



## **UNCHAINED: Owning Our Messes**

### **Matthew 5:21-26**

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Over the past month we have been talking about finding freedom in forgiveness. Our focus has been on identifying the places in our lives where we hold guilt – either guilt for failures and problems of our own, or holding guilt against others for the failures of past relationships. We've named that only in receiving the forgiveness of God ourselves, or in extending forgiveness to others, can any of us truly live freely into the lives we have been created and called to live.

It seems like internalizing the pain of broken relationships and past problems would make life easy. How bad can it be to just not talk about things? Who really wants to lay out on the table all our dirty laundry and rehash issues of the past? When you gather with family or friends with whom you have a broken relationship, it's far easier to let the elephant sit quietly in the corner, perhaps sipping some warm tea, than to call the elephant out for what it represents. When we hold on to such guilt and pain from past problems, we never quite have a clear conscience. The scar tissue of such pain is always there to remind us of the difficulties of our times past, and it holds us back by reminding us of hurtful words and actions, and the reminder of such guilt finds its way bubbling up too often, chaining us to the past we so desperately yearn to forget.

I've had a number of conversations over the past few weeks about this series with some of you who I know are struggling with how to find and how to extend forgiveness. I have my own struggles with knowing how to offer forgiveness to others who have caused me great pain. I've also had conversations with people at Coffee House Chats who are scarred by pain that well-meaning and faithful church people have caused them in the past. Truly, we – the Church (universal) – are not immune from being the cause of pain. The Church has a great history of shaming people into guilt – guilt for bad decisions, guilt for failed relationships, guilt for breaking the historic law of God, and guilt for doubting the one true authentic and infallible interpretation of scripture (as if such a thing exists).

Today, to help us with some of these struggles, we're going to look at what is perhaps the strongest language used by Christ that calls us to own up to our messes, and to find resolve for those places in our lives for which we harbor guilt, or in which we know reconciliation with another is needed.

The fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel is the narrative of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. You may think my sermons run long from time to time; Jesus' sermon begins in chapter five and runs through chapter seven. Three chapters of teaching, spanning a multitude of topics. Standing atop the mountain, Jesus is preaching to a large audience of intrigued followers, including the disciples, all of whom have gathered to learn from this teacher who has been healing the sick, making the lame to walk, casting out demons, and ceasing the tremors of epileptics. The

majority of the crowd gathered there would have been faithful Jews – the norm among people who lived in the fishing region of Galilee. They would have known the Biblical Torah, the mosaic law, and the historical narrative of the Hebrew scriptures.

Jesus begins his sermon with the beatitudes – a series of statements claiming the nature of those who are blessed. “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the meek ... blessed are the peacemakers ...” and so on. He then goes into this compilation of arguments regarding the nature of the law. He says first in verse 17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil.” The stories that follow, including our passage read this morning, all have a similar construct. They begin with a two-fold statement. First, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said ...” and then names a law that these faithful Jewish listeners would have known well. Then Jesus says, “But I say to you ...” and he lays out a new way of understanding the historical law.

Jesus isn’t simply rewriting the law; in fact, that’s not at all his intention. He’s not come to abolish, but to fulfil. Jesus’ restating the commandments is not an attempt to name a *new* list of rules to follow. Instead, he’s attempting to name the intention of the rules that already exist. He’s not wiping away the laws of old, he’s offering clarifying statements regarding the historical Hebrew teachings.<sup>i</sup>

Our passage today, coming in verses 21-26, offers the first clarifying passage. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not murder;’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’” ... This should be recognizable as one of the Ten Commandments. Do not kill. Jesus continues, “But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult your brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘you fool’ (that is, if you speak ill toward another), you will be liable to the fire of hell.”

Jesus is not minimizing the effect of the law, he’s broadening it. I mean, I don’t know if your thoughts are like my thoughts – but I think it’s pretty easy to get through life without murdering someone. I mean, there’s always that person who cuts you off in traffic who pushes the limits of your self control ... or that person who takes the last whole grain bagel right in front of you at Starbucks ... but really, murder’s not even in my vocabulary as a possibility. Jesus comes along and says that even having anger in your heart toward those people is a violation of the command.

In other words, it’s one thing to act rightly, but it’s a whole different story to have your attitudes and emotions in check.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus is not *just* worried about the lived out actions sparked by one’s mind, he’s focusing in on the thoughts and feelings of the heart. In shaping and defining the true meaning of the law, a focus which Jesus names elsewhere is all about the love of God and the love of neighbor, Jesus says that our love for one another must go further than ‘not murdering.’ “It curtails even anger and insults that would alienate us from one another.”<sup>iii</sup> He names, “Hostility that results in verbal abuse [is] just as worthy of punishment as murder.”<sup>iv</sup>

And really, come one, this shouldn't be that hard of a teaching for us to accept. Jesus' connecting anger towards another with murder shouldn't be such a foreign concept for us. Even when we talk about the hostility of two people, and focus in on anger that is expressed in verbal attacks on each other, we use the language of murder to define the exchange. You've heard the expression, 'stabbing someone in the back;' it's part of our own cultural language to use the words of murder to define anger and resentment.

For Jesus, this isn't just another thing to work on; this is a primary issue. Let's keep looking at the passage: we see beginning in verse 23 Jesus' instructions for what to do when such issues of anger or hostility exist. Jesus says, "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Do you catch the implications of what Jesus has just said? This is like the best permission you can have to sleep in on Sunday morning. Jesus says, it would better for you to skip church and go mend a broken relationship than to approach the altar knowing that you have a broken relationship in need of reconciliation. To the greatest extent, Jesus says that if you reach the altar, ready to make your sacrifice, and you remember that someone else has something against you, you should leave your sacrifice there at the altar and go mend that relationship. This might mean leaving the wood you had brought for burnt offerings, but it could also mean leaving the bull, sheep, goats or pigeons you had brought there at the altar. I imagine that would have been a sight to see – livestock running free through the temple as people left them behind in search to go find someone with whom they needed a reconciled relationship.

