

Choosing Transcendence

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

There was once a little boy with a very bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, to hammer a nail in the back fence. The first day the boy drove 37 nails into the fence. Day by day, the numbers decreased. The boy discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He didn't hammer even one nail in the fence. When his dad came home from work, the boy proudly told him about it. The father suggested that *now*, the boy could pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper.

The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, "You have done very well, my son. Now, we must look at the holes in the fence. The fence is no longer the same fence. When we say things in anger, they leave scars and wounds that look just like the holes in this fence. The fence now needs to be repaired.

Our passage today speaks to the effects of anger. In last week's passage, Jesus said to his disciples, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it." In today's passage, Jesus continues teaching his Sermon on the Mount by giving examples of what he means by this. Jesus is not giving a replacement of the Ten Commandments, but a deepening, a realization of the original intent of the laws. It is the same theme of which we have been speaking the last few weeks: God is not as concerned with how we perfectly worship as to what is in our hearts and how we treat one another.

Is the worship, is the following of the laws of God, instituting a change in one's heart? In last week's reading of Isaiah, the people were forlorn that God was not noticing their fine practices of religious piety. God responded that their forms of worship made no difference if it didn't impact their treatment of one another and those in need. Are you housing the homeless, are you feeding the hungry, are you giving clothes to those who have none?

Jesus begins by referencing the 6th Commandment, "You have heard it said, you shall not murder, or be liable for judgment; but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable for judgment." Like the results of worship, Jesus

is pointing out that it is what is behind the law that matters just as much as the law itself – the intention behind the act.

If we are angry or insulting or are prone to name-calling, we are also liable for judgment. Because it is these behaviors, left unchecked, that eventually lead to murder. Stop them before it's too late. If we have murderous thoughts and then we worship and the murderous thoughts remain, this is problematic. Likewise, if we know that someone has an issue with us, something against us, we must reconcile first before offering our gifts to God.

Jesus is pointing out the tendency for hypocrisy among the religious. Those who claim to be right with God and yet are not right with their sisters and brothers. This is not the freedom God had in mind when offering the commandments to Moses to give to the people. To say, "I have not murdered," is not quite enough. It doesn't really check the box of Commandment 6. Not murdered, done! I'm all good!

Jesus is reminding his disciples that if they are holding grudges and resentments, they are not living to the fullest that God intends for them. Murder destroys relationships, and anger does, too. It is through reconciliation that we will manifest God's will for us and our communities. We need to repair and rebuild the hole-filled fence.

The 12-step programs have a saying, "Anger is a luxury we cannot afford." Because anger is where the trouble begins, and we don't know just how far it will take us, or what it may leave in its wake without us even knowing. There is a saying, too, that we are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought.

This is what Jesus is getting at here. Anger is going to arise within us. It is not the emotion of anger in itself is altogether wrong; anger is inevitable. Jesus is speaking about what we do with our anger, how we manage it so that it is not destructive to us and our communities. We can begin by recognizing our anger and then taking steps towards reconciliation.

One Biblical example of reconciliation of siblings is between Jacob and Esau, the twins who struggled even in the womb. Jacob tricks his brother Esau out of his inheritance and many years later sees Esau coming for a visit with an army of 400 men. Jacob goes fearfully and tentatively to greet him, offering 7 bows. Esau however, runs to greet Jacob, embracing him and kissing him.

Though we are not told of the process of this transformation, we can learn from the Jacob/Esau story that there appear to be two components for forgiveness and reconciliation. The first is an acknowledgement and/or apology from the person seeking forgiveness. Jacob does this when he bows down to Esau, showing repentance for his wrongs.

The second component is revealed when Esau embraces his brother, kissing him and weeping with joy over the reunification. Esau accepts his brother's apology without conditions or punishment. He wholeheartedly forgives him, and this part is crucial to their reconciliation.

In a Wall Street Journal article entitled, *Sibling Rivalry Grows Up: Adult Brothers and Sisters Are Masters at Digs; Finding a Way to a Truce*, author Elizabeth Bernstein notes that sibling rivalry is a normal aspect of childhood and siblings are our first rivals. They competed with us for the love and attention of the people we needed most, our parents, and it is understandable that we occasionally felt threatened.

