

# A WORLD WITHOUT ANGER

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:21–26  
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*Matthew 5:21–26*

Several days ago, someone on the highway became very angry with me. I had to move over a few lanes, and I had underestimated how much time I had. So I did so rather quickly.

Another driver became furious. He screamed at me out of his driver's window. Then he offered me a particularly unfriendly hand gesture. Finally, he laid on his horn for a full ten seconds while he drove next to me, glaring at me the whole time.

I don't like it when people are angry at me. This encounter shook me up. Literally. I found myself shaking with adrenaline for a few minutes afterwards. It was a difficult interaction.

It's terrible when someone is angry at you. But it might be worse to be the angry one.

Earlier this summer, I was camping with my children. We were having a deep conversation around the fire, and I asked them, "What's your least favorite emotion to experience?" I was surprised when several of them said "anger." After thinking about it though, that made a lot of sense.

What do we do when others are angry at us? What do we do with our own anger?

We're several weeks into our series on Jesus' most famous talk: the Sermon on the Mount. We've called it "Blessed Are" because the whole theme of his message is how to live the good life. He was speaking to a bunch of poor Jewish peasants on a hill near the Sea of Galilee.

One of the first topics he chooses to deal with is anger. Our passage this morning is challenging because it forces us to ask some hard questions of ourselves. But it's also hopeful because Jesus describes a way to deal with anger. His words show the way to a world without anger.

Remember that Jesus' message is about living in what he calls the kingdom of the heavens. He seems to think that we can experience a different kind of life here

on earth. This message is the beginning of a section in the sermon where Jesus addresses issues in our world which prevent us from experiencing that kind of life. He starts with murder, then goes on to adultery, divorce, false oaths, revenge, and enemies. In each of these, Jesus begins on the surface before taking things deeper into the root of what causes so many problems in our world.

All of them end up focusing on the heart. Jesus begins with the behavior but ends with the heart. Throughout this section, Jesus is peeling back the layers to show us what the heart of a kingdom-dweller looks like.

I agree with my children that anger is a terrible thing to feel. Several weeks ago, Dan Westman preached on Psalm 103 and talked about his own experience of anger. Mine has been very similar. I never thought of myself as an angry person, but it has been in the intimate relationships of my life where I've seen anger develop most clearly.

It's terrible, but it's true---the people I care about the most have often been the recipients of my anger. It has taken me a while to recognize my anger. I remember conversations early on in marriage with my wife. I used to call them "serious conversations" because I didn't think it was okay for Christians to fight. My wife would ask me, "Why are you so angry at me?" And I'd throwback at her, "I'm not angry!"

Dealing with my anger in marriage, in parenting, and leadership has been humbling. I don't want to be angry, but anger isn't something you choose. It starts deep within us and bubbles up to the surface. Eventually, it comes out, and usually in very unhelpful ways.

Jesus' sermon is so important. I can't just stop being angry. I can't stand up here and tell you that anger is wrong and you should stop feeling angry. Instead, Jesus goes to the heart. He gives us a behavior—something we can do—that will help to change our hearts.

We'll start this morning by looking at this section of Matthew as a whole and ask what Jesus is trying to accomplish in these six statements on such different topics. Then we'll look specifically at his words on anger.

Finally, we'll consider the solution Jesus suggests and consider how we can apply that in our lives.

## Living the new law

Jesus' statement on anger is the first of six similar statements on different topics. Bible scholars call them antitheses because he seems to set two ideas in contrast to each other. In each statement, he begins with "You have heard it said", and concludes with "but I say to you."

Remember that Jews defined themselves by the Law. It was their most prized possession. In each of these statements, Jesus quotes from the Law and seems to correct it. When we first hear it, it sounds like Jesus is saying "the Law said this, but let me tell you how the Law got it wrong."

And yet last week we heard about Jesus saying, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." He was preparing us in advance for the kinds of things we would hear next.

Jesus is not contradicting the Law; he's showing us how to fulfill it. Remember his words that there is a new kingdom available for us to live in. These are examples or illustrations of what our hearts would look like if we managed to live within that kingdom. But they are also warnings of what happens when we don't.