This is Jesus' command – do not come and say you love me in an act of worship if you have not taken the time to look another in the eye and tell them you love them. "Reconciliation with an offended brother or sister takes precedence even over acts of worship ... One is first to be reconciled with one's brother or sister and only then come to offer one's gifts."<sup>v</sup>

The other piece of what Jesus says here that catches me is our call to be aware of the pain we cause others. We have to own our messes. "Upon becoming aware of any offense committed against another, reconciliation should become our first priority."<sup>vi</sup> We can't just push off our wrongdoing and expect to move on with life. Truly, as humanity, we've been trying to do this from the start. What does Adam say when God comes and asks about his knowledge of his own nakedness? Adam says, "It wasn't me God, it was her." Jesus doesn't give us the excuse – he says if you know of a problem, go and deal with it. Make amends, and you be the one to take the initiative. "Regardless of who caused the problem in the relationship, the person who becomes aware of the difficulty is responsible for taking steps toward reconciliation."<sup>vii</sup>

Jesus is the living witness of God's love in this world. We know from Jesus' birth to his death, that Jesus exemplified the persona of God for us to witness the breadth of God's love for us and for this world. Through Christ, God calls us to reconciliation with one another because God intends for us to live in mutual support of one another. Like the visions of the Kingdom of God

where the wolf lies down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf with the lion, where the cow and the bear graze side by side, so God calls us to live in mutual support and live in harmony with one another, ruled by love. The call by Christ is that we cannot continue to live in faithful compliance with the law of God if we are not working toward reconciliation with one another.

Now, I know, and believe me, I know, that there are moments when the ideal is not immediately possible. “The process of reconciliation and forgiveness often takes time, and not a small amount of patience on the part of both parties. ... [but truly] forgiveness is the first step toward reconciliation. [Forgiveness] in the knowledge that we have been forgiven and therefore we [can] forgive those with whom we are in conflict.”<sup>viii</sup>

But the words of Christ do not allow us to write off reconciliation for long simply because the ideal isn't possible. “Jesus' reframing of righteousness exposes the easy truces we make.”<sup>ix</sup> You know how easy it is to say to ourselves and to God, *I'll work on that next week; I'll deal with that person next year; I don't have the energy for him today God, how about tomorrow.* You know how little we like people meddling with our personal lives – much less Christ, who call us out by saying, *what about her ... what about him ... what about that one time ... what about those words of anger you didn't even say, but you still hold in your heart?*

And talk about meddling – how about all the good work we do to try and overcome the feelings of anger and guilt. Truly it is easier for us to take up a global or communal cause for Christ, speaking at large on behalf of the marginalized, or the hungry, or the immigrants, or the refugees (all good and faithful things to do), but how many times do we turn to this work on the macro level because it is far easier than it is for us to work toward reconciling the one or two deep wounds we have with others in our own personal lives. As if the great work of sharing the love of God in the world will overcome and silence our own messes – as if it will heal the pain of those few broken relationships we've never sought to reconcile.

Christ calls us, as we come to the altar to worship and to celebrate the love of God, to not come as such high and mighty worthy and righteous saints, but to “offer to God the totality of our lives – the darkness and the light.”<sup>x</sup> We must come and acknowledge we are broken, we have to own our messes. We must come and name that we are in need of one who can offer us forgiveness that we too might be able to extend the living witness of God's forgiveness to others.

This morning, I want you to think of a relationship in your life that has suffered some damage. I'm not worried about who is to blame, but I want you to hold that person in prayer this morning. I want you to offer that broken relationship to God as a place in your life where forgiveness needs to be experienced. I want you to imagine that person is in this room with you, and that together, you are able to look at one another and acknowledge that you are each a child of God, created each in the image of God, and are both worth the love of God and the love of one another.

You know, in Jesus' ministry, he invited all kinds of broken people to come to the table. Jesus invited people in all conditions to the table to share in a meal and to offer them new life. From Saul, to the Pharisees, to Nicodemus, to the woman of the city, to Judas at the last supper – ***Jesus calls us to the ideal, but welcomes us in our imperfections.*** “While we strive for Jesus’ ideal, when things fall short of the mark, coming to the altar, offering one’s gifts, is not a bad place to start afresh. ... [The meal] serves to encourage those at the table to begin life again, committed to living faithfully and in harmony with each other.”<sup>xi</sup> For at the table, Christ accepts you for who you are, instills in you the promise of new life, and fills you once more with the reminder of God’s love.

So, as you seek reconciliation and renewal with others in your life, hear this good news: God delights in you, and loves you unconditionally. God desires the best for you in and through your relationships. God makes this table available to you that you may know, tangibly so, the love of Christ in the bread and the wine. God extends you a seat that you may know the grace of God. And there’s a seat next to you for those with whom you have the most hurt, that together – in Christ, through Christ, and with Christ – you may share in the freedom of forgiveness that unchains us from the past for a future that exemplifies the faithful sharing in the love of God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Ann Case-Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Amy Oden. [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org). Retrieved February 1, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Ann Case-Winters.

<sup>iv</sup> Carla Works. [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org). Retrieved February 1, 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Ann-Case Winters.

<sup>vi</sup> R. Jay Waggoner. *Repairing Broken Relationships: Forgiving & being forgiven*. ECS Ministries: Dubuque, IA, 2012.

<sup>vii</sup> Ronald J. Allen. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> Charles James Cook. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> Amy Oden.

<sup>x</sup> Charles James Cook.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid.