

# ***“With or Without Cause”***

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

**Corinth Reformed Church**  
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW  
Hickory, North Carolina 28601  
828.328.6196 [corinthtoday.org](http://corinthtoday.org)

*(© 2020 by Robert M. Thompson. Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright 2011 by New York International Bible Society.)*

***Anger boiling over can cause irreversible consequences with people and God.***

***Matthew 5:17-26***

***January 17, 2021***

(Available in print form at [corinthtoday.org/sermons](http://corinthtoday.org/sermons) or by audio at 828.328.6196.)

## ***What makes you angry***

When I laid out this sermon series a few weeks ago, I did not expect that tensions in America would be as high as they are. I also could not have known there would be a high-profile murder in northeast Hickory this past week. As this week progressed, however, I certainly became aware that “people” are angry. I didn’t want to preach a sermon, however, on “anger out there.” I wanted to know what’s happening among those in our church family, so I sent out a survey. Within 48 hours, the responses numbered more than 500. Here’s what I learned. Not everyone is angrier than they were a year ago, but almost half of you (43%) are. When I asked you, “How angry are you?” the responses ranged from 0 to 100. The average is about 4 on a scale of 1-10.

The next question was, “Who or what is making you angry?” Three out of four (75%) are angry about “politics and politicians.” The second most common response (60%) was “bias in the media.” A little over half of you are angered by lack of morals and decency (54%) extremists (53%), and violence, crime, and abuse (51%). 33% are angry about “protests and marches,” with 33% angered by “silence and passivity.”

Answers related to the pandemic come in a little lower – 26% are angered by rules related to masks and social distancing, and 39% by people who do not take the virus seriously. 24% are angered by their own thoughts, words, and actions, 16% by “family and friends,” and 5% by God. God must be OK with people saying that, because there’s a lot of anger directed at God recorded in the Bible. Write-in responses included “scam phone calls” and “the Carolina basketball team.”

If you are hoping I will address politics or the pandemic or Carolina basketball in this sermon today, you're going to be disappointed. My topic is anger, because that's the subject of the Scripture text in front of us. Whether you're angry at God, at yourself, at your family, or at "those people," or whether you're angry that people are angry or not angry, let's focus on the question, "What did Jesus say about anger?"

### ***Don't get ahead (17-20)***

We learned last week that Matthew describes the crowds drawn to Jesus early in his ministry as diverse – geographically, ethnically, spiritually, and politically. If Jesus drew a similarly diverse crowd to Hickory today, they would be Black, White, and Latino; Trump loyalists, Never Trump Republicans, and Democrats impatient to impeach; terrorists, peaceful protesters, and stay-at-homers; mask-wearing, socially distant listeners out on the fringes and no-mask crowds packed in nearby; those suffering from or bereaved by Covid and those who think it's all overblown. I want you to imagine that all of them are listening to Jesus in an outdoor natural amphitheater next to the lake.

Matthew places Jesus' teaching about an anger in the context of what we call "The Sermon on the Mount." It's a sermon about turning the world's values upside down. He begins with what we call "Beatitudes." In the kingdom of heaven, it's a blessing to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry, and persecuted. Yes, Jesus knows this world doesn't see any of that as good. But his disciples are to think differently than the world. You shine light in a dark world by letting people see your good deeds to glorify God.

The rest of chapter 5 clarifies Jesus' relationship to what we call the Old Testament. Like any public figure in a divided world, Jesus had already been misquoted and misunderstood. Some had said he was anti-Bible, that he devalued what Moses and the prophets had said. "Not true," Jesus insisted in verse 17. "The Old Testament is not the problem, not a problem at all." Jesus' goal wasn't to eradicate the Law but to continue and complete what Moses and the prophets had said.

In verse 18 he addresses the thinking of his day: that God's commands can be ranked in importance, that as long as you major on the majors, little rules don't matter. Jesus says everything God says matters. If you go to the distinction between civil law, ceremonial law, and moral law, that may be true but you're getting ahead of Jesus. His point here is that everything that matters to God should matter to you.

In "the kingdom of heaven," he continues in verse 19, the definition of "great" and "least" focuses on what God has said and what God wants. "Which laws do I have to keep?" is the wrong question. In this new but old thing God is doing, the right question is, "How do I shine light?" What opportunities do I have to distinguish myself from the world around me?

In verse 20, Jesus makes a rather startling statement. At a time when literally no one possessed a Bible in their own home, the people who knew the Bible the best were

those who hand painstakingly hand copied the scrolls and taught the Law to others. Next to them were Pharisees, who were apparently passionate not only about keeping the Law of Moses but enforcing it. For Jesus to say, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” seemed absurd.

Somebody commented in a Bible study this week, “It’s like saying you have to know more and act better than Pastor Bob.” The flattery is undeserved, believe me. But maybe on some level it helps you grasp the impact of what Jesus said.

One of the ways to read not only this passage, but the whole Sermon on the Mount, is that Jesus is deliberately raising the bar impossibly high. Nobody can meet these standards. He’s setting us up for grace. That may well be true, but again, you’re getting way ahead of the story. The danger is that you’ll dismiss what Jesus says, thinking, “Well, nobody can do that. I’ll do what I want and ask for forgiveness.”

I’m not sure anyone in the crowd that day was thinking along those lines, nor do I think Jesus wanted them to. He actually wanted them to examine their hearts, words, and actions, and turn it up a notch or a hundred because the kingdom of heaven is near.

In what sense, then, can anyone surpass the righteousness of scribes and Pharisees? They focus on observable and specific rules. With the best of intentions, they had added great quantities of interpretation and application to what the Torah literally said. If you take the Law seriously, do this, don’t do that, times a thousand.

Jesus is saying that’s not only not enough, but it misses the point of the Torah. Totally. He gives six illustrations of what he means. We will focus on one – anger.

### ***What Jesus said***

Jesus’ explicit claim of authority, and implicit claim of identity, is remarkable in this passage. By the end of the sermon, this diverse crowd is “amazed” because Jesus’ teaching is not at all like the scribes, who were always quoting some other source. Six times Jesus contrasts what “You have heard...” with “But I tell you...”

In this first example, Jesus’ “You have heard” is what the Law actually said. “You shall not murder” (21) is one of the Ten Commandments, as you know, and “anyone who murders will be subject to judgment” is a fair summary of the Torah. Capital punishment for murder (and lots of other acts) was the law.

Verse 22 is where I want to spend more time. Jesus’ main point is clear: You may not have taken a life with a dagger or sword, but in my kingdom that’s not all you need to examine. He makes three parallel statements in his “But I tell you...”

- Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister...
  - ...will be subject to judgment.

- Anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’
  - ...is answerable to the court.
- Anyone who says, ‘You fool!’
  - ...will be in danger of the fire of hell.

That’s strong stuff. Convicting words. It puts everyone immediately into what I call “But mode.” If your first response is, “But I have a perfectly good reason to be angry...” Or “But Jesus got angry...” Or “But what if they actually are fools....” you’re not alone. Almost everyone who has ever read this passage has gone into “But mode.”

I grew up reading it in the King James Version, which is based on the best copies of the New Testament that were available in 1611. If you have an old King James, you’ll notice a phrase that doesn’t appear in any other translation, unless it’s in a footnote: “Whosoever is angry with his brother *without a cause* shall be in danger of the judgment.” Without going into too much technicality, let’s just say this is a very widespread addition to what Jesus actually said. Whatever Jesus is saying about anger, it’s true *with or without cause*.

There’s debate about what Jesus means by “hell” in this passage, and some of you are waiting to see if I say it right. I’m not going to talk about hell at all, not because I don’t believe in it, but because Jesus’ primary point here is not about hell. It’s about anger. Focus on anger.

It’s clear in verse 22 that there is a crescendo of consequences from “subject to judgment” to “answerable to the court” to “in danger of the fire of hell.” It’s not as clear whether the first part of each statement also crescendos. I think so.

He starts with “angry with a brother or sister.” I don’t need to define it. Anger is anger. If you’re angry, people will judge you. Then Jesus says if you insult someone by calling them “Raca,” something like “Blockhead,” you might be called to account by legal authorities. Both anger and insults can get you into trouble with people.

Saying “Fool!” can get you into trouble with God. The issue is not mouthing two syllables – *MOR-ay* (the Greek word from which we get our English “moron.”) It takes the verbal insult up a notch. Maybe 100 notches. While “Raca” is an insult, *MOR-ay* rejects the person God has created as irredeemably unworthy of a relationship other people and even with God. It’s contempt and rejection. “I’m done with you!”

The NIV, for stylistic reasons, translates a phrase that is used three times in the verse differently – “will be subject to” the first time, “will be accountable for” the second time, and “will be in danger of” the third time. It’s literally, “will be liable” (*enochos estai*). With that in mind, let me retranslate succinctly –

- Anger risks judgment.
- Insult risks court.
- Contempt risks hell.

I don't think Jesus is saying that anger always results in judgment or insult always lands you before a judge. So I don't think he's saying that contempt automatically condemns you to hell. But you're taking a risk when you leave it unchecked, *with or without cause*. Consider what's liable to happen.

What Jesus is not doing here is naming certain words you should never say or you'll go to hell. That's the kind of thing Pharisees and scribes said. He is saying is that in his kingdom, every thought, word, and action must be open God's scrutiny.

Then he says what to do. In verses 23-24, *prioritize reconciliation over worship*. The worship system that was in place when Jesus spoke these words was different than ours, but when Jesus says "First go and be reconciled," he means that worship is empty when relationships are left intentionally shattered. He doesn't even say, "If you have something against someone." Instead, "If someone has something against you." God's at least as interested in the horizontal as he is in the vertical.

Then, in verses 25-26, *consider that you might be wrong*. Again, the legal context is different today, and in our system we sometimes use the court system like others might have used a mediator. But the essence of what Jesus is saying is that you may have only surrounded yourself with people who affirm and validate what you think – even if it's contempt. What if you're wrong? It might cost you more than you can pay.

### ***Safeguards***

The final question in my short survey was about who or what helps you most when anger rises. I'm proud of my church family for your responses, or *most* of your responses. The dominant themes were prayer, Scripture, talking, releasing control to God, exercising, meditating, deep breaths, music, diversion, quiet times.

In a conversation this week a friend likened anger to a soup pot. Anger simmers lots of emotions together. There are always multiple ingredients in anger. I altered the boiling analogy a bit yesterday morning while making my steel cut oatmeal. In the past I have put a lid on the pot, and most of you know what happens when you cover a pot of boiling starch. It will eventually create a big mess. I've done that with my oatmeal, and I've done it with my anger. Some of you will always remember some stories I've told about anger disasters right along with my plumbing disasters. We've since found a "boil over stopper" that magically prevents mess.

Jesus is not telling us never to be angry. He's warning against "boil over" that can cause irreversible consequences with people and God. So what do safeguards look like?

*Cultivate a kingdom heart*. What does it mean to be "salt" and "light" in this world? We think the world is as bad as it's ever been, worse than ever. I've been listening to an audio book about the building of the Panama Canal. If you're troubled by media bias now, you need to know it's been much, much worse at other times and

places. Whether it's that story or others in world or church history, we have to keep reminding ourselves that humans are by nature sinful and foolish.

Kingdom people recognize that the world around is not nor ever will be, before Jesus comes, the kingdom of heaven. We recognize the difference between the world's kingdom and God's kingdom and don't conflate the two.

The kingdom heart is concerned about following God's laws in a way that others "see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (20), but it is equally concerned that others see a heart that represents the heart of God. It's a heart that is ready to forgive, to reconcile, to listen. On this Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend we remember it's also a heart that notices injustice and wrong and seeks to advocate for those who are disadvantaged and powerless.

*Passionately guard your input and output.* Many of us are recognizing that news media and social media only inflames anger – not only when it comes from "the other side" but maybe especially when we agree with the point. We need to know what's going on in the world, but if Jesus is right about the potential of anger to wreak havoc to body and soul, then kingdom people need to guard it.

Social media is being used by the left and the right to destroy lives. I may use my Facebook to say Happy Birthday or propagate the Bible, but I'm not going to use it inflame or divide – unless Jesus is dividing line. I don't want anything I say to be a reason someone else says, "If that's what you think I'm not interested in your Jesus." And when we say, "Well, I have *cause* for my contempt," we didn't get that from Jesus.

*Value truth over power.* It's not my purpose today to tell you who or what specifically will be vindicated by history in today's divided world. It is partly my goal to remind you that over time, truth and justice have a way of fighting back to the top. In the meantime, there is absolutely no wiggle room in the New Testament for not abiding by the rule of law, even when it hurts, unless we're required to renounce Jesus, or show respect to those who govern, even when they're in the wrong. See Romans 13 and 1 Peter 3. I have done my best to pray for and respect Donald Trump as President whether I liked what he said and did or I didn't, and I will do my best to do the same with President Joe Biden.

The kingdom principle is that all human power is cotton candy. It's vapor. We seek to know and tell the truth because we know Who is the way, the truth, and the life. And he prayed to his Father, "Your Word is truth." We are human, of course, and find ourselves sometimes swayed by popular opinion or by voices we prefer. But our heart is to know and tell truth, and not be ultimately loyal to any power on this earth.

The reason we can confess our anger and find peace is because we know ultimate power is real, but it doesn't belong to any human government or party or person. God's the One in charge, and through Christ we belong to him. Amen.