

We are continuing this series through the Sermon on the Mount, and we've shifted from the introduction. Jesus has spent multiple weeks, not quite clearing his throat, but laying the groundwork, the prologue, if you will, and we arrive this morning at the bulk of the teaching.

Social commentator David Brooks has called our time an age of creeping dehumanization. His assessment of this is that our age is one of growing anger and fear. It's an anger that tends to dehumanize. Anger always moves in that direction. It degrades. It creates a caricature of the other and then proceeds to hate that supposed image that they have constructed. Angry people are always in search of someone to be angry at. A person who is always angry is one who is perpetually mishearing and misreading others. They perceive what the others said, and they begin to deconstruct the person as well as the argument. Brooks is right; it could be said that we live in an angry world.

It was George Orwell's classic dystopian novel, *1984*, where he describes this ritual in this fictitious world called the "Two Minutes Hate." This was a daily ritual in which citizens would gather in a movie theater. The powers that be would use it to control the people and would flash images of their supposed enemy. They would work the crowd up into a frenzy of rage and anger. The idea behind the ritual was that you could control people if you got them angry at the right things. Listen to the way Orwell's main character describes this ritual of the Two Minute Hate.

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, on the contrary, that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds, any pretense was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledgehammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion, which could be switched from one object to another, like the flame of a blow lamp. Orwell, 1984

Orwell captures something about the nature of anger in his fictitious world. He understands the control and the power of anger to take over people. That line at the beginning is a bit haunting. "It wasn't that they were obliged to do it, but that they couldn't avoid joining in." And while we, in today's world, don't have mandated daily rituals, few would argue that the constant drip of media and social outrage doesn't function something like the Two Minutes Hate. Unfortunately, my fear is it's much more than two minutes; it's becoming a thing that hovers beneath the surface of our always-connected world.

Anger is like a toxic drip of dopamine fueled with rage and fear into our nervous system, in which we create communities around those we hate. Communities are being formed on mutual hate, and if you hate the right people, you're accepted. Social media posts get more clicks and responses based on their ability to cultivate viewership on the concept of anger.

Anger gets clicks, anger gets views, anger gets votes. In a hostile world, anger and hate become currency. What Jesus has to offer us is a way in which Jesus is almost functioning like a doctor trying to diagnose something at the very core of the human problem. He says that anger resides in our heart, and it slowly metastasizes throughout our whole being.

Any wonder that the proverbs would say in Proverbs 4:23, "*Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.*" What does it mean for us to guard our hearts above all else? The author means that more important than anything else, guard your heart. Now, the heart in the ancient world wasn't the emotional center that you and I perceive it as now. In the ancient world, the heart was understood as a little bit more of a mix between what we call the heart and the brain. It's the executive center of the person.

So when the author of Proverbs is writing to guard your heart, they are saying to guard the very thing that dictates the whole of our life. We come to this text and ask if there is something from the way of Jesus. In an age of fear and anger, is there a practice from the way of Jesus that can liberate us from this enslaving, toxic connection to fear? Well, of course there is, and that's why we're in Matthew 5.

The most famous sermon ever preached is the Sermon on the Mount. Last week, we left off in Matthew 5:20 with a bit of a haunting line: "*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.*" What Jesus is doing between here and the next six sections is diagnosing the problem.

We all recognize that we need a righteousness that goes beyond, or I like the idea of deeper than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were focused exclusively on external behavior. Now, behavior is important. Jesus wants you to change your behavior. It is, in fact, very important, and Jesus is after changing our behavior.

The difference was that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would look at that external behavior and try to change it from merely external means. So they would create hundreds of laws that they would add onto the law of God in an effort to prevent you from fracturing that particular law. Think of it like a fence near an edge. They would create

all these laws so you would bump into the fence just to make sure you wouldn't fall over the cliff. That's what the teachers in law would do.

But Jesus, being as brilliant as he is, understands there's a far greater way to transform behavior, and it's through the inward transformation of your heart. He says that if we can transform all of that, as the writer of Proverbs said, all that behavior flows from our heart. Jesus, in some ways, is after a similar type of thing, but he says there must be something much deeper to do about this. So he invites us to learn from him on how to go deep within the human condition and begin to transform, not just the ability to not murder, but the ability of dealing with anger, because Jesus said that this is where murder comes from.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:21-22

I'll never forget the first time I taught this text. I was a young youth pastor around the age of 22 or 23, and I was teaching sixth and seventh graders this text. I was working diligently on my message to maintain faithfulness to the text to teach the hard things of the scriptures. So that Sunday morning, I stood before a group of sixth and seventh graders and said, "Listen, if you've ever been angry, you're a murderer in the eyes of Jesus." Then the next morning, I awoke to an incensed, angry parent email. It said, "After youth group yesterday, my son kept insisting that I was a murderer because I got angry at my husband. Can you help me understand what happened at Youth Group?" That was a fair question.

