

Basic Training: Putting Out Fires...With Gasoline
By Jason Huff
February 28, 2015
Psalm 37:7-11; Ephesians 4:17-32; Matthew 5:21-26

Matthew 5:21-26. [Jesus taught,] “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Have you ever tried to stop a fight only to make it worse? If you’ve ever seen a Facebook conversation on a controversial subject, you know what I mean. “Putting out fires with gasoline” was a popular song lyric of David Bowie’s in the ’80s, and plenty of people have stolen it since. But it captures how we often feel in our relationships when things get difficult – we try to defuse them, but they blow up in our faces instead.

Anger is the gasoline that keeps many fires burning in our lives, and Jesus deals with it directly in today’s passage. Jesus has begun explaining the full meaning of the Law, and He expands the definition of murder far beyond what the Jewish teachers and religious leaders ever thought. We learned last week that Jesus’ explanation of the Law would challenge us and point out that we can’t keep the Law to its fullest extent – we don’t even realize how deep the Law goes! But as we study, we’ll see God’s grace to us, a warning to fall upon that grace, and ways we can start to live like the citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus begins by quoting a popular statement: “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’” Sounds good, right? The first part sounds like the sixth commandment we studied together not long ago. But there’s an addition to it – “and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” From what we know of the Old Testament, that seems OK.

But the last half of the statement is not in the Bible; it’s a summary by the ancient teachers of the Law. What’s happened is called the logical fallacy of hasty generalization. It’s where you think you know something based on an incomplete set of facts. For example, if you drove into a town and saw ten children and no adults, you might make the hasty generalization that no adults live in the town. Seems silly, right? But based on the data you have, you might make that guess. In the same way, the ancient teachers read the sixth commandment, “Do not commit murder.” Then they looked at different sections of the Law, separate from the Ten Commandments, where God issued punishments based on various situations where people had been murdered. The ancient teachers declared they knew what murder was based on the other laws God gave them. But they didn’t. They made a hasty generalization.

Jesus teaches, “No, in fact the Law is much stronger than anyone ever realized.” Because we hate to repeat words in English, the translators in every version substitute words. But Jesus says the same word, *enochos*, four times. It means *liable to* or *subject to*. In every situation, Jesus uses that word. You think you’re subject to judgment just for killing another human being? You’re subject to judgment for being angry at another human being! Think that you’re subject to the high court if you use foul language against your brother and slander him? You’re subject to hellfire for far less of an insult! The repetition rang in His listeners’ ears. Murder equals anger equals slander equals insult. All of them make you guilty in the sight of God.

Now some of us here know our Bibles and we might think, “Waitaminute! What about when Jesus turns over the moneychangers’ tables in the temple? And when He calls the Pharisees fools?” Two things we have to keep in mind – the anger described here is not righteous anger; it’s not justified. It’s fury, rage, where the emotion and outburst do not fit the action. In Psalm 4, repeated in Ephesians 4, the Bible says, “In your anger do not sin.” In standing up for His Father, in His righteousness, Jesus did nothing wrong removing the moneychangers from the temple. In comparison, most of the anger we feel isn’t justified by the circumstances.

Now as far as fools go...the word “fool” in Hebrew meant someone who was without faith and godless, a functional atheist. There are times when it is not an insult but a reality – Jesus used it of the Pharisees when they condemned Him while they led people away from God. Paul used it of the Galatians when they started to go back to following the Law rather than trusting in Christ for salvation. But the Israelites used it as a casual insult. I think back to the old Charlie Brown cartoons where everybody called Charlie Brown a “blockhead.” It’s the same kind of thing. That’s what’s condemned – hurting your brother by venting your anger through what you say to him.

Jesus teaches that because of the inherent issues with anger, it's super important for us to do everything we can to avoid it – and to help others avoid it too. Jesus says, if you're at the temple offering your sacrifice to the Lord and you remember that your brother is angry with you, leave your gift, be reconciled, and then come back. God is more interested in your reconciliation with others than He is with your gifts to Him!

Getting right with God isn't a matter of coming to church and worshipping. Getting right with God means getting right with one another, then coming to worship to rejoice in God's grace. God has no interest in worship as “the right thing to do.” Coming to worship and singing praise to God while harboring anger in our hearts towards others is hypocritical. Sometimes we can release our anger because we've worshipped; we let go of those things because we have come into God's presence. But worship alone doesn't make us good with God.

