

Hearts and Words Ruled by God

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I. Confession and Prayer

Good morning, family. Hear my confession.

Last Sunday morning, I used a single word that disturbed and perhaps even hurt a few people. The word was *angry*. I confess that I was expressing only my interpretation and my perception when I characterized the words and actions of certain other people as *angry*. And my perception may not reflect the totality of reality.

It doesn't matter how many people might have agreed with that assessment. Even if it was an accurate assessment, that doesn't matter, either. What matters is that I expressed a perception—which may or may not be true. Just as others may misunderstand my words and my motives, I may misunderstand the words and motives of others. Therefore, I ask you to forgive me for using that term.

Hear my prayer.

Father God, we gather as your children, as your family, in Jesus' name—in your presence, with your Spirit in our midst. We come to honor You, to glorify You, to ascribe worth to You, for You are worthy of far more adoration and devotion than we could ever offer You. Father, bless the heart, mind, and especially the words of your servant to draw us all nearer to You, nearer to Your will, through the proclamation of Your word. And bless us all with open hearts to receive Your word, Your will, Your ways, Your Spirit—and to accept one another, even as you have accepted us. Father, teach us to be as merciful to one another, as You are to us. We thank you for Your grace to forgive us when we disgrace You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

II. The Beatitudes, So What?

Matthew 5

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.

2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying,

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

12 "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

13 "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

14 "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden;

15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house.

16 "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

Okay, so what? That all sounds fine in the realm of abstract theory. But what does it look like in real life? If we are seeking God's kingdom and God's righteousness, how should these principles affect who we are and the way we live?

So we are supposed to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world—glorifying our Father in heaven. How does that work? What does that look like? Where do we start in applying the beatitudes in ways that will equip us to be so powerfully influential as representatives of God's kingdom?

Well, what if we start with our speech and our relationships? That's where Jesus started. And let's face it—in fact, let's confess it—if only we would allow God to rule our hearts and our words He would very nearly rule us entirely. If our tongues were only ruled by God, letting him rule the rest of our lives would be easy by comparison.

III. The Spirit of Murder

Matthew 5

21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'

22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

23 "Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,

24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.

25 "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

26 "Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

A. What Not to Do with Anger

1) Don't keep it. Don't *become* it.

You are going to encounter situations in which you become angry. But how long does it last? Do you keep your anger and feed it and nurture it? Does it become your state of being? Don't maintain anger as your predisposition. Don't look for reasons to be angry. And even if you have a legitimate reason to be upset, process your anger and get rid of it before it destroys you or someone else.

2) Don't view others through the lens of your anger.

If you do, you'll see them as beneath you and unworthy—either as *raca* (good-for-nothing) or as fools. If that is how you see others, you have most assuredly exalted yourself. And you don't have a clue about poverty of spirit, mourning, gentleness, righteousness, mercy, purity of heart or peacemaking. In fact, you may be setting yourself up to become a persecutor.

In the scenario Jesus describes, is there a reason for this person's anger? I propose that we will see from the context that, yes, there is a reason for this person to be upset, to feel cheated somehow, perhaps to experience anger. But even if there is a legitimate reason for being upset, there is no excuse for harboring that anger or using that anger as an excuse to look down on others.

3) Don't use anger as an excuse to tear down others.

Don't think it, and you won't say it. The scriptures make it abundantly clear that words are potentially deadly. Words can give life or death. Words either build up or tear down. And once deadly words have left your mouth, they don't go back in. They're out there, and you can't take them back. It's like shooting a gun. The bullets only go one way—out. Once you pull the trigger, you have set in motion a force that cannot be reversed. So, don't let your anger pull the trigger on your words.

B. Horizontal Reconciliation First, Then Vertical

The word *therefore* in verse 23 ties together what Jesus is about to say with what He has already said about anger and words. Because the spirit of anger and angry words are just as destructive spiritually as murder is physically—if you remember that your brother has something against you, you go . . .

Now, wait a minute. He's angry at me, and he is accountable before God for his anger—just as surely as if he had killed me. But I'm the one who needs to seek reconciliation with him, before I can seek reconciliation with God?

Why? In this context, I see two reasons.

