

No doubt you have heard a conversation that went something like this:

Do you think you will go to heaven?

Yes, I think I will, because I am not a bad person. I have never killed anyone....

Unfortunately there are two great faults with this line of reason.

The first is this – no one is good enough to get to heaven. It is not a matter of not committing murder or doing enough good deeds. The fact is, there is only one way to get to heaven, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. This is more than believing that he lived, but realizing that he lived on this earth, and died on the cross of Calvary, was buried and rose again from the dead for one purpose: **to provide the only way to heaven**. Our sin will forever keep us out of heaven, but Jesus died to deal with our sin. So if we confess our sins, repent of that life without Christ, and receive Jesus into our lives by faith we will go to heaven when we die. But that is the only way to get to heaven – through Jesus.

The second fault in this argument is the assumption that you have not committed murder!

This is what made Jesus teaching here so radical and searching. Jesus is saying the intent of our heart, what is happening within, is just as important, and dangerous, as what we actually carry out.

Look at what Jesus says.

He starts with a quote, one taken from the Ten Commandments. Jesus assumes his audience has heard this command before. He begins by saying, “You have heard it said to the people long ago...” This is not a new law, a new commandment. No doubt the Jews of Jesus’ day were saying, we are not that bad – we never killed anyone!

And why did most people not become murderers? The answer is likely found in the second part of what Jesus said: “anyone who murders will be subject to judgement.”

The law made it clear that there were consequences for taking a life – usually a life for a life. If you killed an unborn child, or a slave, a neighbour or a fellow worker you would face consequences. If the killing took place accidentally, you were still responsible and paid a price. If it was premeditated, you had a plan, then the consequences were more severe, and usually it meant you forfeited your life. This fear of punishment kept many from murder.

Have you ever wondered why taking a life was such a serious crime to God? Briefly, the answer is this: we were created in God’s image; God breathed life into our bodies and made us a living soul, one created to have fellowship with him for eternity. Scripture says God has determined the length of our life, and He has a plan for every single person. To destroy that life is to say we

know better than God, and that we do not value what He has created and what he values. God gave His life on the cross of Calvary to rescue humanity from the curse of sin and death. That is how valuable a human life is to God. When we take a life, we show we do not see the value God has placed on our lives. It shows we have no relationship with the God who gives us life.

But the crowd who heard Jesus that day no doubt felt safe, knowing they had never taken a life.

But then Jesus adds, "But I say to you..."

What was this? Jesus was speaking with a voice of authority – with the voice of God! It would be some time before Jesus' disciples figured it out – Jesus was God, that is why he spoke with the authority of God!

And Jesus goes on to challenge those who were listening to look beyond their actions to their very hearts – to look at their motives and feelings. He says to beware the downward spiral:

First, if you are angry with your brother and sister you are subject to judgement. The term for anger Jesus uses indicates the danger of holding onto bad feelings about someone, harbouring bitterness and resentment against them. It is this simmering, ugly feeling within that leads you to want to see harm happen to that person because of something they said or did to you. It is within you, but it is just as serious as murdering a person, taking a gun or a knife to them.

Second, Jesus says that calling out "Raca" to someone deserves punishment (going to court). This is when the anger starts to get out. This is calling someone names, treating them as less than you. "Raca" is a hard word to translate, but words like numskull, dunderhead, brainless, stupid come close. These are demeaning words, hurtful words; words I am afraid too many of us have heard at some time in our lives. Jesus says his followers can never be calling others such names, bringing them down with words, seeing them as less than they are. We are God's special creation.

William Barclay says there was a rabbinic tale of a certain Rabbi who thought very much of himself. One day as he returned from his teacher's house, admiring his own skills and goodness, he was greeted by a very ill reputed citizen of the village. The Rabbi did not return the greeting but instead cried out, "You Raca! How ugly you are! Are all the men of your town as ugly as you?"

To which the villager responded, "That I do not know. Go and tell the Maker who created me how ugly is the creature he has made." With that, Barclay concludes, the sin of contempt was rebuked.

Thirdly, Jesus tells of the person who calls someone a fool, or "MOROS" in Greek. This is to destroy someone's reputation – saying they are immoral, not to be trusted, someone you do not want to do business with and certainly someone you want to avoid. Like the "Fool" of Psalm 14:1 that says there is no God, this is saying that this person is without hope and bound for hell. But note what Jesus is saying: the person who calls down his brother like this is the one who risks the fires of hell.

In all three instances Jesus speaks of a heart problem – an internal problem. To commit murder is something you cannot hide, and there will be consequences. But, Jesus says, many people are committing murder in their hearts almost every day, and though they think it does not matter, that it does not hurt anyone, they are wrong. They will pay the price for this inner sin.

Jesus is saying that not only are your outward actions under scrutiny, but what is going on in your hearts as well. You may never pull a knife on someone, or point a gun at another person, which is good, but you have committed murder in your heart many times. You have thought some very nasty thoughts about someone else – and you justify it by saying their actions were so bad. They may have been abusive, or cheated on you, or stole from you, or called you some terrible things and you are just getting back at them. Jesus says this cannot be. This is committing murder – in your heart.