There's also something funny about this verse that we'll see again next week. It's the idea that we are partially responsible for others' spiritual well-being. I'd always expected based on the first part of Jesus' teaching, that murder equals hatred equals insult, we should go to our brother if we have something against them. But the verse reverses our expectations. It's about our brother who has something against us. If we've made someone angry with us – maybe legitimately, maybe not – it's still God's will that we take the lead in reconciliation.

Why should we make the first move when someone else is angry with us? It's counter-intuitive. As we mentioned before, often we try to defuse a situation and it creates a bigger fire. But remember, Jesus is talking to members of God's Kingdom, you and I, people who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak grace and truth into difficult situations. Anger and rage and all the results can lead to disastrous spiritual consequences for the person who "loses it."

In Jesus' thought, leading someone else into sin is even worse than committing the sin yourself. In Matthew 18, Jesus says it would be better for someone to have a millstone put around his neck and be drowned in the sea than to lead one of His children into sin. If we create anger in others by intentionally provoking them, we may be guilty of the greater sin! So we're not just called to reconcile with others when there's anger between us – we're to watch carefully not to become angry and to avoid causing anger in others. As Paul will later put it in Romans 12:18, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace with everyone."

Then the perspective changes. Jesus is still talking about anger, but now He says to settle matters with adversaries before getting to court – to agree with our adversary and finish the matter before we wind up stuck in debtors' prison until every last cent we owe is collected. This is an odd example because Jesus's crowd is Jewish. They knew about debtors' prisons, but the Jews didn't utilize them. It was Greco-Roman. Was Jesus talking about debts to people outside Jewish society? Or is He talking about something different entirely?

He's moved on to a different kind of anger and a different kind of debt. He doesn't state it explicitly, but the Sermon on the Mount continually points to our inability to keep God's Law. While Jesus's principle might be true for everyday life, He's talking about another adversary we have – God Himself. In Romans 8:7, Paul says the "carnal mind is enmity – is hostile – to God." In Ephesians 2, Paul writes there is a "dividing wall of hostility" between us and God. That wall is brought down by Jesus, who through His death on the cross brings the possibility of reconciliation. God didn't declare war on us, but through our rebellion against Him, we declared war on Him! God is our adversary, and He has a legitimate claim against us – we have become traitors, fighting against our Maker and acting in ways contrary to His goodness, truth, and love.

God has the right to send us to the true debtors' prison – hell, what Jesus calls Gehenna, the garbage pit outside Jerusalem that was always on fire. It was an unclean, unholy place where pagans once sacrificed their children. Nobody wanted to go there. And here's the really scary thing: our debt to God can never be repaid. There's no way for a traitor to take back their traitorous actions. There's no undoing what's been done. If someone should go to hell because of their debt because they refused Jesus' free offer of forgiveness, they are stuck there forever. That's why we should so want to avoid it, and lead others away from an eternity there.

So Jesus says literally, "Make friends with your adversary on the road to court." That's what Jesus calls the disciples in the Upper Room before His arrest, recorded in John 15. He says, "I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." When Abraham trusted in God for the promise of a people, James 2:23 tells us, he became God's friend. Through Jesus, we have the ability to be reconciled to God. His sacrifice on the cross covers our debt. Through faith, Jesus' righteousness is accepted on our behalf, and we become friends of God rather than enemies.

So what can we put into practice this week? *First, rethink anger and how you treat people.* It is so easy to get angry. This week, Jackson was sick coughing in the middle of the night; he couldn't sleep, we couldn't sleep. I had to run to Rite Aid at 1am. I was not happy. I was angry we didn't have any cough syrup in the house though he'd been hacking for days.

A few days before, I was really hungry and I was in a bad mood and I made myself a snack and all of a sudden half of it tumbled out of the bowl. And I was fuming; I was so mad I couldn't see straight. And I wanted to swear. And instead, at the top of my lungs, I yelled, "I AM SO ANGRY!" And immediately I stopped being angry. I just laughed. It was suddenly clear that my anger served no purpose. It didn't do anyone any good, least of all me.

Righteous anger – the kind of anger that Jesus showed and that is legitimate – is anger for someone else being wronged. Jesus was passionate about His Father's glory and was angry that the moneychangers were defiling His Father's holy place. But typical anger, the anger that condemns us, is self-centered. We get angry because we didn't get what we wanted. I didn't get to sleep at 1am. I didn't get to eat my snack. My anger was all about my desires, my passions.

