



# THE HEAVINESS OF HATRED

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Catalog No. 1088

Matthew 5:21-26

Tenth Message

Gary Vanderet

February 23, 1997

Some Christians seem to try too hard to be good. They're upright, but they're uptight. For such, goodness is a stern, demanding business. They're chaste, honest, sober, respectable, Bible-toting, churchgoing, hymn-singing people, but everything seems out of phase. As William James said, "Their faith exists as a dull habit." They have the appearance of righteousness, with its self-imposed worship, obvious humility, and harsh treatment of their bodies, but they lack the genuine love that springs from having contact with God.

True goodness is not found in doing extraordinary things, it is in doing ordinary things in an extraordinary way. Pascal said, "The strengths of a man's virtue must not be measured by his efforts, but by his ordinary life." True goodness is not so much a matter of overt religious behavior as it is exhibiting a gracious, winsome spirit in everything one does.

Jesus was inclined to be stern with those who wore their religion on their sleeves. As we learned in our last study in the Sermon on the Mount, creeds, rites, rituals, and edicts can never modify behavior. Authentic goodness is much more subtle. Here is how Howard Butt put it: "It is not a way of doing special things; it is a special way of doing everything."

In the next few weeks, we will be exploring what really goes on beneath the surface in people. That fact that someone attends church and sings in the choir is not a measure of his or her spirituality. The absence of these things may indicate a problem, but their presence is no guarantee of anything.

Consider the quality of your relationships. How do you impact others? How do others impact you? Make it a concern of your ministry to encourage people to think through how they are perceived by others.

The purpose of the Scriptures, Jesus says, is to produce in us a love for others. Love, therefore, is the distinguishing mark of citizens of the kingdom of heaven. If we don't love people, then we have missed the entire point of the Scriptures. That is what Paul says in 1 Timothy: "The goal of our instruction is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." Bible study ought to make us more loving, not smarter or better able to produce eschatological charts or forecast what is going to happen next. Theology is important, but the point of studying Scripture is not to get our theology correct. As the hymn puts it, "beyond the sacred page, we see you, Lord." The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and become conformed to the image of his Son.

Paul warned Timothy in his second letter to "flee youthful lusts." The apostle was not talking about sexual lust, but about the tendency of young men to argue and debate endlessly over issues and never come to any conclusions.

If that is how we act, the Word of God will never have its intended effect on us.

The remaining verses of Matthew 5 set out a number of examples of this greater, or rather, deeper, righteousness. In our last study, we saw that Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because, being a righteousness of the heart, it is deeper. The Pharisees were content with an external and formal obedience, a rigid conformity to the letter of the Law, but Jesus declares that God's demands are far more radical than that. The righteousness that is pleasing to him is an inward righteousness of mind and motive, for "the Lord looks on the heart."

What follows in the rest of chapter 5 is Jesus' unfolding of the Law to show its original intent. The text comprises six parallel paragraphs, each of which is introduced by the same formula of words: "You have that it was said...But I say to you." As we have already noted, Jesus is not inaugurating a new law, nor is he contradicting the Law of Moses. What he is doing is taking well known Old Testament passages and expounding upon their original intent. He is not contradicting the Scriptures, but tradition; not God's Word, but the false interpretation of which the Scribes and Pharisees were guilty. In each case, these religious men of Jesus' day were attempting to reduce the challenge of the divine Law to suit their convenience, either by restricting what it commanded or extending what it permitted. They were tampering with the Law to make it less exacting. But in his discourse, Jesus plumbs the deeper level of the Law to show God's original intent.

Jesus begins with the Ten Commandments, the most succinct statement of the will of God, because that is the place where any Jew would begin in a discussion of the Law. And he begins in the middle of the Ten Commandments, with the second table of the Law, which deal with personal relationships, because that is where we see how love operates. We pick up his words at verse 21 of Matthew 5. He starts with the sixth commandment, the prohibition against murder. Jesus is a good teacher. He first quotes the text, in v 21; then he interprets it, in v 22; finally, he applies it, in vv 23-26:

**"You have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not commit murder' [Here he is quoting Exodus 13:20] and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, 'Raca,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the hell of fire. (Matt 5:21-22, NASB)**

Jesus says that the Old Testament prohibits murder, but the intent of that law is to protect one's brother from hos-

tility. Hostility can be revealed in ways other than murder. God still has to protect my brother from my anger, because while I may not commit murder, I can show my dislike for him in other ways. Here is a brother who is created in the image of God, and while my behavior toward him in terms of the Law may be absolutely correct (I have never laid a hand on him; I have never tried to take his life), yet I can still miss the intent of the Law, because God wants me to be reconciled with him.

