

# Keeping Going In Faith

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Preacher: Andy Gemmill

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Good morning. We are reading from Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26. For those of you at home, Matthew 5 verse 21 to 26. In the church here it's page 969 in the Bible, page 969 in the Bible.

So let's read God's word, the words of Jesus. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, you shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or a sister, Raka, is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, you fool will be in danger of the fires of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them, then come and offer your gift.

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly, I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Good. I'm on. Am I on? I'm on. Excellent. Thank you, Alan, very much for reading. Good morning. My name's Andy. I'm a member of the congregation here. Let me extend again my welcome to you this morning. It's wonderful to have you here, especially if you're here for the first time. This is the time of year when all kinds of people rock up to Glasgow for the first time and to St. Silas for the first time.

Whether you're familiar with church or whether you're just beginning to have a look at Jesus for yourself for the first time, we're so glad that you're able to join us this morning. I'd be very grateful if you keep your Bible open at Matthew chapter 5. If you're not there already, we're on page 969 in the Bibles in front of you. Our habit here on Sundays is to work through books of the Bible bit by bit so that God's word sets the agenda for what we're learning as a congregation. We started in Matthew 5 a couple of weeks ago, and we've got as far as verse 21. So that's where we're picking it up today.

[ 3 : 1 4 ] As we do, let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the scriptures which speak to us about you and what you have done in sending your Son to be the Savior of the world.

And as we look at his teaching this morning, we pray that you would open our eyes to see who he is and what he's done and how we should respond to him. And we ask all of this in his great name. Amen.

Well, we are this morning in what's commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount. Huge crowds are following Jesus, interested, expectant, amazed, and in the middle of all this, Jesus sits down, as was the custom of teachers of the day, and teaches his own disciples. And his teaching in this sermon is all about what it will be like for them to belong to him, what they'll need to be ready for if they belong to him, and how they'll need to conduct themselves as his representatives in the world. Because that's what they're going to be, his representatives. Look at chapter 5, verse 13.

You are the salt of the earth. Tasty. Verse 14. You are the light of the world. Shiny. Tasty. Shiny.

Deliciously distinctive in the world. This is what you are. Not this is what you might possibly be if you get your act together. But this is what you are as a follower of mine. My distinctive representatives in the world. Now, folks, that is a heartening backdrop for us as we come to quite a challenging passage this morning. Because if you're a real Christian, you probably don't feel all that delicious or distinctive. I mean, just look around the room. Do they look deliciously distinctive to you?

[ 5 : 18 ] If you're a person who's come to Jesus for forgiveness and pinned all your hopes on him, you will inevitably have begun to learn something of your own spiritual poverty and lack.

It's one of the things that happens when you follow the one who is himself, the light of the world. You begin to discover your own darkness. And that's why right at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, chapter 5, verse 3, blessed are the poor in spirit. And verse 6, blessed are those who know that they're not full of righteousness yet. Good for you if you recognize your poverty, reality, says Jesus. That's a sign that spiritual reality has begun to dawn.

If your spiritual poverty hasn't dawned on you yet, you probably haven't seen Jesus clearly yet. It's a good sign. And yet, spiritual poverty often makes Jesus' disciples feel they'll never be of any use in the world. And Jesus says, no, you're the salt and the light and the hope of the world.

Shiny, tasty, deliciously distinctive. That's my intention for you. Now, let me say two things about this distinctiveness which are important for our particular passage this morning. First, Jesus is going to talk about distinctiveness in personal relationships. Just scan your way through chapter 5 from verse 21 onwards. Look at the subject matter. Anger, murder, adultery, lust, divorce, divorce, telling truth, telling lies, revenge, love, hate, how to relate to enemies. It's the kind of stuff that's kept EastEnders going for decades. Jesus starts with personal relations.

His disciples are going to be distinctive in that area, he says. Indeed, in verse 20, he says a really shocking thing to his disciples about their distinctiveness. It's going to be better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The lives of his disciples, not least the way they relate to one another and the outside world, is going to be better than the really religious people of his day.

[ 7 : 46 ] Secondly, distinctiveness in personal relations. Secondly, that distinctiveness is going to be lived out in a hostile climate. Look at chapter 5 verse 11. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. There's going to be hostility in following Jesus. I think the same thing is there right at the end of the chapter in verse 44. I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. There are going to be persecutors.

And that persecution did come, and it came from the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the people mentioned in verse 20. That relational distinctiveness is going to have to be lived out on a backdrop of hostility. Now, two things are interesting about that. First, this chapter, chapter 5, this is where the conflict starts. Because all the way through chapter 5, there's a running contrast between how Jesus understands the Old Testament Scriptures and how the Pharisees and teachers of the law understand the Old Testament Scriptures. You'll meet it repeatedly. Jesus says, you've heard it said, but I tell you. They have one understanding about what God says.