When we think about the last time we swore about something or got in somebody's face, it was likely that we were displeased that events proved we aren't the center of the universe. Occasionally we are genuinely wronged – we were overcharged, our car was hit. But anger takes the focus off of fixing the problem and onto us. We make it worse because we take out our anger on those who've not wronged us at all, who just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. We stiff a waitress or yell at a manager on the phone when they weren't even the ones who messed up in the first place! We use language that shouldn't come from the lips of someone controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Selfish anger makes us liable to judgment. How do we avoid it? We remember that we have little control over the initial feeling of disappointment, but we do have control over what we do with it. If we deny feeling anger, we lie to ourselves, and that's dangerous. But once we recognize the feeling, we can use it positively.

Many of the best movements in the world have been led by a passion to see wrongs righted. The passion that fuels those feels the same as the passion that fuels selfish rage. We need to recognize our feelings for what they are. Then rather than acting on the selfish desire to rage, to outburst, to curse and swear and get physical, we take those desires to God and ask Him to sort them out for us. Let them go. And if those desires are good, because we desire to correct wrongs done to someone else, God will eventually convict us to do just that.

Another thought to take home: *we are our brother's keeper when it comes to anger.* We can't keep someone from becoming angry. At times we need to challenge others. Sometimes what I preach is hard to swallow. It might make you uncomfortable or angry. Hopefully, over time you see I try to preach God's truth. My intent is to bring you closer and closer to God. But often, we provoke anger in other people. We intentionally upset other people, not to encourage them to right a wrong or stand for a truth, but because we like to get a response. Whether it's a child poking his brother or the husband or wife picking at their spouse's faults, it all needs to stop, because we are not to provoke others to anger.

An example of this is the story of Joseph in Genesis. His story is one of forgiveness. His brothers viciously throw him in a well and sell him off to slave traders; he lives for years as a slave in Egypt, even wrongfully imprisoned for a couple of years. Through a series of God-driven events, he eventually is placed over all Egypt and his brothers (unaware that he's alive) come there during a drought to find food. Joseph reveals himself and forgives them; they are reconciled; it's a beautiful picture.

But most people forget that Joseph's father Jacob and Joseph himself are partially to blame. Jacob favored Joseph so much that he had an ornate robe made for him, which Joseph bragged about to his brothers. Joseph had dreams that he would one day rule over his brothers, but rather than keeping them to himself, he bragged about them. Jacob and Joseph's actions pushed their triggers. Did they commit a heinous crime? Absolutely! Are they responsible for their actions? In every way! Yet the continued provocation led them to blinding hatred and extreme sin. What might have happened had Jacob been more kind to Joseph's siblings? And what might have happened if Joseph hadn't been so arrogant?

What do we do that provokes anger in others? How might we keep from doing it? Anger is not just about us and how we feel, but about others. When we stir up anger in others without justifiable cause, we become a part of the sin issue in their lives too. Let's make sure to reconcile with those who are angry with us. Let's take the first step. And before there's a need for reconciliation, let's do what Paul suggests in Ephesians 4:2-3: "Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Finally, our last thought for this week: *be reconciled to God and enjoy His reconciliation*. If you have made friends with the judge of your soul through faith in Jesus Christ, you have a lot to rejoice about. Your sin is forgiven. Your anger is not judged. You have the power to live in the new ways we've talked about tonight. You can leave here confident not only that you have saved from your sin, God has blessed you with a new way of life where your anger and the desire to create anger in others does not have to overcome you.

If you haven't been reconciled to God, or if you've slipped away from Him – if you realize you haven't fully embraced His forgiveness and found peace beyond your anger – then do it today. There are so many reasons why. Your anger makes you guilty before Him, and to spend eternity with Him requires getting right with Him now through faith in Christ. You can avoid hell; you don't have to be separated from your Creator for eternity. That's a great one. But even better is knowing you're forgiven. Knowing you don't have to be angry. Knowing you don't have to respond with rage when things don't go your way. Knowing peace. God holds those out for you today. Take hold of Him and all He offers.

As we close today, I want to use an illustration. Rick, would you stand up for us? Tammy has a couple of bags that I'd like you to carry for us. Can you do that? Thanks. They're pretty heavy, aren't they? OK, now, while you're doing that, would you please pick up a pew Bible and read Romans 12:18 for us? What? You can't? Huh. It's pretty much impossible, right? Thank you, Rick. In the same way, anger is a weight on us that fills our hands. Unless we put it down, we can't receive the blessings of God. Today, let's put down our anger and have our hands filled with the riches that God has for us.