

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Arrival: A Study of Matthew 1–7

STUDY FOURTEEN

Steering Clear of Murder

Matthew 5:21–26

When you come to Christ, the Spirit of God makes His residence in your life. He lives there to control your emotions, to restrain your rage, to calm your tendency toward retaliation, and to give you genuine peace.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

IN his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus laid out a roadmap to deeper righteousness, which was not the kind of righteousness that the scribes and Pharisees modeled. Their piety was all external, bound up in countless regulations and meaningless rituals.

For example, the scribes and Pharisees interpreted the Mosaic law's prohibition of working on the Sabbath as carrying a burden. But what counted as a "burden"? According to commentator William Barclay, these nitpickers went to extremes to define acceptable burdens:

They spent endless hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a brooch or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or an artificial limb. These things to them were the essence of religion. Their religion was a legalism of petty rules and regulations.¹

Jesus warned people not to take this religious rabbit trail. He led His followers into the kingdom of God along the path of inner change. While the religious leaders placed their emphasis on appearances, Christ emphasized character. They focused on rules of the flesh; Jesus focused on the motivations of the heart.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Steering Clear of Murder

Matthew 5:21–26

In the remainder of Matthew 5, Jesus illustrates this deeper righteousness through six subjects that include murder (Matthew 5:21–26), adultery (5:27–30), divorce (5:31–32), oaths (5:33–37), retaliation (5:38–42), and love (5:43–48).

For each of these topics, Jesus repeats a pattern: “You have heard. . . . But I say . . .” (5:21–22, 27–28, 31–32, 33–34, 38–39, 43–44). By using this rhetorical technique, He sets His teaching of the Mosaic law against the teaching of the religious leaders, proving His heart-level righteousness is “better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees” (5:20).

Let’s begin where Jesus began with a deeper understanding of the law’s prohibition of murder.



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Murder is a subject we might not think applies to us. But Jesus wasn’t addressing the act so much as the attitude that inspires the act. His teaching applies more than we realize! Prepare your heart to receive Jesus’ words with the following prayer.

Father, I need Your insight as I read Jesus’ teaching on anger. Reveal to me the ways that I have stabbed a friend in the back with gossip or cut down an enemy with criticism or attacked a stranger with a rash judgment. I need to hear Jesus’ words. Lead me into peace with others in Your kingdom, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Now read *Matthew 5:21–26* in light of the larger context of Jesus’ explanation of deeper righteousness. What broader subjects does Jesus address under the topic of “murder”?



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Observation: Murder, Anger, and Reconciliation

In the first stage of *Searching the Scriptures*, we simply observe what the passage says, noticing main verbs and nouns, contrasts and comparisons, sequences and patterns, and examples and illustrations.²

Outward Act of Murder, Inner Attitude of Anger—Matthew 5:21–22

What do you observe about Jesus' comparison of murder with anger in *Matthew 5:21–22*?

What illustrations of anger did Jesus list? And how did Jesus illustrate the increasing harm? Hint: notice the levels of the courts that Jesus references.

Jesus' illustrations of anger move from an insult to a pronouncement of condemnation. It's what we do in a burst of temper when we take off all restraints. It's an anger that won't forget, refuses to forgive, won't be pacified, and seeks revenge. It's when we seethe deep within and cultivate hatred for another person. We're dealing with murder in the heart.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Reconciliation—Matthew 5:23–26

Although we may never commit murder, we may cut into another person's soul with angry words. Or, just as hurtful, we may cut people out of our lives by shunning them *as if* they were dead to us. What can heal the wounds of anger? Forgiveness and reconciliation.

In Matthew 5:23–26, Jesus illustrates these remedies with two situations. What do you observe in the first situation (*Matthew 5:23–24*)? What is the person doing, and what comes to mind? Who is responsible for taking the first steps in reconciliation, the one offended or the offender? What does Jesus say takes priority—even over a sacred duty?

