

# ***"Making Things Right; Relationships in the Kingdom of God"***

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## **GOSPEL MATTHEW 5:21-37**

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <sup>24</sup>leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.<sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

<sup>27</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall not commit adultery.’ <sup>28</sup>But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>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.

<sup>31</sup>“It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ <sup>32</sup>But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

<sup>33</sup>“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ <sup>34</sup>But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, <sup>35</sup>or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. <sup>36</sup>And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one

hair white or black.<sup>37</sup>Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

## **RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD**

There was once a king who needed to hire a driver for his coach. He periodically had to make trips along a mountain pass, and the road was very narrow. When he interviewed prospective coach drivers, he told them about the road, then asked, “If you were my driver, how skillfully could you drive that road?” The first driver said, “I could drive so that the wheel of your carriage was even with the edge of the cliff.”

The second said, “I could drive so that half the wheel was off the cliff.”

The third one said, “I could drive so that the wheel was next to the mountain was never more than an inch from the mountain.”

He’s the one that got the job.

The king did not care how close you could come to danger, but about how you could stay in safe territory. It was not about how close someone could come to edge of the danger, but about how they could avoid it.

In the passage we read today, Jesus is like the king. He is not interested in how close you can get to the edge without falling off, he is telling how to stay close the mountain. Except that Jesus is talking about relationships, not about driving mountain roads. When it comes to relationships, he is showing us how to keep our wheel close to the mountain, how to stay as deep as you can in safe territory, not how to skirt danger.

The style he uses here is “You have heard...But I say.” The “You have heard” part is the edge of safe territory. The “But I say” part is Jesus telling us to stay deep into safe territory.

If you didn’t know anything else about Jesus, you would think he is just extending the Law of Moses, making it sharper and more stringent. But remember, this is the teacher who starts this sermon with the words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” blessed are those who do not have it all together.” Rather than think of Jesus here as making the existing law, think of him as keeping us in safe territory.

For example, Jesus says, *You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'*

Well, I think we can all agree that killing someone is definitely an example of going over the cliff. If it comes to that, you have probably been driving with one wheel half over the edge for a while. Jesus is saying, "Don't let it get to that point!"

Because, frankly, few of us are probably going to kill anyone this week. If the standard were simply, "don't kill each other," I would not have much of a sermon to preach. Actually I would hate to have to serve a church where that sermons WAS needed! But Jesus wants to take it a step further. Actually many steps further.

*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.*

Now I don't think we are supposed to read this literally. I don't think he is saying, "Whatever you do, don't call someone a fool, or you are going to hell!" What he is saying is that in a healthy relationship you keep a handle on your anger, and you don't insult your friends.

He says anger contains judgment on the person who is angry. That's actually pretty true. Think about the times you have been angry.

Now there are a couple of reasons we get angry at people. They do something deliberately to hurt us. That makes us angry. But how often is that real reason we are angry? We also get angry because we don't get what we want. That has more to do with ourselves than with other people. I may want you to do something, and you don't do it, so I get angry, but a) have I really expressed what I want, b) can you actually do it, and c) should you actually do it?

Or we get angry because people do things we do not like. But a) is it our business, b) do we not like it because it irritates us, not necessarily because it is bad that you do it, and c) is it hurting anybody?

I have to admit that I have had very few times when I could be legitimately angry at another person. Almost always, my anger tells you more about me and my quirks than it does about the actions of other people. Yet, I can also tell you how dangerous anger is. It IS the edge of cliff for relationships.

Let me give you an example. One year I signed up my kids for indoor soccer. That is a big deal in Fairbanks in the winter. On the form, when I signed up, it asked where you would like for your child to have practices, and which nights were best for you. I put on my form that any night EXCEPT Wednesdays was ok, and that I preferred a practice sight in the Northwest part of Fairbanks, because that is where we lived. In fact, we literally had a school in our backyard.

Guess what team we got? One that was located in the extreme Southeast end of town and which practiced on a Wednesday night. You can imagine what I was thinking. Oh, and the insults I was forming in my head...

So I called up the league. I was angry, but I have learned that when you call in to complain about something, the person on the other end of the line is usually not the person who is responsible for whatever you are complaining about, and yelling at them just puts you in the end of the whatever line you need to be in to actually get your problem fixed.

So instead of insulting her and the soccer league, which I wanted to do, I just calmly explained the situation. She said, and I quote, "Once we have assigned a child to a team, we cannot change that." Again, I bit back everything I was thinking, and simply said, "I know you are not the person who has caused to this problem, but your organization asked what night and what part of town would be best for us, and you gave me the exact opposite of what I wanted. I am pretty angry about this, and given this situation, my children cannot play soccer this year."

It was at that point the woman broke down in tears. I didn't think I sounded that harsh, but she was sobbing.

So I put on pastor my hat, and asked her what was wrong. Her story came out. She was the person who had assigned the children to teams, but only because the person who was supposed to do it had not done it. Not only had they not done it, they had left all the forms on her porch the day before the assignments HAD to be made, with a note saying they couldn't do it because they were going out of town for two weeks. She spent all night trying to assign teams, but really had no idea what she was doing, and finally just put randomly put kids on teams, so that at least they would be on a team for the first week of practice. She had been getting calls like mine all day long, and the other people were not holding back on the insults.

Well, when I heard the full story, I was not angry any more. I felt sorry for her, and I tried to encourage her, and to help her feel better. I told her she did the best she could, and I appreciated what she did, and that I was sorry she was put in that situation. I was really glad I

did not say any of the insults I was imagining saying in my head. She thanked me, and when we hung up, we both felt a little better about the situation.

By the way, she called me back, and asked where I lived, and which night would be best for my kids, and she changed their teams. That would not have happened if I had insulted her. Sometimes you do sow what you reap.

But let's look at how seriously Jesus takes this: *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.*

Now notice what it says. If you are leaving your gift at the altar, and you remember that someone **has something against you**, leave your gift. It took me a while to really see what Jesus was saying here. I always read it as, "If you are leaving your gift at the altar, and you remember that you are angry at someone, then go be reconciled." But no, Jesus is saying something different. If you are leaving your gift, and you remember **SOMEONE IS ANGRY AT YOU**, then leave your gift. It is not "if you are angry," it is "if someone is angry at you."

Now the temptation is to say, if you are angry at me, then that is your fault. You have to deal with that. You see, if I am angry with someone, then **obviously they** have done something wrong. But if someone is angry at me, then **obviously** they are just way too sensitive. If I am angry at someone, they must have done something deliberately to make me angry, but if someone is angry at me, well it is not my fault they took something I said or did the wrong way.

Now this is exactly what Jesus is trying to get at.

This is where Jesus wants us back off the edge, and stay in safe territory. Don't wait until you are angry at someone. Live your life in such a way that no one is angry at you!

This is Valentine's weekend, so maybe it is appropriate that we are looking at this next part: *"You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery.' Again, I think we can agree that adultery is going over the edge. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Now, does this mean that looking at a woman is the same thing as adultery? No. I mean if that were the case, if you took a wrong look, you might as well finish the act! "Well, I looked at her

with lust in my heart, so since that is already adultery, I might as well make it worth my time!” That is definitely NOT what Jesus meant.

When I was in high school, I was in a Bible study where this text came up, and our youth group leader told us that no one can help the first look, but if you took a second look then that was a sin—to which one of my friends said, “If that is the case, make sure the first look is a doozy!”

But again, Jesus is not laying down a new law. He is telling what happens when we stray toward the edge. If there is adultery in a marriage, then there are probably many other unresolved problems in the marriage. There are two problems with chronically wandering eyes. The first has to do with something someone taught me before I got married. Always say “No” *BEFORE* you *have* to say “No.” If you eye wanders, it will not be long before your heart wanders. I did a research project on the effects of porn for a counselling class, and found that statistically the more porn a man watched, the more dissatisfied both he and his spouse were with the relationship. Whether the porn caused the dissatisfaction, or was a result of it was unclear, but one thing was—the porn did not help anything.

And I can tell you this; in my years of counselling I have seen more than a few affairs, and I can tell you, almost no one ends up happily marrying the person they are cheating with. More often than not the cheater is using the person they are cheating with, to get away from the person they are married to.

Jesus wants us to back away from the edge.

The same is true of marriage. Is Jesus telling us that anyone who has remarried after a divorce is living in adultery? I don’t think so, but I think he is affirming the importance of marriage. There is a part in the Presbyterian marriage ceremony where the minister says that marriage should not be entered in to lightly. Now Jesus is referring to a situation where marriage is not held in great importance—where all you need is a decree.



At the time he said this there were two notions of divorce. One side was saying that divorce was never permitted, and the other side said if your wife burned your toast, you could divorce her. Also, women were not permitted to file for divorce. Only men could, and when a man divorced a woman, she was often left without any

resources, for her or her children.

Here Jesus is weighing in on the side of marriage. He is condemning divorce at the drop of a hat. When it comes to any relationship, Jesus is going to default to maintaining the relationship.

Divorces happen. But we should be a people who are on the side of marriage—healthy marriage. If the Presbyterian Church spent half as much time helping people have healthier marriages as they do fighting about WHO could get married, we would be a much healthier denomination. The institution of marriage is not weakened by letting people get married—it is weakened by not helping people stay married.

Finally, Jesus asks us to look at how we act in relationships regarding our promises. He is not saying that when the judge asks you to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth under oath that you are sinning if you say “I do.” He is saying you should live your life so that you are trusted. Whenever anybody has to say, “I swear to God that is true,” you know you cannot trust them. I learned this raising kids. If you ever say you going to do something, your children will hold you to that until your dying day! I had to learn to not say yes, unless I was sure I could come through with what I was promising. Because if I couldn’t, I would sure hear about it!

This section of the Sermon on the Mount deals with relationships—specifically broken relationships. Jesus talks about what makes them broken, and the importance of fixing them.

