

**3/22/26****The Mountain of Peace****Matthew 5:21-26****Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church**

There's an epidemic that's poisoning our nation, and it's not a physical disease, like COVID or Ebola. It's an epidemic of anger and contempt. I'm especially disappointed when people who call themselves Christians express anger, in behavior and speech, in ways that are an affront to Christ and his teaching, and serve to discredit our faith to those who don't yet follow Jesus. Too many people who claim the name of Jesus repeatedly disregard what Jesus teaches about how we're to handle anger. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has clear words to say about anger, and if we don't learn to heed these words, in our families and personal relationships and as a people, our national struggle to move forward together is not going to get better. As Arthur Brooks wrote recently, "The outrage economy thrives on your attention. But remember that when you're moved to hatred, someone is profiting from it. And it's not you." Of all the mountains we're scaling in this series on the Mountains of God, the Mountain of Peace may be one of the most difficult to climb.

Jesus tries to help us to do so in **Matthew 5:21-26**. "You have heard that it was said to those of 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.** 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. 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. Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny."

**The idea** I want to share with you, today, is that **peace in God's kingdom begins when we confront the anger and contempt in our heart and pursue reconciliation with others.** In most societies – including that of Moses, Jesus, and our own – murder is viewed as the ultimate crime. When Jesus said, "*You have heard*

that it was said to people in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘The person who murders will be in danger of judgment’”, the folks on the mountainside would have nodded their heads in agreement, and said to each other, “Of course that’s the way it is and the way it should be.” While they were nodding in agreement, they would have been shocked by what Jesus said next, and you may be, too – that a person who is angry with someone else is open to equal condemnation to one who commits murder. Jesus uses the exact same phrase, “**be liable to judgment**,” to apply to anger that Moses applied to murder. This is difficult for us to hear, and to accept, because murder is not an act that most of us are likely to engage in. We look at those who commit murder as the most reprehensible in society. However, while we may not be murderers, most of us get angry, and when we do, our anger frequently can lead us to sin – and we may hurt ourselves and others. Jesus says that managing anger and contempt is a step toward having a heart filled with the peace and goodness of God.

**Anger is an emotion.** An emotion is “a feeling and its distinctive thoughts, psychological and biological states, and range of propensities to act.”<sup>1</sup> Anger is a message, from us to us, that can provide important information that impacts our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Anger and its family comprise one of the primary human emotions. When not managed well, anger’s disagreeable and unattractive offspring include fury, outrage, resentment, wrath, exasperation, indignation, vexation, acrimony, animosity, annoyance, irritability, hostility, and, at the extreme, pathological hatred and violence. Anger is impatient, unkind, often boastful and arrogant, frequently arising because we insist on getting our own way and we’re mad because we’re not and we refuse to yield. Anger is irritable and resentful, unwilling to bear hurts, often not believing or trusting another’s words or motives, has lost hope and the ability to endure. Anger can lead us to quit or give up. If you’re familiar with Paul’s words about love in *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*, you’ll recognize how love is described in opposite terms to anger, “*love is patient, kind, not envious, boastful, arrogant or rude, doesn’t insist on its own way, is not irritable, or resentful. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (1995), page 289.

Jesus always wants what's best for us and for others, which is why he's so concerned about anger. **Anger can hurt us.** In his terrific book *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Daniel Goleman describes how anger is suicidal. A study of anger, in heart patients at Stanford University Medical School, revealed that anger is the emotion that does the most harm to the heart; dozens of other studies have also described the power of anger to damage the heart. Dr. Redford Williams of Duke University found that being prone to anger was a stronger predictor of dying young than were other risk factors, such as smoking, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol. A Yale School of Medicine study tracked over nine hundred men who had survived heart attacks, and found that those who had been rated as easily roused to anger were three times more likely to die of cardiac arrest than those who were more even-tempered.

Goleman writes, "These findings do not mean that people should try to suppress anger when it is appropriate," but "the net effect of ventilating anger every time it is felt is simply to feed it, making it a more likely response to any annoying situation." The difficulty is when anger and hostility become "so constant as to define an antagonistic personal style – one marked by repeated feelings of mistrust and cynicism and the propensity to snide comments and put-downs, as well as more obvious bouts of temper and rage. **The hopeful news is that chronic anger need not be a death sentence: hostility is a habit that can change.**" Dr. Williams, from Duke, noted, "The antidote to hostility is to develop a more trusting heart. All it takes is the right motivation. **When people see that their hostility can lead to an early grave,** they are ready to try."

