

Mad as Hell

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

www.knollwood.org

1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-26

February 16, 2020

A weary truck driver stopped at a truck stop to grab a quick bite. He had just begun to enjoy his meal when a gang of roughnecks roared into the parking lot on motorcycles. A moment later, they noisily entered the diner, looked around, and made a beeline to the table where the lone trucker sat.

The biggest of the bunch hissed, "Beat it, trucker boy. We want this table."

"But I'm not finished," said the trucker.

"Oh yes you are," said one of the motorcyclists who picked up a glass of water and poured it over the trucker's dinner. "Looks like you're finished to me. Now get out of here before we throw you out." At that, the trucker picked up his cap and quietly walked to the door.

The four thugs laughed it up as they squeezed into the trucker's booth. A moment later, a waitress came over to clean the table and take their order. Nodding at where the trucker had sat, the gang leader said to her, "He wasn't much of a man, was he?"

Peering out the diner window, the waitress answered: "Not much of a truck driver either. Looks like he just ran over four motorcycles."

Jesus taught that unrestrained anger is a highly destructive force. Sometimes such anger brings catastrophic consequences to others, and always, such anger has a corrosive

effect on ourselves. So Jesus tees off his teaching in the Sermon on his Mount by offering a crash course in anger management.

Jesus begins by deepening the meaning of the 10 Commandments' prohibition against murder to include a killing rage. "You have heard that it was said in . . . 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."

Here Jesus grounds the act of murder in the escalating hostility and violence that preceded it. As he does throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus focuses not just on behavior, but on the warped, twisted attitudes from which destructive behavior springs.

Granted, few people commit actual murder. But all of us can remember a time when we struck out at another person with killing force in the insults we leveled, the hateful words we spoke, or the love we withheld.

Sometimes, our weapon of choice is a stony silence where we act as though the other person is dead to us. When our patience wears thin, some of us have lashed out at our own children with a vengeance that surprised them and shamed us. As Andrew Peterson sings in his folk ballad, *I Want to Say I'm Sorry*,

Well, I want to say I'm sorry but I don't know how.
But I'm sorry, I'm so sorry now.
I said some words to you I wish I never said.
I know words can kill 'cause something's dead.

And now my heart is like a catacomb, and I'm praying we can find a way to raise these bones again, oh, again.

None of this is to suggest that vicious, unrestrained anger is as bad as murder. Clearly, it is not. But Jesus insists we start grappling with what's going on in ourselves long before our anger erupts and brings hurt and harm to others.

The other night, Bambi and I saw the new Matt Damon flick, *Ford vs. Ferrari*. It's the story of how Ford Motors developed the GT-40 race car that finally defeated Ferrari in the grueling, 24-hour race at Le Mans.

A recurring theme in the story is the danger of exceeding 7,000 RPMs in a racing engine, which can blow out the engine. That's why on the tachometer on the Ford GT-40, 7,000 RPMs is marked in red. A driver pushes into the red zone on that at great peril to both the car and himself.

In Jesus' teaching on anger, he marks the tachometer of rising emotion with red: being angry with a brother or sister, insulting that person, then writing them off altogether. Taking that last step--treating another person as a fool no longer worthy of our love or care--is entering the red zone, or as Jesus says it, "Being liable to the hell of fire." This is not so much a commentary on the *life-to-come* as it is a painful truth about the *person we become* when harboring hate and rage. Consumed by a red-hot fire of resentment and bitterness, we are reduced to a scarred, shrunken shell of the disciple of Jesus we are called to be. As Frederick Buechner writes about anger in his whimsical little volume, *Wishful Thinking*,

Of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, . . . to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back in many ways it is a feast fit for a king.

The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Jesus' teaching about anger in Matthew 5 applies to all kinds of anger. But as some will quickly recognize, when struggling to apply this teaching to your unique circumstances, there are different kinds of anger. There is the justified anger against injustice that fuels the need for change. There is the rush of anger that rises unbidden when a person in power mistreats someone we love. There is the seething anger an abused wife must tap if she is to ever escape the tyranny of her husband.

Jesus himself was white-hot with fury as he threw the money changers from the temple. And when Jesus encountered religious leaders who opposed his healing a man with a crippled hand on the sabbath, Mark's gospel says, "He looked around at them *with anger*; he grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.' He stretched it out, and his hand was restored." (Mark 3:5).

But in truth, much and probably most of the anger in our lives is not of this high and holy variety. Rather, it is the kind of anger that arises when we don't get our way. Paul calls this type of anger a "sin of the flesh," by which he means not our bodily existence, but the self-centered life. "For you are still of the *flesh*," he writes the Corinthians, "for as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to merely human inclinations?" (1 Cor. 3:3). Such petty conflict--when folks act like spoiled children instead of the children of God they are--discredits the church's witness and makes the gospel sound like the worthless wares of a snake oil salesman.

