

We all witnessed this past week the senseless and tragic murder of 26 people as they attended church. In no way am I minimizing what happened there, but what if I told you that in the sight of God what most of us do every day is as liable to judgment as what that shooter did? In the text we're looking at today, that's what Jesus says. Listen to his words,

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment." (Matt. 5:21–22b)

Now I understand that what Devin Kelley did and just being angry with someone are two very different things in terms of the loss of life. One ended in the senseless death of 26 people; the other may not kill anyone. But there's another sense in which they **are** the same. Why did Devin Kelley do what he did? Where did that evil act begin? It began in his heart. It started with seething anger, resentment, a desire for revenge that was nurtured and coddled, eventually erupting in the act of murder. In fact, it was likely with Jesus' words in mind that the apostle John later wrote this, **"Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer"** (1 John 3:15).

Still, this raises all kinds of questions for us. Who can get through life without being angry and resentful with someone else? In this crazy world no one gets through life without being mistreated and hurt. What are we supposed to do? Just let people walk all over us?

Let me give you some context for what Jesus said about murder and anger because all this goes back to something Jesus said earlier. We've been walking through the gospel of Matthew. Last week we began looking at the Sermon on the Mount, which begins in chapter 5 and ends in chapter 7. It was there Jesus went up on a mountain, sat down, and began to teach his disciples. It's almost like Matthew is picturing Jesus as a new Moses—up on a mountain like Mt. Sinai, revealing a new way for people to relate to God.

And he said some things that must have sounded truly strange to them. He began by saying the truly blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek and merciful, and those who thirst for righteousness. That sounded very different from the kinds of things they'd been taught from Jewish law. So it was understandable if some people began to question Jesus' relationship to the law. They wondered, "Is Jesus disregarding the OT law? Is he throwing it all out? How can he do that?" Jesus addressed this head-on in verses 17–20.

Jesus is Fully Committed to the Old Testament

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

Now remember, the command against murder was part of the Ten Commandments, which was part of what was called "the law." And what we're going to see is Jesus is going to show the true meaning of the law. But first, he wants them to know that he's fully committed to the law and all of the OT Scriptures. When Jesus talks about "the law and the prophets" he's pointing to the entire OT as we know it. Jesus is pro-Old Testament! And he says a few things to drive this truth home.

First, he says he's so committed to the law that even the smallest letter and the least stroke of the pen matter greatly to him. The smallest letter "is the letter י (*yod*), and the "least stroke of a pen" is the Hebrew letter ן (*vav*). Bottom line: Jesus upholds the authority of the OT Scriptures right down to the smallest detail. He says everything in the OT will come to pass.

Second, he says our status in the kingdom of heaven will be determined by what we do with even the least of these commands. He may be particularly speaking to teachers here. If you as a teacher think you can set even one of the least of these aside and you teach that to others, you'll be called least in the Kingdom. But if you both practice and teach them, you'll be called great in the kingdom.

So it's quite clear the OT Law is still important in the life of a follower of Jesus. Not just some of it but **all** of it! There's no room for picking and choosing what Scriptures we'll obey and teach and what ones we won't.

Jesus Came to Fulfill the Law and the Prophets

But if you look again at verse 17 he says something even more startling. He says, **"Not only am I fully committed to every last detail of the law, but every last detail is fulfilled in me. Not only am I all about the OT, but the OT is all about me. I've come to fulfill all of it."**

But what does it mean for him to **fulfill** it? Some people say it just means he obeyed the moral demands of the law, which is true; he did keep it perfectly. But that's not what the word fulfill means. Others say it means the law in and of itself was incomplete and inadequate and Jesus would kind of fill in the missing pieces. For that reason, there are some believers who pretty much disregard the OT. It's like, "I'm so glad I don't have to keep all those rules and regulations anymore because of Jesus." But that can't be what he means because, again, Jesus is defending the OT. He says it's all valid.