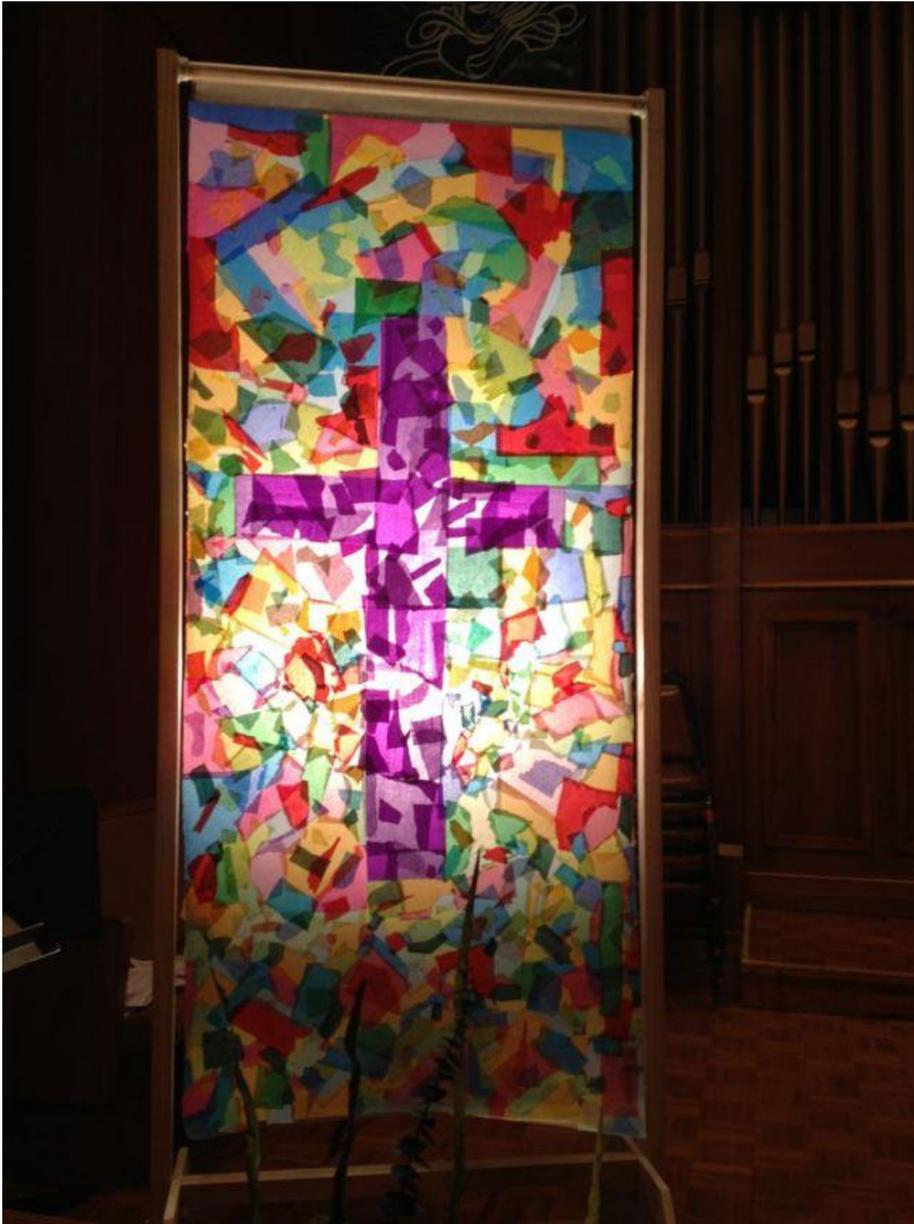
We are surrounded by broken relationships. We are not perfect people. We are not always nice people. We get angry, often without real cause. We mess up relationships, even the most

important relationships in our lives. We treat people like objects, we snub them, we demean them, we lie to them.

We build fences between ourselves and others, fences made of political differences, theological differences, social differences, racial differences, sexual differences, fences of disdain, of anger, of hurt feelings, of jealousy, of our insecurities, of hatred and of betrayal. That is who we are. We can read this part of the Sermon on the Mount as a continual condemnation of our worst aspects as human beings.

Today we heard words that could be taken as words of condemnation, words that none of us really live up to, but they should be taken as words of hope. Jesus is telling us what God wants of us. He wants us to reach out in love, not anger, to speak words of affirmation, not insults, to treat everyone as people, and not objects. God wants us to honor the relationships we have, not just go looking for new ones when the ones we are in start to falter. God wants us to speak with integrity.

Last week we asked you to take the paper we passed out, think of a broken relationship, and tear up the paper, symbolizing that broken relationship. Some of you went to town on your paper. All these pieces of paper symbolize the individual pieces of our broken relationships. My guess is that these pieces of paper represent the anger, the insults, the infidelities, the divorces, and the dishonesty behind our broken relationships.



But the collage represents God's hope for our relationships. Yesterday a group of people came in here, and turned the symbols of our broken relationships into something beautiful. In the hands of a loving God, all the disjoint pieces of our lives can become symbols of faith, symbols of hope, symbols of love.

And so we meet at the cross