

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark Peters and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. I'm glad you've joined us this morning, and I trust that you've come with a measure of expectation. Jesus is among us by His Spirit--He is here to bless, to transform, to speak, to heal--turn to Him today.

As I begin my message this morning, I want to invite you to read James 1:19-20 with me out loud; I've got the scripture on the screen behind me. My hope is that as we read with our eyes, speak with our mouths, and hear with our ears that this truth will find its way into our minds and descend into our hearts.

Inspired by God, this is what James wrote, "*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*"

Over the past few weeks, we have been saying repeatedly that the word "righteousness" is a highly relational word--in many biblical texts it could be translated as "right relatedness" or "right relationship". I'm going to insert these words into the verses we just read, and I'd like to invite you to read them with me one more time.

"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, 20 because human anger does not produce the [right relationships] that God desires."

I'm going to give everyone the next 60 seconds to come up with an answer to the following three questions:

- when was the last time you were angry?
- what made you angry?
- how did it affect your relationship with God and others?

I'm going to set my iPhone for 60 seconds and I'll call you back when our time is up.

We've all experienced anger--we've seen it with our eyes, heard it with our ears, spoken it with our mouths, and even felt it in our bodies.

Anger creates a physiological change reaction in our bodies. When angry, you may experience a clenched jaw or fists, tense muscles, sweating, and shallow breathing--your skin temperature might even begin to rise. Anger activates a rise in adrenaline, our blood pressure may go up, our pulse rate increases, and blood flows from the brain and central organs out to major muscle groups--physiologically, when angry, your body is preparing to run or to fight.

illus: By a show of hands, how many of you are familiar with the fictional superhero, the Incredible Hulk. Can anyone tell me what the Incredible Hulk is known for? A bad temper and big, green, muscles. Whenever Dr. Banner, renowned scientist, became angry, the chain reaction would lead to his alter-ego, a big, angry, green wrecking machine.

Turn your attention to the video screen for a small clip of the Incredible Hulk at his best. **Play clip (37 seconds).**

"That's my secret Captain, I'm always angry." If you're big, green, and fictional, anger can be wildly entertaining, but apart from the Silver Screen, anger always destroys our ability to relate to others. What was it that James said? "*human anger does not produce the right relationships that God desires.*"

This morning we're going to continue in our series through the Sermon On The Mount; our text this morning deals with Jesus' words about anger and contempt. Let me encourage to grab a Bible, paper or electronic, and turn with me to Matthew 5:21-26. **Read.**

"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 court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

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

This morning, I'd like to walk through Jesus' words, verse by verse, and then conclude by offering a few thoughts about how we might align our lives with Jesus' words.

vs. 21-22: *"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."*

illus: I don't know if we have any icebergs experts among us, but scientists tell us that 80-90% of an iceberg's mass exists below the waterline--the same is true for us. With a few simple words, Jesus offers a master class in scuba diving for the soul--*what's lurks beneath the surface of your life?*

#6 on God's list of 10 Commandments reads, "*Thou shall not murder.*" It's highly unlikely that even two or three of us will ever break this commandment in our lifetime. But murder isn't the only way to destroy life or relationship--anger, hatred, and contempt are nearly as effective.

Allow me state the obvious before continuing: there are acceptable forms of anger--Jesus' Himself exhibited anger on a number of occasions. But before we brush aside Jesus' words, thinking about all of our *what if's* and *what about's*, let's sit under the weight of what Jesus has said. He draws a comparison between murder and anger, and if nothing else, that should tell us that relationships hang in the balance when anger is present.

In verse 22, Jesus picks up on two common terms of abuse in the ancient world. *Raca*, translated directly, means empty-headed or useless--in today's slang we might refer to such an individual as a numskull. The second word, *fool*, comes from the Greek root *moros*--it's from this word that we derive the English word "*moron*".

These two terms, “numskull” and “moron” were everyday ancient insults and not the sort of words that would land a person in court or in jail. The whole point of Jesus’ teaching is that these ordinary “insults” can betray a contempt that God takes very seriously.¹

Jesus is making the connection between anger/hatred/contempt and murder. Jesus goes beneath the surface of behaviour and gets to the heart of the matter. One scholar writes, “You think yourselves far removed, morally speaking, from murderers--have you not hated? Have you never wished someone dead? Have you not frequently stooped to the use of contempt, even to character assassination?”² *What's beneath the waterline? What lurks beneath the surface of your life?*

James says that we should be **quick** to listen, **slow** to speak, and **slow** to become angry, but all too often we are **slow** to listen, **quick** to speak, and **quick** to become angry.