Jesus has a completely different one. And he wants his disciples to follow his pattern, not theirs. And this chapter is the first time in his gospel, in this gospel, that Jesus mentions the Pharisees.

And that conflict between his teaching and theirs starts here, and it runs all the way through this gospel with murderous consequences in the end.

Here's where the conflict starts. And that background conflict may also be important for this morning's passage. Because pressure from outside a community can breed relational difficulty inside a community, can't it? Isn't it interesting then that Jesus' first words in this relational section of the sermon are all about conflict between brothers and sisters, people who want to be getting on, but are not. Hostility from outside can breed problems inside. And Jesus starts, verse 21, with one of the best-known relational commands in the Bible. Commandment number six of the ten commandments Moses received.

[ 10 : 44 ] Verse 21, you've heard that it was said to the people long ago, you shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you, anyone who's angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, raka, is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, you fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Now, I'm going to look at this section under two headings. The first is this, the disturbing diagnosis that Jesus makes. Now, isn't the command not to murder a wonderful command? It's a wonderful command, isn't it?

Human lives matter. And it would be terrible if God didn't say, human lives matter. Well, he does. Don't murder people. But according to Jesus, what the command prohibits is just a symptom.

The tip of the iceberg, there's something deeper and much more common and much more deadly than murder. He pushes behind the act to the attitudes that lead to it. You've heard that it was said to the people long ago, you shall not murder. And anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who's angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Judgment comes to those who murder. It also comes to those who are angry. Now, folks, murder is not all that common.

Anger, on the other hand, is an everyday thing. Both of them, says Jesus, lead to judgment. They're closely linked, aren't they, murder and anger. Indeed, it's quite hard to think that murder ever happens without anger, really. Anger can be rightly motivated, can't it? There is such a thing as righteous indignation, not least God's righteous indignation at the way we relate to him and our people and other people and our world. But even with us, righteous indignation, the kind of, that's terrible, somebody ought to do something about that. The righteous indignation can very quickly turn into, that person is just contemptible. Something ought to happen to them. Anger very quickly becomes malicious, destructive and self-righteous. I would never do that. That's a wicked person.

[ 13 : 38 ] She humiliated me. I'd love someone to humiliate her. He's hurt me. I wouldn't mind at all if hurt came his way. That person, they threatened my position. I would love them to be taken down.

Human anger is a destructive force, isn't it, which cares little for other people. Let me illustrate with two very familiar images from the supermarket. Picture in your mind for a moment the toddler having a tantrum in the supermarket. You ever seen that? Terrifying, isn't it? Picture the trolley is laden with stuff. There's the toddler seat in the trolley and in the seat, the rigid, purple, fuming, yelling, implacable, egotist that is an 18-month-old. Imagine what it would be like if that was an adult.

Imagine the destructive intensity of that unrestrained rage in a grown-up body. Imagine. The only reason there aren't significant numbers of parental deaths while shopping is that they're very small. And while they're all stiff like that, they can't get out of their cage. That is the only reason there are not parental deaths while shopping. Anger is a destructive force, isn't it?

Here's the second image from the supermarket. The tin can. This is the grown-up version. We learn quickly, don't we, that tantrums have consequences. Embarrassment, loss of privileges, retribution even. And so our responses to situations and people we don't like are constrained.

We keep the lid on, which is good for shoppers, but it doesn't, of course, mean that our ability to be self-centered or contemptuous or destructive has disappeared. In fact, if anything, the more we grow, the more finely honed and subtly employed our contempt for others becomes. Look at verse 22.

[16:00] There's a common theme in verse 22. Do you see what it is? I tell you that anyone who's angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, raka, is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, you fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Raka just means empty. It's an insult. Airhead, meathead, dumbass. It's that kind of insult.

And fool is an expression of contempt, of proud superiority. It always comes with a tone, doesn't it, when it's really meant, that word, you fool. What an idiot you are. Worthless.

Useless. And I think the thing that unites these verses is the attitude expressed at the end of the list. You fool. That contemptuous attitude. Sometimes our contempt for others overflows in cutting remarks. Sometimes it overflows in frank insult. Sometimes in outbursts of rage. Occasionally, actually in murder. None of those happen without contempt for another human being.

So there are various symptoms, but there's one underlying condition, and it's a common one. If murder is the symptom, contempt is the disease.

