

*Kingdom Calling -
Protecting Relationships*

Matthew 5:21-26

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We're in the middle of a study of the first of five sermons that Matthew presents in his account of the life of Jesus. The Sermon on the Mount is the first, and best known. In it, Jesus describes the core values and standards of the Kingdom of heaven. Among them are some very practical, tangible heavenly commands for how we relate with each other.

These are not options that we can take or leave.

These are fundamental to Kingdom living.

We don't have the option to take them or leave them.

As followers of Jesus, as members of the New Kingdom Community, we **MUST** take them.

Including the one we read today – first in a group of expanded commands.

First, I think, first because it has traditionally been one of the hardest for people to honor.

It is Christ's call to value and protect relationships.

And when I read it I wonder how well we can hear it in our North American context.

I wonder if we can appreciate just how seriously God takes the protection of human relationships.

Given how obsessed we are with *individual* rights and freedoms, I wonder.

And given how we manage to qualify so many things, and find all sorts of technical loopholes to get ourselves out of responsibility for whatever standard of behaviour may apply to others, I wonder.

So – first thing Jesus does is smack us in the face with a very cold glass of water.

This heavenly dictate doesn't just apply to people packing guns – long or short.

It also applies, v.22, to those who harbor anger.

And those who insult others.

And those who call others nasty names.

By the way, did you notice something curious about how Jesus phrases that?

A bit of almost over-the-top rhetoric to reinforce the point that this business matters to us ALL?

And that it matters to us all EQUALLY?

Angry

Insult

Fool.

Quick – which is the most serious?

Anger, right? Could carry serious consequences.

And least?

Well, to label someone as a fool.... can't be that serious, can it?

Now look at how the punishments line up.

Anger – someone will judge you.

Insult – you'll get dragged before the council.... to court

Fool – you'll go to hell.

Jesus turns it all right around.

Those cute little justifications we come up with for behaving the way we do; for minimizing our own behaviour and talk that can ultimately be so destructive to relationships – Jesus rips them all to shreds.

Equally devilish.

Fully worthy of hell itself.

There is NO excusable, defensible way to engage in nasty, negative, destructive interpersonal conduct.

NONE.

No matter how small we may think it is.

Heaven views the way we treat each other most seriously!

Building and protecting a safe, respectful, loving community, the sort of community where the cherished child of God, Myah, can be raised and taught about the Lord and provided with wonderful modelling of what a Jesus life is all about is HUGELY important to the Kingdom of Heaven.

How important?

How seriously does our Lord take this?

Well, have a look at verse 23 and following.

When you find yourself at odds, sort it out.

"If you are offering your gift at the altar..." Too many of us race right past this sentence.

That's because, I think, we have a picture of the neighborhood church in our mind when we read it. But that's a false picture!

In Jesus' day, where did you find the altar?

Only at the temple.

And the only temple was in Jerusalem.

Jesus is saying, "Leave the temple, go home, and only when you have fixed up your relationship mess come back to worship."

OK, so? Well, remember, where is this sermon preached? Check Mt 4:23-25.

He's preaching in Galilee.

Get it? Jesus is saying, after you've made the pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem, walked over 100km, and are in the middle of your worship experience you may well have to walk 100km **back** to Galilee to sort things out before walking still **another** 100km to Jerusalem's temple and the altar.

It matters THAT much.

Relationships are, apparently, HUGELY important to the Kingdom of God.

We have trouble getting that in our western culture, which is so supremely structured around the INDIVIDUAL. **Personal** rights and freedoms has become an obsession.

Now, that's not to say that all thing personal are wrong. Or that working for rights and freedoms for people is invalid. But, like all good and proper things, when they get blown out of proportion they take on a power and life of their own. And I'm afraid that in our culture they have received almost absolute value; they are of primary importance. And that makes them, if not fully, then certainly good candidates, for the label of *idol*.

I am very grateful for people that have been drawn by God to this congregation who have been born and raised in non-Western cultures. They have helped me enormously in being able to stand back and see what we sometimes take for granted. Like the focus on the individual that we prize so highly.