The best explanation is to understand "fulfill" the same way it's been used throughout Matthew's gospel. Repeatedly, Matthew has shown how the OT prophecies were fulfilled in the life and teaching of Jesus. Now Jesus says the whole OT points to himself and he's its fulfillment in every way. As James Boice says, "He fulfills the moral law by his obedience, the prophecies by the specifics of his life, and the sacrificial system by his once-for-all atonement."

It's like a little boy grows up and he's fascinated with the stars, planets, and vast galaxies. He reads about them, has posters on his bedroom walls of them, and dreams of traveling through space. But then he grows up and guess what? He becomes an astronaut. As he travels through space, all the pictures he saw in books are now real and right in front of his face. He now sees the real thing up close; all he dreamed about is fulfilled in his experience.

This is what Jesus is saying. The entire OT is a picture book of him and his work. They were good pictures. But now you're looking at the real thing they point to. All the stories, all the laws, all the Psalms—they all point to him. By the way, this is an audacious claim on the part of Jesus. Believe me, the scribes and Pharisees wouldn't have liked this at all.

Jesus Demands a Greater Righteousness Than the Religious Leaders

But Jesus still doesn't stop there. He drops another bomb. He says unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and scribes, you won't even enter the kingdom of heaven. What's that all about?

The Pharisees were a strict sect of layman. Not only did they insist all the laws of God be observed, but they made up other laws to make sure they didn't break those laws. Altogether, they had 613 rules to keep. The Scribes or the teachers of the law were the religious professionals who interpreted and taught the law. They were the theologians and pastors. Jesus says, you need to be better than all of them! This would have bothered everyone listening. It bothers me!

Imagine if someone told you today: You must shoot three's better than Steph Curry; you must be more innovative than Steve Jobs; you must be more intelligent than Stephen Hawking; you must be more loving than Mother Theresa. But, obviously, in

Jesus' mind there was something deficient in the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. What was it? Their problem was their righteousness was external. It was humanly manageable. It was focused on outward behavior and neglected the condition of the heart.

Remember what Jesus said on another occasion? He said the whole law can be summed up in two commands: Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. Even when Jesus concluded this sermon, he said this, "*So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets*" (Matt. 7:12). We call it the Golden Rule, but it's the law of love.

And what Jesus will do in the next several paragraphs is give a long list of examples of how the genuine righteousness he demands is different from the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees in that it's not about rules, it's about love. That brings us to his first example which I spoke of earlier. Look at what Jesus says about this in full in verses 21-22.

Jesus Defines True Righteousness in Regard to Murder

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."

In Exodus 20:13 the Law said, "*You shall not murder,*" which is talking about criminal murder or what we call homicide. It's not talking about killing in general. In fact, there are places in the OT where killing was considered legitimate, as in the case of the death penalty or in the context of war. In fact, the calls for the death penalty are to be imposed on those who commit the sin of murder, which is what Jesus means when he says a murderer is subject to judgment.

But then Jesus goes deeper. Deep seated anger is also subject to God's judgment. Murder is more than just killing someone; it starts in the heart. What if a person plans to kill someone but is stopped by an unexpected circumstance? Is he innocent because he didn't get a chance to complete his plan? What if you want to kill someone, even plan it out, but you don't have the courage to do it? Does that get you off? Murder starts in the heart.

Of course, in a human courtroom only the external act of murder can be condemned and punished. You can't send someone to jail for anger. But Jesus says in God's courtroom just being angry is subject to judgment. In fact, if you just call a person "Raca," which is the Aramaic word for idiot or empty-headed person, you'll be subject to judgment. Or if you call a person a "fool" (literally a moron) you'll be subject to the fires of hell. Again, in a court of law, you can't be convicted of a crime for calling someone a name, but in God's courtroom you're guilty. It's quite clear both our thoughts and our words matter to God.

This was nothing new. If those who heard Jesus that day really knew their OT law, this wouldn't have surprised them. Listen to what it says in Leviticus 19:17-18, *"Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart... Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."* So this was not groundbreaking stuff.