What exactly is Jesus up to in this passage? I hope to do a little more dignity to the text and Jesus' intention than I did some 15 or 20 years ago. But what is Jesus up to? At the beginning he's equating this idea of murder and anger, and trying to connect these dots, but a surface reading feels like Jesus is telling us to never get angry. That seems impossible. Let's break it down piece by piece.

The first part of it should sound somewhat familiar. It's an exact quotation from Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17. It's the sixth of the Top 10 Commandments, and it says, "You shall not murder." A common way the rabbis of Jesus' day taught was, "You have heard it said," meaning they were referencing the Old Testament law. Then would say something to the effect that Jesus said, "But I say to you," which was a rhetorical device that means, "Here's my interpretation of the thing you've heard." Here is me as rabbi Jesus saying this. Here is how I understand the very hard saying and the impact of this."

Jesus is brilliant. He is our leader. He is our rabbi. He is our savior. So whatever Jesus says in this teaching is what we take as authoritative of what is meant by these Old Testament commands. Jesus then says, "You have heard that it was said do not murder," which we would agree with. I feel pretty good about that. But, Jesus wants to dig deeper, which is why he then says, "But I tell you," and he goes deeper to say, "Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." So

Jesus is, somehow in this short teaching, right at the beginning, connecting the concepts of anger and murder, and he is saying that these come from the same place in the human heart.

Let's unpack this concept of anger because I want to complexify this idea of anger. Like young Kevin teaching those sixth and seventh graders, I used to take it as a pretty point-blank statement of don't ever be angry or else you're a murderer. But I wonder if there's more complexity here. Let's start with the definition of anger. Here's one that I crafted from a few other people that I had read from, and then put on my own touches.

Anger: A powerful emotion that takes control of our mind and body when someone or something interferes with or blocks our will.

Which is a wordy way to say anger is that feeling that floods your nervous system when you want something done and it doesn't happen. It's a powerful emotion. It's one that can control us, and it happens whenever our will, our desire, is interfered with or blocked. If we break this down a little bit more, we'll recognize that this affords the possibility of both good anger and bad anger.

It could be that when your will to do something is blocked, you respond with vitriol and hatred, which would be the wrong anger. Or it could be that you get angry because the beatitudes hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice are blocked, and it creates within you a righteous indignation, which is a healthy anger.

It's important to note that although the English language has one word for anger, other than synonyms like rage, the Greek language actually has multiple words for anger. The first word for anger in Greek is *thymas*, which means a passionate, impulsive anger, more like rage or fury.

Thymas is the moment when your will is blocked, and anger floods your system. It's unavoidable. It just happens to you. I would argue that when we talk about desire, one can control their emotions somewhat. They can create conditions in which one is ripe to respond more appropriately, but at the end of the day, one can't really control the emotions that flood them. *Thymas* is the instance in which it floods your system.

That is not the word that Jesus uses in this text. Jesus uses a really long word, but I'll give you the root word as it is a little easier. It's just *orge*, which is a settled and deliberate anger rising up from an ongoing (fixed) opposition. The difference with this anger is that it proceeds from a steadfast opposition to the other, or the thing that's blocking you. Think of it more in the ways, although it's a little softer language than Jesus uses, like nursing a grudge. You know when you get angry and you stew on it and you just sit on it and imagine, "Oh, I wish I had said that. I wish I had done that." Or, "I'm going to speed up. I'm going to cut them back off." You know what I mean? This *orge* or anger that Jesus is talking about is settled and deliberate.

Not all anger is sin. Both of these are lousy. Both of these are not necessarily helpful and should be avoided to some extent, but the difference is that *thymas*, when it floods your system, you are given the opportunity to do something with that anger. You can choose to entertain it, to nurse that grudge, to sit on it, to stew over it, to let it fester within your

soul, or you can let it dissipate. You can name the emotion and allow yourself to process it, to not deny it, but see it and let it pass like a cloud going through your mind's eye. It's not that you want to live in a world that is constantly stoking that anger, but the difference is that *orge* is a deliberateness. It's the moment in which you consent to that flood of emotion and say, "I'm going to sit on it a little bit."