And as some of you know who grew up in conflict-ridden churches, this was not just a problem long ago in the church at Corinth; this sort of behavior is still with us today. It's the reason my daddy resigned as a deacon, the one and only time he served. He was shocked and dismayed at the rancor and hostility he saw in the so-called leaders of the church at deacons meetings that ground long into the night, including one when the pastor was invited to step outside and settle the matter with fists!

"So if you're in a dispute with someone in the work of my kingdom," says Jesus, "drop everything else and see what you can do to make it right. Because until you do, that ugly spat is going to disrupt, not just your relationship with your brother or sister, but with God."

Last spring, after several days of driving rain, I awoke at two in the morning to the sound of "Tick . . . Tick . . . Tick." I strained to hear and to figure out what was going on. When I got up

to see, I stepped into a pool of water by my bedside. That's when I discovered the water was dripping from the ceiling!

I rushed upstairs found a path of water in the attic, about the width of a sidewalk, running from a leak in the roof to that leaky spot in my bedroom ceiling. Outside, torrential rains were pouring down, so I got some buckets under the leak, mopped up the water, and went to bed planning to call a roofer in the morning.

A couple of hours later, I awoke to hear the tick, tick, tick once again and then stepped into another pool of water. I ran back upstairs and found the leak had grown larger, recreating the whole watery mess. So at first light, I called my friend, Tim Pruitt, who came over and determined the problem was likely a faulty gutter, perched high on my steep roof. I then called my gutter guy who scampered up the roof and plucked a tennis ball from the gutter. When he did, a huge torrent of water was released and came gushing down the downspout.

It turned out all that water in my attic and then in my bedroom was due to a small, yellow tennis ball stuck in the gutter.

As to how a tennis ball got in a gutter, three stories high, I was completely baffled. Until my grandson, James, reminded me that during his last visit, we were throwing a tennis ball to each other across the rooftop. All of his pitches made a high, graceful arc and cleared the house. One of mine did not!

Sometimes we get in silly tiffs with the people we love: in our family, with our friends, and even at church. And unless those small irritations are quickly named, negotiated, and resolved, they can create a huge mess. Until the blockage or impasse is cleared, all the love we, as disciples of Jesus, are called to share, gets stuck.

It's like there's a blood clot in the body of Christ. But when that blockage is removed through frank conversation, listening, understanding, and forgiveness, the body of Christ, the church, can thrive again. Paul describes such vital, healthy congregational functioning in

Ephesians 4:15-16: “But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.”

And just in case you're wondering, I'm not aware of any rift in our congregation or any simmering dispute at Knollwood that is about to reach that red, 7,000 RPMs threshold of unrestrained anger and blow up. Knollwood has a remarkable way of working through disagreements with thoughtfulness, kindness, and care.

But I don't take that miracle for granted. And in an age when attacking one's personal and political enemies has become a national pastime, the witness of a congregation where the love of Christ is clearly present is a gift beyond words. It's a living embodiment of Jesus' kingdom ethic that calls us to a resourceful, seeking love that will stop at nothing to reclaim a lost brother or sister or maybe even, *oneself*.

There is a story in the Talmud about three rabbis discussing how one can tell when the dawn has come.

“It is dawn,” said the first, “when you can tell a dog from a wolf.”

The second said, “No, it is dawn when you can distinguish blue thread on gold cloth.”

But the third rabbi saw clear through to God's deeper truth: “It is dawn,” he said, “when you can see your brother.”

Granted, there are times when reconciliation is not possible. And there are times when reconciliation is not advisable, as in the case of a merciless tyrant who keeps doing harm to oneself and to others. Jesus addresses that situation in Matthew 18:15-20 where he offers a strategy for intervention and if needed, separation. So if you're dealing with a chronic abuser *that* is the text you need to read.

But today, Jesus is pressing home to us, as to his first disciples, the vital truth that ugly, willful, self-serving anger has no place in his kingdom. As Dorothy Day, the Catholic activist and author often counseled her fellow activists, especially in tense, difficult times: "If each of us could just remember that we are all created in the image of God, then we would naturally want to love more."

"So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and 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" (Matthew 5:23-25)

Because for you, at such a moment, there is no more important kingdom work than this.

O holy Christ, recall us to what is truly important, which is not life's small irritations and aggravations, but you. Help us live in such a way that your resourceful, seeking love finds expression in us so others can see your reconciliation and healing at work in the world.

*In your name we ask this of our loving heavenly Abba, in the power of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.*