

MORAL DILEMMAS:
The Ethics of Anger
A Study of Matthew 5:21-26

Characteristic of Completeness: Peace

Big Idea: What would Jesus undo?

Related Scriptures: Exodus 20:13; Psalm 34:14; Matthew 5:9; Romans 5:1, 8-11; 12:18;
2 Corinthians 5:17-21; Ephesians 4:3; Colossians 1:19-22; Hebrews 12:14; 1 John 3:14-16

Introduction

1. Welcome. And thanks for spending your Easter morning at Moon Valley. I'd like to begin with something familiar. It's a question you've probably heard and seen a lot.

What would Jesus do?

It's a pretty good question I'd say. WWJD: What would Jesus do? It's certainly a marketing success—what with the bumper stickers and bracelets and all. What would Jesus do?

But I wonder. I wonder if the question is actually misleading. I wonder if, in fact, the question invites us to focus on something pretty good to the exclusion of something more important.

You see, I suspect the question has a down side. When I think, What would Jesus do?, I tend to focus on external behavior, on doing things, on behaving. That's pretty good. But if all I'm focused on is behaving as Jesus would, I may be missing something exceedingly more important.

2. I'd like to propose a deeper, more fundamental question: What would Jesus undo? That's right. What would Jesus undo?

This question goes deeper than behavior. When I think, What would Jesus undo?, I think of ideas that need to be undone. It involves a renewal of our thinking, not just behavior. Sometimes the most important thing Jesus does in my life is undo—undo my thinking. So, when it comes to my thinking today, what would Jesus undo?

3. Look in the Bible and you'll find that Jesus undoes things. In fact, His earthly ministry is characterized by undoing things. In my sermon this morning, I want to show you how Jesus deconstructs prevailing notions—how He destroys popular ideas—how He takes apart widespread preconceptions.

- I. And this will not be some distant, theoretical, impersonal exercise. No. In fact, I want to begin by asking you a very personal question. Here it is: As far as your own way of thinking, what would Jesus undo this morning?

The question catches you off guard, doesn't it? I suspect most people are not too sure what Jesus would undo. "Can you give me an example," you say.

Okay. This morning, I want to go back a couple of thousand years to study an example of Jesus undoing the thinking of a crowd of people following Him.

The crowd is a lot like you and me. They are, to some extent, religious. In a moment, we'll see that they have some familiarity with the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. This is not surprising in that most of them are Jews.

And they have some interest in Jesus—enough to join a crowd gathered to hear His words. Many haven't quite figured Him out yet. He's some kind of powerful God guy who speaks with authority. And, who knows? He might be the Messiah.

The biblical text we'll be studying this morning begins in Matthew 5:21. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn there. It's Matthew 5:21. If you don't have a Bible handy, the text is printed for you on the sermon note sheet. We are resuming our study through the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 5:21, Jesus says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:21 "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'"

You can almost hear the Jews thinking to themselves, "Yup, we got it. It's the Law of Moses. Number Six of the Ten Commandments. We're not supposed to murder anybody. We've heard that. And we've behaved. We're not murderers. We're not guilty. We're good, moral, ethical people."

That's the thinking.

And maybe it's yours. "I haven't murdered anybody. So I'm good. I'm a good, moral, ethical person."

That's the thinking.

But Jesus undoes this thinking. He presses the command inward. Jesus shocks His hearers with a statement that challenges us even today. Just listen to the bomb He drops in the very next verse, Verse 22:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:22 "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court . . ."

Jesus is saying that merely being angry or hateful or malicious toward another person—even if only in thought or word—this, too, is murderous. You're just as guilty before the court.

Evidently it's not a human court, because human courts can only weigh behaviors, not hearts. Not so with the court of God. God judges hearts. And evidently, God finds the seed of vilifying anger just as guilty as the fruit of literal murder.¹

And this is unsettling. The written words of our text do not give us any indication of pauses in Jesus' delivery, but I imagine there is a pregnant pause here. And, in the pause, I imagine people thinking, "Did I hear Him right? Did He just say that I'm as guilty as a murderer, even if I've only had some passing angry thoughts and I've never laid a hand on anybody?"

In reference to the Ten Commandments, I suspect Jesus leads with the sixth commandment and not the first because the sixth commandment about murder is the one commandment that most everybody thinks they've got covered. Oh, I'll admit, I've got an occasional problem with coveting. But not murder. Okay, I've got occasional issues with not telling the truth. But not murder. And yes, I've used the Lord's name in vain. But I'm no murderer.

I think.

And so, I'm right with the first-century audience, thinking that maybe I didn't hear Jesus right on this whole my-being-a-murderer deal.

So Jesus removes all doubt. He restates the very same idea two more times using different language.² In Verse 22, He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:22 ". . . and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell."

Jesus is saying, "You think taking a person's life is murderous. You're right. But, I'm telling you, if you say a single angry, hurtful word to one other person, you're guilty. If you even think a single maliciously angry thought toward another person, you're guilty. You, too, are a murderer."³

¹ There is a righteous anger, evidenced by Jesus Himself, that is not sinful. But, the context here clearly suggests that this is a malicious anger.

² I agree with a host of scholars who think that Jesus is not presenting ascending levels of guilt or judgment; rather, He's simply restating the same idea for emphasis.

³ You may say, "That's a little harsh. Isn't He exaggerating a little?" Well, just listen to 1 John 3:15. It says, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer . . ." That's pretty direct. But you may say, "Well 'hate' seems like such a strong word. I'm not sure I've ever truly hated anyone. So I'm not so sure I'm really a murderer." Actually, the context of this verse defines for us exactly what "hate" means. The last half of the verse immediately preceding provides a useful parallel. In 1 John 3:14, it says, ". . . He who does not love abides in death." The last part of Verse 14 and the first part of Verse 15 are synonymous; they are restatements of the same idea. Therefore, the one who hates in Verse 15 is the same person as the one who does not love in Verse 14. As such, to hate here simply means to fail to love. And this is not just my idea. For example, in commenting on these verses, one Bible scholar agrees, saying, "Abruptly, and pointedly, the concept of 'not loving' in v 14 is identified as 'hating.'" (Stephen S. Smalley, *Word Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, 3 John*, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker eds., (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), 190.)

And so, you and I are undone. We who think we are not as bad as murderers, have we not hated? Have we not wished someone were dead in a moment of anger? Have we not vilified another? Have we not harbored animosity?

What would Jesus undo? Our self-righteousness. He would undo the thinking that we're good, moral, ethical people. God doesn't grade on the curve. Our hearts have flashed vilifying anger. And from a moral standpoint, we are murderers all.

So, what would Jesus undo? Our self-righteousness. He would undo the thinking that we're good enough to get to heaven—not perfect, but good enough. He would even undo the thinking that good people go to heaven. According to Jesus, no one is good enough. In God's courtroom, we all stand condemned. On the one commandment in all the Bible that seems easiest to obey, Jesus renders our verdict three times: guilty, guilty, guilty—“. . . guilty *enough to go* into the fiery hell.”

We are undone! And the very words of Jesus are our undoing. We join Jesus' first-century audience as convicted murderers on death row. I am a dead man. You are a dead man.

What would Jesus undo? Our self-righteousness. That's my first point.

Right now, you may be thinking, “What a gloomy message. Does this get better?” Hang on. Easter's comin'.

- II. The first-century audience listened to Jesus' convicting words, the darkness of their own hearts uncovered, their self-righteousness undone. Yet many kept following Jesus, and they found that Jesus kept on undoing things. He would undo the moneychangers. He would undo illnesses. He would undo legalism. He would undo greed. He would undo religious pretense. He would undo what it means to be a true leader.

But finally one Friday, it seemed that Jesus Himself was the one undone. The authorities had had enough of His undoing their things. And so they decided to undo Jesus.