[17:39] So cast your mind back. See if you can call to mind the last time you had one of those moments of contemptuous superiority. It might have been in the playground talking about a fellow school child, or in the chatter at the school gate, or in the staff common room talking about a child, or a parent, or a fellow staff member. It might have been in the car when someone cut you up, or the checkout queue when someone in front of you couldn't find their credit card, or in the office chatting about that irritating colleague, or in your tutor group at uni sniggering about that person who doesn't quite fit in, or in your sports team when someone messed up, or indeed anywhere. Do you find it hard to identify a moment like that in your own experience?

Sometimes they're obvious. Anger, insults, snide remarks. Sometimes less so. The snigger, the silent sulk, the haughty attitude. But even if the lid remains on all the time, contempt is nothing less than murder in a can.

Take the lid off, shake it a bit, just wait and see what happens. And God takes that contemptuous superiority with absolute seriousness. Anyone who says, you fool, will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Sometimes, of course, human beings judge the effects, the symptoms of contempt negatively. Our insults to others can land us in a human court in our day, and it seems that was also the case in Jesus' day. But there's a much more significant judge, one who sees everything and whose verdict is true and just.

And he absolutely did not make us human beings to be proudly contemptuous of one another. It's the last thing he had in mind.

[19:58] The disturbing diagnosis Jesus makes, murder is a symptom. Contempt, the deadly disease. Now, folks, before we move on, let me say there's something truly wonderful about this alarming diagnosis.

The kingdom of heaven, the wonderful reign that Jesus has come to bring about, that kingdom is a realm where murder, anger, hatred, proud contempt are banished.

Isn't that a wonderful thing? Imagine the absence of those things. Here is a king who will bring peace and joy and righteousness and humble love everywhere, forever, in the end.

And he cares about that enough to banish contempt forever. Now, his diagnosis is certainly alarming because none of us find those contemptuous thoughts all that hard to recall.

But his intentions are magnificent, aren't they? What a wonderful person. But it prompts a question, doesn't it? How does Jesus want his disciples to be salt and light?

[ 21 : 15 ] Deliciously distinctive in this area. And how on earth is that actually going to be possible for them? Well, we move on to verse 23.

And let me say, I've been wrestling with these four verses. They are very complicated and very surprising indeed, I think. Here's my best shot.

Heading number two. The radical peacemaking that Jesus commands. Therefore, if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar.

First go and be reconciled to them. Then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly. With your adversary who's taking you to court. Do it while you're still together on the way.

Or your adversary may hand you over to the judge. And the judge may hand you over to the officer. And you may be thrown into prison. Truly, I tell you, you'll not get out until you've paid the last penny. Now notice how surprising this is.

[ 22 : 21 ] As a follow-up to what's gone before. You would expect Jesus to say something like this. Because moral contempt can lead people to the fire of hell, if you're offering your gift at the altar and you are fuming mad with your brother or sister, well, go and sort your anger out first, quickly.

If you're angry with somebody who owes you money, for goodness sake, go and sort it out with them before you get even angrier and any chance of an amicable solution disappears as you send them to the debtor's prison for life.

But notice Jesus doesn't say that at all. He addresses the disciple who may have caused his brother or sister to be angry. Two examples.

One is an example taken from temple worship. The other of financial debt. In both cases, the person who's to take action is the person who's caused the anger.

The person who's caused the upset. And in both cases, the emphasis seems to be on urgency. Do it now. So picture number one.

[ 23 : 37 ] You're in the temple. You're offering a sacrifice. You haven't upset a friend. You upset them a while ago. You haven't done anything about it yet. It's kind of on your mind.

And as you present your gift at the altar, it comes to mind. Now, the religious mindset of Jesus' day would say sacrifices to God are much, much more important than an upset friend.

Get on with offering your gift. Who cares about the other thing? Jesus says, nothing could be further from the truth. upset friends can be consumed with bitter anger.

And we know how terrible the consequences of that can be. Verse 22. You know your friend is upset at you?

Do something now for their sake. Notice that no comment is made here about whether the friend is justifiably upset or not. They might be cross at you even though you've done nothing wrong.

[ 24 : 44 ] The right response is not to say, well, look, I didn't do anything wrong. I'm standing on my right. They're upset. They're a problem. No, says Jesus, if you're my disciple, it's your problem that they're upset.

If you believe my words about how serious anger, bitterness, contempt are, you'll do everything you can to ensure that your fellow believer is not consumed by those things on your account.

The second example's a dispute about money. You owe money. Perhaps you think the other party is being unreasonable in some way, so you haven't paid.

You could settle, but you don't. I'll just let them stew. They can take me to court if they want. And so the other party stews and gets more and more obsessed with the issue.