Pick out the key actions (verbs) in *5:23–24*. Write them down as steps to reconciling with someone you have offended.

When you remember you have said something or done something that is cutting and you know you are wrong, go and be reconciled. Turn enmity into amity. Turn the offense into a resolution. Reconcile with the brother or sister you have hurt. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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In *Matthew 5:25–26*, Jesus switches scenarios from the temple courtyard to the city courthouse. What aspect of this conflict is different than the conflict in verses 23–24? What is similar?

Notice that in Jesus' teaching on murder, He contrasts people considered guilty "before the court" (Matthew 5:22) with people settling their differences *before they go* to court (5:25). Also, He refers to two different courts: a human court and the divine court. Read *5:21–26* again and write down any other themes weaving through Jesus' teaching.

I encourage you to cultivate reconciliation with others. Is it humiliating? It can be. It's certainly humbling. Begin with these words: "I was wrong. I want to make it right. Please forgive me." —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Interpretation: Escalation of Anger to Murder

What did Jesus' teaching mean to His original audience? His listeners were used to measuring their righteousness by the Pharisees' standards: if a person doesn't murder someone, then he or she is guiltless before God. What principle did Jesus teach in this passage to open His listeners' minds to a deeper standard of righteousness?

In Matthew 5:22, Jesus cited two forms of verbal abuse: calling someone *raca*, an Aramaic term meaning “empty,” and calling someone *moros*, a Greek term meaning “fool.” What do these derogatory names communicate about the heart of the person saying them?

The natural course that such name-calling takes leads toward murder. If we assassinate someone's character without remorse, could actual murder be very far behind? The Pharisees themselves stepped across the line from contempt to murder when they plotted to kill Jesus (Matthew 12:14).



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In a later setting, Jesus taught this same concept, saying, “From the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander. These are what defile you” (Matthew 15:19–20). What was Jesus teaching about the key to righteous living under God’s rule?

The Pharisees taught the law, but they never dealt with the anger. They were the ones who led the way to the crucifixion of Jesus. He shattered their self-righteousness, and they despised Him for it. By teaming up with the Romans to nail Jesus to the cross, they hoped to silence Him. On the contrary, they set the message free. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Heart of Anger

Other passages in Scripture describe the harm inflicted by harsh words. What do these passages say about the destructive power of anger in a person’s heart?

Romans 3:10–15



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James 3:5–10

James 4:1–2

By pronouncing angry judgment on others, we turn the tables and place *ourselves* on the scales of judgment. Thankfully, Christ leads us to a place of peace within ourselves, with others, and with God. Let's follow Him as we apply His teaching.



Application: Responding to Jesus' Counsel

Bundling together Jesus' words, we can sum up His thoughts with the following truths.

The principles of kingdom living go deeper than the external. Because Jesus loves us, He doesn't just deal with surface matters. He enters the parts of our hearts where our deepest fears and resentments reside to bring about real and lasting change. In what part of your deeper life would you like Jesus to help you change?



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The potential of anger is far greater than mere words. Our words betray our true thoughts and feelings and inflict immense harm. Reflect on your speech. Do you need to address an anger issue that may be erupting in your words? If so, what is at the core of the issue?

The power of reconciliation is stronger than revenge. When the man in Jesus' story remembered he had offended someone, he went right away to be reconciled. Is there someone you have offended? How can you make it right with this person?

When we reconcile with someone with whom we're in conflict, it's amazing the burden it lifts from our hearts. The Pharisees argued about what counts as burdens we should not carry on the Sabbath. They fussed over whether a tailor should carry a needle. *How ridiculous!* How about whether we should carry anger? Now that's a burden worth releasing!



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, help me to live in an angry world without responding with anger in return. Give me the heart to live differently, to refrain from cursing others with contempt and labeling others with derogatory names. Free my spirit to live under Your rule and feel the joy of Your peace. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 128.
2. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