**Anger, expressed in unhealthy ways, not only hurts us, it hurts other people.** When we learn that someone is angry with us, we're often hurt, even if we haven't received that anger directly. Anger raises the stress level of everyone exposed to it. The tension around a table or in a room goes up rapidly when someone is expressing anger, especially if they're out of control. Anger feeds on anger, and often evokes anger in others. People who are angry at us may want to hurt us, which they can do by how they look at us or by refusing to look at us, by how they talk to us or refuse to talk to us. Most of us can recognize when these behaviors are being done to us. We may not be quite as aware when we're engaging in them with other people. Worst of all, anger can

lead to violence. It's hard to calculate how many violent crimes are preceded by an individual's inability to handle anger appropriately. Most murders happen because the killer chose to embrace and indulge his or her anger, instead of handling it wisely or letting it go.

Dallas Willard describes how **“When we trace wrongdoing back to its roots in the human heart, we find that in the overwhelming number of cases it involves some form of anger. Close behind anger you will find its twin brother, contempt. To cut the root of anger is to wither the tree of human evil.”**<sup>2</sup> That's why Paul says, in *Colossians 3:8*, **“But now you must get rid of all such things — anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.”** How are you doing with that? How are people we see in the public arena doing at fulfilling that verse? We all feel anger at times, but it's what we do when that happens that's important.

Whether our problem is with another believer, a neighbor, a politician, or, as in Jesus' example, with someone who is taking us to court, Jesus says our response is not to be one of anger and self-righteousness. **Jesus wants us to see the value of the person with whom we're angry.** This is what's difficult about politics in our nation at this moment. People talk about other citizens as if they're bitter enemies in league with the Devil. **We don't see value in people who are different than we are, and we don't seek to understand why they think or feel the way they do.** Too many people find it easier to be mean, angry, condescending, judgmental, disrespectful, rude, crude, and even violent, rather than seeking to understand. We can't imagine how someone can be a Christ follower and not see things the way we do.

Jesus knew that laws, like the Ten Commandments, that deal only with actions, can't reach the human heart, the source of our actions. A relationship with Jesus can get to matters of our innermost self, so that we're not concerned merely with what we shouldn't do, but we're filled — as Jesus was — with positive regard for our neighbor, whom we love as God does. Jesus tells his listeners on the mountainside, if you find yourself in the holiest of moments — for a first century Jewish person, standing before the altar about to present your sacrifice to God — when suddenly, you realize that you

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<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, chapter five.

gossiped about somebody and that person is mad at you, Jesus says, in that moment, a heart filled with the peace of God leaves everything to make that relationship right. The message is clear: **peace with God and peace with others are deeply connected.**

**Peace in God’s kingdom begins when we confront the anger and contempt in our heart, and pursue reconciliation with others. The good news is that anger is a habit that can change.** If anger is something you wrestle with, I want to suggest three things for your consideration. **The Antidote to Anger** involves three things: 1. **Self-Awareness**, being aware when anger is beginning to stir within us; 2. **the Ability to Regulate Anger** once it’s begun; and 3. **Empathy** for other people.

Let’s start with **Self-Awareness**. An old Japanese story tells how a belligerent samurai challenged a Zen master to explain the concept of heaven and hell. The monk replied with scorn, “You’re nothing but a lout – I can’t waste my time with the likes of you!” His honor attacked, the samurai flew into a rage and, pulling his sword from its scabbard, yelled, “I could kill you for your impertinence.” “That,” the monk calmly replied, “is hell.”

Startled at seeing the truth in what the master pointed out about the fury that had him in its grip, the samurai calmed down, sheathed his sword, and bowed, thanking the monk for the insight. “And that,” said the monk, “is heaven.”

When the angry samurai suddenly wakes up to his own emotional state, he illustrates the difference between being caught up by a feeling and becoming aware that you are being swept away by it. Self-awareness means “being aware of both our mood and our thoughts about that mood.” Self-awareness includes one of the most powerful ways to defuse anger – undermining the convictions that are fueling the anger in the first place. **“The longer we ruminate about what has made us angry, the more ‘good reasons’ and self-justification for being angry we can invent. Brooding fuels anger’s flames. But seeing things differently douses those flames. Reframing a situation more positively is one of the most potent ways to put anger to rest.”**<sup>3</sup> *Ephesians 4:26-27* urges us not to let anger fester and grow, because it opens space in us for the Evil One to work: **“Be angry but do**

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<sup>3</sup> Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ by Daniel Goleman, 1995.

***not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.***” Anger is a feeling we can nurture or not; contempt is even worse, because when we’re feeling contempt, then we’re insulting, degrading, and even demonizing the other person. In our country, there’s too much anger and contempt, and too little kindness and humility.