It's important to say here not all anger is evil. When we talk about the wrath of God, we're talking about anger that's holy, pure and just. Jesus was angry when he drove the money changers from the temple, and he called the Pharisees not just fools but snakes. There's such a thing as righteous anger. Paul said, *"In your anger do not sin"* (Eph. 4:26a). He didn't say don't be angry. Martin Luther called righteous anger "the anger of love, one that wishes no one any evil, one that's friendly to the person but hostile to the sin." But Jesus is talking about unrighteous anger—the anger of pride, hatred, malice, insult, revenge.

When I was a senior in high school I was competing for the starting QB position on our football team. My competitor was just a junior, but he was good. I vividly remember hating him for no another reason than threatening my position. I'd stay awake at night thinking of ways I could hurt him. I rejoiced at every failure he had, and fumed at every success. I looked for opportunities on the field to put him out once and for all. And do you know what's really sad about all that? He was a really good guy. But I murdered him a thousand times in my head, and he never even knew how much I hated him.

Unrighteous anger shows up in different ways in all of us. For some of us we wear it on our sleeve. We lash out in ways everyone can see. For others, like me, we hold it in, but it comes out. We just ignore people. We write them off. We put them in a box called, "I don't care about you anymore."

Theophane, a monk who lives at St. Benedict's Monastery in Colorado, tells a story that resonates with me. He says,

I saw a monk working alone in the vegetable garden. I squatted down beside him and said, "Brother, what is your dream?"

He just looked straight at me. What a beautiful face he had. "I would like to become a monk," he answered.

"But brother, you are a monk, aren't you?"

"I've been here for 25 years, but I still carry a gun." He drew a revolver from the holster under his robe. It looked so strange, a monk carrying a gun.

"And they won't — are you saying they won't let you become a monk until you give me your gun?"

"No, it's not that. Most of them don't even know I have it, but I know."

"Well then, why don't you give it up?"

"I guess I've had it so long. I've been hurt a lot, and I've hurt a lot of others. I don't think I would be comfortable without this gun."

"But you seem pretty uncomfortable with it."

"Yes, pretty uncomfortable, but I have my dream."

"Why don't you give me the gun?" I whispered. I was beginning to tremble.

He did, he gave it to me. His tears ran down to the ground and then he embraced me.

Most of us have a gun; often it's hidden under the robe of our Christian persona. It's fairly easy to keep our gun hidden most of the time, but we know it's there and it's incongruent with the person God wants us to be. We also know if it were to go off unexpectedly, it would do great damage. We're uncomfortable living with it, but we're afraid to live without it. In this text, Jesus asks us to give him the gun.

Jesus Encourages Us to Deal with Our Anger

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on and gives two practical examples of how to deal with our anger. Listen to what he says in verses 23-26.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift."

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Both of these examples tell us to deal with our anger and our broken relationships as soon as possible. The first example is about a person going to the temple to offer a sacrifice. It's kind of like this: "If you're going to church, and in the middle of worship you suddenly remember your brother or sister has something against you, leave church right away and make it right. Don't wait until church lets out. First go, then come. First, **go** and be reconciled to your brother, and then **come** and worship your God."

The second example is taken from the court of law. It doesn't concern a so-called brother or sister but an adversary who's taking you to court because you owe him a debt. Jesus says, "Don't wait until you get to the court. Settle matters quickly—out of court! Once you get to court, it'll be too late. Your adversary will sue you, you'll be handed over to the authorities and end up in jail."

What's fascinating about both examples is they both deal with not just with **our** own anger but with anger that's directed at us from others. In both cases, someone has something against us. We've done something to them that needs to be made right. So it's not enough to deal with our own anger, we also must not arouse the anger of others. D. A. Carson said this, "We're more likely to remember when we have something against others than when we've done something to offend them. And if we're truly concerned about our anger and hate, we shall be no less concerned than when we engender them in others."