This is the real promise Jesus offers. No one follows Jesus because he gives them a better set of rules to live by. We follow Jesus because he promises to make it possible for us to live differently. He offers to transform us. Deep within us, our hearts can be transformed.

We can become the kind of people from whom the law naturally flows. That's what Jesus means by fulfilling the Law. The law becomes unnecessary: not because we can break it whenever we want but because we never want to break it.

Many of you know that I love ice cream. There was a time in my life that I could enjoy a bowl of ice cream every night before bed. I'm sorry to say that time has passed. I'm finding it necessary to be a bit more selective in the quantity of ice cream I consume.

But if we have ice cream in the house, I find it nearly impossible not to eat some. It's right there - how can I not have a little? But then a little turns into a lot, and everything goes downhill from there.

The Old Testament Law was like saying "Don't eat too much ice cream." To follow that Law, I have to be strict with myself. I can't even have ice cream in the freezer or have just a little bit.

But what if I could become the kind of person who loved ice cream in moderation? What if I could change not to become a better rule-follower, but to become a healthier, more integrated person? What if my desires transformed so that I wanted large amounts of healthy foods and small quantities of desserts only occasionally?

That's what Jesus is talking about. He's saying that when you live in the kingdom of the heavens, your heart changes; you become a different kind of person. Our hearts need to be changed to live well as a kingdom-dweller.

Jesus gives us six pictures from different areas of life to illustrate this. At the end of this section, he says something that hardly makes sense.

### Matthew 5:48:

**You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

What could he possibly mean by us being perfect? That's hardly even thinkable. But the word he uses here for "perfect" can also be translated as "complete" or "fully developed." It comes from the same root of the word Jesus said just before he died on the cross, "It is finished." To be perfect in this sense is to fulfill a purpose completely.

It sounds exhausting to be perfect if it's all about my own self-effort. I work hard enough just to be mediocre. But if Jesus is saying that my heart can actually change, and I can live a fulfilled life, that sounds amazing.

Isn't this what we want? Don't we want to live lives of wholeness? Can you imagine your life if you were free from anger, lust, revenge, and all the other things Jesus talks about?

That sounds incredible, right? Let's see how he begins by applying these ideas to anger.

## Murder, anger, and contempt

The sixth commandment reads, "You shall not murder." It's a simple law. Pretty much every society has some kind of rule against just killing people. It's the last worst thing you can do to someone.

Jesus starts there with murder, but he immediately takes it deeper.

**Matthew 5:21-22:**

**“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”**

The first thing Jesus does is to go from the surface behavior of murder to the underlying issue of anger. Murder is rare. Most of us in the room have obeyed the sixth commandment. But anger is a different matter. Notice how he says “everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” Jesus knows that anger is everywhere.

Dallas Willard has a great definition of anger. He says, “It is a feeling that seizes us in our body and immediately impels us toward interfering with, and possibly even harming, those who have thwarted our will and interfered with our life.”<sup>1</sup>

Anger is what happens within me when someone stands in the way of something that I want. They prevent something from happening I want to happen. Or they make something happen that I don’t want to happen.

When your will is blocked, anger just happens. You can’t control it. It starts in your body, and it works its way outward. That’s why anger isn’t wrong or sinful at first. It’s a natural physical and emotional response to certain situations. But then I have a choice on how to handle that response.

When it gets to my brain, I start thinking through options for how I can handle that situation. In the worst of cases, anger leads to murder. Most of us never get there. But we usually find some way to react in an attempt to remove the obstacle in our way. We raise our voice, we try to manipulate, we get sulky, we become hyper-logical, or a hundred other unhelpful options.

But Jesus doesn’t stay on the topic of anger. He takes it even one step deeper. His words describe a progression: whoever is angry with his brother; whoever insults his brother (or literally, says ‘raca’ to his brother); and finally whoever says ‘You fool!’

Jesus shows us how we descent into contempt. Someone stands in my way. Before I figure out a way to get around them, I have to justify the action I’m going to take against them. So my anger turns into contempt. I dehumanize them—they are less than me. Somehow at that moment, they are no longer fully a person to me.

