

THE OAK IN THE ACORN

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Matthew 5:21-24¹

The Commandment People Break Without Knowing It

How would you feel if at the age of 40 you have made a colossal mistake, lost your temper, done something that has ruined your life-career, forced you into ignominious exile? And then you have spent 40 more years there in obscurity, so now you are 80 and your life's-work is nil. Just being a good sheep-herder, that's all you have accomplished—except you have left behind a poem that is read at almost every funeral in the world thereafter: Psalm 90. And in that poem you have pretty well shut the door on yourself as being at 80 years old (verse 10), far too old for any meaningful career. “We live for seventy years or so (with luck we might make it to eighty), And what do we have to show for it? Trouble. Toil and trouble and a marker in the graveyard.” (Peterson version; actually, when Moses finally found a grave, there was no “marker,” but the Resurrection Lord remembered where he was buried, for we read of Moses’ special resurrection in Jude 9!).

Forty years of repentance finally fitted Moses for a world career beginning at the age of 80. Keep your wits about you and your heart warm, and it is never too late for God to bless you. And for younger

people below the age of 80, there is tremendous Good News in the story of Moses. For sure, he knew all about discouragement as the result of failure. In his prayer, he prayed, “Your anger is far and away too much for us; we’re at the end of our rope. You keep track of all our sins; every misdeed since we were children is entered in Your books. All we can remember is that frown on Your face. Is that all we’re ever going to get?” wrote Moses in his poem (Ps. 90:7-9). At this time just before his beginning of success, he had a dark view of God’s character, saw Him as, well, our Enemy writing down all our mistakes and sins, to hold them against us.

There is a strange expression in Ps 90:7: “We have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified.” If God is “angry” with us, and His “wrath” hangs over us, we are indeed terrified and can’t help being so. (It can be a deep, slow anxiety based on terror). We long for love, for good will, for someone important to us to be pleased with us. You long for some person you love to smile upon you, to know he/she truly loves you. Such love is the “sweet mystery of life.” Disappointment in love is painful, sometimes lifelong, an entire life shadowed; deep dark secrets of pain are cherished. David knew that the most wonderful woman in the world could never bring him the happiness that a glimpse of the smiling face of God could give him: “There are many who say, ‘Who will show us any good?’ Lord, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart” (Ps. 4:6, 7).

¹ “Love Divine”; 183 “I Will Sing of Jesus’ Love”

A false or distorted gospel clouds that otherwise smiling face of God. For example, a successful evangelist writes me that he believes a cloud of condemnation hangs over the head of every person in the world who has not chosen to “accept Christ.” Yes, millions believe this; and no wonder they live sad lives. But the Bible teaches that the “condemnation” that came upon “all men” “in Adam” was reversed by the second Adam for the same “all men” (Rom. 5:15-18). Galatians 3:13 tells us that the “curse” (same as the “condemnation”!) that was due to come upon us came upon Christ instead, for He “was made to be a curse for us.” That “curse” or “condemnation” was the sentence of death, not mere “sleep,” but the real thing.

If you feel that God is holding that over your head, you can’t help but feel miserable! But Hebrews 2:9 says that Christ died that “death” for “every man.” 2 Corinthians 5:19 says quite clearly that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them.”

Your job is to believe the simple word of God; He is not imputing your trespasses to you! He imputed them to Christ instead; He bore them, He has already set you free from them. That’s why He can send His rain on both the just and the unjust! Yes, the truth is that you and I are by nature sinners; *but* because of the sacrifice of Christ He treats us as though we were innocent! This is not effervescent emotion; it is solid truth.

Moses always saw God as a Divine Stickler for righteousness, but he finally came to see Him as not the “frowning” One but as the One “merciful and

gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness” (Ex. 34:6), the One who always gives what He demands—“the righteousness which is of faith” (Rom. 10:6).

Could people break a commandment of God without realizing what they are doing? The sixth one says, “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13).

How could anyone break that commandment and not realize what he is doing? God has displayed the answer for all the world to see: it’s the crucifixion of Christ.