I would suggest that this *orge*, this anger, is something that we're familiar with. The word that Jesus actually uses is a present participle. What it means is you are presently angry, and the participle part is that it's ongoing anger. So Jesus says that anger is the one that hits you, and then you persist in it. What arises out of this is two forms of anger. There's a destructive anger and there's a redemptive anger. Let's talk a little bit more about that.

Destructive Anger

Destructive anger generates from all sorts of ways. Here are just a few to get your imagination going. Destructive anger can come from something as simple as a wounded ego. Someone says a loose word about you, a comment towards you, and you feel offended. That response can be, "How dare you say that to me? Do you know who I am?" Destructive anger can come from a wounded ego. It can come from self-righteousness. It can come from a zealotry in which you just look down on the other, assume you're better than the other person, and that can just become destructive as you demean and degrade. The other is thinking of yourself as more powerful, which brings us to maybe the third form of destructive anger.

Anger can be a means to power. In a world of creeping dehumanization, as Brooks called it, anger can be used to get ahead. Our world rewards anger, fury, and rage, and so destructive anger can be simply the means by which you get ahead. The only way you know is to crush the other. But then there's redemptive anger.

Redemptive Anger

Not all anger is wrong. Redemptive anger can be anger over injustice. It can be where you look out in the world, and see the brokenness of it, which infuriates you because you recognize it's not the way that it should be. It's a healthy anger, a redemptive anger. An anger that is triggered by the evil in the world. It can be a redemptive tool. This is why Paul, in Ephesians 4, said something quite basic for us. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry," (Eph. 4:26). Do you notice that he said anger is okay, but in that anger, when it floods you, do not sin. There is, in fact, redemptive anger.

You see this in the life of Jesus. Think of the times that Jesus got angry. Mark 11:15-18 is the classic example in which Jesus goes into the temple and sees the corruption of the religious elites and starts flipping tables, angry at the corruption that was there. When you read that, I'd caution against thinking of it as Jesus snapping or losing it. But if you actually read that story in the context of the whole gospel, it was a calculated moment. Jesus had been building up to it. It wasn't him flying off the handle. It was in anger at the corruption. It didn't stem from a flood of emotion. It was strategic and intentional.

You see in Mark 3, another example of Jesus' anger in which he's in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and this man comes to be healed, and he heals the man on the Sabbath. The religious leaders get angry and upset, and the text says explicitly, "He looked around at them in anger." Anger can be redemptive, or it can be destructive. More often than not, our anger is used in destructive ways.

So, what could we learn about how to have redemptive anger? One of the things you notice from these two examples of Jesus' life, and much more, is that every time Jesus gets angry, his anger emerges because the poor or the marginalized are being mistreated. His anger is always on behalf of others. He never gets angry when things happen, and injustice happens against him. But somehow, he funnels that anger to look out and give voice to the voiceless. My point is that I want to complexify the teachings of Jesus because we have to understand that anger, what Jesus here is identifying, is in the human condition, like playing with fire, has the ability to consume you and me. So, how do we handle that?

I want to go back because Jesus names a vicious cycle that plays out when we entertain and nurse a grudge. It will be helpful for us.

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:22

Do you see this vicious cycle that Jesus names? It's three steps. The first is anger, and you can equate anger with emotion. So anger equals that emotional response. But then he goes further and says, anyone who says *Raca*, which is this movement towards contempt. It has moved from emotion to contempt. Then lastly, in the vicious cycle, you eventually call someone a fool, and you then move to dehumanization. This vicious cycle plays out from emotion to contempt to dehumanization. Eventually, if you entertain anger, if you nurse that grudge, it falls into this category in which you will be tempted to call someone *Raca*.

Now I'm going to go out on a limb and say that none of us in here has called someone *Raca* this week. But let's unpack a little bit of what he means. *Raca* was a term that meant "empty one" or "worthless one." It was a term of vilification. It was that move to contempt toward the other. Contempt is an emotion that is like dismissing their very existence. It's like they don't mean anything to you. It's like when you place that person, and the emotional response comes, you're like, "I just don't care about them." You're dismissing their humanity all in one particular move.

Contempt is the point when you write the other off, we might say something more akin to They're just one of those people—a Democrat or a Republican. *Raca*. We dismiss them. We assume that their humanity doesn't exist any longer, and that emotion you entertained, that something that blocked what you desire, irritates you, and then you just dismiss them outright. But he says what's wrong with contempt is that, eventually, if emotion gives way to contempt, contempt eventually

gives way to calling someone a fool, so where contempt dismisses their humanity.

