

YOU HAVE HEARD...[PART I]

Matthew 5:21-26

Today we are going to start working through today's and next Sunday's Gospel readings. These two readings actually form one section in Jesus' sermon on the mount. Each sub-section begins with the phrase *You have heard that it was said...*

But to begin with we need to hear again Jesus' introduction to this section:

¹⁷*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ...* ²⁰*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. [Matthew 5:17-20, TNIV]*

In verses 21 to 48 Jesus gives examples of what he means.

Today we will only have time to deal with Murder. We will continue with the rest next Sunday.

²¹*“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.’* ²²*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 Sanhedrin. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. [TNIV]*

What Jesus does is quote the command from the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments), but also includes something of the teaching of *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law*. So here Jesus says *You shall not murder* – one of the Ten Commandments, and adds *anyone who murders will be subject to judgment* – the teaching of the Pharisees and scribes.

And then he teaches in the following verses how the disciples' keeping of the law is to surpass all this.

In essence Jesus is going from teaching about behaviour as righteousness to what is happening in the heart as righteousness. Later Jesus will teach this quite plainly:

¹⁶*“Are you still so dull?” Jesus asked them. ¹⁷“Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? ¹⁸But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these defile you. [Matthew 15:16-18, TNIV]*

So when Jesus teaches about murder, he does not simply talk about taking someone's life. He gets to the heart of the matter.

First, anger – Anger that leads to lashing out. All human anger is tainted by sin. No matter if we like to claim we were justified in being angry, there is always a self-centred sinful twist to it. Which means we can never be sure our motives are entirely pure.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God [Matt 5:8], Jesus taught. If that's the case, will any of us see God?!

Worse still is to call a brother or sister 'Raca'.

Raca means something like 'idiot' 'dingbat', 'dunderhead'. 'air head'. It's a straight-out insult.

As well, brother or sister here most likely means fellow disciple. This is picking up from what Jesus said only a few moments before: *In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven* [Matthew 5:16, TNIV] *your Father in heaven*

The trouble with insults is that they also insult the God who created that person being called 'Raca', instead of glorifying him.

But even more, in the Christian fellowship, to call a sister or brother in the faith 'Raca' (or anything similar, eg, 'pew warmer') actually indicates one's own failure to and encourage and nurture that person in the Christian faith.

So raca indicates a Christian fellowship that is fractured in its relationship with God and between its members. In short, discipleship is 'murdered'.

Finally, 'fool'.

One might think that this is less serious than 'raca'. But the term 'fool' in the Bible has a loaded meaning:

Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good [Psalm 14:1, TNIV].

So to say someone is a fool is to say that they are dead to God. A form of murder far worse than physical murder.

But Jesus' teaching on murder doesn't stop there.

To drive home that it is first of all essentially about the nature of one's relationship with God and then with one's 'neighbour', he then says:

²³*"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.*

The relationship with God is reflected in the relationship with one's fellow disciple.

The setting here is still Jewish: the offering at the huge altar at the temple in Jerusalem.

But the essential truth is picked up by St Paul, and applied to the Christian fellowship of mostly non-Jewish background. This comes out in 1 Corinthians Chapters 10 and 11. Believers must not approach the Eucharist when they are harboring division and especially bitterness and a competitive, comparing spirit over against their fellow communicants. To do so invites God's judgment.

In many of our worship orders we have the Greeting ("The Lord be with you." "And also with you.") just before Communion. Some orders, like "Sing the Feast" and "Worship Today" only have the Greeting near the beginning of the service.

The Greeting is actually an ancient and powerful element in the liturgy. Originally it was the "passing of the peace" (as in the Worship Today order), and occurred just before Holy Communion.

It is meant to be a meaningful opportunity for all in the congregation to acknowledge that the reconciliation Jesus brought about in his death and resurrection must remove bitter divisions between those who commune together.¹ Imagine, then, what spirit would rule in a congregation if the passing of the peace was done the way it was meant to be done: a weekly reconciliation between disciples!

So instead of murder, Jesus teaches us to choose life!

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live [Deuteronomy 30:19, TNIV]

The last thing Jesus has to say on murder is

²⁵ "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. ²⁶ Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

It strikes me that when Christians take each other to court, not only is their relationship murdered, but so too is the Gospel. If the non-believing world sees disciples at logger-heads with each other, what does that mean for the teaching that they say they believe in!

^{6a} *Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? [James 2:6-7, TNIV]*

¹ From, Gibbs, J. A. (2006). *Matthew 1:1-11:1* (284). St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House. See the discussion in Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "An Exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34," *CJ* 21 (1995): 148-63, especially 161-62.

Anyway, the emphasis in this last bit about murder is in the phrase , *you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.*

We should not read this as if it meant one could somehow pay the last penny, and so get out of prison. The whole point is that one has no chance of ever getting out because there is no way one could pay the debt down to the last penny.

This makes more sense when we realize the word for penny is quadrans, the second smallest coin in Roman currency at that time. 1/40th of a denarius (denarius = a day's wage for a labourer.)

It may seem odd, but not all wrongs are of equal seriousness *But each of you is tempted when you are dragged away by your own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. [James 1:14-15, TNIV]*

Anger, for example, is not as serious as the 'fully grown' sin of murder. And both need to be dealt with differently.

Anger is the 'quadrans'. Murder is the '10000 talents'.

How much fuss would you make over \$2 owed to you if you had wealth of \$6,000,000,000?

The truth is, we are always clocking up debts far greater than a quadrans' worth; and have no ability to get rid of our debt down to the last penny.

So Jesus' teaching to forgive is really about choosing life rather than death.

God forgave us in Christ's death. Life, then, is now open for us.

And Christ is teaching us to live the same way towards each other.

We are murders – anger, raca, and fool; unreconciled; and in conflict.

Yet God gives us new life in Jesus, received by faith, and then calls us to live in that life, like a light shining on a hill: *You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden [Matthew 5:14, TNIV].*

Amen.

To be continued...