

Matthew 5:21-26 (NKJV)

²¹ "You have heard that it was said to those of old, '*You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.*'

²² But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

Ok, a quick review. Every week the **meaning** of this passage has been getting clearer for me. I hope it is the same for you.

Jesus starts with telling us that the pharisees said that the **big deal** about murder is that it **leads to the civil death penalty**.

Jesus does an interesting play on meaning and basically says that anger, which is a **committed grudge** against a person, leads to a **lower human court**.

Devaluing a human's value due to their intellectual deficits leads to a higher human court that can **pronounce the death penalty**.

And calling a person a fool, basically saying they are **not morally fit to live**, puts a person in danger of **hell fire** which is clearly **God's** judgment.

But all of these qualities are essentially on the murder train. They are all acts of murder. And they all deserve the penalty for murder.

Our brother Jones has this to say:

Thus I think we are enabled to draw lines of distinction between these things. 'Do not imagine you are clear with regard to this injunction,' says Christ in effect, 'simply because you have not committed murder.' What is the state of your heart? How do you react to things that happen? Do you find yourself flaring into a raging temper when a person has done something to you? Or do you sometimes feel anger against a person who really has done nothing to you at all? These are the things that matter. It is that which God meant when He said, 'Thou shalt not kill'.

Killing does not only mean destroying life physically, it means still more trying to destroy the spirit and the soul, destroying the person in any shape or form.

I think we really need to understand this and apply it. If we do not, we ignore it to our own peril. God is **picky** about how we regard other people. We are not free to pick **our own** path. We are not free to **follow our hearts** or our instincts. We aren't free to come up with **our own** standards to evaluate the worth of another human being. We preach this kind of thing all the time when we talk about abortion. We get this right when we speak about someone else making the selfish evaluation that an unborn human life has no value. But it is so easy to set ourselves up as ultimate judges on those who have already been born. It is easy to weigh people in our own scales and have them come up wanting.

Granted, we are free to judge right and wrong behavior. In fact, it is not **we** who are judging. We are just **telling the truth** about what God has already spoken. God has already made the judgment. We are just repeating it. We are rationally applying scripture. But that is as far as we are allowed to go.

When it comes down to who is fit to live or die, that is God's domain. And it is **He** who determines it. How do we know who God wants dead? They die.

How do we know who God wants to live? They live. And He is the expert at vengeance. We never have to worry that He **needs our help**. God is very good at granting the death penalty to anyone He wants dead at the exact moment He wants them dead. Until that point we must regard them as a person that could turn to Christ. And ultimately, as much as it so deeply wounds our pride to say so, apart from Christ **they are not substantially different than us**.

Have you ever considered what kind of person you may have been if you were born in a family where you were you abused every day? What might you have done if you were **living in poverty** and were **desperate for the next meal**?

Any natural goodness we might think we have is purely circumstantial. We might think "I would never do this thing or that thing". But odds are there are circumstances that would have caused us to do **just that**. We just haven't encountered those circumstances. Our **history of sin** is the best indicator of what kind of person we are apart from Christ. Do we really think we have any kind of right to set ourselves up as a judge of another human's value? Just in case we think we might, Christ tells us here very clearly that **we do not**. No believer is allowed to ride the murder train.

I hope we will allow this to change our minds and our behavior. What we say about even politicians is in view. I am seeing application of this in my day to

day life. I am far too quick to call people idiots just because they make my life harder. But really. Who do I think I am? If you knew my heart like I know my heart you would laugh at the idea that I have a **single credential** to set me up as a judge of others. And we are all the same.

Now that leads us to where we are in the text. All of a sudden there is a shift in focus.

²³ Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Look at what happens here. We start with this idea that someone has acted in a way that we think **they are not worth living**. We commit murder of the heart against the person because they have wronged us in a way that is unforgivable. And Jesus tells us, every stop of the murder train is evil. So give it up. Get off it. Get off your self centered, ego centric system of viewing the world. That system is evil. People who live in this kind of self worship will face God's punishment.

Now he changes the focus to the wrongs **we** have done to others. That should be the real focus of our efforts and attention. That is the thing we have power over. That is the thing we are responsible for.

Now look where it starts.

In our acts of worship.

What is being described here as bringing your gift to the altar is an act of **voluntary sacrificial giving**. This is an act that is not required. It is **voluntary**. Imagine it as the one thing you really want to do for God to show Him **how much you love Him**, how much you **value Him**, how much you **worship Him**. It is the thing you want to do that shows you really really love this God.