Their verdict was unjust. The Savior was undressed. Their hatred was unleashed. Their torture was unmerciful. The disfigurement made Him unrecognizable. The suffering was unimaginable. Undone on the cross, Jesus said, “It is finished.” But He seemed to leave so much unfinished.

And so the hopes of Jesus' followers unraveled. Their very lives had been undone, and now there was no one to redo them. What good is it to find out that we're convicted murderers on death row if there's now no one to free us? What good is it to find out I am a dead man if I have no hope of real life? What good is it to find out you are a dead man if the only one who could save your life is Himself now dead?

That was Friday. But Sunday's comin'.

Come Sunday, some other things were undone. The stone was unrolled. The guards were unconscious. The tomb was unoccupied. The linens were unwrapped. The disciples were unknowing. The event was unexpected. The resurrection was unbelievable. But His appearances were unmistakable. And history has been unable—unable to explain away the resurrection. Death is undone! Jesus Christ is undead!

Today we celebrate Jesus being undead. Easter is all about being undead. Because in Christ, we too can be undead. We look back and we see now why it is so important for Jesus to undo our self-righteousness. Undoing our self-righteousness sets us up for another big thing that Jesus would undo.

What would Jesus undo? Our guilt. That's my second point. Jesus would undo our guilt. First, He would undo our self-righteousness, showing us we are certainly guilty. Then, He would undo our guilt, showing us we are certainly forgiven. We cannot appreciate the second without the first.

You see, Jesus took our place. He became the dead man as a substitute for us. What looked like His undoing was our salvation. Because of His unconditional love, His undeterred love, His undiminished love for us, Jesus took our death sentence upon Himself. To undo our guilt. To undo our punishment. To undo our condemnation. Romans 5:8 explains:

^{NAU} Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

What would Jesus undo? First, our self-righteousness. Then, our guilt.

- III. What is your part? What do you undo to get to heaven? What must you undo to become undead? What must you undo to become unguilty? What must you undo to become uncondemned? It's the third thing that Jesus would undo. It's the one thing we must undo: our unbelief.

You see, bad behavior isn't going to keep you from heaven; unbelief will. And it has absolutely nothing to do with being good enough. That's the thinking that must be undone. You're *not* good enough. Neither am I. Nobody is. Remember, we're murderers. That's why Jesus had to die and rise again. In response to His grace, your part is to undo your unbelief.

What would Jesus undo? Your unbelief.

Because of His unconditional love for you, Jesus died and rose again to underwrite the penalty for your unclean heart. In turn, Christ alone promises you eternal life—undeath unending—as a gift. A gift unearned, a gift undeserved, a gift unmerited. It's a gift you simply unwrap by undoing your unbelief.

What would Jesus undo? Your unbelief.

- IV. Some of you may be thinking, “Okay, I believe. I’ve believed in Jesus for some time now. I’m a Christian. And while all you say is a pretty good reminder, it’s not exactly undoing any of my thinking. My self-righteousness is already undone. My guilt is already undone. My unbelief is already undone.”

Well, that’s great. But Jesus is not done.

Jesus presses ever inward and makes yet another unsettling assertion in our text. He says that maybe some of us believers ought not to be at this service this morning. That’s right. Jesus says that some of us may have a more important thing to do. And it’s not brunch. Just listen to Verses 23 and 24. Jesus says:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:23 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar. . .

Now, presenting an offering at the altar was an ancient form of worship. A modern form would be attending a worship service like this. So, Jesus says:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:23 “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar [or attending a worship service like this] and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 leave . . .”

That’s right. Leave. Evidently, Jesus has no training in church marketing. He says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:24 leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.”

No training in church marketing, but perhaps finance. At least He says leave the offering.

Here’s the real point. Peaceful, harmonious relationships, particularly within Christ’s community of faith, are so important to the Lord that He says resolution of conflict ought to come *before* acts of worship. Making peace with your brother or sister ought to come *before* performing religious duties. Reconciliation ought to come *before* worship service attendance.

