

Sixth Sunday after Trinity;

Matthew 5:20-26 K.J.V.

This sermon was first printed in the “Two Sermons on Anger.” *A new and unaltered reprint appeared under the title: “One person should not be angry at another, an excellent sermon. – An exhortation to patience and meekness, a second sermon by Dr. Martin Luther, Wittenberg, 1543.” At the end are the words, “Printed at Wittenberg by Joseph Klug.”*

Contents: Concerning anger and its signs.

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

This text has now been the theme of sermons for more than fifteen hundred years, and will continue to be until the day of judgment, before a person can be found who fully believes and keeps it. It has been copied enough and clearly enough explained, so that we can read and hear it daily and continually. However, it will indeed not be exhausted and still less lived perfectly, although everybody fancies he can hear and learn his fill in one day, so that he will need no more of it. But God knows What fools and dunces we are when we believe ourselves to be the wisest; for that reason he constantly presents one and the same sermon to us, and does not grow tired of drilling and forcing it into us continually, hoping to bring us to the point of seeing our blindness and stupidity, and, like obedient pupils, begin to learn and practice it. [The above is inserted from Luther’s Two Sermons, “Zwo Predigten.”]

PART 1: CONCERNING ANGER

1. This Gospel we have fully and sufficiently explained on other occasions, when treating of the entire sermon of Christ, which Matthew the Evangelist records in three chapters; for today we will take a part of it, where Christ expounds and explains the fifth commandment. For here we observe first, that Christ attacks a sin called anger, which is very common and powerfully rules the world. And it is not one of the gross, public vices punished also by the world, but one of those fine sins of the devil that do not want to pass for sin. For they sail under false colors, so that no one can rebuke and punish them. For instance, pride will not be called pride, but truth and justice; envy and hatred do not want to be reprimanded, but rather extolled as being true earnestness and godly zeal against wickedness. These are really the two colors the devil carries in his realm, namely, lying and murder, which in the eyes of the world claim the honor and praise of being holiness and righteousness in the highest degree.

2. For this reason our Lord and Savior singles out the Pharisees, who fain would be the holiest and most pious, and be so considered by everybody; he even calls their doings by the beautiful name of righteousness, but he pictures and judges it as one not leading to heaven but into the abyss of perdition, a veritable fruit of satan. And this he does for the reason that they wanted to be called righteous and pious, defying the whole world to prove the contrary, and at the same time were filled with venomous wrath, envy and hate. The world cannot see nor judge in such matters, therefore Christ alone is the judge here who dare and can pass such a sentence of judgment. Even if this righteousness of the Pharisees be ever so beautiful and holy, yet, they shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven; for I do not desire nor will have a righteousness that stamps itself as such, and will not be called sin, but struts about in the fine coat of divine righteousness, so that we must call them Christian, pious people, holy spiritual fathers, etc.

3. Now, on what is this righteousness of the Pharisees based and where does it derive its name? On the fact that God said, "Thou shalt not kill," etc. On these words they planted themselves and stood. The text says nothing more than "Thou shalt not kill;" hence it follows that whoever does not kill, is righteous. But when my feelings are hurt and I am wronged, I have good grounds and reasons for being wrought up and for resenting the injustice; at the same time my wrath appears doubly justified because it suffers violence and injustice without actually killing. This wrath of mine advances a step by embellishing its cause in proclaiming its innocence and parading its piety before God and the world thus: Have I not good reasons for being angry? This and that my neighbor has done to me in return for my many favors, and I would have gladly given him my life's blood; this is the thanks, the returns, with which he pays me. Am I to suffer all this and pass such malice by? And at this point a Pharisee boldly proceeds to malign and persecute his neighbor in the highest degree, wherever he can, inflicting harm and injury; and all this is claimed to be done justly, he himself being pious and holy, yea, extolled as a martyr in the sight of God and men.

4. In like manner, when the Pope and his followers condemn, burn and murder all who will not worship their abominations, counting them as disobedient to the Christian Church and obstinate, this of course must be called genuine service of God, and God should feel elated over becoming worthy of such saints. Our great noblemen act much in the same way, who boast so loudly they are friends of God and of the whole world, but enemies to iniquity. Indeed, what a great friendship we here have with God and with mankind! Where shall God stand before such saints in order to raise them high enough heavenward?