Now what could God possibly want **more than this** from you? Would He not cater to that above everything else in life? Would He not say prioritize this above all else?

Think of it as your prayer time. Think of this as your witnessing and evangelism time. Think of this as your study time. Maybe you are intending to give a great deal of money to a mission. Maybe you are thinking about doing a tremendous act of service for a fellow believer.

And what does He say is more important than this?

This is mind boggling. What is more important to God than our voluntary acts of sacrifice to honor God?

Our **right relationship to human beings**. Our determination to live in regard to human beings **the way He instructed us to**.

Our hearts are tricky things. Won't we do many things in an effort to worship God, **rather than** do the simple things He commands? Because the things He commands demands that we **die to ourselves**. But the things we contribute to God can be done out of our own pride and self glorification.

We think of Saul making his huge sacrifice to God. It was an enormous cost of animals. But he had just **disobeyed** everything that God had said. And God did not accept that sacrifice as **anything good** at all. Why? Because it did not come from a heart submitted to God. It did not come from a heart obedient to God. It came from a self exalting heart that would not obey God. And what did the prophet Samuel tell Saul about what is best? He said, "It is better to obey than to sacrifice." And notice that God showed no empathy toward Saul's decision. It angered Him. In the same way it angers God when we want to bring our acts of worship to Christ but we will not treat people like He tells us. When we will not regard people like He tells us.

Here we are told that if you really want to please God with your acts of worship, **stop right where you are** and ask, how am I treating people? And like I said, this is not even necessarily a believer.

Now what we have in view here is some wrong that **we have done to someone** that might cause them to hate us, might cause them to want to kill us. Jesus is expanding this commandment of thou shall not kill to something greater. He is saying two things.

1 You stay off that murder train.

2 Do all you can to keep others off it too.

The focus shifts from what is **bad for us** to what is **bad for others too**.

And even more than that. It does not just appeal to avoiding something bad.

The goal is ultimately something very very good. **Reconciliation**. Restoration of relationship and fellowship. Remember we learned about this in 1 John. We have fellowship with God and with fellow believers to the degree that our confession is accurate and thorough. Our fellowship is only as good as our confession.

In eternity, we are going to have wonderful fellowship because truth will rule the day. There will be no more destructive selfishness. The best of what we have now will be 1000 times better. That is what God **wants** for His church and we get to **practice it now**. God values **restoration**. God values good relationships. These are important to God. They are so important that before we do any act of worship to God we need to consider if we are treating humans the way He commands.

Have you ever had God bring to your mind a way that you have wronged someone completely out of the blue? We can expect that sort of thing because God cares so much about relationships. Given also that this is so important, it is worth time to be introspective about it. I think this is largely what the call is when **taking communion**. It is a call to consider how we are treating the body of Christ.

Who are you having trouble with right now?

What distance is there between you and others?

Is there anything you can do to restore that relationship? Have you tried that thing?

Is there anything you may have done to create the rift?

Has the person confessed to you but you won't let it go?

These are all worthy questions.

I got this quote from somewhere. Not sure where.

Worship that is acceptable to God cannot take place against the background of a damaged human relationship which is being ignored. The perspective here is related to that of Is. 58:2-7.

Isaiah 58:2-7 (NKJV)

² Yet they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways, As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God.

³ 'Why have we fasted,' *they say*, 'and You have not seen? *Why* have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?' "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers.

⁴ Indeed you fast for strife and debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as *you do* this day, To make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

⁶ "Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke?

⁷ *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

It is very clear what the problem is here. People are trying to worship God, but they are treating God's people horribly. There is no doubt about this fact.

God's people are the **very most important thing to God in this world**. We really need to orient to this fact continually. His children are the apple of His eye. Even His children that are not living the way **we think they should be**. We need to represent God to those people. We need to love God's people. We need to keep their needs higher than our desires for ourselves.

God does not get the joke when we run to Him with all the apparent sincerity in the world, but we will not submit to His desires. Fasting does not make up for lack of love. In fact there is nothing we can do for our lack of love that will please God except repent of it. No amount of evangelism, no amount of service, no amount of sacrifice, will ever make up for our lack of regard for that which God cares about the most.

