

Our messages during Lent all come from the Sermon on the Mount. This sermon by Jesus may be summarized as the spiritual standards of a people reconciled to God. That is, it is not about how to be saved. It's about how we live after we've been saved, how to walk the talk, that we might be a source of life to the people among whom we live. That's what we're going to talk about tonight.

PRAYER

READ Matthew 5:21-24: "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'you shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

To understand the Sermon on the Mount it's helpful to note that this is not case law. That is, Jesus is not giving us rules for making a decision concerning every conflict we may come up against in our lives. For example, later on he preached, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" (Matthew 5:29). Jesus was not saying that every time you look at another person lustfully you must tear out an eye. We'd all be blind, if He did! Rather, we should understand that Jesus intentionally used hyperbole—gross exaggeration—in order to make a point having profound spiritual ramifications which require our thoughtful consideration.

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:21, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.'"**

When Jesus said, "**You have heard that it was said to those of old,**" he was referring to the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, people who were in charge of leading worship and teaching people about the things of God, but who didn't know the first thing about God, despite their years of education!

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:22**, "I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'you fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

"Hell of fire" is literally "Gehenna of fire." Remember how I've said that Jesus was very concrete with his illustrations, helping his listeners to easily visualize and understand what he was saying? Gehenna was a valley on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the trash dump for the city. Trash was piled up and burned. Day and night it smoldered. And the stench was terrible. But going back even before Jesus' time it was even worse. There was a time when the Jews were apostate and followed the practices of the Philistines, worshiping their god, Molech, to whom they burned human sacrifices. So by Jesus' time, as the people watched the flames and smoke rise up from Gehenna, they had a very real representation of hell!

It sounds like Jesus wants us to keep our traps shut! Don't be angry, don't insult your brother, don't call anyone a fool. Well consider how Jesus himself did insult the scribes & Pharisees, regularly! He called them "**whitewashed tombs!**" (**Matthew 23:29**), and he accused them of being "**fools & blinds guides**" (**Matthew 23:17**). Do you see what I mean about how Jesus' commandments are not case law, but that they are about something with deep spiritual implications which requires our thoughtful consideration?

Also note how the psalmist wrote in **Psalm 14:1**, "**The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'**" And in **1st Corinthians 15:35-36** St. Paul called those who denied the Resurrection of Christ fools.

As astute students of the Bible we see here that the ones whom Jesus, Paul, and the psalmist called fools were people who did NOT know God. That's why Jesus didn't want us to use that expression lightly. It's a terrible judgement against a person to proclaim they don't know God. Today, "fool" doesn't mean god-hater anymore. As a semi-Christian country I think Jesus would tell us never to call someone a non-Christian unless we are absolutely sure, especially if they tell you that they are a Christian. That's what this means: Don't judge another person's relationship to God.

But perhaps you are thinking, “Sticks and stones may break my bones.” But is that all there is to it? You have heard the expression, “Words are power”? Our country was created with words. One collection of words is called the Declaration of Independence, and the other is the Constitution. With words everyday men and women are declared guilty or non-guilty with words in courts of law. And with words the media moves us to action or inaction, laughter or tears, joy or frustration. Words are power.

With words God created the heaven and the earth in six days. With words Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. With words God proclaims our sins forgiven. And with words, one day, the Lord will judge and redeem once for all. Words are power.

So consider how we murder a brother or sister in their heart when we use mean, cruel words. I think that is what Jesus wants us to think about.

Jesus said, **Matthew 5:23-24, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”**

This is the solution for our problem, the problem we have with our fellow man and with God when we hurt one another with words. Jesus said that our relationships with each other affects our relationship with God. In other words, we can’t compartmentalize our relationship with Jesus. We can’t gossip, cheat, and lie to other people and then expect for everything to be okay between us and God.

Let’s carry this one step further. If there’s bad blood in the church between two people everything can be spoiled for everyone. So Jesus wanted us to be reconciled one to another so that our relationship with Him was right and so that the work of his church was not hindered.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the Gospel in flesh and blood. Jesus died for us to forgive us our sins, He rose from the grave on the third day to gift us with eternal life, He sent down the Holy Spirit to transform our lives from lives filled with grief and sorrow into lives filled with peace and joy. And He wants this

relationship which He has formed with us to take root in our hearts so that we have the same kind of living, revitalizing, transformative relationships with each other.

Friends in Christ, this week may you be encouraged in your heart to know and believe that Jesus lives in you and He's building a relationship with you.

May you be encouraged to build the same kind of relationship with your brothers and sisters in the Lord, being reconciled to one another, lifting one another up with words of kindness.

And may you have the opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.