Those who did it broke the sixth commandment! Here were Jews and Gentiles together, murdering the Son of God, and He prayed for them, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34).

When Jesus prayed that Friday morning for those who were killing Him, His prayer embraced all the world, for the solemn truth is that by nature we today are no better than those people were then. We are fortunate that we weren’t there that day to take part in the deed, but in principle we were there, like the old Negro Spiritual that asks, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” The answer is, Yes.

Why do they do it? Because “the carnal mind is enmity against God” (Rom. 8:7), and we all by nature are born with a carnal mind. “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15). That’s the “mind” we have by nature until, by the grace of God, we learn the gospel and are converted. It is then that Jesus’ prayer for us is answered, and we experience or receive His forgiveness. He forgave

us at the cross itself; but only when we believe it do we know peace.

There was a thoughtful man (Horatius Bonar) who wondered how it could be possible that he would join in crucifying Christ if he had been there that day. “My whole soul would revolt against taking part in such a deed!” he said to himself. Then one night he had a dream in which he witnessed the rude, cruel soldiers driving spikes through Jesus’ wrist bones and ankle bones and stringing Him up on the cross. In his agony (the dream was so realistic) Bonar grabbed hold of one of the soldiers, shook him by the neck and yelled at him, “Don’t do this awful deed!” Then the soldier turned around to look at him, and to his horror he saw himself as in a mirror.

Paul understood the truth that “all the world [is] guilty before God,” and “there is none righteous, no, not one: there is none who understands” (Rom. 3:19, 10, 11). We are born self-centered with this raw impulse to claw our way to the top, even if we have to climb over everybody else to get there. Look at the wars that have plagued this planet! Soldiers who never wanted to kill anybody go wild with rage in the heat of battle and shoot in all directions.

Jesus said something both wonderful and terrible when he said to His disciples, “Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose so ever sins ye retain, they are retained” (Jn. 20:23). It was a parallel statement with the one in Matthew, “I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind

on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (16:19). As authority figures to other people (that is, parents, teachers, preachers/pastors), can we actually open or lock the gates of heaven to people? Jesus says yes!

If in a fit of temper a parent tells a child, “You are lazy! You’ll never amount to anything!” that child will have to carry that burden all his life unless somehow he finds the true gospel that gives him relief from that “burden.”

If a preacher/pastor tells his congregation similar Bad News, he can close the gates of heaven against children and youth. We may wonder why they drop out of the “family” when they reach their teens, but that was the reason. In a fit of anger, a husband/wife can tell his/her spouse words that wound forever: “There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword” (Pr. 12:18). Sometimes the words are so painful that they are like a barb—it hurts even to draw them out in repentance. You are indeed an authority figure even to your spouse!

Many a person who has lost his/her temper has been saved from the physical act of murder only because there was no loaded gun at hand to use. We only kid ourselves when we say, “I could never do that!” Remember Peter? He protested loudly that he could never deny his Lord, but he did it three times before the rooster crowed that next morning. We are by nature no better than poor Peter!

The people who were close to the crucifixion of Christ realized the enormity of that deed when the finally-converted Peter told them, “God has made

this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Trembling, they cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” They realized that they had participated in the greatest sin of all the ages, and yet had not known it! The apostles said, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins” (Acts 2:36-38).

Just as an oak tree is in the acorn, so murder lies buried in the thought or impulse of hatred. God can see the towering, massive oak tree when the little acorn in the ground sprouts. So John says, “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer!” (1 John 3:15). Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment’” (Matt. 5:21, 22). Too bad the people who heard Him say that didn’t take it to heart before they acted out their anger in the murder of the Son of God!

The violent anger that permeates our movies and TV programs is the spirit of Satan actually taking possession of human hearts. Hatred blazes in people’s eyes, and too much of it explodes within the family. Two spirits are locked in a death struggle—the spirit of Satan and the Spirit of Christ. Human hearts are the arena for the conflict. Anger can be the blazing, violent kind or it can be the silent, cold dislike or contempt that inwardly wishes its enemy could be destroyed. Both are the cold, wicked sin of murder, because they are “acorns” waiting only for time to develop into the “oak trees.”