5. Behold the excellent, grand and sacred anger of the cavalier or nobleman, who cannot possibly be guilty of a transgression or an injustice; and whoever is not of this opinion is evidently not a godly man. This sermon of Christ seems therefore very peculiar to the world, in fact it is unknown in use and practice, though heard often enough and well known as to its words. For the world does not consider it a sin for a man to resent a wrong, when he is innocent; and it is true that he who has a clear case against his offender can also seek redress in court, all this we must admit. But in adding his personal wrath to matters and trying to avenge himself, he overdoes it; one law now conflicts with the other, and a small right develops into a great wrong.

6. Hence you must in this instance so tune the organ as to have the pipes sound in harmony, and so as to prevent two from clashing. For what kind of justice would you call it when one offends you by a mere word, or pilfers a penny's worth, and you go and cut off his arm or burn down his house, crying angrily the while: Well, he did me wrong, and I have good reasons, etc.! In such a case your murderous wrath, that does tenfold more violence and injustice to me, is not to be called a sin, but righteousness and holiness, while I am to be considered unrighteous and suffer wrong.

7. This now I am not saying for the benefit of strangers, who are without, except merely for an illustration to show how this vice rules in the world; but concerning us, both teachers and scholars, who pride ourselves on being evangelical and still want the liberty of becoming angry and to rage when we please; and not permit ourselves to be punished nor reprov'd, but rather than that everything may go to pieces, if only we be considered to be in the right, and pious, despite the fact that such a despicable farce of right causes a hundredfold more wrong.

8. Therefore Christ here takes energetic action, and abolishes anger wholly and completely in the entire world, draws it to himself and says: I do not merely say, Thou shalt not kill, nor say Raca to thy brother, but thou shalt in no case be angry; the one is as solemnly and earnestly prohibited as the other. For you are not told to judge or avenge yourself, and even though you are right and have a just cause, still your wrath is of the devil; as St. James in his James 1:20, says: "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Hence all anger is to be abolished entirely from us and the wrath of God alone is to work; otherwise it will turn out to be the devil's wrath and it certainly does not cool down without sin. Just as also these three: to judge, to avenge and to glory, have been taken from us, and no person should share in them, though they have ever so good a cause and ever so great holiness. But to God alone belong honor, judgment and vengeance, hence also wrath.

9. Now, I fear, this will not be done by us as long as we are here in this life, and yet it would be grace, if we only became so pious as to make a beginning; for as soon as we suffer an injury, flesh and blood at once act as flesh and blood; they begin to rage and rave in anger and impatience. It is natural for us to feel hurt when suffering injustice and violence, hence it is necessary to check and restrain the feelings of anger and resist them. The feeling that you are injured will pass away; but that you in addition desire to avenge yourself in this or that way, is prohibited. Therefore see to it that one fits well into the other, that one claim does not conflict with the other nor cancel it, but let the two harmonize, so that both may continue. If you cannot secure your rights without doing greater harm, let it go. For it is not good to check or punish one wrong with another, nor is God willing to have universal justice perish because of your petty claims.

10. Now the aim and contents of this sermon by Christ are as follows: You fancy that whoever does not inflict a blow with his arm has not acted contrary to God's command; but he is at liberty to be angry at his neighbor and to avenge himself; and to take vengeance is so far right, and no sin at all. This would nullify the commandment, leaving it without any force whatever. For it does not ask merely that you refrain from killing with your fist, but also from doing harm or injury with your tongue or your heart. If not, how about the command that we are to do good to our enemy? If that is to hold good, we most certainly must not work against our neighbor. Otherwise in what respect would we be better than publicans and public sinners, as Christ himself says, Luke 6:32, who are friends to each other, the one not inflicting any harm on the other?

11. But possibly you say ' Well, if wrath is to be so thoroughly rooted out of the heart of man, how is evil to be stayed and punished, which cannot be done without some severity? But if evil is to have free course and left go unpunished, you would soon have no house and no town. I would reply: We know that God has committed the judiciary to the civil government and to that end established princes and lords, who bear the sword in God's stead; their sword and its edge is God's sword and edge. Aside from this they are personally exactly as other people are, having no more right to be angry than anybody else. Now the judge or executioner, in condemning and executing a man that never personally did an injury to either, does so in God's stead, officiating in God's place, inasmuch as the malefactor has become liable to God's sentence and penalty. Assuredly there should be no anger nor bitterness in man's heart, and yet God's wrath and sword accomplish their work.