And in that culture of the individual the mantra certainly applies, "*It's not whether you win or lose that matters..... It's whether I win.... period.*"

We do well to remember that the bible has WAY more to say to the GROUP than it does to the INDIVIDUAL.

Again, not exclusively.

But, compare one to the other and the scale tips WAY to group speak.

There is strength in community that an individual simply cannot find:

Ecclesiastes 4:12 says that "a person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken." (NLT)

And leadership is best done by a team, in the context of community, rather than by a lone ranger or two – in Numbers 11:17 God tells Moses to find 70 elders to share the burden of leadership.

And as for spiritual growth and vitality – well, let me challenge you to go to Scripture and search out all the "One another" passages. Then ask yourself, "Why would the Bible have so many references and calls to 'One Another' living?" Could it be that, perhaps, such living can be very fragile? And that this way of living – together – **really** matters to the Lord?

EG:

Wash one another's feet—John 13:14.

Love one another—John 13:3; 15:12, 17; etc.

In honor preferring one another—Romans 12:10.

Don't judge one another—Romans 14:13.

Receive one another—Romans 15:7.

Greet one another—I Cor. 16:20,

Serve one another—Gal. 5:13.

Don't provoke one another or envy one another—Gal. 5:26.

Bear one another's burdens—Gal. 6:2.

Forbear one another in love—Eph. 4:2,

Forgive one another—Eph. 4:32

Teach and admonish one another with song—Col. 3:16.

Comfort one another—I Thess. 4:18.

Edify one another—I Thess. 5:11.

Exhort one another— Heb. 3:13; 10:25.

Friends, we cannot do ANY of this well when we are sniping at each other, estranged from each other, giving the cold shoulder to each other, fighting with each other or see our lives as one big competition against each other or can't conceive how my life might possibly be connected to your life.

One of the words I used to hear in Christian Reformed circles when I was growing up,
a word that I don't hear near so often anymore,
a word that I want to challenge us to return to popularity here at Calvin
is the word.....

Covenant.

Covenant means, if I can put it in a simple sort of way,
a deep, heart-to-heart, lasting personal relationship.

It is deeper than contract, which is a work relationship between two parties for a limited
period of time – when it is fulfilled there is no further obligation on the part of either party.

Covenant lasts.

Covenant is for keeps.

You can depend on a covenant.

Covenant love is what propelled God to send his son, Jesus to earth.

Covenant relationship is what was signed and sealed in baptism.

God – and Myah, Derek & Erin – and the rest of us.

Covenant relationship is what we are called to live within the community called “the Body of
Christ.”

And covenant relationship is what we are called to model to the world.

You can't do that when you engage in habits that damage relationships – that can quickly
grow like a BC wildfire can grow from a thrown away cigarette butt in deadly ways.

Like calling someone a fool.

Or insulting them.

Or nursing an angry grudge against them.

As we have gathered before the baptism font, the great symbol of heavenly covenant;
And as we look forward to gathering next week for Holy Communion, the other great
heavenly symbol of covenant relationship;

I want to challenge us all to take a careful, hard look at how we manage our
relationships.

It'll be hard to do.

Partly because of what goes on around us.

What do you see on TV?

This enormous popularity of so-called “reality TV”, most of which features this
tiresome and endless stream of sniping, back-biting, conniving and undermining of the next
person.

How much would email traffic be reduced if we filtered out all gossip about others?
That makes it hard to avoid, and hard to prevent participation in, bad relationship habits.

The other reason it gets hard to really do an honest self-examination is not because of what
goes on **around** us, but because of what goes on **inside** us.

The brother of Jesus, James, asks in his letter, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?" -- James 4:1

What kind of desires cause us to break into conflict / competition with others?

