

“How to Love!”

Matthew 5:21-30 & Philippians 4:8-9

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What does it mean to love? In this series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, we have been looking at Jesus' character sketch of the kind of people whose lives reflect God's new world, also known as the kingdom of God. The Beatitudes give us a picture of the internal character that is blessed, whole and joyful. Jesus' teaching about God's grace that enables us to be salt and light describes our outward focus to bring out the God flavors and God colors. But how can we know if we are living right? What does the life of God's world look like in practical terms? In this next section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gets specific regarding how to love.

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:21-22 NRSV** “**You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.**”

Failure to love, sin, hurts ourselves. Whenever you are angry, you are filling your days with anguish, you are making your life a living hell.

Amy Oden said, “Jesus shifts our attention from particular behaviors we must avoid to particular interior orientations we must cultivate. Kingdom righteousness saturates our whole lives, and promises much more, too. It is the way of blessedness.”

Love starts with your thoughts, purging your thoughts of every angry, negative, hurtful, diminishing thought and replacing them with pure, loving thoughts. Immanuel Kant said, “In law a person is guilty when they violate the rights of others. In ethics they are guilty if they think of doing so.”

Jesus is challenging us to a deeper understanding of what it means to love. Righteousness means obedience to the will of God from the innermost being—in which actions are rooted in justice and concern for others, not just about fulfilling the outward forms of the law. Obedience must become internal if it is to bring genuine love which yields abundant life for everyone. Jesus has already proclaimed that he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. Jesus instructs us to do much more than fulfill the letter of the law. We are to fulfill the spirit and intention of the law.

Anger is the underlying cause of physical violence. We are called to do much more than doing no physical harm, we are to not say an angry word, we are to not think an angry thought. Angry words and thoughts are a kind of character assassination, a socially acceptable violence that kills love.

The way of the Kingdom of God means that the way we relate to everyone changes. Not just our friends, but also those we despise and those who can't stand us. It is not easy to love the unlovely. When we are attacked, we attack back; when we are threatened, we threaten. Our natural posture is defensiveness. Jesus lumps all defensiveness under the same rubric, to be angry is the same as murder. Often when one gets angry they have a crazy conversation in their mind. They said this, I will say that, they will respond thus, I will have that response, etc. Usually in one's mind the battle is won, but in the process the other person is humiliated, put down, and dehumanized. In one's mind they are murdered. Jesus says that the Christian life does not consist of these mental battles. Instead we are to make peace in every way for, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Retaliation is not an aspect of Christian existence, rather we are to love. Angry thoughts, defensiveness, retaliation are all symptoms of limited forgiveness. God is grace. We are to be gracious. There are no limits to God's forgiveness. We are to have no limits on our forgiveness.

Susanna Metz said, “Jesus says not even to call one another “you fool.” That's nothing in comparison to what we call each other today—face to face as well as behind each other's back. But Jesus seems very serious about this kind of language. “You will be liable to the hell of fire ... ” Really? Oh, come on. Maybe we just don't want to think about the hurt and tearing apart of relationships that happen when we use our precious gift

of language as a weapon. We have a choice. Will we choose life-giving words or life-destroying words? Our language is one of our most powerful gifts and everyone has access to that power. "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God."

There is righteous anger that seeks to right wrongs. Righteous anger is fueled by love for all people. Righteous anger is never aimed at a person or group of people, rather it is aimed at an action. This is really important; righteous anger is aimed at an action, never the person. Labels diminish. Avoid thoughts such as all democrats are liberal, all republicans are conservative which divide people into sides that must be angry at each other. Focus on the issue. Love the person. Which statement is hateful, hurtful anger and which is righteous anger? You evil, liberal, democratic, tree hugger, you are killing jobs, you are destroying my family. Or, my family and friends lost their jobs when the environmental regulations were enforced. How can we care for the trees and maintain meaningful employment for my family and friends?

Learning to turn your anger into love is important in all relationships. It involves active listening, so you understand the other person's perspective. It involves being assertive about your feelings right away so anger does not build. It involves using I statements to own your feelings, perspective, and needs, instead of you statements that blame. It involves specifically naming the hurtful action. Which would you rather hear? You are an ungrateful person. I felt sad when you did not say thank you for the projects I completed today.

About fifteen years ago, after meditating on the Sermon on the Mount, I resolved to rid my speech and thoughts of the word, "hate". I would say things like, "I hate beets" or think "I hate shopping". To end the use of hate, I acknowledge my perspective and think a grateful thought. I dislike beets. Beets are not for me, yet other people enjoy beets. I am grateful for the gift of taste, that everyone has a favorite food and I can choose what to eat. I do not enjoy shopping; yet, I love being with people who do enjoying shopping. I am grateful that I can shop with others. I am grateful that I have the money to go shopping. After a few years, I have discovered whenever the word "hate" enters my mind or comes out in my speech, I am immediately aware which enables me to wrestle with that hate before it grows. Avoiding hate makes me more whole and joyful. This whole process has made me sensitive to whenever anyone says the word hate. It has been a long journey to rid my thoughts of hate. It is just one step on my quest to be more loving.