There may be some listening today that know exactly what I am talking about. You know the pain of betrayal, or abuse, or abandonment. You know the pain of being called terrible names, sometimes by those who you trusted most. You know what it is to be yelled at – and maybe to yell back. Jesus says, I see your heart, I see your pain, but you must learn to respond differently. Holding that anger, that disdain, that pride, that desire for revenge will not only destroy you but puts you in the place of judgement. You may be able to hide your seething hatred from many people – though usually it manifests itself in some way – but you will not be able to hide it from God.

So Jesus gives some steps to help release you from the curse and punishment this sin of mental murder deserves.

In verse 23-24 he speaks about heading to the temple to offer a sacrifice and you remember that someone has something against you. In Jesus' day you would head to the temple with your offering so the priests could offer it up on the altar and then you would be forgiven. But as you are seeking forgiveness you realize there is someone you have to make things right with, someone who is upset at you. Stop what you are doing and go make things right with your brother if you can. When things are right with your brother, then you are ready to come before God and ask for his forgiveness.

The key here is for you to go and make reconciliation – to make things right. Earlier Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.” Here he shows how important it is to put this into practice. Do what you can to make things right. True, not all people will want to be reconciled. Some will want to continue the fight, to get even, to hurt you. Nevertheless, you must do what you can to bring peace to the situation. Yes, it will be humbling. It will not be easy. You must ask yourself the hard questions: what have I done to contribute to this problem? What must I do to make things better? It will take much courage and strength – probably more than you have. But that is why the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit is so important. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you...”

Jesus gives a similar message in verse 25-26. If we owe anyone, make things right as soon as possible. Do not wait until the courts – earthly or heavenly – demand repayment. This is particularly true in relationships. Make things right now, not later.

This teaching of Jesus is not easy. We all want to say “I would never commit murder” yet all too often we already have in our hearts. As Jesus says in Mark 7:21-23:

²¹ For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, ²² Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: ²³ All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

So this teaching of Jesus is not so much a new commandment, but a call for the searching of our own hearts, to see if they are filled with love or bitterness, grace or anger. As scholar, Dallas Willard, said: “Actions do not emerge from nothing, they faithfully reveal what is in our heart.”

I can honestly say I have never harboured anger or hatred towards anyone. But I wish I could also say I never was angry. But I cannot... It would be easy here to digress into a lesson on the psychology of anger, that it usually is a secondary emotion and often stems from fear... etc.

But it is more important that I can tell you about one source of anger I am far too familiar with: Selfishness. When we put ourselves at the center of our world, when we think people must treat us special, that we always should come out on top, then we will discover our ability to get angry. Why? Because seldom does the rest of the world see us as the center of the universe.

When I was a child and into my teenage years I had a very quick temper. I seemed to get angry at anything. If someone took the ball from me playing soccer I was angry. When someone called me a name – which happened often – I was angry. When my sisters teased me I got angry – and then in trouble. I seemed to be a ticking time bomb that would explode in anger all too easily. Sometimes that got me into fights on the school grounds. Sometimes that got me benched in sports. Often it got me in trouble with my parents, and then I was even angrier...

But I was also a Christian. As a young boy of eight years I had realized Jesus died for my sins, so I asked Jesus to forgive me and come into my heart. I knew my temper was not okay for a Christian but there was nothing I could do about it – or so I thought.

Then one day at summer camp I heard the Lord speak to me in chapel service. He pointed out the inconsistency of saying I was a Christian and being angry all the time. So at that camp I surrendered my temper to the Lord, and asked his Holy Spirit to come in and help me be more kind, and loving and peaceful... And that is exactly what he did. From that point on the Holy Spirit has been helping me deal with the anger. Many years later, He opened my eyes to the cause of my anger – a selfish spirit. I wanted everything to go my way. When I surrendered all to him and let things go His way, the anger all but disappeared. Yes, there are still things today that frustrate me, I can be impatient, and injustice makes me angry, but I do not have the anger Jesus was talking about in this passage – a murdering anger. Instead, the Holy Spirit is putting

within me... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. I am still a work in progress, but praise God for the progress He is making!!

I know some of you are thinking – what about Jesus; didn't he get angry in the temple? Yes, at the sin that pushed people away from God. Jesus never harboured anger against people – not even the Pharisees. Doesn't Paul write, "Be angry but sin not...?" Yes he does in Ephesians 4:26. We could spend much time looking at scriptures that speak of anger and when it is appropriate...

But here we are simply looking at what Jesus said – Do not commit murder – neither with your hands nor in your heart. And he wants us to take an honest look within to be sure that is not happening right now – and if it is, to confess that anger to him, ask forgiveness and ask instead to be filled with His love. That will come through the presence of the Holy Spirit within you.

Christians have been accused of many things, but one label that should never be able to stick is that we are murderers, not even in our hearts. May each of us today come to the altar of worship with no need to run and make things right. They are already. So gladly we bring our sacrifice of praise to Jesus.