Sibling relationships are often the longest of our lives. People questioned later in life frequently say their biggest regret is being estranged from a sister or brother. The rivalry often persists into adulthood because in many families it goes unaddressed.

The article suggests 6 suggestions for reconciliation between estranged or distanced siblings from psychologist Jeanne Safer.

1. The first step is to consider who is this person outside of the sibling relationship. What are some likeable characteristics? Remember the positive memories.
2. Take the initiative to change. It could be a gesture, like an offer to help with a sick child, a conversation or a letter. Be sincere and don't ignore the obvious. Perhaps say, "These conversations between us are painful. I would like to see if we can make our relationship better."
3. Gestures count. Not everyone is comfortable talking about a strained relationship. Phone calls, invitations to spend time together, and attempts to help can be seen as peace offerings.
4. Consider the sibling's point of view. Try not to be defensive. What did childhood look like through his or her eyes?
5. Tell the sibling qualities that are respected, such as, "I love your sense of humor," or "I admire what a good parent you are."
6. And, finally: It won't kill you to apologize; which brings us back to Jesus' point -- if you don't apologize, it could lead to some very unfortunate consequences.

Jesus always has in mind the hurting and oppressed. When he discusses Commandment 7, though shalt not commit adultery, he presents the same concept as murderous thoughts lead to murder: it is adulterous thoughts that lead to adultery. So change the channel. Replace the thoughts with something wholesome and healthy and God-given.

His suggestion to tear out the eye or cut off the hand is an exaggerated way of saying, "Don't go there." Remove the thought. Remove the source of the sinfulness so that it doesn't go any further and rupture relationships, families, and communities.

Again -- we are not responsible for our first thoughts, but we are responsible for our second thoughts. When we have a thought that is not God-given because it clearly would create harm for ourselves and others, we must choose not to act on it, not to take a second thought in pursuing it.

Similarly with his words on divorce – divorce was legal, but there were specific consequences in Jesus' time for the woman who was given the divorce and then faced survival in a world where women were property. A divorce threw a woman out with little opportunity for her sustenance. Jesus was concerned with the protection of women from economic abuse that divorce leaves in its wake, as well as upholding the sanctity of marriage.

Which leads to his last point in the passage -- that of swearing. This refers not to bad-language, but to taking oaths. Theologian William Brosend claims that an oath is a substitute for honesty: I know you don't believe me so I *swear*. In God's kingdom, there is no need to take an oath to God to swear the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help me God because people are naturally honest. Yes means yes and no means no and people trust each other.

Imagine the lack of anxiety in living in a world where there is complete trust in all relationships. This is what God intends for us and our communities, our world. In the ideal world, we don't need oaths because we say what we mean and mean what we say.

In light of the Old Testament reading in Deuteronomy, set before us is life and prosperity, or death and adversity. If we obey God's commandments and love the Lord, than we shall live and be blessed. The passage implores us to choose life. Jesus implores us to do this in a way that transcends the law.

Not simply to aspire to a life of rule-following where there is no murder, adultery, and deceitfulness; but to aspire to live into a life of reconciliation. This is not only choosing life over death, prosperity over adversity, but it is choosing transcendence. It is choosing to live in a state of grace, where our focus is not on our own survival and well-being, but that, too, of everyone around us.

Theologian David Lose reminds us that the law is not merely a set of rules by which to abide, but is given as a gift. The law is a gift. The Ten Commandments are given after God has declared that the people of Israel are God's people. The law is not meant as a way to earn God's love, but rather a gift given to God's people because God loves them. God's gift of the law helps God's people to live life to the fullest and in abundance.

The law does this by strengthening God's community. The law is not about meeting individual needs but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of God's children can be nurtured, and all are healthy, safe and blessed.

The good news today is that God gifts us the Word and guidebook because we are each and every one so loved by God. God desires for us to be free through God's Word in Jesus Christ and the way of reconciliation. All we have to do is say yes. God will and already has provided us with everything we need for this life of abundance and freedom. We need only say yes, God, I choose the life you would have for me. I choose to live in a state of grace. I choose transcendence.