This idea of fool, which is the Greek word *mōrós*, from which we get the word moron, moves now to not dismissing them but attacking their character. It becomes personal. Then you've moved from contempt and say, "I'm just trying to dismiss them." But then you look at them and say, "Ah, they're just an idiot. They're just a fool." The anger has now caused you to take one element of an individual and label it for the entirety of their person. Do you see the way this has escalated from an event that happened to seeing them in contempt, to now attacking them?

Once you name someone and you begin to attack their character, what you do is dismiss them from being created in the image of God, and you quite literally dehumanize them. Meaning they are no longer a human in your mind. They are simply someone who is a fool, an idiot, a jerk, or whatever it is. Once you dehumanize someone, there is nothing stopping you from attacking them either verbally or physically. This is at the heart behind racism. You dehumanize the other, call them some sort of slur, because then if they're not human, well then you can treat them like something other than human.

Jesus says this is the cycle that plays out. It's at the very core, which is why he links anger to murder, because for Jesus, murder and anger come from the same place in the human heart where every one of us has been. We all have had this anger rise up within us. I'd go so far as to say we've all played out this whole vicious cycle in which we've nourished that grudge, stewed over it. They are just one of those people. And then you begin to dehumanize them over and over. Like the religious leaders, most of us have not murdered. We've been able to restrain that behavior, but often we're enslaved to that anger, and it sits with us day after day after day.

The punishments seemed so severe. If you call someone a fool, then you're in danger of the fire of hell. Well, watch what Jesus does here. He says, "Anger is that emotion." Then Jesus says, "If you're angry, you are subject to judgment." Now, put that in the context of the conversation we had earlier in which there's destructive and redemptive anger. If it's subjected to judgment, that's actually a good thing. Judgment helps you figure out what anger you entertained. Was it the destructive anger or redemptive anger? This is the moment in which Jesus is inviting us to root out the anger. The judgment's a good thing because then we have the opportunity to cut off the vicious cycle, to stop it in its place before it descends into contempt and dehumanization.

So he says, "If you are angry, you are subject to judgment." Then he says, "If you call someone *Raca*, that is if you descend into contempt, you're answerable to the court. The word court used there, in Greek, is *sunedrion*, which is similar to the Supreme Court. It's the highest level of court, which seems like a drastic escalation of punishment. But Jesus is trying hard to root out this vicious cycle that we all descend into. Then he says, "Well, if you name someone a fool and dehumanize them, you are in danger of the fire of hell."

We have to do a little work on this concept of the fire of hell. We come to this concept of hell with all sorts of baggage and imagery, more from Dante's *Inferno* than we do from Jesus. Now this is severe, and it is, in fact, real what Jesus gets to here. I have to unpack it so that we understand what Jesus had in mind when he used this phrase, "the fire of hell." The word behind this is the Greek word *Gehenna* or *Ge-Hinnom*. That's the word hell. And it literally translates as the Valley of Hinnom.

Now, *Gehenna* is an actual place you can visit. It's a valley south of Jerusalem, but somewhere along the history of Israel, it took on this form to be the metaphor that the biblical writers would use to talk about eternal judgment. Hell is a very real place, and it is used to talk about eternal judgment. I don't want you to miss that or assume that I'm trying to dismiss the severity of it or the implications of hell itself.

So let's talk a little bit about what it is that Jesus had in mind, or what the first-century readers would hear when they heard the word *Gehenna*. It is used throughout the scriptures. It's used all throughout the Old Testament. Let's go to 2 Chronicles 28. This is a dark moment in Israel's past in which King Ahaz, who was a terrible, awful king, was in power. "*He burned sacrifices in the Valley of Ben Hinnom and sacrificed his children in the fire, engaging in the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites*" (2 Chron. 28:3).

There's a moment in which Israel was caught up in pagan worship, and so they were in this Valley of Gehenna Hinnom, and there they were practicing pagan practices of child sacrifice right in that valley. God has very strong feelings against that, and rightfully so. With those strong feelings, we move forward to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet of the Lord, which the prophets were like the voice to God. They spoke on behalf of God. So, as Israel was failing in this, taking on these practices right there in the valley of Ge-Hinnom, read the way the prophet speaks about this.

'Hear the word of the Lord, you kings of Judah and people of Jerusalem. This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Listen! I am going to bring a disaster on this place that will make the ears of everyone who hears of it tingle. For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned incense in it to gods that neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. Jeremiah 19:2-6

Jeremiah is bringing a warning from God to Israel, who are practicing these detestable practices, that says there's coming a day in which destruction will come, and it'll happen right in the place where they were doing that. What would play out shortly after this is the Babylonians would come in and utterly destroy Israel as punishment for the

detestable practices that Israel was standing by. That all took place in Gehenna.