First, that person is your brother or sister—a person who is precious to God—a person who should be precious to you. So, go. And if you can reconcile, you are helping to save that person from his own anger. The anger looks and sounds like it's trying to destroy you (and maybe it is). But in reality it is destroying him spiritually, and he is guilty before God. So you go for his sake.

Second, if you know that you have trespassed against him in some way, you go for your own sake.

C. Trespass and Obligation

This is one of those cases, in which an understanding of the Old Testament is essential. If we don't have a clue about Old Testament law, then we don't have a clue about why Jesus says what He does in verses 25 and 26. What Jesus describes is the trespass offering.

When a person did something that in some way cost or defrauded another person of their rights, property or welfare, that was considered a trespass. Something was stolen, damaged, destroyed—you borrowed something and did not return it—or you owed him money or goods—or your actions physically injured him or someone in his family. Even if your prize bull got in a fight with his prize bull—and your bull killed his bull . . . In some way, whether it was intentional or not, you or yours caused him to suffer a loss.

And if that is the case, there may be some basis for his anger. He may be angry, because you have violated his rights or you have not met your lawful obligations to him. So, of course, you must make things right with both him and God.

Here's how it works.

- You must offer a sacrifice to God, which was called the *trespass offering*.
- But you must also pay restitution to the person you have offended. Restitution is what we might call the fair market value, the replacement cost.
- And you must also pay propitiation, which means *satisfaction*. At the very least propitiation was an added 20% on top of the restitution price.

So, if restitution was \$100, propitiation would be an additional \$20. But in some cases, depending on the type of trespass, restitution and propitiation could be calculated at several times the cost of the loss. For example, if you stole a cow, you paid five head of cattle in return.

Thus, trespassing against your neighbor resulted in an expensive financial obligation. Restitution, propitiation, plus a sacrificial trespass offering to God to take care of the guilt involved, to cover the sin.

Those laws were meant to protect the rights, welfare and property of individual Israelites. And they also served to protect everyone from the anger that could result from such trespasses. Financial restitution and satisfaction resolved situations that could otherwise have easily escalated into angry and murderous conflicts.

What Jesus describes in Matthew 5 is someone who is guilty of some kind of trespass. He is obligated to pay restitution and propitiation. But he hasn't done that yet. And perhaps he doesn't intend to pay. Nonetheless, whether or not he

has any intention of making things right with his angry brother, against whom he has trespassed, he wants to make sure that he is right with God. So, he goes to offer his sacrificial trespass offering to God.

Jesus says, *Oh, no you don't. That is not the way of God's kingdom and His righteousness.* You can't get right with God if you are not right with your brother, against whom you have trespassed. You go to him first and be reconciled. Then come and present your trespass offering to God.

And if you still owe your brother restitution and propitiation, you work it out with him—while you are with him on the way to see the judge for an evaluation of what you owe him.

Notice, he is with you on the way. You are together. He's no longer angry enough to kill you. You are going to the judge together to work out the details. If you let him stay murderously angry, by trying to hide, deny, or avoid paying your obligation to him, then when you get to the judge, he is going to own you. He is not going to be your brother; he is going to be your master. You will be thrown into a debtor's prison—enslaved to pay what you owe.

Note well, that in this context Jesus is talking about trespasses or sins—things that God has clearly defined as wrong. He is not talking about our differences of opinion, personality clashes, differing world views or personal preferences. It is spiritually absurd to think that those things would cause anger, hard feelings or conflict among kingdom people. The ways in which we differ as people or the myriad of ways we might disagree **are not sins or trespasses**—even though we have a terrible tendency to use our differences and disagreements as an excuse to commit very real sins against each other.

IV. The Spirit of Reconciliation

Well, what about this person who has become the victim of a legitimate trespass? Someone has sinned against him. He has been hurt by a violation of God's will. Jesus has just held him accountable to deal with his anger in a way that is not sinful. And Jesus has just held the person who trespassed against him accountable to make things right.

So, is this offended party *off the hook*? Does he bear any responsibility to seek reconciliation? The context of Matthew also reveals the rest of the reconciliation equation.

Matthew 18

15 "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.

16 "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED.

17 "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Some of the ancient manuscripts also include the words *against you*. If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault in private. In other words, it's a private matter—between the two of you. But even if it's not a sin against you personally, it's still a private matter—between the two of you.

Notice, once again, that this is not a matter of personal differences or a disagreement on some disputable matter. God, who is our Lawgiver and Judge, is the only one who defines what is a sin or a trespass. And this context specifically addresses how to seek restoration and reconciliation in a matter that involves sin.

Therefore, the witnesses of which Jesus speaks are witnesses to sinful, unlawful behavior. Again, this is a command of the Old Testament law. One person's word was not sufficient to condemn another person. But the corroborating testimony of two or three eyewitnesses was sufficient to confirm a matter. And since the two or three you take with you are eyewitnesses to the sin—they are not just people who support your position in a personal disagreement.

So to tell the church—when there is not a matter of sin—what does that accomplish? It certainly does not accomplish anything spiritually good or of any worth in the kingdom of God. What can the church do except to shrug and say, "That's not sin. Therefore, the people you took with you are not witnesses. And you should not be bringing this matter to our attention."

V. Privacy, Trust, Confidentiality and Faithfulness

A. If You're Naming Names, Don't Try to Tell Me!

Now, if you came to me personally to express a concern about a specific brother or sister—or some problem that you are having with a brother or sister, here's what happens. As soon as I start to understand what you are trying to tell me, I may stop you, and ask, "Have you spoken to him about it?" If you tell me that, no, you have not talked with that person . . . then I will probably reply, "Then why are you telling me this? You need to talk with her first, and try to work it out between you."

Why? Because we really need to learn to talk with each other, instead of talking about each other. Talking about each other does not resolve anger. To the contrary, it provokes and escalates anger. Talking about each other does not result in reconciliation. It results in greater and greater offenses—which actually are quite sinful. Talking about each other is behavior that in a heartbeat becomes gossip or slander—escalating into factions and divisions—horribly sinful deeds of the flesh that we should have crucified—deeds of the flesh that are in diametrical opposition to the fruit of the Spirit.

Hopefully, you had a good mother or a teacher who taught you better than that. I bet you can fill in the blanks. My mother used to say, "If you can't anything good

about a person, _____ (don't say anything at all)_____." And the scriptures teach the same principle in profuse abundance.

B. Hypothetical Situations—No Names

If you came to me with a hypothetical situation—you're not naming names—but you are concerned about someone, and you do not know what to do—here's how I respond to those situations. Since you are not accusing someone you have not confronted—since you are not complaining about someone by name—I will listen and offer advice. Together we will ponder whether the other person's behavior is sinful—or whether it's just a personal thing that you need to work out between yourselves. If it is something that the two of you need to work out together, but you need help to do that—then both of you come back together.

C. Situations That Require Intervention

If you come to me in distress and tell me that you or someone is in danger, that's a different story. If you are in danger, the elders, other ministers and I will consult, intervene, and shelter you (if necessary). If you tell me that a minor child is in danger, I will intervene immediately. Been there, done that. When I directed a teen session of Bible camp, not all campers returned to their homes. Abused children do not stay in dangerous environments. Or if you tell me that someone is a danger to himself, together we will consider whether or not it is appropriate, and if so, how we might intervene.

D. Accusations Against the Elders?

But what if someone comes to me—or to you—to accuse the elders of the church? Apparently that was a problem in the early church. And Paul gave crystal clear instructions on this matter to Timothy, a servant of God's word in Ephesus.

I Timothy 5

19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

20 Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.

The principles are precisely the same as what Jesus revealed in Matthew. It's not a gripe session aimed at the elders over a matter of opinion. This is an issue of sin, something that God defines and judges as sinful. And if it *is* an accusation of sin, two or three witnesses to that sinful behavior must be presented to corroborate the accusation. If it's not an issue of sin—don't receive the accusation. Have nothing to do with it.

As long as the church is comprised of people, and as long as the church has leaders who are people—there will be disagreements. The most vulnerable people in the process of those disagreements are your elders and the ministers who serve you. When church leaders make decisions, they must consider everyone in the church,

not just you. You are included in the *everyone*. But their decisions must seek the good of all—what is best for the most.

When church leaders make a decision, you may not be privy to any more than a small fraction of the information they have available when they made the decision. In other words, most of the time you do not know what they know, about some situations. In fact, they would very much prefer that they did not know a great deal of what they know.

