems. We dare not take lightly the value of an individual whom God so loves.

Jesus goes on to describe the actual practice of murder.

Esteeming oneself above others

Murder at this level is rooted in an elevation of oneself over the good of others. When we begin to place ourselves above others, when our needs, ambitions, and the way we want life to go become the driving motivation, when we selfishly esteem these things more highly than the value of another's life, then we set ourselves up to be trapped into going down this path. As other people live around us and react to us, they are not always going to do what we want or satisfy our needs. So if our orientation is toward ourselves, then we are going to get upset that they don't fall in line with what we expect of them. Jesus describes what happens then. It is what I would call a progression of disdain. It starts with anger. Verse 22: "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother...."

Now, there are passages in the gospels where Jesus himself gets angry. Probably the most explicit example of that is when he goes into the temple courtyard, sees what is going on, becomes angry, and

drives out the merchants. It will be instructive for us to analyze Jesus' expressions of anger. The only times in Scripture that he appears angry are when he sees injustice and manipulation, particularly of the poor, oppressed, and disenfranchised. When he walks into that temple courtyard, what he witnesses is merchants' exploiting poor people in the name of religion. They are selling the doves to the poor for their offering, and they are charging them outrageous prices, making a profit out of the exercise of religion. Jesus says, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you are making it a robbers' den." (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46.) Anger flows out of Jesus' reaction to the injustice that was being done to those poor and oppressed people.

But Jesus is never angry when he himself is attacked, slandered, and eventually hung on the cross. He offers no resistance. He doesn't slander in return. In fact, when they come to the garden to arrest him, his disciples whip out a sword, start whacking away, and cut off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves. Jesus stops that, heals the ear of the wounded slave, and tells them this is not the way the kingdom of God is going to be (Matthew 26:51-52; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:49-51).

So I think the anger Jesus is describing in the Sermon on the Mount is when you and I are personally angry at another because they are not meeting our needs or doing what we want them to do, when the attack is on us. However, Jesus' example allows us to be righteously indignant at the injustices of the world, but not to regard ourselves as more important than others.

It's interesting that Jesus uses the word "brother." While the principles here apply to all human relationships, there is a specific application in the household of faith. Isn't it sad that the people of God throughout the history of the church, rather than being beacons of God's grace and forgiveness, often have exemplified to the world the very kind of character assassination through anger and failure to forgive that Jesus is speaking against? It is a particularly heinous expression of anger when fellow believers in Christ, who are trying to live out the glory of who Christ is, to proclaim the message of God's love and grace and forgiveness, are themselves unforgiving, ungracious, and sometimes malicious toward one another. There is a highly specific call for us within the body of Christ to be sure that we are living selflessly and for the good of each other.

The second step in the progression of disdain is saying to one's brother, "You good-for-nothing." You will find all kinds of translations of this, and we actually don't know what the most accurate translation of the word *raca* is. But it has the idea of an empty-headed blowhard, a blockhead. It is a word of derision. It is a word we use when we start name-calling. Someone does something we don't like, and we fume, "You idiot, I can't believe you did that," sometimes under our breath, and sometimes out loud directly to them.

The third step in the progression is saying, "You fool." This word is where we get our word "moron." It had the connotation of being not all there, either morally or intellectually. We are moving into full-blown slander here. This is publicly defaming another person in an open attack on them because they have not met our expectations.

Jesus goes on to say that there are consequences.

The urgency of restoring relationships

He talks about going to court before the Sanhedrin, and ultimately becoming worthy of the very fires of hell. The expression "hell" is the word *gehenna*, which was the local rubbish heap in the valley outside the city, where the bodies of criminals were dumped and burned, all the way back to the Old Testament times of Josiah, and where the city rubbish was taken and burned. It was always smoldering or burning. That became a picture of future judgment. Now, I don't think Jesus is giving us a theology of judgment

here. Rather, he is making a statement about the seriousness of this transgression. If we attack someone whom God holds dear, we do so at our peril. The way we treat one another is very serious before God.