Thank God, His terms are very easy. They are just this, that I face and **acknowledge** this sin and confess it utterly and absolutely, that I stop any **self-defense** or **self-justification**, even if there was provocation from this other person. I must just confess and admit it without any reservation to God. If there is something in actual practice that I can do about it, I must do it at once. I must humble myself, make a fool of myself if needed, and let the other person gloat over me if necessary, as long as I have done everything I can to remove the barrier and the obstacle. Then God will tell me that all is right. 'I will settle with you'

24 leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

We really cannot miss this. It is easy at this point to say "**yes, but**.

I am worshipping you God. I love you God. I am praying to you God.

And I know there is this person who claims to love you, who claims to be serving you, who seems to be trying to follow you. But that person hurt me.

They did something that deeply harmed me. That person said bad things about me. That person does not seem to like me. And all of that offends me.

They do not treat me with the degree of **respect** that I think I deserve. They do not **cater** to me. They do things **I do not like**.

Surely you do not expect me to abandon my prayer time to make things right with that person? Surely you do not expect me to confess my **minor** sin to **them** in light of the **huge sin** they have committed **against me**? Surely you do not think that I should go to them to make an effort to restore relationship when look at what they did to me?"

Christ says leave your gift, leave your spiritual contribution to me intended to show me how much you love me. Leave it right now. Leave it sitting right

where it is. Because it is not as important to me as you making the **relationship right** with that person who is mine. Go your way. Make first things first.

And the first thing is not that you **give** me your acts of **worship** toward Me. The first thing is that you **show me** your acts of **obedience** toward those people whom I deeply love. When that is done, and only when that is done, I will be glad to have your fellowship. Then come and worship me. And I will accept your worship. I will relate with you. I will commune with you.

Have you ever considered that the reason you might **feel far from God** is that you refuse to take the dramatic risks involved to restore relationships with **the people** God loves?

Have you ever considered that the worship you offer to God may not be received because you will not humble yourself in human relationships enough to confess to others the sins you have actually committed against them?

There isn't a workaround here.

At work I am often looking for a work around. There are lots of things that don't work like they should. Sometimes a person's phone won't work at their house. So we ask them to use the equivalent of a phone on their pc. We never actually fix the problem. But we find a way to make it work anyway.

Well there isn't anything like that with God. We must do all we can to **restore relationships** with those who are in Christ. I think this is mostly important for those in the same body of believers. These are the people we have covenanted with. They are the ones we are answerable to. Are you nurturing a grudge toward someone in this body? Is there anyone that you have no intentions to go out of your way for their welfare. Is there some personal slight that causes you to ignore any of the needs you see?

Those are the kind of things we need to be on the lookout for.

And this is why. It is a big deal.

Matthew 5:25-26 (NKJV)

²⁵ Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

Let's look at the context to know how to understand this text.

Verses **21 and 22** emphasize that sins of **attitude** bring on the same guilt of breaking the law as sins of actions. That is the **spirit** of the law. And punishment goes beyond human courts.

Verses **23 and 24** tell us that the sin of intentionally allowing broken human relationships to exist is an obstacle that must be overcome before God is willing to accept our worship of Him.

Then we come to verses of **25 and 26** that appeal back to the human courts. What is the main point here?

I think it is this:

1. We have the **method** for restoring relationship when we have wronged others.
2. We are given the **reason** for restoring relationship.

Remember that we started this passage with Jesus saying- **“you have heard it said”** and essentially He explained that the Pharisee’s teaching limited the reasoning to not murder to avoid the **human court’s** punishment. Jesus goes on to make the point that it goes **further** than that.

God’s **pleasure** is to be lived for and God’s **punishment** is to be avoided. In his escalation of the crimes and punishments, the first two start in human courts and the last one shows a penalty that **only God** can inflict.

So I think as we look at **23 and 24**, we can make the same application. It starts in human courts but there is a danger in the **court of God** if reconciliation is avoided. Jesus starts with the method for restoring relationship.

25 Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

The adversary here is clearly the person with a legal gripe against us. From what I have read, the word **adversary** does not necessarily mean someone who hates us or has malice against us. But they have a legitimate complaint against us. Think of it as if we have stolen \$1000 from them. In a court of law, that person would be our adversary, even though they might actually like us as a person. We have committed an offense. They are seeking for it to be made right.

Now the method for restoration that Jesus prescribes is for us to accept all the blame that we deserve. If we stole \$1000, we must freely **admit we are guilty** of stealing it and we must **accept our responsibility** for restoring the proper amount.