God wants us to deal with our hostility on other levels, too, hostility that is revealed by anger and resentment, and by the vocabulary we use towards someone who has treated us unjustly. *Raca* is a derisive Aramaic term meaning empty headed, which is an insult to a person's intelligence. At times we throw out terms like nitwit, blockhead, numbskull, bonehead, lame brain, words that may appear innocent, and often they are, but they indicate the intent of our heart. The word translated "fool" is the Greek term from which we get our word "moron." Jesus says if I call my brother a loser, and mean what I say, then I have missed the intent of the Law. A. B. Bruce probably preserves the major difference between the words in this statement: "*Raca* expresses contempt for a man's head = you stupid!; *more* expresses contempt for his heart and character = you scoundrel!"

These seemingly innocent terms reveal the intent of our hearts. If we say that we have never murdered anyone, and that we have no intention of doing so, and yet there are a number of people whom we don't like and are resentful of, and we show it by the terms we use toward them, then we are guilty of breaking the Law.

Jesus is saying that we need to deal with the intent of our hearts.

Angry thoughts and insulting words may never lead to the ultimate act of murder, yet they are tantamount to murder in God's sight. It was the apostle John who wrote: "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer." Anger and insults are ugly symptoms of a desire to get rid of someone who stands in our way. Our thoughts, looks and words all indicate that, as we sometimes dare to say, we "wish so and so were dead." Such an evil wish is a breach of the sixth commandment. It renders the guilty person liable to the very penalties to which an actual murderer exposes himself, not in each case literally, as would be the case in a human law court, but before the bar of God.

Jesus is saying that we really need to deal with the intent of our hearts. The Law is given to teach us how to love our brethren. As children we chanted, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." But that's a lie. Words hurt deeply. Words rip and tear; they wound and hurt and cause irreparable pain and harm. As long as we permit anger to reside within, one early Christian wrote, "she continues to be the fruitful mother of many unhappy children."

Jesus then proceeds to give practical application of the principles he has just outlined. The point he makes is that if anger and insult are so serious and dangerous, then we must avoid them like the plague and take action as speedily as possible. He offers two illustrations: going to the temple to offer sacrifice to God (23-24); and going to court to answer the charges of an accuser (25-26).

**"If therefore you are presenting your offering at the al-**

**tar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar, and go your way; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, in order that your opponent may not deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you shall not come out of there, until you have paid up the last cent. (5:23-26)**

Jesus' illustration is expressed in the cultural terms of his own day, in which the temple still stood while its sacrifices were being offered. Perhaps it would be legitimate to render his illustrations in more modern terms:

If you are in church, in the middle of a service, and you suddenly remember that your brother has a grievance against you, leave church at once and put it right. Do not wait until the service has ended. Seek out your brother and ask his forgiveness. First go, then come. First go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your worship to God.

Second, if you have an unpaid debt, and your creditor takes you to court to get his money back, come to terms with him quickly. Come to a settlement out of court. If you are on your way to court, pay your debt. Otherwise, once you reach the court, it will be too late. Your accuser will sue you before the judge and you will be handed over to the police and taken to jail, where you will remain until you have paid the last penny. Payment before imprisonment makes much more sense.

The illustrations are quite different: one is taken from church, the other from the law court. One concerns a brother (23), the other an enemy (25). But in both cases the situation is the same (somebody has a grievance against us), and the basic lesson is the same (the necessity for immediate, urgent action). In the very act of worship, if we remember the grievance, we are to break off our worship and go and set matters right. In the very act of going to court, on our way there, we are to settle our debt.

Jesus is assuming here that we have wronged our brother and our brother has something against us. Maybe he has wronged us, too. But in most of these conflicts, we will find it to be the case that we have wronged him as well. Maybe he initiated the action; he got under our skin and we reacted. But the point is, we are at fault, too. We have offended our brother, and he has something against us.