Jesus illustrates the consequences with two real-life situations: one in the judicial arena of life and one in the religious arena of life (I'm addressing them in reverse order). In verses 25-26 he makes reference to the judicial process: "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent." The purpose of Jesus' illustration is to show the extreme urgency of the call to reconciliation. When someone had a debt that was not satisfied and went to court over it, he was thrown in jail, and he stayed in jail until his debt was paid to the last cent. If he couldn't pay the debt, he just stayed there for the rest of his life. So he says, "Before you ever get there, when you are on the way, seek out your opponent and make reconciliation!" Do not delay one bit in trying to be reconciled to those whom you have offended, those from whom you are estranged because of something you have done. As Paul says later, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26). Seek *immediate* reconciliation as much as it is possible for you. Make that a priority in your life.

His other illustration, in verses 23-24, concerns our religious practice. "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering." Jesus says it is impossible to worship the Lord while treating with contempt one of the very ones he himself will die for.

Notice that in both of these illustrations, the implication is that you are the one who has done something wrong, something to raise a sense of offense in someone toward you. While the impetus for reconciliation can be taken by either party in a relationship, the one who has caused the offense has a particular moral obligation to seek reconciliation.

Now, we are not particularly oriented toward liturgy in this church. We have a rather casual approach to worship. But the truth of it is that we have our forms, processes we go by to express our worship; and so the call to us is the same. The problem with liturgy, even one as informal as ours, is that we get used to it. Even when it is infused with the greatest meaning in the world, it is so easy for us to practice it as a matter of habit. We know the rhythms of a worship service, the things we will be involved in, and we can kind of go on autopilot. Having forgotten the true meaning behind the things that we do, one of the dangers is that we can walk into church week after week and never seriously consider the moral condition of our heart. We can ignore or at least set aside from our consciousness the reality of what is really going on in us. Jesus says you can't do that. When you come to offer your worship before God, you must come with a heart that says, "Lord, show me where I have offended another," and then go and seek reconciliation.

Are we to take these words literally? Right in the middle of the worship service, right now, should you get up and leave? Perhaps! At the very least, I would say, at earliest possible opportunity, the burden is on you to seek out reconciliation and restoration of relationships, recognizing that your fellowship with God is deeply impaired as long as you do not esteem that which is valuable to him, that which flows out of his heart.

So how is our righteousness to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees? We must avoid externalizing the command, and instead allow the Spirit of God to penetrate to the very core of our motivations, of our relationships, and seek to honor God.

Let me share a few passages of Scripture that will broaden our understanding of Jesus' teaching.

Embracing the ethic of absolute love

The apostle Paul, in Romans 12:14-21, says this:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Paul qualifies this teaching when he says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you.” If I go to seek reconciliation with another, they may choose not to be reconciled. I cannot control another’s response, but the call is for me to make sure that my own heart is right in that situation.

In Romans 13:8-10 Paul writes these words:

“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Just as God loves, love flows out from us. We seek to express the love of God in our relationships.

Finally, in 1 John 4:20 John says the same thing:

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

How we treat one another is an index of our relationship with God, for there is no following of Christ that does not honor and esteem what Christ does, and he laid down his life for us all. I am called by Christ as his follower to embrace his ethic of absolute love.

Now this isn’t easy. It’s complicated. Relationships are hard. Our own selfishness and flesh that we have to work through certainly don’t help. But just because it is difficult doesn’t mean it is not right. The wonderful promise of God is that because we are his followers, the Spirit of God lives within us and his grace is abundantly supplied to us so that we can live as he has called us to.

In summary, there are four principles that come out of Jesus’ teaching here. First, followers of Jesus are called to live sacrificially for the good of others, through the grace of God. We are motivated by the ethic of love. That is the very nature of God and that needs to be who we are as followers of God. Second, to profess allegiance to Jesus while harboring anger, prejudice, or disdain for any individual or group of individuals is to disobey our calling as the people of God. (This doesn’t mean that we have to accept or like everything others believe or do. But it does mean we have to value them for who they are, created in God’s image.) Third, the burden of reconciliation is on us. We can’t wait for the other person to come to us. Jesus says, “Leave your gift at the altar and go get it done. Restore that relationship.” And

fourth, to go through the forms of our faith while holding on to offenses against others at best renders it meaningless and at worst is the height of arrogance and hypocrisy. We have to be brutally honest with ourselves. Jesus' calling is absolute.

There is no act in history that more completely displays the value that God places on human life than the sacrifice of His son for us. And Jesus gave his life for us so that we might be freed from our sins, set free to model God's love and forgiveness to those in need around us.

“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:9-11.)

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Matthew 5:21-26

Fifth Message

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