What would Jesus undo? Our conflicts. Our quarrels. Our divisions. That’s the fourth thing Jesus would undo: our conflicts.

Why? Because Jesus has a heart for the reconciliation of all relationships. And because animosity toward others adversely affects not only our relationships with people, but also our relationship with God. In a very real sense, if we’re not at peace with people, we’re not at peace with God.

And, come to think of it, peace or reconciliation is a theme that runs through everything we’ve considered so far. And so, Peace is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. Peace is woven throughout.

Let's review. Our self-righteousness gets in the way of peace with God, so Jesus would undo it. Our guilt gets in the way of peace with God, so Jesus would undo it. Our unbelief gets in the way of peace with God, so Jesus would undo it. Now, Jesus turns to something else that gets in the way of peace with God and other people: our conflicts.

You say, "Well, I can see how conflicts can get in the way of peace with others, but I don't quite see how conflicts get in the way of peace with God."

If you think about it, it's not so unusual. Growing up, when I beat up my sister, I had to answer to my father. When I made trouble for my sister, I got in trouble with my Father. And now, as a father, if somebody mistreats my children, *I'm* offended. I think that's the way it is with our heavenly Father.

Let me give you a biblical example. In 1 Peter 3:7, the Bible tells husbands that they ought to live in peace with their wives. Here's the reason, straight from Scripture, verbatim:

^{NAU} 1 Peter 3:7 . . . so that your prayers will not be hindered.

Here's the idea. When I make a murderous mess of things in my relationship with my wife—and sometimes I do—when I have anger simmering in my heart—and sometimes I do—God wants me to make up with her before I make up with Him. God wants me to ask her for forgiveness before I ask Him for favors. If I don't make peace, my prayers are unanswered. And if I don't make peace, my worship is unwanted. Leave. Make peace. Then worship.

And the peacemaking is not limited to marriage. The Bible tells us in Romans 12:18:

^{NAU} Romans 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

At peace with *all* men. That's everybody. Even somebody who's taking you to court. Back in Verses 25 and 26 of our text, Jesus explains:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:25 "Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent."

Jesus is again stressing the importance and urgency of personal reconciliation. And notice Jesus seems to expect conflict. The point is not so much to eliminate conflict, but to resolve it. Jesus doesn't say, "If you're being sued, shame on you." Or, "If your brother has something against you, shame on you." Conflicts are inevitable. The focus is on resolution.

Why is interpersonal peace such a big deal? Here's what I think. Jesus went to unparalleled extremes—He gave His life away, He died and rose again—to undo the obstacles preventing

peace with God and others. He paved the way. Now, He expects us to walk the path. He expects us to do what we can to make peace with others.

Of course, what we can do is not always enough. Sometimes reconciliation is not possible. We only have control over our part of the relationship. But here's the question: Have you done what you can? Have you done your part to be at peace with your antagonists, your in-laws, your ex, your parents, your children, your spouse, your coworker, your friend, your neighbor?

Conflicts are like Easter eggs. Left hidden, they rot.

What would Jesus undo in your life this Easter morning? Would He undo your self-righteousness? Would He undo your guilt? Would He undo your unbelief? Would He undo your conflicts?

Come Sunday, the stone was unrolled. The guards were unconscious. The tomb was unoccupied. The linens were unwrapped. The disciples were unknowing. The event was unexpected. The resurrection was unbelievable. But His appearances were unmistakable. Death is undone! Jesus Christ is undead!

And He lives to undo some things for you. So that you can experience His peace. A peace unfathomable. A peace unquenchable. A peace unavailable anywhere else. What would Jesus undo for you?

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for the things Jesus would undo. Our self-righteousness. Our guilt. Our unbelief. Our conflicts. Help us to rise up, as He is risen, to live out the peace He makes possible. Amen.