**Secondly, Regulating Anger – this involves purposely substituting reasonable thoughts for cynical, mistrustful ones during trying situations.**

Right now, we see the opposite, every day. People can’t even agree on what facts are, and there’s lots of lying and substituting cynical, mistrustful thoughts for reasonable ones. This is especially applicable when we’re driving. Some people think that cars are a means of transportation. In fact, they’re God’s way of revealing exactly what is going on in our heart and soul, at any given time. You don’t have to go away to a monastery for a retreat, just get in your car and start driving around, and what is going on within you will soon become clear. The next time someone goes flying by you on the mid-Cape highway, instead of cursing, imagine they’re rushing to the hospital, where a loved one has been taken, and say a prayer that they’ll get there in time and that their loved one will be okay. If you imagine that it’s a friend of yours rushing to the hospital, it changes your emotional response even more. Even if that isn’t the case, you’ll be amazed at how different you’ll feel. As we learn from Jesus, at the end of *Matthew 5*, it’s much harder to stay mad at someone – or to see them as your enemy – if you’re praying for them. If we change our thoughts, we can change our feelings. If we change our actions, we can change our feelings and thoughts. All three are intertwined.

**Self-Awareness and Regulating Anger can help us, thirdly, to a place of Empathy.** Empathy in frustrating situations involves learning to see things from the other person’s perspective, which helps to calm anger. God, twice, asks Jonah, the reluctant prophet with zero empathy for the residents of the city of Nineveh, whom he considers his enemies, ***“Is it right for you to be angry?”*** That’s a good question to ask ourselves when we’re angry. In his vanity, self-justification, and immaturity, Jonah replies, ***“Yes, angry enough to die.”*** As I said earlier, anger can kill you.

We’re all susceptible to angry flare-ups when we’re tired, hungry, worried, fearful, frustrated, or stressed, and we can lash out with angry words – often, against the people we love the most. These outbursts come with a cost, since incidents like these are

like driving nails into a fence – even when you pull the nails, the holes in the fence remain.

We need to be even more on guard against contempt, resentment, bitterness, and grudges; those angers with a long, slow-burning fuse are even more deadly, and more destructive to our peace of mind, our health, our spiritual wellbeing, our families, and our relationships. **Jesus says that it's not enough merely not to do harm when we're tempted to say or do something in anger; rather, we're to love and to seek the good of the other person.** We're to be willing to give and receive forgiveness. We're to lay aside anger and to act out of a desire for reconciliation. Jesus' goal in teaching about anger is to show the value of human beings, even – and especially – those who are different than us, and with whom we may disagree.

In Shakespeare's play, "Hamlet", Hamlet says, to his friend Horatio, *"Thou hast been... A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards Has taken with equal thanks... **Give me that man That is not passion's slave,** and I will wear him In my heart's core, aye in my heart of hearts As I do thee..."*

A sense of self-mastery – of being able to withstand the emotional storms that the buffeting of life and Fortune bring, rather than being "passion's slave" – has been praised as a virtue since at least the time of the Greek philosopher, Plato. Jesus is comparing goodness in the kingdom of heaven with the mere goodness of not killing someone we're mad at. While it's good to avoid committing murder when we're angry, Jesus says it's even better to grow in spiritual maturity, self-awareness, and empathy, so that we can become aware of our emotions and master them, rather than our emotions ruling us. This will enable us to live a far more peaceful and contented life.

**Prayer:** Gracious God, you know our hearts and the emotions we carry within us. You know the moments when anger rises in us, and the ways it can damage our relationships and our peace. Through Jesus, you have shown us a better way — the way of reconciliation, humility, and love. Teach us to pause before we speak, to listen before we judge, and to seek peace and reconciliation whenever conflict arises. Give us courage to repair broken relationships, and grace to forgive as we have been forgiven. Shape our hearts so that our words and actions reflect the peace of Christ. Help us become people who bring healing, understanding, and peace into the world around us. **Lord, teach us to master ourselves, in order that we may become the servants of others.** We pray this in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen.

**Blessing:**

*“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you **and give you peace**” (Numbers 6:24-26, NIV).*

*“**Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.**” (2 Thessalonians 3:16, NIV).*

**Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. How was anger expressed or managed in the family in which you grew up? Did you see anger managed appropriately, inappropriately, or both? How did that shape you?
2. Why is anger such an important emotion to understand and to be able to manage appropriately, as Jesus and the Bible tell us?
3. What’s the best advice you’ve ever received on how to handle anger?
4. What new standard of right and wrong is Jesus creating in *Matthew 5:21-26*?
5. How does Jesus link anger and murder? Why do you think he does that?
6. What are some ways you can improve in how you handle and express anger?