

Peace on Earth  
Matthew 5:17-26

A courthouse set ablaze in Oakland, California. Looting in downtown Minneapolis. The National Guard mobilized in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Shootings in Chicago are up 50 percent over last year, and over the last three months, New York City has seen 352 more shootings, 464 more victims and 69 more murders than at this time last year.

What in the world is wrong with the citizens of our biggest cities? Don't they know right from wrong? Haven't they read the Ten Commandments? God made it very clear about 4000 years ago that stealing is wrong and killing is wrong. So, if everyone would just follow the Ten Commandments, who can doubt that the world would be a better place? Who can doubt we would have peace on earth?

And yes, in today's passage no less an authority than Jesus affirms that all of God's law is still valid. He says that we need to keep every one of God's commandments. We need to do them, and we need to teach them to one another, if we would be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that doesn't mean that we can just take the book of Deuteronomy and substitute it for our state constitution. After all, some of God's laws have been fulfilled by the person and work of Jesus Christ Himself. All those passages in Leviticus about animal sacrifices, for example, were really just pointing to the one great sacrifice that Jesus would make for all His people on the cross of Calvary. We don't need to sacrifice sheep and oxen anymore because the blood of Christ is sufficient to make atonement for all who trust in Him.

So, if on the one hand it would be better for the world if everyone lived by God's law, but if on the other hand some parts of God's law have already been fulfilled by Christ, how do we use God's Law as a guide for modern living? How can it help us to bring more peace on earth?

Well, Jesus gives us a hint in today's passage. He takes one of God's laws and stretches it out to its fullest extent. He takes the underlying root principle of one of God's laws and He applies it, not just to our actions, but to our words, and even to our thoughts and feelings.

And the law that Jesus brings to our attention in verse 21 is the sixth commandment, the one directly connected to so many of the problems in our big cities today: "Thou shalt not kill."

Now, I hope we would all agree this law. I hope we would agree that all human life is to be treated with honor and respect. Yes, we might have problems with some of the other commandments. We might fail at times to honor our parents or we might covet what other people have, but none of us proper Presbyterians would ever approve of committing murder. None of us would ever act like those rioters we see on TV every night.

And neither would the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus mentions in verse 20. After all, they were scrupulously careful to follow all the Law of God to the letter. In fact, they took great pride in conforming their behavior as completely as possible to what God's law requires. But in verse 20, Jesus says that our righteousness must be greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. That means our righteousness must not only be measured by our outward actions. No, true righteousness expresses true love for others that dwells deep within our hearts.

That's why Jesus goes on in verse 22 to condemn not just violent deeds but anger and harsh words. That's why Jesus insists that whoever is merely angry with his brother without a cause is in danger of judgment. He says that the one who calls his brother Raca, or empty-head, shall be hauled up before the Sanhedrin, the council of the elders. Jesus even says that the danger of hellfire awaits the one who simply calls his brother a fool. If all that's true, then not only the violent protesters in our streets, but so many of the talking heads on TV are in big trouble.

But how can that make sense? How can angry words and feelings be just as bad as expressing those feelings in violent behavior? After all, I'm guessing there's not much love lost among us for the thugs turning our city streets into shooting galleries. So, does God really think that our disdainful thoughts about riotous vandals are just as bad as the damage they are doing to people and property?

Well, think about it. Where do most fights start – with actions or with words? And before hostile words can reach our lips they must first be incubated in angry hearts, right? So as we can see on our streets every day, if hatred and anger are allowed to fester, they will eventually explode in violent words and deeds.

And so to Jesus, Who could after all see into the depths of our hearts, violence is just anger with skin on it. To Jesus, violence and anger are two sides of the same coin.

And so, if we would bring peace on earth, if we would bring an end to the violence that is all too present around us, we must first address the problem of anger within ourselves, no matter how reasonable it might seem to us. Instead of condemning others, we must confess whatever anger, whatever hatred of others that we are harboring within ourselves. For unless we keep God's commandments not only with our hands but with our lips and in our hearts, there will be no peace on earth.

But even this is not enough for Jesus. He says it's not enough for us to let go of our own anger, of our own hatred. For us to keep this commandment of God fully, Jesus says we must also help our brothers and sisters to deal with their anger and their hatred.

Look at the stunning example Jesus places before us in verses 23 and 24. This is the situation: you have confessed your sin to God, and sought God's forgiveness. In your freedom and gratitude, you have come into the house of worship to pray and to praise God. You are, so to speak, offering a sacrifice of joy and thanksgiving. And all of that is right and good.

But suddenly you notice that one of your brothers in Christ is absent. You realize that he hasn't come to worship because he is angry or upset. And you understand that you are the focus of his anger. What do you do?

This is not just a hypothetical situation, is it? We've all had people who have been upset with us in the past, for one reason or another. Moreover, in this election year, how many relationships have been strained between friends who choose to support different candidates for public office? And then there are the crowds of people thronging our streets all over America, protesting the historic injustices black and brown people have suffered throughout American history. And some of those people choose to direct their anger over past racism at modern people who are not personally guilty of racist thoughts or actions. And, believe it or not, some of those angry people are Christians.

