

This morning we continue our study of Christ's first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount. You'll remember that the sermon began with the Beatitudes which brought Christ's listeners from unbelief to conversion and salvation, and then to discipleship. In the Gospel this week and in the following weeks Jesus describes what this discipleship looks like, describing the spiritual standard of a people reconciled to God. That's what we're going to talk about this morning and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 5:21-26

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² 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. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:21, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'"**

When Jesus said, **"You have heard that it was said to those of old,"** he was referring to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, people who were in charge of leading worship and teaching people about the things of God, but who didn't know the first thing about God!

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:22, "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.**

“Hell of fire” is literally **“Gehenna of fire.”** Jesus was very concrete with his illustrations, helping his listeners to easily visualize and understand what he was saying. Gehenna was a valley on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the trash dump for the city. Trash was piled up and burned. Day and night it smoldered. And the stench was terrible. But before Jesus’ time it was even worse. There was a time when the Jews were apostate and followed the practices of the Philistines, worshiping their god, Molech, to whom they burned human sacrifices in this same valley! So by Jesus’ day, as the people watched the flames and smoke rise up from Gehenna, they had a very real representation of hell!

Jesus said, don’t be angry, don’t insult your brother, don’t call anyone a fool. It sounds like he wants us to keep our traps shut! But consider how Jesus himself spoke to the scribes and Pharisees, calling them **“whitewashed tombs!” (Matthew 23:29)**, and he accused them of being **“fools & blinds guides” (Matthew 23:17)**. The Psalmist wrote, **Psalm 14:1, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”** And St. Paul called those who denied the resurrection of Christ, fools (**1st Corinthians 15:35-36**).

As astute students of the Bible we see here that the ones whom Jesus, Paul, and the Psalmist called fools were people who did NOT know God. That’s why Jesus didn’t want us to use that expression lightly. It’s a terrible judgment against a person to proclaim they don’t know God. Today, I think Jesus would tell us never tell someone they’re not a Christian unless their offense was so absolutely abhorrent as to turn people against Jesus himself. In other words, we should resist the temptation to judge another person’s relationship with God unless it is absolutely imperative to do so. For example, I don’t have a problem saying Jim Jones was not a Christian, and the people who followed him to their deaths should’ve been told that!

But perhaps you are thinking, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” But is that all there is to it? Our country was created with words. One collection of words is called the Declaration of Independence, and the other one is the Constitution. With words men and women are declared guilty or not guilty in courts of law. And with words politicians, entertainers, and activists move us to action or inaction, laughter or tears, joy or frustration. Words are power.

With words God created the heavens and the earth. With words Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. With words God proclaims our sins forgiven. And with words, one day, the Lord will judge and redeem all. Words are power.

So consider how we murder a brother or sister in their heart when we use cruel words. Indeed, “murdering a person with our words partakes of the same poisonous root as murder itself” (Gibbs).

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:23-26, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”**

Again, Jesus said don’t give a gift to God before our relationships with other people are reconciled. In other words, our relationships with each other affects our relationship with God. We can’t compartmentalize our relationship with Jesus. We can’t gossip, cheat, and lie to other people, we can’t scream at and berate others and then expect everything to be okay between us and God.

Let’s carry this one step further: Have you ever noticed that when there is bad blood in the church between two people everything can be spoiled for everyone else? Jesus wants us to be reconciled one to another so our relationship with him is right and so the work of his church is not hindered. Indeed, the tradition of “sharing the peace” is intentionally set right before our communion with God at his altar.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the Gospel in flesh and blood. Jesus died on the Cross to forgive us our sins, he rose from the grave on the third day to gift us with eternal life, he sent down the Holy Spirit to transform our lives from lives filled with grief and sorrow into lives filled with peace and joy. And he wants this relationship which he has formed with us to take root in our hearts so that we have the same kind of living, revitalizing, transformative relationships with each other.

Friends in Christ, this week may we be encouraged in our hearts to know and believe Jesus lives in us and he's building his relationship with us day-by-day.

This week, may we be encouraged to build the same kind of relationship with our brothers and sisters in the Lord, being reconciled to one another, lifting one another up with words of love and kindness.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.