

Mat 5:21-26 Words to live by: forgiveness

A few years back, when Toby moved into his first share house in Canberra, he told me about a conversation he had with one of his housemates. As soon as this housemate found out Toby was a Christian, he grilled him with questions!

One of the questions was around the issue of good and evil – and who says what is good and what is evil? The housemate felt that there were no absolutes, that what was ‘good’ was considered good, because it has emerged in society as the best way forward. In other words, it worked. What was evil was stuff that hurt society, and therefore didn’t work – and good and evil were things that could evolve and change. Interesting viewpoint....

As Christians, we believe there are absolutes when it comes to good and evil. God is good, and the author of all that is good and what is not of God is evil. God has the final word on what is good and what is evil.

The reading from Matthew introduces us to some of the more important ethical teachings of Jesus in the New Testament where he speaks unequivocally about what is good and what is evil in relation to our conduct and our relationships. There are six issues in this discourse, four of which are in this morning’s reading. (You’ll be pleased to know that we’re only going to look at the first one!)

that the law had God’s authority, but he was also aware that over the generations, the various interpretations of the law that had been applied had begun to change its focus, so that the central truths of God’s law were being lost.

So Jesus makes His own pronouncements. *"You have heard that it was said"* and states what is a commonly held belief about the law, but then he says, *"but I say to you ...!"* Jesus uses very emphatic language in this passage. So emphatic, that this places his declarations on the highest level of authority, - on the same level as God himself! (which is one of the reasons that the teachers of the law were so incensed by him; why they called him a blasphemer, and wanted him dead!)

Jesus doesn’t mince words as he delivers *God’s* truth on these matters.

The first prohibition Jesus addresses is the one against killing. The Law had said that if you took another's life yours was to be taken in return ([Lev 24:17](#)). It was seen as a legal requirement which brought balance. The tendency had been if one person from your tribe was killed, you wiped out the perpetrator’s whole tribe as an act of revenge! So the law limited revenge to one life for one life. But what had happened over the centuries was that the

Jews had lost the central tenet of this law, which was the value of human life, and had focussed instead on the legal ramifications. In other words, the law had become, if someone kills one of yours, then you MUST kill one of theirs.

Jesus took the focus away from legal payback, which had found its way into the law in a myriad of ways, and refocused on the value of life. He says that anything that leads to killing is wrong. It is not only the act that is to be avoided but the attitude of ill will that leads towards the act.

To be angry with another person, says Jesus, brings you to judgment. In Jesus' day if you insulted someone by calling them "*raca*," which meant stupid, or empty-headed, or a fool, you could end up in court. (The Sanhedrin was the Jewish Supreme Court). Jesus took it further – he said if you called someone a worthless fool or outcast, you were in danger of more than just a court appearance. You were in danger of "hellfire." Those are strong words! Acting towards another human being out of anger has no place in God's kingdom.

Let me say at this point that the rising of a feeling of anger within us is not a sin – it is often a natural human response to injustice and to pain. But how we deal with that feeling is what can make it a sin. If we hold that anger close to our chest; if we dwell on it, or nurse it; if we choose even to let it sit in the back of our minds and not deal with it; if at any point, we allow it to inform our words or our actions – then it is sin.

Some years ago, a friend of mine and her husband were having dreadful trouble with their son. He'd got into drugs, and they had taken over his life. The parents had tried everything to help him, but he wouldn't cooperate. He actually stole from them on a number of occasions, selling things the house that would bring in money to feed his habit. He took all their electronic equipment one time. After that, the boy's father cut him off, refusing to have him in the house or to have anything more to do with him. He was angry with him to his very core.

Some time later, the boy's father was diagnosed with terminal cancer. A week or so before his death, the father and I talked about his son and the father's refusal to forgive him. He was still angry and bitter, and justified his position by saying he did not have to forgive his son, because his son had not asked for forgiveness! He went to his grave, with his anger and bitterness eating him up.

The person who lost out the most in this sad story was not the son because he was not forgiven, but the father, because he was bound and chained by his own bitterness. The father was the one who had no light or freedom in his life; the father was the one who went red in the face and felt the heat of hatred

whenever the topic of his son was brought up, the father was the one who continually lost his peace over his son.

If there is someone in our life that we are angry with, or bitter towards, even if we know they deserve it, not only do we sin when we harbour these thoughts, but we imprison our own spirits and deny ourselves the freedom God wants for us. The best thing we can do for *ourselves* if we are angry with someone is to let it go.

But it's not easy, is it? - Especially when we feel the person we are angry with deserves our anger because they're at fault.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4, "**In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.**" He acknowledges the anger – "**In you're your anger**", he says. But in his next phrase, "**Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry,**" he presupposes that it lies within our power to put our anger away from us, before the sun sets.

To forgive someone is first and foremost an act of the *will!* If we hate someone, and we pray and we pray, waiting to *feel* like forgiving them – we may wait a long time!

The first step in being able to forgive someone, believe it or not, is to actually repent of our own sin; to repent of harbouring feelings of anger. Not HAVING the feelings - HARBOURING them.

(Actually, there's a step before that. If we know we are harbouring anger towards someone, and we know it's not good, but we don't care, and we don't particularly want to change, then the first step would be to ask God to GRANT us repentance – because you won't repent if you're not repentant...).

So the first step is to pray – to acknowledge our hardened, angry hearts to God, to ask forgiveness, and to ask God to change us – not change the other person – change US.

The second step is to then to *decide* to forgive, and act on that decision. (This is also part of repentance - which is not just a mental recognition of sin - it's a turning away from it) Every time the feeling of anger surfaces, we give it to God. Every time we encounter the person in question, we *act* towards them in love, even though we may not feel like it!

The third step is to pray for the other person. Not that they will be struck by lightning - but that God will BLESS them. Jesus was very clear about this. He said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

We will then find that God will transform us, if we are willing to come to him and engage with him about this.

Jesus addresses so many human problems by asking His followers to take the initiative in reconciliation. I wonder how many families might be brought back together if people were willing to let go of their anger, and pursue reconciliation.

I wonder how many church feuds and squabbles would be healed; how many communities would live harmoniously; how many religions and races might live together in peace - if people were willing to let go of their anger and pursue reconciliation.

As Christ's followers, we are called to have the highest regard for our fellow human beings; we're to respect the sanctity of human life and to meet difficulties by the practice of love.

With Christ as our example and our enabler, we can be empowered to forgive, and set free to love.

As we come to the confession in a few moments, I'd like us to observe a few minutes of silence. In that time, let us offer our hearts to the scrutiny of the Spirit, asking God to reveal any anger or bitterness that may be lurking in our hearts. Let us ask for forgiveness and in his strength, determine to forgive.

May the sun go down on our anger this day. Amen.