So, how should we respond to such anger, directed either to us as individuals or as a group? I suppose our first inclination would be to look at the facts of the case. "Did I personally do anything to cause these people grief or pain? Have I personally said something for which I need to apologize?" And if we can't think of anything, aren't we likely to dismiss our brother's feelings? Aren't we likely to say something like, "Well, so what? He may be sore at me, but I'm not responsible for the situation he's in. And I've done the right thing. I've come to church to worship. He should get over it and come to church too."

Yes, that's probably what we would do. But is that what we should do? For if we have such a dismissive attitude toward our brother or sister's anger, what does that say about our own thoughts and feelings?

Remember, Jesus has said that anger against someone else is a damnable offense. So, if your brother is angry with you, whether for good cause or not, he is in danger of damnation. And so if you are unconcerned about her anger, doesn't that mean you are unconcerned about the eternal state of her soul? I mean, how can we go on our way to church if our angry brothers and sisters are headed on the way to hell?

No, there's no getting around it. Jesus makes it clear that we must leave our sacrifice at the altar to go and seek reconciliation with those who are angry with us. For how can we possibly love and worship God while we have such a callous attitude about our brothers and sisters in Christ? What would such an attitude say about the state of our own souls?

So, it's not enough to say that the world would be a better place if everyone else would just follow the Ten Commandments. No, if we want to have peace on earth, the Sixth Commandment requires all of us to be peacemakers, to take the initiative to make peace. And so if our brothers

are angry at us, whether for good reason or not, it is our responsibility to go to them and seek to be reconciled. It is our responsibility to help our sisters assuage their anger, regardless of the cause. For to do anything less, Jesus says, is to break God's law. Callousness, Jesus says, is as bad as murder.

Now, that's tough. But Jesus goes on to give an even more extreme example of how the Law of God should be applied. For He says that it is not enough to avoid anger in our own hearts. It's not even enough to seek to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must also seek to be reconciled to our enemies, to those who have harmed us.

Now, the specific example Jesus gives in verses 25 and 26 concerns two opponents in some sort of lawsuit. But once again, the facts of this case are strangely absent. For to Jesus, it does not matter who is at fault. Instead, the important thing is how we should deal with disagreements once they arise, no matter what may have caused them. Jesus says we should settle our disputes, no matter what they are, no matter who is at fault, as soon as possible.

And the first reason He gives is probably the last thing that would occur to any of us – that we ourselves might actually be in the wrong, that we might actually be the ones who are at fault. Notice that Jesus says, "Agree with your adversary so that he won't deliver you to the judge." So, regardless of our high opinion of ourselves, the sobering truth is that we could actually be guilty of some of the things that our enemies say about us.

And that means we shouldn't just dismiss criticism that comes our way, either as individuals or as a group. Those of us who have confessed that we are sinners in need of a Savior should never be surprised to find sin lurking in unexpected places, in unexplored corners of our hearts and minds. We should always be up for honest soul-searching, no matter who is leveling an accusation at us. And if our enemies happen to be correct, if we happen to be in the wrong, then of course we should apologize and try to make it right – before we experience the consequences of our actions.

But what if you're not guilty? Why should you settle things with your adversaries if they are completely off base? Why should you roll over and let those who hate you take advantage of you?

After all, you don't have to. If someone else hurt you by acting in a selfish, spiteful manner, you don't have to do what Jesus says. You can haul the guilty party into court and insist on your rights. You don't have to let your enemy play you for a chump.

But before you get busy climbing up on your high horse and justifying yourself, think about another dispute to which all of us are a party. Our God is also someone who was wronged, you know. God created a beautiful world, and made a man and a woman in His own image to enjoy that world and to manage it for His glory and to be in close fellowship with Him.

But what did His creatures do? And what have each one of us done? In fact, what are we doing right now? We are looking at God's law, and listening to Jesus' explanation of it, and deciding for ourselves whether we are going to follow it or not. We are making up our minds as to whether this part of God's law is reasonable or not. And this kind of setting ourselves up as the arbiters of what is right and wrong is nothing less than sin, nothing less than rebellion against God.

So no, you don't have to listen to what Jesus is saying. You don't have to take the initiative to reach out to those who are angry with you. You don't have to let other people take advantage of you. You don't have to be a chump.

But what did God do when He was faced with a world full of people who were angry at Him for no good reason? What did God do when a world full of people responded to His love with hateful rebellion? The Son of God took the initiative to restore the relationship that our sin had destroyed. The Son of God in His purity and innocence reached out to our angry, hateful world, taking on Himself the penalty that we deserved for rebelling against Him. Yes, Jesus went so far as to let our angry, hateful, violent world kill Him on a cross. In laying down His life for His enemies, the King of Kings allowed Himself to become the chump of chumps.

No, there is very little peace on earth today. But perhaps that's because there's very little desire among the people of Christ to let ourselves be chumps. Maybe that's because there's very little desire among the people of Christ to take the initiative to restore broken relationships, very little willingness to suffer wrongs so that others might see Christ in us, very little inclination to lay down our grudges, our wounds, our stubbornness, our rights, our very lives for the sake of others. Maybe there's so little peace on Earth because we Christians have so little inclination to follow Jesus.

So, of course we should pray for peace on earth. But will we go so far as to try to be peacemakers?