Last week Senator Rand Paul was mowing his lawn with headphones on when suddenly his neighbor, a physician, tackled him

and broke several of Paul's ribs. They've been neighbors for 17 years and the only motive that's emerged is the two men had a long-running feud over leaves and lawn clippings along the property line they share. Apparently, Senator Paul didn't agree with some of the neighborhood rules on how to maintain your yard, and so the two neighbors hadn't spoken to each other in years.

I'm not exactly sure what to make of all that, but I can tell you this: That incident didn't start when that neighbor tackled Senator Paul. It started years before, and it could have ended differently. One of those guys could have humbled himself and tried to make amends with his neighbor before it got to that point.

That's what Jesus is talking about. He doesn't say anything about who's right and who's wrong. He just says do what you can to make it right, and do it now. We should never allow an estrangement to go on and on, much less grow. Like Paul said, "Don't even allow the sun to set on your anger." If we want to avoid committing murder in God's sight, we need to take every possible step to live in peace with others.

The point of all this is simple: Our righteousness must go beyond just keeping the rules because there's a murderer in all of us. Jesus sets the bar higher than we ever imagined, and frankly none of us can reach those heights. This, of course, brings us back to the beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Blessed are those who know how far they miss the mark. Blessed are those who mourn over their sin and thirst for this kind of goodness and love, knowing they can't produce it on their own.

You see, one of the purposes of God's law is to humble us before God as we see the depth of our sin and our need for a Savior. The good news of the Gospel is not only does he forgive us, he comes to live within us. And when he comes to live within us, we begin to manifest his life; we begin to look like him and love like him.

Let me finish with a positive example from a man in this church who is learning the law of love. He's in recovery and was working on the ninth step of AA, which is about making amends to people you've harmed. As he began that process, he realized there was one amends, to his stepfather—he kept putting off out of fear that what he'd done was unforgivable.

Working the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous has been a life-changing event that brought me into a close relationship with God. This change did not happen overnight, it was a slow process that is still continuing today. In working the 9th step of Alcoholics Anonymous, I made amends to people who I've harmed in the past. Between 9 and 12 months sober I made the bulk of these amends.

But there was one amends, to my stepfather, that I kept putting off out of fear. Fear that the harm done to him, and my mother, was so great the prospect of facing it was overwhelming. My mother remarried when I was 5 years old and my stepfather helped raise me. As a confused child, I never showed him the love and respect he deserved. The real harm came when at age 14 my mom was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She battled the cancer with incredible courage and strength. She finally passed away from the disease four years later. During this time, and especially in her last few months of life, I was not there for her as a son should have been. I was off in my addiction, only concerned with partying and my own selfish needs. I imagine what it must have been like for my stepfather, to see the woman he loved dying, and the son she loves so much not there to support her. To make matters worse, during these years I'd been stealing money from a box in his closet.

He goes on to say how after being three years sober and becoming a Christian, he asked his brother for his stepfather's phone number. But it wasn't until four months later that he was moved to make the phone call.

I thought about that call every day for four months, but was overcome with fear. Then my fiancé and I pulled into the CPC parking lot with our fire relief donation. I was inspired by the people involved in packing up the truck and by those dropping off donations. I thought of all the people in emergency shelters who had lost everything, and how their faith was being tested, and the struggles they faced. As we were pulling out of the parking lot I was led to make the call. I immediately asked my fiancé to pull over. I said, "I have to do this now" and she knew exactly what I meant.

The amends was a complete success. Nothing like I had imagined. After greeting my stepfather, he got emotional and said, "not a day goes by that I don't miss your mother". He wouldn't accept the financial portion of the amends, but suggested I donate the money to a cancer-related charity. Since the amends, my stepfather has been to our house for coffee and will be attending our wedding in March.

That's a righteousness that goes beyond keeping the rules; a righteousness produced by the Spirit of Jesus living in us; a righteousness that transforms us from murderers to lovers.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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