D.A. Carson writes, “there is a place for burning with anger at sin and injustice. Our problem is that we burn with indignation and anger, not at sin and injustice, but at offense to ourselves.”³ Jesus’ anger was never wrapped up in His own personal ego. When He was most severely tested, during His trial and crucifixion, He did not retaliate in word or in deed. His dying words were, “*Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing.*”

Jesus’ invitation is to embrace kingdom living, to embrace life that is aligned with the life He Himself lived--He is both our Master and our model. The absence of murder, anger, and contempt is not the Kingdom’s ultimate goal--the goal is the presence of right relationships, the presence of love, mercy, and kindness. Murder is wrong, as is anger and contempt, because it has missed the mark of Jesus’ life.

Vs. 23-26: Let’s look for a few moments at verses 23-26. Jesus offers two parables or scenarios that give practical shape to His teaching. *“if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”*

illus: Most scholars conclude that the location for Jesus’ Sermon On The Mount is somewhere in Galilee, some 130 kilometers away from Jerusalem. Imagine making the trip by foot or by donkey; it would take days of dusty travel. Old Testament Law required you to travel to Jerusalem several times a year in order to offer a sacrifice at the Temple altar.

I want you to imagine arriving at the altar, with your living sacrifice in tow--dove, lamb, or bull--you finally get to the altar but there you remember that your brother or sister (related by blood or by

¹ R.T. France, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew*, 201.

² D. A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7*, 41.

³ Carson, 42.

community) has something against you---something real or perceived.

Jesus says, "*Leave your animal by the altar, hike back the 130 km and seek reconciliation--then you can hike back one more time and offer your gift to God.*" What extent would you go to in order to seek reconciliation? Would you walk an additional 260 km?

In 1 John 4:20-21 we read, **20** *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.* **21** *And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*" Love for God cannot be separated from love for others.

In Jesus' second scenario, vs. 25-26, a person is on their way to court, likely because they have failed to repay a debt. For you baseball fans, it's the bottom of the 9th inning, 2 out, and the batter is down to his/her last strike--this is a last chance opportunity for reconciliation. Jesus doesn't offer us a principle for legal disputes, instead, He is reinforcing a singular message: *deal with broken relationship before it's too late.*

In the time remaining, let's move on to the application. As is the case with much of Jesus' Sermon, understanding His words is far easier than living them out.

Application: I want to begin with story. Pastor Dave is fond of telling me that my personal stories are a frequent form of entertainment in the Sattler home, and one of their personal favourites took place on a soccer pitch about a year and a half ago.

It was a quarter final playoff game, single elimination, and our team was down by a couple of goals. The other team was young, big, and rough--our team was old, small, and frail, and the Ref wasn't doing us any favours--he was letting fouls go that should have been carded.

At one point a ball ricocheted out to the sideline and I chased after it as fast I could. Just about the time I got my foot on the ball, a blond-haired, 22 year old behemoth planted his shoulder in between my shoulder blades. He hit me from behind so hard that I was sent flying--a few days after the game, my doctor told me that all the ligaments in my lower back had been strained.

I didn't fly for long--the combination of gravity and field turf has a way of quickly stopping a body. Once I came to rest, I laid there for a few moments and didn't move. It's hard to describe what I was feeling--it was a combination of whiplash, rug burn, blinding pain, and smoldering rage. Very slowly I got up onto to my hands and knees--I could see the referee standing above me, watching me, waiting for me to get up, and *no*, he wasn't reaching into his pocket to show a red card to my opponent.

I finally struggled to my feet and as I did, the referee asked me an ill-timed question. "*What are you doing?*," he said. I responded saying, "*I'm trying to contain my anger.*"

Some of you have lived a longer than I have, and I suspect that you've come to discover, as I have, that anger isn't something we can contain, at least not for long. Anger is like hazardous waste--some time, somewhere, somehow, our anger is going to come out, and the longer it's been contained the more potent its destructive power.

It's one thing for Jesus to banish anger from kingdom living, and it's another thing to deal with anger below the surface of our lives. The question is, *how do we deal with our anger?*

Before I offer a few suggestions, I want to make a point of telling you what I believe. I believe that Jesus can bring healing to the angry places in our lives. Occasionally Jesus will bring this healing supernaturally in a moment, but more often, to quote one author, "Deep wounds require deep healing. And deep healing involves a slow and difficult process. Like peeling an onion, it generally happens one [painful] layer at a time."⁴

This journey of healing is seldom successful when we undertake it on our own. I would recommend that you undertake this journey with someone at your side: a spiritual friend, a small group leader, a mentor, a pastor, or a trained counselor--someone you trust.