So obsessed and consumed that they become unshakably determined to exact every penny from you that they can. And so you end up in the debtor's prison from which you can never escape because you can't earn anything while they're there.

[ 25 : 53 ] Any thought of leniency or mercy is long gone from the mind of the person who's been left to stew on an unpaid debt.

So in what way are Jesus' disciples to be salt and light, deliciously distinctive representatives of his kingdom?

Well, first of all, to be so concerned for the well-being of their fellow believers that they do everything they can to deliver their fellow believers from contempt, bitterness, anger.

So concerned that they go out of their way to make peace even if they've done nothing wrong. So concerned that they're willing to embrace the idea that the anger that somebody else has might be my problem, not merely their problem.

Jesus wants his disciples to be distinctive in being radical peacemakers with each other.

[ 27 : 01 ] What an unusual, surprising, intriguing place a community like that would be, wouldn't it? You'll never find that kind of thing going on at the golf club or at the soccer training or in the office or the lab or at the gym or in the higher echelons of organized religion or in the woke blogosphere or on the Twitter feed or indeed anywhere.

What an unusual thing it would be if people cared about other people's distress and anger. But it begs the question, doesn't it, is it really possible is it possible for disciples who know only too well that they themselves are spiritually poor and lack righteousness and are still prone to contemptuous thoughts?

Is it really possible for this kind of distinctiveness to be a reality for Jesus' flawed people to be radically peacemaking?

Well, amazingly, wonderfully, it can happen. Let me say two or three things about this. First, Jesus welcomes the spiritually poor.

We've had it already, haven't we? It's the first thing in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are you if you're poor in spirit. Blessed are you if you hunger for a righteousness you don't yet have.

[ 28 : 33 ] Folks, if you're just here this morning having a look at Jesus through the window for the first time, this is the gateway to knowing him and to eternal joy, recognizing your poverty.

It's the route to great riches because Jesus welcomes the spiritually poor. The gateway to eternal joy is coming to him, asking him for forgiveness, asking him to fill you up.

And not only does Jesus welcome the spiritually poor, he works in the spiritually poor. The Sermon on the Mount has got transformation embedded in it.

It's just assumed. Not complete transformation yet, but real transformation. Look at chapter 5, verse 9. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.

He doesn't mean that peacemaking is the way you get into the family. He's saying that peacemaking is one of the marks of those who belong. Peacemaking is one of the marks of those who recognize their spiritual poverty.

[ 29 : 45 ] If you realize how much you need cleansing from your contemptuous attitudes, you won't want to be a person who stands on your own rights with others. If you know how eternity threatening your own anger is, you'll never be happy to leave a brother or sister stewing in anger.

because of you. And if we've come to Jesus, we belong to one who himself has walked a radically peacemaking path for us.

One who, when others were hostile to him, went out of his way to make peace with them. One who, as the nails were hammered into his wrists and into his ankles, as he died to bear the punishment for sins, prayed for those who nailed him up, Father, forgive them.

They don't know what they're doing. One who promised his disciples right at the end of this gospel that as they were being sent out into the world to make disciples of others to represent him, he would be personally with them in that endeavor all the way to the end of the age.

Is it possible for still, flawed disciples to live this deliciously, distinctive, radically peacemaking community life? Is it possible?

[ 31 : 19 ] It is. For the great peacemaker is at work in his spiritually poor, forgiven people to make them tasty, shiny, distinctive in his world.

Let's pray together. Let's just have a moment to reflect on what God has spoken to us this morning.

You may be aware of your spiritual poverty, the proud contempt for people that lurks inside your tin can. This would be a great morning to come to Jesus with your poverty and ask him for his forgiveness.

He came to make peace. He died to rescue us. from the fire of hell. He's a safe place for the spiritually poor.

You may be aware of unresolved anger, of relationships with brothers and sisters which are not what they should be. This would be a great morning to stop standing on your own rights, to recognize that someone else's anger is your problem if you belong to Jesus, to be distinctive for Jesus' sake who was distinctively peacemaking towards you.

[ 32 : 53 ] You may be aware of the wonderful joy of belonging to a peacemaking community. This would be a great morning to share that truth with others out in the world.

callous hello. If we respond ourselves and then I'll pray. Amen. We thank you, gracious God and heavenly Father, for the magnificent peacemaking work of your wonderful Son towards us.

We thank you for his generous kindness to those who treated him with hostility. We thank you that he welcomes the poor. We thank you that he transforms the contemptuous.

And so we pray that you would help us today to rejoice in all that he's done, to rejoice in belonging to him, and to follow his pattern in the world in which we live to the glory of his name.

We ask this in his great name. Amen.