12. The same holds good in war, when you must either defend yourself, or vigorously thrust, beat and burn: then likely wrath and revenge reign supreme, and yet it should not proceed from the heart of man, but emanate from the divine authority and command, so that the wicked be punished and peace be maintained. Even though you thereby meet with damage and harm, you must submit. Thus God suffered his wrath to come over Jerusalem through the king of Babylon; again through the Romans, until not one stone remained upon another.

13. Hence where such wrath exists it is not to be called man's wrath, but God's. And when, unhappily, you commingle God's and man's wrath, it is the miserable doings of the devil. Wickedness, I say, must be restrained; but this duty must be performed in God's place and stead. But when a judge and government are not godly, and they mingle their personal wrath

with God's, and grace their actions with the name and shield of the office; when they are secretly hostile to me and can do me harm, they avail themselves of opportunities to do so, and then claim to have done so officially: this I would call diabolical malignity, but they claim to have done the right thing and to be entitled to praise.

14. But you say: Well, the officer has done this and the other thing to me, and I cannot restrain him in any other way; if I should allow it, I would never have peace. I answer: It is indeed not right for persons to harm you, nor are you forbidden to protect yourself in a proper way; but it will never do for you to play double, using the office as a vent for your wrath, so that people will later on say: Mr. John – or Mr. Peter – did not do this, but the mayor or the judge, and you then take credit in saying that you did not do it from motives of anger or hatred, but of duty and justice.

15. Here you see that infamous filth formed by appending human, yea, devilish wrath to divine wrath and making one cake of both, which indeed should be kept asunder farther than heaven and earth. And just as they, contrary to the second commandment, use the name of God in vain by swearing and the like, making that sacred name serve the purpose of a lie, so that it can be on the market under the label of that beautiful and glorious name: so too in this instance the office and law that are God's must serve the purposes of your envy and hatred giving them a standing so they can achieve all they purpose in the way of harming a neighbor. At the same time you parade about as if you had done the right and proper thing. Yea, you are a two-fold saint; in the first place you have been abused; in the second place, you do not avenge yourself or seek redress personally, but in the capacity of an officer or judge. In this same way our tender saints, the Papists, bishops and priests, now act everywhere, and, following in their wake, great princes and lords illtreat and murder people, as the whim of their raving wrath and hatred may move them. And in the end all this is to be called the service of God and supreme holiness.

16. Thus the wrath of man is at all times full of envy and hatred to his neighbor, being occasioned by the devil and planted in the heart of man, especially in the Pharisaical saints, who sin manifoldly and are more worthy of condemnation than others, since, for one thing, they interfere with God's office and law, robbing him of his own, and then want to be in the right and be considered pious.

17. On the contrary when God's wrath is administered according to his command, it does not spring from envy or hatred, but from pure love and a good heart. A heart that deplores the fact that man should suffer any ill, and yet, for his own sake and the sake of his office, God must punish and abolish wickedness.

18. For it is indeed plain that Adam loved his son Cain as being his firstborn flesh and blood, and he moreover wished to be holy and began to serve God with his first offering, etc; and thought his offering was far more acceptable to God than his brother's. He also insisted that he was right and his brother wrong by virtue of being the first-born, so that he had to be the true priest and the first in God's sight. On these things he depended, despised his brother, and fancied to have good reasons for being angry and for persecuting and slaying his brother; as if injustice were done him in that Jehovah had no respect unto his offering.

Therefore he goes ahead, and because his father did not approve and praise him, he murders his brother. He follows this up by being insolent, for when Adam in the name and place of God calls him to account he retorts, What do I know of my brother? Am I to be his keeper? Now, dear as he was to Adam as a natural child, and after Abel's death his only child, still his father pronounces that stern and dreadful sentence, Genesis 4:10: "The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth." Again: "A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. "Truly these are the words and actions of wrath, for by them he placed him under the gravest ban and direst anathema, expelling him from heaven and earth. And Adam forthwith proceeds to execute this stern wrath, and banished his son, so that he should nowhere have a safe dwelling place. Without doubt he did this very reluctantly, for he would by far have preferred to keep his son; but the wrath of God must take its course, assigning death and the fire of hell.

19. The Christian Church must act on the same principles, when putting a person under the ban and "delivering such a one unto Satan," as St. Paul did at Corinth, 1 Corinthians 5:5; also when denying him the sacrament and all fellowship, so as not to participate in his sin. This indeed is a dreadful sentence and terrific wrath; still it is not the wrath of man but of God. For the Church would much rather see man converted and be saved; as she shows by her actions, for where one repents and is converted, she gladly receives him back as her dear son and rejoices over him with all the angels, as Christ says of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. Luke 15:6f.

20. Here we must beware not to abuse this power, as the Pope has been guilty of doing against those attacking his person or rule, thus confounding his person with his office, making out that his wrath is God's wrath, thereby spoiling both and pouring poison into the wine. For thus the Pope has, under the name of divine wrath, threatened and stunned emperors and kings, and yet he accomplished nothing more than to pour out his own wrath and spite. For this reason his church is in Scripture called a church of blasphemies, Revelation 13:5,16, having the marks of blasphemies written on her forehead, in all her words and deeds.

21. This now is the wrath we call the divine or paternal wrath. Then there is another, called the brotherly wrath, of the same nature because it proceeds from love. For instance when I am angry at a person whom I heartily love and to whom I wish all manner of good, and I am grieved because he will not forsake his sins and do better, so that I always distinguish between the person and the sin, to help the person and restrain the sin, doing all I can by exhorting, warning, threatening and correcting, in order to lead him to forsake his sins.

22. But it is well here also to be on one's guard, lest a rogue be back of this, in the sense of one's own wrath intermingling. For our wrath should be so wholly absent that not a speck of it be found; but that God's wrath alone hold sway, which is to flow either from the office assigned, or from brotherly love, which here would mean from the wrath of God. For it is God's command that we admonish, correct, reform and help one another, so that our neighbor desists from his sins and receives our admonitions gladly and with thanks. This is the "wrath" of that common Christian love of which Christ says, Matthew 18:15: "If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone,"

and in Scripture it is called an excellent, godly jealousy. St. Paul in Corinthians 11:2 says' "I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy." For a wrath of this nature does not seek your disgrace or disadvantage, but your honor and advantage; it would regret to see you injure the prospects of your soul's salvation.

23. So we assert that Christ here is not preaching on the office which is God's, nor on love, but on each person's own and individual wrath, proceeding from our heart and will, and directed against the person of our neighbor: – this wrath is to be wholly done away with and be put to death, no matter if the injury and injustice done to us hurts and pains. To illustrate' that John the Baptist was so shamefully slain, that Christ was nailed to the cross, that the holy martyrs were so cruelly put to death, all this did not pass without the weeping and lamentation of pious hearts; for we do not have, nor should we have, hearts of iron but of flesh, as St. Bernhard says: Dolor est, seal contemnitur; it is painful, but must be borne and overcome. And there is quite a difference between enduring pain, weeping and lamenting, and seeking revenge, or entertaining hatred and envy.

24. Now God wants this commandment: Thou shalt not kill, understood to mean so much that no one is to be angry. For by nature we all are liars, born in natural sin and in blindness, not knowing how to be angry, nor seeing how depraved our nature is, to-wit. , that it is not able either to love or be angry aright, since in both it seeks nothing but self and selfish ends. Since now by nature we are so corrupt, it is forbidden and annulled both to love and be angry as a human being, in which our nature would seek its own ends. On the other hand, divine love that "seeketh not her own" but that of one's neighbor, is enjoined, and an anger that is zealous not for his own but for God's sake, whom it behooves either to punish transgressions against his commandments, or out of a spirit of love, and for the good of our neighbor to help him.

25. The Pharisaical holiness, however, does not act thus; but as it has no love for one's neighbor but only wishes to see self honored and praised and served; so too it cannot' but rage and rave against the truly pious persons, and still pretends not to have sinned against the commandment in question. ,lust as Christ was treated by the Pharisees and high priests, who delivered him to the judge Pilate to be offered upon the cross, and still they did not want to be accounted guilty, but to eat the pascal lamb and remain holy.

26. Hence the Lord strikes a fresh blow at all the Pharisaic holiness and righteousness, denying them every particle of grace and the kingdom of heaven and condemning them to hell-fire, as having an unrighteousness doubly wrong in God's sight and corrupt to the very core. Therefore I say, says God: "Whosoever is angry with his brother;" I do not say, He only that slays with his hand, but if you have anger in your heart, then you are already worthy to be condemned by the judgment; for such wrath originates only in man's inborn malice, which seeks either its own revenge and wantonness, or its own honor and gain. But God does not want you to seek your own honor and right; but let him seek and demand it who should, and to whom he has given authority, namely, the judge and executioner, who are not looking after their own but God's affairs, for otherwise they would not be permitted to execute or punish anybody. But see to it, says he, that you personally do not grow angry,

but so completely control your anger that, be it in official duty or not, it does not proceed from the heart.

PART 2: CONCERNING THE SIGNS OF ANGER

27. The other part of this text, “Whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca,” etc. , we hold to mean all kinds of evil demeanor and bad turns done to a neighbor, which are not done by angry words. Such a man, Christ says, “is in danger of the council;” it has, as yet, not been determined what to do with him, but he has incurred the verdict of guilty; it remains merely to determine the penalty. This means that such a person cannot enter heaven, but has already merited his condemnation, the only difference between him and those in perdition is that he is a little more remote from the final punishment; but nevertheless he also belongs there.

28. The third part is: “Whosoever shall say, Thou fool. “This is also a very common vice, consisting in robbing our neighbor of his honor and reputation, be it done behind his back or to his face, which is called “contumeliam” and “conuitium,” defaming and reviling. Whoever does this, Christ says, “is in danger of hell-fire;” that is to say, there is no need of debating the question, of citing the culprit, indicting and sentencing him; he is already convicted and condemned, it but remains for the executioner to lead him off and do his duty. So God does not want you to avenge yourself out of anger in any form or manner, be it with your heart, with your fist, or with your mouth, and thus do an injury to your neighbor, show him spite, give him unkind words, etc.

29. But I hear you say, Who then can be a preacher or a judge or a plaintiff, if no one’s honor is to be questioned, or be ever called a fool? Why then preachers, judges, plaintiffs, witnesses, etc. , are all to hold their peace. But here, as I have stated, this difference is to be observed. When I, as a preacher, reprove you publicly from the pulpit, or privately in confession, I do not do so, but God’s Word: therefore you are not to complain that I am speaking against your honor. For a preacher cannot, in keeping with his office, abuse or revile anybody, unless he be a rogue, who mingles his own malice and hatred with his office. And you cannot say to a judge when performing the functions of his office: You are speaking against my honor in calling me a thief and a murderer; for God and not the judge, has spoken thus to you. Therefore it will not do to say it is touching your honor, when being reproved or corrected. True, such words do not promote your honor; however, not man, but God did it; should he not have the right and authority to speak on this subject?

30. But when God through the office has already rendered a verdict, both I and others may speak of that; for anyone may speak of God’s public works and judgments; it is then a matter of history, discussed everywhere. Therefore we must nevertheless not enjoin silence on everybody to the extent of forbidding him to say, “This man is a thief or a rogue,” after the judge has pronounced him such. For more honor you can neither take from nor give to a man than God has taken or given. Now since God has declared the sentence and published it publicly through the judge or preacher, everyone may with a good conscience speak of it. I recur to this because we are always inclined to go the wrong road. When preaching, there is always an inclination so to turn and twist everything as not to be bound by the Word of God. Likewise, when with Christ we say that no one should be angry or at variance with his

brother or speak evil of him, everybody would like to silence the preacher to the extent that he is not to touch upon or punish public sins and vices.

31. Finally this is the sense of our Gospel lesson: When you, as a man, for personal reasons speak against the honor of your neighbor, feeling elated over his sins, this is wicked and wrong. But when it has come so far that God himself makes anything public, then it will not do for me to praise a public, scoundrel, whom God himself has publicly proved to be such; for that would be the same as defending and abetting rascality. So our whole conduct should be guided by this, that we do not contemplate or attempt anything of ourselves; but see what God enjoins, or does through his servants; this then God himself has done and all is good and proper. So it will not do to be silenced in such cases, but to stand on the side of truth and justice, and contribute your influence in upholding and lauding God's judgment, in order to terrify and warn others. Let this suffice for the present on this Gospel text.

Content Page



First Page