Moreover, based on the Scriptures we've examined this morning, a great deal of what they know (or what I know) is simply none of your business. It would be inappropriate—a violation of trust and confidentiality—and probably sinful—for church leaders to tell you, even in order to defend themselves. So, don't ask. Instead, expect them to be trustworthy.

Think about it. If you have been here for a while and I have shared in your life or the lives of your children, do you suppose I might know some things about you, about your marriage, about your children—maybe even some things about your children that you don't even know? How much of that would you like for me to share with anybody or everybody? Don't worry. It's not going to happen.

The same is true of your elders and the other ministers who serve you. There are things I do not tell the elders, and I sincerely hope there are things that they do not tell me. Spiritual leaders must be willing to fall on their swords before they would ever violate any confidence that you—or your family members—or your best friend—or anyone—has entrusted to any one of us. So don't ask. Better yet, understand that you really should not even want to know.

E. A Personal Example

Many years ago, a relentless assistant district attorney learned the hard way that wanting to know was not sufficient reason for asking. The young prosecutor may have been trying to earn his stripes. He knew that I had information that might prove his felony arson case. But he also knew that I had received that information from a member of the church who had revealed it to me in confidence.

I told the A.D.A., "Don't subpoena me to testify, because I will refuse. If you're going to make this case, you'll have to do it without me." He subpoenaed me, anyway. So I went to court, pondering the potential of being jailed for contempt.

As soon as the prosecutor called me to the stand, and I sat down, the judge ordered the bailiff to remove the jury. Then he ordered the prosecutor to approach the bench and proffer his questions for me, which included revealing the source of my information.

The judge turned to me, and asked, "Are you going to tell him what he wants to know?"

I replied, "No, Your Honor, I am not."

The judge turned back to the A.D.A., and said, "History has shown that men like this may be willing to be burned at the stake for their refusal to provide the kind of information you seek, for He serves a higher authority. His testimony would be prejudicial, and if you persist, I will dismiss the case before this court."

So, instead of going to jail, I was allowed to go home. I would do the same for you, as I did to keep the confidence that brother had placed in me. Would you do the same for one another? Would you do the same for me?

You should expect that same level of trust, and not just from the elders and ministers of your church family. You should also expect it of yourself and your brothers and sisters in Christ. And they have a right to expect it of you. We should all be trustworthy—faithful in all of our relationships within God's family.

Faithful not to use anger as an excuse to tear each other down. Faithful to talk with each other, not about each other.

If we know we have sinned against a brother or sister, faithful to go to that person to seek reconciliation. Faithful to talk with each other, not about each other.

If a brother or sister has sinned against us, faithful to go to that person to seek restoration. Faithful to talk with each other, not about each other.

If a brother or sister has trusted us with private information, faithful to keep that confidence. Faithful not to speak.

If a brother or sister has entrusted their private life to someone else—or if spiritual leaders are involved in the lives of others—faithful to mind our own business. Faithful not to ask. Faithful not to want to know. Faithful not to judge.

When a brother or sister does ask—or does tell—or if a brother or sister is talking about someone in way that may be rumor, innuendo, gossip, slander, or not true—

- Faithful not to listen.
- Faithful not to participate.
- Faithful not even to appear to imply our consent through timid silence.
- Faithful to ask that brother or sister not to speak in that way.
- Faithful to gently correct—or if necessary boldly rebuke.
- Faithful to pull that brother or sister back from the brink of their own verbal sins against other members of God's family—and thereby faithful to stop the escalation of anger, hurt feelings and fractured relationships.
- Faithful to stop any words that are untrue, unfair, unjust, or unproven.
- Faithful to stop any words that may be deceptive, disgraceful, distrusting, or divisive . . . for such are deeds of the flesh, not fruits of the Spirit.

- Faithful to stop any words that contribute more to the cause of Satan than to the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Let's talk with each other, not about each other. Talk with each other, not about each other. Talk with each other, not about each other.

For if we claim to be faithful to Christ—but we don't even try to be faithful to each other—we are only pretenders. If we claim to love God—but we do not love one another—we do not have a clue about God or love. If we claim to be the people of God's kingdom—but our hearts and words are not ruled by God—then it should not surprise us that God rules little else in our lives. And if we claim to be saved by the cross—but we do not live the cross—and relate from the cross—and put ourselves on a cross for each other—then we have not been transformed by the cross.