So when we have this imagery of the fire of hell, what's going through Jesus' mind is that scene, and he says what happened to them in that time will happen to you. But we have medieval writers like Dante and his *Inferno*, in which they assume this literal fire, this eternal torture chamber. Well, you'll be tortured forever, but what Jesus is doing here is he's mapping this concept of what essentially the Israelites did to people in the Valley of Gehenna is what will be done to them. It's like the principle of retribution. Listen to the way Tim Mackey, the scholar at the Bible Project, describes this. "The nature of *Gehenna* is a symbol of divine justice. The primary meaning is about divine justice inverting what was wrong, so that what they have done to others will be brought back upon them."

Think of it as an inverse of the golden rule. If you dehumanize, you will experience it as well. What's coming to you, as the rest of the New Testament would say, is death, for the wages of sin is death. Jesus says that if you descend into this vicious cycle, you are in danger of the fire of hell. It should shock us. It should startle us. Because what's happening in this moment is that Jesus is saying that how you treat others will come back to you.

Now, notice, and this is where we need to clean up some language, it never says that Jesus casts people into hell. It doesn't say anything about that. Here it says they're in danger of the fire of hell. Hell is a real place that should be avoided, that should startle us. That will be the eternal punishment for those who are not in Christ, but it is not caused by Jesus. He says that this is what's happening when you engage in this behavior without any sort of heart set to the other direction. What came to the others that you brought will be reaped unto you. Listen to the way Dallas Willard describes this particular text, and he plays off this.

To brand someone a 'fool' in this biblical sense was a violation of the soul so devastating, of such great harm, that, as Jesus saw, it would justify consigning the offender to the smoldering garbage dump of human existence, Gehenna. It combines all that is evil in anger as well as in contempt. It is not possible for people with such attitudes toward others to live in the movements of God's kingdom, for they are totally out of harmony with it. Willard, Divine Conspiracy

Remember where this whole sermon started? Jesus announcing the reality of the kingdom of God, repent and believe that the kingdom is here. And that kingdom that began the moment Jesus declared those words is now launching into eternity. There will come a time when Jesus is all in all, meaning all of the created world is saturated with God's rule. Now, if your heart is not bent in humility towards Jesus, you will be miserable in the kingdom of God, which is exactly what Jesus says here.

If your heart is consumed with anger, you are living out of step with all of reality. As the kingdom comes more and more, you'll get more miserable and more miserable, and eventually it'll eat you up like the fires of *Gehenna*. So that's where it's all going because that's the reality

that's breaking in. If you are not, as Paul would say later throughout the New Testament, in Christ then you are identifying and living within the present age. And that will slowly erode your very soul. People who end up in hell are not the people that would or could enjoy the kingdom of God.

In another spot, Willard said, "For some people, hell is the best that God could do for them because it's just what they desire." At some point, God respects the dignity of the other and says, "If you don't want my grace, you don't have to have it," but he offers it freely. C.S. Lewis stated:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock, it is opened. Lewis, The Great Divorce

Jesus' word seems so harsh to us because he understands the severity and the power that anger has over the human condition and the human soul. He invites us to break that vicious cycle. If you are angry, you are subject to judgment. If you call someone *Raca*, you're subject to the court. I can almost imagine with fear in his eyes when he says, "If you call someone fool, you're in danger of the fire of hell," inviting them out of that cycle.

What I love about Jesus is that he's very practical in the Sermon on the Mount, and he actually provides us a way forward to come out of that vicious cycle. Because we can understand the concept of anger being bad and murder being bad. It's simple in its understanding, but harder to live it out. Jesus offered instruction for us.

"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 there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus gives two hypothetical scenarios to fashion our moral imagination to understand how we root out the anger. If you're coming to offer a sacrifice, this would have been before Jesus' death, and if you're there and recognize that you have some issue with someone, he said to leave it. Drop the gift. Go reconcile. You would want to reconcile the anger in your heart because he just said you're in danger of the fire of hell. Jesus will use this throughout the Sermon on the Mount, using this hyperbolic way of teaching to grab our attention.

What we often miss is that Jesus is preaching at the Sea of Galilee. The only altar that would've existed at this time in history was in Jerusalem, some 80 miles away. Meaning you would have had to travel 80 miles with a goat, you land at the altar, and you're waiting in line to give it to the priest to sacrifice. You then remember that you and your neighbor had that thing about him using your hose. You hated that and are really angry with him. Jesus says to drop the goat, go 80 miles back, and

reconcile with your neighbor. Spoiler, you're probably going to need a new goat by this time. I don't think it stayed in line at the altar.

That's the extreme levels to which Jesus is saying to do whatever you have to do to uproot evil from your heart. It's that serious. An 80-mile journey on horseback or donkey or whatever it was would take many, many days. He said, "Do whatever you have to do." Because this anger sitting in the human heart is like a fire, it will consume you. Do whatever you have to do to get rid of it.

Notice also the way in which Jesus masterfully puts this example in the context of a worship service; there's something there for us. I wish we had a little more time to unpack this, but I want us to recognize that there are a lot of different reasons in which we may feel distanced from God. If you are harboring anger in your heart, it seems quite clear from Jesus that this can hinder your communion with God.

As Rich Villodas would say, "You can't be in relationship with the Lord of Life if you're secretly harboring death in your heart." If that's sitting within you, it will hinder your relationship with God. That's how seriously Jesus takes this concept of reconciliation.

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

This is Jesus saying that if you are caught up in this cycle and want to take the other to court, try as best you can to settle before you get to that place. Move quickly to reconcile with the other, move quickly to settle these disputes because it could end up that you get handed over to the judge, then to the officer, and thrown in prison until the debt is paid.

If the first lesson is to go to any lengths to root out anger, the second is to move quickly to root it out, because the more it festers, the more it will consume you. That is my main idea for this sermon. Go to extreme lengths to quickly root out anger from your life. This is what Jesus would have us do. I don't know what that looks like for you, because I don't know the context of your problem or whatever it is.

I've been talking about anger, and I'm guessing something has come to mind. So it will be complex. It's not an easy thing. For some of you, it might be anger that you're harboring from a childhood wound or something, where it's either not possible to go back and reconcile with the other, or it's not safe to reconcile by seeing that person face to face. Please know that this is okay. Jesus obviously understands that.

However, how might you take a step towards being free from that anger? Often, that may look like, if it isn't safe or appropriate for you to go to that person and work through it, finding a trusted friend or

mental health professional who can help you deal with the trauma you've experienced, in which anger is residing in your heart.

Jesus so desires for us to be free from anger because it's one thing not to murder, and you may go your whole life without murdering someone. But is it any life? It certainly isn't life in the kingdom of God if all of those years you're enslaved to anger. Go to any length to root out anger quickly from your heart, or as the writer of Proverbs would say, "Above all else, guard your heart for everything you do flows from it."

There are many legitimate reasons to be angry in this world. We've just sat through headlines for the past few weeks, and there are a lot of legitimate reasons to be angry, but I would warn us. Church, to live the way of Jesus, in the kingdom of God, there is no legitimate reason to let anger destroy or consume us.

I pray we become a people who are quick to reconcile, as James would say, quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, and the real gift of the gospel as we explored in Exodus and as we saw through the Lent series, that although we are quick to anger, "*And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,'"* Exodus 34:6

The beauty of the gospel through all of this, as we get caught in this vicious cycle, is that Jesus is quick to forgive, and all we need to do is open ourselves up to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, shaping and molding us, to root out that anger.

So what I want you to do right now is to clench your fist. I typically have you hold them open, but I want you to clench your fist because I want you to feel that anger. I'm guessing that as I've been talking, if you're harboring anger, something or someone came to mind, and I want you to clench those fists to feel it. Jesus doesn't tell us to deny our anger. He tells us to deal with it. So as you clench your fist, I want you to think about what it would look like to then release that to Jesus.

I invite you, in the posture of prayer, to say, "God, I am angry at this person or this thing." Feel it in your bones, and just sit for a moment with that, with clenched fists. Maybe there's a face or a name. Maybe you were betrayed or wronged. You had expectations that you thought were going to be held up, but they were unmet. Maybe you're carrying something that happened ten years ago, and you say, "God, I'm really angry about this."

Then I invite you to loosen that grip and release it in front of you. Now, with open hands, read this prayer. "God, I trust you with this situation, with this person. I leave it with you." I give you the opportunity to invite the Holy Spirit to reshape your heart. Holy Spirit, would you take our hearts that have anger residing in them and mold us into people of love for Jesus? We give you our anger now. We trust you, and we leave it with you. Would you help us by your Spirit to move us towards being a people of peace and love? Amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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