Now what we should immediately do is seek out the party that we have offended and offer confession and restitution if it is something we can repay in some way.

But suppose we are unaware of our offense? In this case, the person who you stole from seeks **you out** and is headed to the court with **you in his grasp**. In this case, offer confession and restitution immediately. Accept your own guilt. Don’t hope to use loopholes in the law. Don’t hope that the law may not expose the whole truth. Don’t hope that there is not enough evidence to

convict you. If you **know you are guilty**, appeal to the mercy of the one who you have wronged. Do everything you can to tell the truth about yourself and right the wrong once the wrong is pointed out to you. In other words, rather than trying to get away with it by denial or trickery or deception, confess it in full. Take the incentive to restore that relationship. Do everything you can to right the wrong you have done.

lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

This was the Roman legal process. These Jewish people would have known this. If the judge is good and the case is clear, this is what would have happened to the person who is in the wrong. That person would have faced the judge. The judge would have decided against that person. The judge would hand that person off to the legal official responsible for taking that person to prison. And to prison he would go.

Now the Roman government did not care so much about people's affairs. But they did have a justice system that was at times very good. And prior to appealing to the judge, you could work out whatever deal you wanted. But once you appealed to the Roman justice system, there was no **repealing** it. There was no **changing your mind**. Once that process was in place, it was now out of the adversary's hands. It was serious business. And the verdict would be carried out. The gears of justice were going to turn, and absolute justice devoid of mercy would be administered.

So the reason to reconcile is partly to **avoid punishment**. We know there are other reasons offered in other places. But avoiding punishment is the one Jesus focuses on.

Paul seconds this principle but from a different angle.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8 (NKJV)

1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?

2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters?

3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life?

4 If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge?

5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?

6 But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers!

⁷ Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather *let yourselves* be cheated?

⁸ No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and *you do these things to your brethren!*

We need to avoid going to courts of law to settle differences between believers. Paul portrays doing such a thing as a **complete failure** of kingdom principles. So Paul is telling us to settle outside of court, not because of the **penalty** but because of the horrible **witness** it presents of Christ and the church. But the same idea is in mind. **Reconciliation** based on **love** for one another. That is the goal.

But what happens when we trust ourselves to human courts.

²⁶ Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

The initial application is of prison and human courts of justice. But ultimately this also applies to God. If we want to, we can try to take on our debt. We can refuse to receive Christ by faith. We can hope to meet Christ in our **own pride** and tell Him how **worthy** we are to enter His eternity.

Or we can resist His Holy Spirit when He convicts us of sin and calls us to repent. We can do that, not betting on the fact that we **too** will be dragged into a court that deals out perfect justice. If we will not do what Christ says, if we will not **reconcile** with both our brothers and our God, we will be throwing ourselves on the heavenly court and we will get everything we deserve.

The problem with that court is that the debt is **too great** for us to pay. We will **never** pay the last penny.

It is clear that the exit to the Murder train is to love. The love train goes in the exact opposite direction. On that train, Christ has **already** paid the last penny. We bask in His mercy and grace. And we long for **others** to experience what **we** have experienced. We want **reconciliation** when someone has sinned against us. We want **reconciliation** when we have sinned against someone else. We don't wait for them to come to us if there is a wrong involved. We go if **we are wronged**. We go if we have done the wrong-ing. **We go**.

Where are you holding a grudge and will not initiate contact? Where do you regard that someone has wronged you but you will not initiate conversation? Sometimes those conversations are not as fruitful as we would hope, but we still must have them. If you are telling all those around you about how **you perceive being wronged** but will not go to a brother or sister who wronged you, it is **you** who are sinning, no matter what **they** have done. And if

someone is telling us how much a fellow believer has wronged them, we are morally obligated to **command** that person, in the name of Christ, to seek out that party to restore fellowship.

Lets close with a quote from brother MacArthur

When there is animosity or sin of any sort in our heart there cannot be integrity in our worship. Nearly a thousand years before Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount the psalmist had declared, "If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear" ([Ps. 66:18](#)). Even before that Samuel said, "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" ([1 Sam. 15:22](#)).

We cannot allow this to be just another sermon. Maybe the changes we long for lay right in front of us this morning. Maybe this is what God is waiting for with us. Maybe this is the **obstacle** to our **fellowship** with God, and our **peace** with God, and or **Joy** in Christ.

It is worth taking some time with Christ today to prayerfully consider. Where should we go to another believer to restore relationship?