This is the look that I saw on the face of the other driver on 101. I can still see it even now. Many of you have that look. I’m sure you wish you haven’t. It’s a terrible thing to be looked at like that. But contempt happens everywhere: in families, in schools, at places of business, between countries, ethnic groups, and political groups. And it happens with churches, within small groups, and between any groups of people in a community.

Notice that Jesus begins with “everyone who is angry with his brother.”

Murder is the most extreme thing you can do to someone. Anger is something that wells up within you. But let me suggest that contempt is one of the worst things you can feel toward another person.

And it isn’t just bad because it’s wrong. When you view someone else with contempt, you think you’re hurting them. But when you dehumanize someone else, you end up losing some of your own humanity. That’s what Jesus means by judgment.

He’s not saying necessarily that God will punish you for doing this wrong thing. He’s saying that when your heart is full of contempt, it poisons your soul. When we become consumed by contempt, we are the ones who suffer.

So Jesus brings this up to free us from that judgment. He wants to recognize this within ourselves. You might not kill someone, but in your heart, you’ve taken away their humanity. He wants us to see the contempt in our hearts. The first step in dealing with anger is to acknowledge our own contempt.

We’re taught very carefully in our culture who to feel contempt toward. Sports rivalries are the “friendly” version of contempt, but even those sometimes don’t stay friendly. Our world is based on competition. Someone gets ahead, another fall behind. You have to learn contempt to survive in our culture.

But recently, it seems to have gotten worse. People say that our country is more polarized than ever

before. But the problem is not that people have become more convinced of their positions. The problem is the contempt that we feel for those who disagree with us. It's a simple defense mechanism. The world becomes simpler and easier to understand if everyone on the other side is less than fully human. But it destroys all of us.

We've become a nation of people who dismiss the humanity of their neighbors. This may be the only approach that people on all sides of the table agree on.

The Gottman Institute is a group of psychologists dedicated to improving marriage relationships. They talk about the four horseman of a marriage which will destroy any relationship. Contempt is one of those. Any marriage is in serious trouble when one partner views the other with contempt.

One of the tricky things that God does with preachers is to give us situations in our lives to learn what we're preaching. That's been true for me. I think I've felt more anger and contempt lately than I used to. I find myself getting angry when things don't go my way. The path to contempt is a short one. Within my heart (and sometimes with my words), I dehumanize people and see them as lesser.

Jesus' words call that out. He shines light within my heart, and I don't like what I see. But this is what Jesus does. He wants to help us see what's true so that we can move past it. What about you? Are you angry? Do you view others with contempt?

I should probably ask, who are you angry at? Who do you view with contempt? Because this is true, to some degree, of all of us. We need to start there. Be honest with your own heart.

So what do we do? If this is true of us, where do we go from here? Fortunately, as Jesus continues, he gives us a path forward.

## **Reconciling with our enemy**

We have seen what the goal is here. We want to become the kind of people who aren't angry. We have recognized the problem; deep in our hearts, we have learned to develop contempt for anyone who stands in our way of what we want.

So what do we do? Jesus actually offers a very simple solution.

### **Matthew 5:23-26:**

**So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.**

Jesus gives two different illustrations from different arenas of life. The first is a religious setting. The second is a civil setting—life in the “real world.” In both cases, you realize that someone else has something against you.

Jesus suggests that the most important thing in both those situations is to be reconciled with the other person. In the religious setting, this is a radical suggestion. Don't think your worship is okay if you're not at peace with other people. That's an incredible thing to say. Leave your gift. Don't give anything to God if you can't get along with others.

In the civil setting, he says not to let the judge have the final say. Work it out with your accuser. That doesn't mean you ought to cave in or give someone who sues you whatever they want. The point is to interact directly with the other person. Don't start with the judge to stand in between you. Start face to face. See the other person for who he or she is.

In both cases, Jesus is telling us how to counteract the contempt in our hearts. He's giving us something concrete that we can do in order to grow into the kinds of people we want to become. And he's giving us a path to escape the suffering in our hearts when we are consumed with contempt and anger.

It's actually incredibly simple. Talk face-to-face with people when there is tension. Don't expect that you can worship God if you're in conflict with someone. Don't ask a judge to stand in between. Interact with the person. Engage with them.

My wife loves mushrooms. I don't. I like lots of foods, but not mushrooms. I usually defend it by saying that I don't want to eat anything that grows in the dark.