Eugene Peterson wrote, "Anger is a useful diagnostic tool. When anger erupts in us, it is a signal that something is wrong. Something isn't working right. There is evil or incompetence or stupidity lurking about. Anger is our sixth sense for sniffing out wrong in the neighborhood. What anger fails to do, though, is tell us whether the wrong is outside us or inside us. We usually begin by assuming that the wrong is outside us -- our spouse or our child or our God has done something wrong, and we are angry. That is what Jonah did, and he quarreled with God. But when we track the anger carefully, we often find it leads to a wrong within us -- wrong information, inadequate understanding, an underdeveloped heart."

Hate, negativity, and anger all murder our self and murders others. Anger dehumanizes ourselves and dehumanizes others. Every time we decide to allow anger to smolder inside of us, we become less than human, less than the person God created us to be. Instead of merely avoiding murder, avoiding anger, we are to embrace reconciliation that leads to community.

Jesus continues. **Matthew 5:23-26 NRSV So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."**

You cannot love God when you devalue another person whom God has created. Therefore, we must seek reconciliation before our love can be accepted by our holy, loving God. Jesus is recalling the emphasis of the prophets on compassion, mercy, and right living. One's gift, that is love, is accepted by God when we repent over the ways we have injured others and ourselves, when we turn from anger to love. You cannot love God when you devalue another person.

Getting even with that person that has wronged you. Beating that person that you cannot stand. Winning an argument with the person that has slighted you in reality, or in your fantasies, diminishes yourself and others. Seeking revenge against terrorists destroys love. Angry talk about how we have been hurt fuels hate, division, and violence. Anger destroys peace. Anger would destroy our future if it were not for God's grace constantly being imputed into our lives. Escalating violent revenge has murdered billions. The maxim "an eye for an eye" is an attempt to break the cycle by declaring you can only take an eye from a person that has taken your eye; you cannot kill their family. Jesus takes it much further. Instead of any form of revenge, even in your mind, there is to be reconciliation, grace, compassion, and peace. Abraham Lincoln advised that the best way to destroy your enemy is to turn them into your friend. Gandhi said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." You cannot love God when you devalue another person. Anger never succeeds in breaking the cycle of violence. Only love will make us all whole, blessed and joyful. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Jesus continues. **Matthew 5:27-28 NRSV "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."**

Lust dehumanizes another into an object that one uses for their own pleasure. Lust is selfish. Lust tries to control another. Lust creates an imbalance in power. All human relationships are to be based on mutual respect. Lust drives a couple apart. Love builds the other up bringing a couple together as one.

Jesus continues, **Matthew 5:29-30 NRSV "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."**

Jesus commands us to remove anything from our life that causes us to falter in love. We must purge our feelings and thoughts of all anger and lust to fully love. We must stop thinking and doing that which harms us and others. We need to get rid of old destructive behaviors, habits, and thoughts before they destroy us.

If you want to be healthy, ... stop doing those things that harm you. If you want harmony in your life, ... stop doing those things that cause discord. If you want peace in the world, ... stop doing those things that lead to fighting. If you want a closer relationship with your children, ... stop doing those things that build up walls between you. If you want to rekindle the romance in your marriage, ... stop doing those things that create boredom. If you want to live in a close-knit, caring community, ... stop hiding behind your front door. If you want a spiritual life that fills you up, ... stop pouring all your energies everywhere but toward God. You can have a renewed marriage, a renewed body, a renewed attitude, a renewed spirit, a renewed career, a renewed community, a renewed world, but only by stopping the old destructive, hurtful behaviors and negative thinking you have kept recycling for years. The changes we want to come about in our lives will not happen just by wishing them to be so. We must cut ourselves off from our old attitudes, throw them away, and replace them with loving attitudes.

Albert Bernstein and Sydney Craft Rozen identify ten mental obstacles that we need to cut out of our thoughts. "Denial: I don't see the problem so it isn't there. Blind Spots and Shortcuts: What I don't like can't be important. Self-Interest: Always looking out for Number One. Mind Reading: People should know what I want without being told. Blame: If something goes wrong, it has to be somebody's fault. Being Nice: Avoid conflict at all cost. Perfection: If it's not perfect, it's nothing. Fairness: I don't need to negotiate for what I want; I just want fairness. Excuses: There's always a good reason why I don't follow the rules everyone else works by. Being Right: There's a right way and a wrong way; my way is right."

Gregory Jones wrote, "Isn't it interesting that when we are talking about a ballet dancer, or, if you prefer, Michael Jordan on the basketball court ... we describe them as being graceful—full of grace. Yet anybody who has ever undertaken the craft of ballet or piano or basketball knows how much work day by day by day goes into the cultivation of that gracefulness. In this sense, gracefulness is not simply a process of sitting back and waiting. Rather, through the activity of daily habits people are prepared to move gracefully, in a way

that transcends the day-to-day preparation. It becomes so natural that the graceful performer doesn't have to think it through. ... The gracefulness develops over time so that eventually the steps come together in a powerfully new way, a performance. That happens only through daily obligation."

The Apostle Paul wrote, **Philippians 4:8-9 NRSV** "**Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.**" Love yourself. Love others. Love God. Amen