1. First, when it comes to letting go of your anger, be willing to be willing.

You will never be free of anger and contempt until you are willing to let it go. If you are already on this journey then you know it's harder than it sounds. Letting go of anger will mean forgiving those who have neglected you, wounded you, betrayed you, rejected you, or violated you--it's no small thing to let go of our anger, at times letting go will itself feel like suffering.

Right now, your woundedness might run so deep that you cannot imagine living without your anger--it has been your constant

⁴ Stephen Seamands, *Wounds That Heal: Bringing Our Hurts To The Cross*, 12.

companion. But if you want to be free, can I encourage you to pray as I do when I'm not yet willing to let go? *Jesus, I do not feel ready to let go of my pain, my hurt, my anger, but I want to be willing. Jesus, create in me a willingness to be willing.* If you are able to pray this today, your journey toward healing will begin.

2. Second, bring your anger to the Cross.

Some of you have seen the movie that Mel Gibson directed, *The Passion Of The Christ*. And while Mel's face doesn't appear anywhere in the entire movie, we do catch a brief glimpse of his hand--he insisted on holding the hammer that would drive the first nail through Jesus' body. Mel knew something that theologians throughout the centuries have insisted upon--that all of humanity was represented at Jesus' crucifixion. Martin Luther is quoted as saying that we carried the nails in our pockets.

It wasn't just 1st century Jews that yelled, "*Crucify Him!*," can you hear your own voice? I can hear mine, "*I'm not following You, I'm living my life, my way, on my terms!*" You may never have verbalized these words to God, but every act of disobedience resounds just as loudly: "*Crucify Him!*"

The cross was the place of the world's anger, contempt, and murderous rage--it is also the place of God's love, justice, and mercy. At the cross we are reoriented. At the cross, our clenched fists can be opened. And as our hands are unclenched to receive, we are able to consider the possibility of living towards others in the same way that Jesus has lived towards us.

3. Third, express your unfiltered anger to God.

Ephesians 4:26-27 says, “**26 In your anger do not sin**”: *Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold.*” As much as it is possible, deal with your anger today. Why? Because when we allow anger to hang around it will go “underground,” and once it goes underground, the devil has a foothold in our lives.

When it comes to nursing our anger, there is what I call *the law of severity*--the longer you nurse your anger, the deeper it will grow, the more destructive it will become, and the more explosive its display when it leaks out.

We have been made in the image of God, the God who has revealed Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From eternity past, before the creation of the world, God was “love”—the only way this makes any sense is in knowing that God has always been One and yet Three--love always requires the “other”. Because we have been made in the image of God, relationship is essential to our personhood. Stephen Seamands writes, “We cannot be persons apart from our connection to others.”⁵

Love for God cannot be separated from love for others--when we embrace Jesus, we embrace His kingdom web of relationships. We cannot live with one hand open towards Jesus, and one hand clenched towards another--our anger will undercut our life with Jesus

⁵ Seamands, 29.

⁶ Seamands, 63.

and others. One author likens it to driving with one foot on the gas and the other foot on the brake.⁶ Try as we might, we cannot cultivate life with Jesus and nurture anger towards others.

And so the best way to let out our anger is to express our anger to Jesus--we pray our way through it until it no longer has a hold on us. And don’t worry about holding anything back, if you’ve read the Psalms then you know you can pray anything to Him. When we pray our anger to Jesus, He can begin to diffuse it, heal it, or transform it.

4. Fourth, may Jesus first step towards you, empower your first step towards others.

In Eugene’ Peterson’s translation of Colossians 3, he writes, “*Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.*”

Reconciliation requires more than expressing our hurt or anger to God, it requires us to take one step after another--forgiveness, mercy, and truth-telling are all required. There is a place for expressing our hurt to others, but we begin by expressing it to God so that by the time we express it to another, we are no longer seeking their destruction.

Conclusion: There is so much more that could be said, but I want to conclude with a question I have been contemplating all week. *Are we willing to let go of what we think we need, in order to find what we really want?* Are we willing to let go of what we think we need--anger, hatred, a desire for revenge, etc., in order to find what we really want?

What is anger costing us, and is it worth the cost? Has it cost you peace? Joy? Has it cost you deep relationship? Are you able to nurse anger and still cultivate the life with Jesus that you desire?

Jesus tells us there is another way, His way, the Kingdom way. I wonder, what do you think about Jesus words this morning? Do you find them inspiring? Demanding? Brilliant? How long would it take, do you think, for the world to be turned right side up, if every person alive put these words of Jesus into practice?

They won't of course, but that's not a deterrent for you and me-- we can embrace Jesus' words, and with the Holy Spirit's power we can live this way. The question is, *will we?* **Pray**

- *invite ushers forward to take Philippine Relief Disaster offering*

Worship