Contempt is like that. Contempt grows best in dark places. It thrives on miscommunication, hearsay, short phrases taken out of context, and assumptions about intent. When that's all you have for someone, it's easy to forget their humanity. Contempt thrives when you don't have to look into their eyes.

But when you sit down with someone, it's much harder to ignore their humanity. The act of trying to work something out is a deeply human interaction. It helps you see the other person for who they are. It gives you the opportunity to express yourself and be honest with your own emotions. When those things happen, you show up fully and you see another person, then contempt dies.

Jesus tells us what to do: reconcile face-to-face.

I haven't lived at other times, but I can't imagine a culture where contempt is more prevalent. We have so many tools to avoid face-to-face interaction. If contempt were a plant and you wanted to build the perfect garden for it to thrive, I think you'd create our world. We know so many people, and we are so connected with immediate communication.

But we can barely look each other in the eyes. We hardly spend any real time together. So much of how we live leads us to dehumanize each other.

We need something to do—a practice that we can commit ourselves to so that we grow into the kinds of people whose primary experience is the kingdom of the heavens. Jesus gives us this incredibly simple one—sit down with someone and work out your differences.

When is the last time you did this? Sat down with someone who had something against you and listened to them. I said that Jesus would give us something to do, but I didn't say it would be easy. This is how your heart gets transformed into the heart of a kingdom dweller. Face to face reconciliation is a part of the habits that spiritually form us to live in God's kingdom.

But what about when it doesn't work? What about when you sit down with someone and you don't feel heard or seen? Jesus says to "go be reconciled with your brother", but sometimes that isn't in our power. Reconciliation requires both parties. I've had times when I sit down to talk with someone, but I'm still angry—even after talking face to face. Sometimes that even seems to make it worse.

This is where Jesus comes in. This is where we have to be living as part of his kingdom. Talking to someone face-to-face is an important part of dealing with our contempt. We have to start there. But it's only through Jesus that we can restore others to a full sense of their humanity.

If you are a follower of Jesus, you have become new. In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul puts it this way, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." Jesus hasn't just restored our humanity—he has given us a new way of being human. When he is our king—when we live in his kingdom—we can have transformed hearts.

That means that we can let go of contempt and anger, even when we don't feel heard or seen. Even if that face-to-face conversation doesn't fix everything—and it never fixes everything—we can see the other person as a child of God, fully restored as a human.

They may not see us, but Christ does. They may not recognize our point of view, but Jesus lives with you and knows your pain. They may not apologize or seek to make it right, but Jesus offers justice and righteousness to everyone in his kingdom.

How do we train ourselves to be kingdom-dwellers? We spend real time with real people in real conversations. Then you can see and be seen. But even when we can't, we know Jesus and he knows us. That changes everything. He helps us to live in the kingdom of the heavens.

## Conclusion

Think again about my encounter on the highway. It's a perfect example of what we've been talking about. We literally stood in each other's way. Anger came first, but contempt was close behind. Neither of us saw the other as fully human. I can't speak for him, but I felt less than human as well. It was lose-lose-lose, all the way around. This kind of encounter is what happens when contempt is allowed to flourish.

Jesus gives us a different way. He provides us with an illustration of how a typical kingdom-dweller handles the prevalence of anger and contempt in our world. Personal reconciliation. Face to face communication. Seeing another person and being seen.

Without that, Jesus says that there is only judgment and suffering. Living in a world of anger and contempt is to suffer all the time.

As Jesus continues, he'll talk about all sorts of other issues—lust, revenge, enemies, and more. But almost all of them start with contempt. If you deal with contempt in your life, then all of those other issues get a whole lot easier. Next week we'll talk about lust. But before you can look at someone with lust, you have to dehumanize them. Contempt forms the root for so many other things.

But we want to be whole. We want to live in a world where the people around us are whole. So we do those things which transform our hearts, through the power of God, into kingdom dwellers. And we desperately pray for the kingdom of God to come. We pray that His will be done here on earth. We pray that others would forgive us and that we would be able to forgive others. Let's pray together for God to make us into the kind of people who feel at home in his kingdom.

## Endnotes

1 Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperOne, 1997), 147.