Jesus says if you come to the altar and your brother has something against you, go and be reconciled to him. In other words, your service to God is meaningless if you harbor animosity toward a brother or he harbors animosity toward you. You can teach a Sunday School class or sing in the choir, but if you are not reconciled to your brother, you have missed the whole point. You need to go to him and, as much as it depends on you, effect reconciliation. Leave your gift, because God is not interested in your service as long as you have a problem with your brother.

The second application deals with an adversary who has something against you. Here Jesus is speaking in legal terms. The first illustration is taken from life, a situation in which we have wronged a brother and he is upset with us and we need to be reconciled. Here, we have done some-

thing illegal and someone has a legal case against us. Jesus says, don't wait until the matter is settled in court. Go now, and settle accounts. If you don't, then you deserve to go to jail.

Yet how seldom we heed Christ's call for immediacy of action. If murder is a terrible crime, malicious anger and insult are terrible also. And so is every deed, word, look or thought by which we hurt or offend a fellow human being. We need to be more sensitive about these evils. We must never allow an estrangement to remain, still less to grow. We must not delay putting it right. We must not allow the sun to set on our anger. Immediately, as soon as we are conscious of a broken relationship, we must take the initiative to mend it, apologize for the grievance we have caused, pay the debt we have left unpaid, and make amends.

This is a good time for self examination. We need to keep short accounts. Maybe we need to telephone someone this afternoon and apologize for something we have done. That is what love does: it seeks reconciliation.

Following the service last Sunday, a good friend told me that during the communion time earlier this month, God spoke to him concerning a strained relationship he had with a brother. He hadn't even thought much about it until the Lord brought it to his mind. So he called this man and they spent a couple of hours together talking, listening, confessing, and even shedding some tears, reconciling with each other. He said that the man's wife told him afterwards how much that time had meant to her husband. She said he hadn't taken communion in church since they had fallen out.

Is there anyone whom you have something against? Or does someone have something against you? Perhaps you have not even expressed bitterness in words, yet you have harbored it in your heart. You need to correct that.

These then are the extremely practical instructions which Jesus draws out as the logical implications of the sixth commandment. We must take every possible positive step to live in peace and love with all men.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus lists thirteen evil things that flow out of the heart: "For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." It is significant that all but the last two are sins against persons. Jesus chose that list deliberately. In their concentration on the external and the ceremonial, the Pharisees were as neglectful of love as they were of true morality. Their painstaking concern for ritual niceties was accompanied by a bitter, scornful, critical attitude.

Jesus taught that people matter more than things. On two occasions, he quoted Hosea 6:6: "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." In other words, according to God's reckoning, compassion matters more than ceremonial rules and regulations; people matter more than things.

That is why Jesus continued to run into conflict with the Pharisees over issues such as Sabbath-breaking and fraternizing with sinners. In both cases, he broke their rules, be-

cause for him, love was the preeminent virtue. He cared deeply about the hungry, the sick and the sinful, and in order to serve their needs he was prepared to infringe upon the traditions of the Pharisees.

Has religion become so important for you that you have lost contact with the God who loves you? I believe that the main cause of problems in marriage and in the Body of Christ is unresolved, unconfessed anger. You cannot love your mate until you first love life, and you cannot begin to love life until you come into a relationship with the loving God who forgives you, cleanses you and fills you with his love.

As we conclude this morning, perhaps you would want to ask some hard questions of yourself. All of us have some unresolved anger in us, but the key is to reduce it to as low a level as possible. The following statements may help you determine the amount of unresolved anger in your life.

I tend to have difficulty remaining close to people. Others have even said that I am cold.

I tend to be judgmental and overly critical of people.

I have a general inability to see my own shortcomings.

I often fail to see that my words or actions hurt the feelings of others.

I think one or both of my parents drank too much alcohol.

I tend to be over-controlling of my mate, my children, or friends.

My parents abused me.

I have a hard time forgiving others when they hurt or frustrate me.

I often overreact to what others say or do to me.

I feel I'm motivated far too often by fear of failure.

I frequently think that I've been cheated out of important areas of life.

I get into fights with others that often result in physical aggression, such as throwing things, slapping, or hitting.

I don't really trust anyone other than myself.

Taking an honest look at our relationships is hard, but it is a very rewarding exercise. Of course, we all fail. But no failure is final. God is a God of infinite chances. And the fruit of a healed relationship is eternal. Remember Jesus' words to his disciples: "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

© 1997 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino