

Offentimes, beneath the facade, we see what's really there. Many of us learned to play the game; that is to be polite, just to hit the surface issues. Surely, that is not what God wants.



Matthew 5:21-26

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. "Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Reflections

"If you are bringing your gift to the altar, and there remember..., go, be reconciled. Then come [back] and offer your gift."

In two quick sentences, Jesus puts his finger on what can be a desperate, but also very painful, need in our lives. It can almost seem unfair that he blows by it so quickly. Few things in our lives can touch a nerve more raw than those simple words, "your brother has something against you." For many of us, those words can encompass a world of hurt, broken families, broken relationships, broken hearts. And Jesus zeros his focus in on perhaps the most painful point of all — my need to ask my brother to forgive me.

At one level, Jesus simply lays out a command, "Go, be reconciled to your brother." Admit the wrong, ask forgiveness, work to reconcile, so that you *both* can go free and begin a relationship of healing. A great idea, except of course, Jesus instructs that *I must go first*. Christmas is for going...

Such a short, stark teaching, on such a difficult topic.

And yet, to stop there, and see only command, is to miss the grace of God that envelops this teaching. Look how Jesus sets it out. There is an offering here, brought forward, left, then finally fully presented. One might view this offering as an empty act, not relevant to the real need here, but I think there's another perspective. This whole thing is wrapped in an act of offering that can give us a picture of God at work, even where our lives may be hardest.

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ask forgiveness,
work to reconcile,
so that you *both*
can go free and
begin a relationship
of healing.**

Jesus casts an image that begins and ends with movement of the heart towards God, and turns on that marvelous moment, "and *there* remember..." Why *there*? What is our Christian experience? Is it not that in moments when we

draw closest to God, God, *in His love*, can call to our minds our deepest needs. It is no accident that remembering comes where it does. I'd even add, comes *when* it does, for who knows what preparation this same God may be working in my brother's heart. The full picture here is of reconciliation that is prompted, prepared, and surrounded by God. We are not alone, we are *never* alone, when God's Spirit calls us to this task.

Can we dare to step out? Perhaps during this season, if you or I feel that tug of "Now is the time," may we recognize it for what it is, dare to go forth, ask forgiveness, seek to reconcile. Knowing that in this act, our God goes with us. Who knows? Perhaps we too will return to offer our gift— a stronger, richer gift, of a heart uplifted by an unexpected dose of "Peace to his people on Earth."

—Bob Henderson

Readings

Sunday, December 13

Luke 2:13-14

From the beginning, Jesus is announced as a bringer of peace. This Advent we are thinking about relationships and the need for forgiveness and peace. Time to get specific. With whom do you need to experience forgiveness and peace? How can you welcome Christ into these relationships?

Monday, December 14

Isaiah 61:1-3

Long before Jesus came, the prophet Isaiah understood who Jesus would be. The beautiful images here are promises from God. Meditate on these promises. Perhaps pick one that touches close to home (OK to be metaphorical – you don't have to be in jail to be "captive") and ask God to work with you precisely there.

Tuesday, December 15

Luke 1:16-17

An angel describes the work of John the Baptist: To turn our hearts to each other, "to make ready a people prepared." What form might "preparation" take for you this Advent? What comes to mind? What might stand in the way?

Wednesday, December 16

Isaiah 11:6-9

Isaiah contemplates (from afar) the coming of our Lord. Such amazing imagery of peace, indeed of peace only God could bring. Where in your life might you already see Him at work to bring peace? Reconciliation? What might you do to "advance the cause"?

Thursday, December 17

Isaiah 42:1-9

Another beautiful set of images, the character of our Lord. Metaphor again: what does it mean, "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not put out"? Where are you bruised? Where is faith dim? Perhaps offer Him such a place today, and see what He does.

Friday, December 18

Philippians 4:4-7

A passage we probably ought to read about once every five minutes during the day! What needs has the Holy Spirit called to mind for you this week? What fears? What unrest or brokenness? There it is in Paul's words: lay it before God. He brings peace to *us* too. We have his promise.

Saturday, December 19

Philippians 4:8-9

A good ending for a week of reflection, especially on things that may be hard. Not all prayer has to be about "hard" things. Where in your life, and in the lives of those around you, do you recognize what is "noble, right, pure, lovely"? Those things are from God. Give thanks, and trust Him for more.

Don't have a Bible? Access these scriptures at biblegateway.com.