I polled a few people. Here's what they suggested:

- jealousy (*taking away what they have makes me feel better*)
- getting ahead (*over or through another*)
- insecurity (*build myself up by tearing another person down*)
- pride (*my way/program/idea has GOT to happen*)
- frustration (*so, find a target... including you*)
- narrowness (*your way CANNOT be right... therefore YOU are not right!*)

And I want to challenge you to begin the hard work by thinking of those right around you.

Begin within your family.

And then to those who live around you, or who work in the next cubicle.

And then consider this church community.

Just those three levels for now.

Are there any that you would not want to have over for dinner?

Any where, if they walked into the room, you'd be wanting to walk out?

Any where, if someone mentions their name, you see red?

Any where you love to spread a nasty comment or story about them 'cause they deserve it?

Then consider the list.

Jealousy.

Wanting to get ahead.

Insecurity.

Pride.

Frustration.

What's going on?

Why do you act like that towards them?

And how can you possibly begin the change that hell-bound behaviour.....

in honor of Jesus?

as a person baptized into a life of covenant with God...

how can you begin to change?

And change it you better.

You must!

For, left unchecked, such things rarely get better.

They tend to get worse.

And, often, quicker than you think.

What you might want to write off as a simple, inconsequential tiff, can easily go viral and turn into a monster that can consume you; escalating into something far beyond your ability to control.

When relationship challenges are **small** – that's the time to sort things out.

Not waiting till you find yourself way in over your head.

That's the point of verses 25-26.

Douglas Noll presents the following illustration of how this works.

Susan and Theresa had been business partners in their professional practice for 20 years. The practice was very successful, but Susan and Theresa had grown apart in lifestyles, goals, and attitudes. They did not discuss these changes with each other. Instead, as is so often the case, they let small annoyances fester. After awhile, they stopped communicating. Business was conducted through memos or their staff.

Theresa retained a lawyer, who advised her to file a partnership dissolution action. It was served two days before Christmas while Susan was at home with her family. Susan, outraged, retained the toughest lawyer she could find.

Clients were caught in the fight and left the firm.
The office was in chaos.

Finally, after months of acrimonious pretrial preparation and tens of thousands of dollars in legal expenses, the parties became financially and physically exhausted. On the advice of their lawyers, they agreed to mediation and after three days of discussions the partnership issues were resolved.

The technical term for that is *Conflict Escalation*. It happens all the time.

- Families stop talking.
- Churches split.
- Neighbors move away.
- Partnerships dissolve.

It starts small – then becomes more intense – then turns to “I’ve got to win” - then turns to “I’m going to make them lose” - and eventually to “I’ve got to get rid of them / destroy them”.

Different levels of conflict.

The deeper you sink into another level of conflict, the more irrational it becomes.

And the harder it is to repair.

Such relational brush fires don't only affect the parties involved. There are all sorts of other people that get hit by the shrapnel when a relationship explodes. Collateral damage. Like kids in a divorce. Or when a church splits: typically some go to one congregation, and some to the other congregation.... but a whole bunch just drop out entirely. Or employees in a company that breaks apart when the partnership dissolves.

And relationship problems can be like the Giant Hog Weed, or like an iceberg -
as the thing grows there is WAY more below the surface than is exposed.

history

personal credibility

memory
finances
and all of that simply gets more difficult to work through the longer it sits.

And it is also true when you see two people caught in a struggle – be careful to judge.
For there is almost always more going on than you realize.
Way more below the surface.

Catch relationship problems early.
If you need to, and often we do, get help from wise, trusted people to bring healing.

And, let me say it again -

All this stuff is easy on a superficial level; with people you don't know real well.

Right?

That, by the way, is why adulterous affairs happen all too easily at the office, where
it's easy and pretty and smells nice and is on a surface level, not the 6am furry-
breath, hair messy reality of life!

Join me, friends, in committing before the Lord to doing the hard work.

Beginning at home.

And right here.

Look around - Do you love these people? Is there a grudge you need to let go of? Is there
someone you are holding resentment against? Is there a person you are shutting out? Or
one about whom you're gossiping – which you need to stop doing?

Let's pray.