Parents, watch out for those little acorns in the hearts of your children. Their childish anger may

appear ever so innocent, even fun to watch, but beware: too many fathers and mothers years later have had to sit in courtrooms and watch their sons or daughters arraigned.

A man and his wife stopped going to church because the pastor preached a sermon in which he spoke of “corporate guilt,” that is, that the sin of someone else would be our sin but for the grace of Christ. He was making the point that everybody needs the Savior, and we do not know or realize the depth of sin that is lurking beneath the surface of our own hearts. We think we’re okay, not knowing what we are capable of doing. “This offends us,” the couple said; “we’re not that bad.”

Some time later, Hubby was out in the front yard working on the lawn when the neighbor stopped by. The conversation turned sour and bitter, and he got hot under the collar. Grabbing his shovel, he was on the point of lunging at his neighbor, when suddenly his face grew white, he trembled, he dropped the shovel, and fled into the house. “Mama, I almost did it! I never dreamed I could get so angry!”

“Do you suppose that’s what the pastor meant when he told us of the buried evil that is in our human hearts?” she asked. Then they started coming to church again.

A cat noted for its success in dealing with groundhogs was borrowed from the neighbors. It is well named “Tiger,” because its disposition is fierce. It seems to be in a state of perpetual anger with the world. It snarls if you pick it up. The neighbors who own it care for it, feed it nicely; but they have had to

conclude that it must live outdoors (which it seems to enjoy).

Apparently Tiger had some experiences in “kittenhood” that made it forever after sour on humans. And I know of no redemption for it. It will forever be on the outside, looking in on the happy “party” that it has chosen to refuse participation in. But there is Good News for you and me who have suffered experiences in our childhood that have wounded us. There is redemption for us! We don’t have to be cast out into that “outer darkness” where we are doomed to watch alone the lights of the heavenly party that we miss going on inside (see Mt. 8:12).

God knows that we human have deep inner problems that stem from heredity and childhood, even pre-natal experiences. He says of us, “Your heart and mind are sick. From head to foot there is not a healthy spot in your body . . .” (Isa. 1:5, 6, GNB). Drugs may temporarily relieve symptoms of our heart-alienation and/or clinical depression—these inner malfunctions more real than Tiger’s learned alienation from the little world she lives in. But drugs cannot be a substitute for the healing of the wounded psyche that only the Great Physician can provide. He “healeth all thy diseases.” He “renews” our “youth” (Ps. 103:3-5). As a Good Shepherd He “seeks” the wounded, lost soul. His business is happiness that flows from reconciliation. How has He learned to be the Great Physician of our wounded psyche?

Rightly understood, that sixth commandment is Good News of salvation already accomplished for us.

When it says, “You shall not murder” it becomes an assurance that God will save you from ever incurring that guilt if you will believe the Prologue to the ten commandments (Ex. 20:2). “The house of bondage” is this evil of selfishness into which we have been born as natural descendants of Adam. That love of self has a vise-like grip on us which nothing can break loose except the salvation of God.

But Christ has broken that vice-like grip. The Father “sent” Him “in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin,” so that “He condemned sin in the flesh [our flesh], that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3, 4). There is the blessed assurance in the sixth commandment!

Thus Christ was tempted as we are tempted to be angry; yet He said “No!” to the temptation and always kept His human anger under total control of His love. No one has ever suffered greater provocation to anger than Jesus suffered; the needling, the constant unreasonable opposition, the hatred of the leaders of His people, all this subjected Him to enormous personal pressure to be impatient, to let His temper fly.

His disciples cracked under only a tiny amount of the same pressure that He endured. Once they were sent to a Samaritan village to find a hotel where Jesus could spend the night while He was on

His journey to Jerusalem. The Samaritans there were eaten up with narrow-minded prejudice and refused to “receive Him.” “And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?’” Throughout the ages, how many professed Christians, even church leaders, have had the same short fuse when they meet people who do not agree with their view of things! They may not have had power to bring down fire on them from heaven, but they have had the power to put innocent, persecuted people in prison and even to take their lives. Millions have been martyred.

But Jesus would not sanction any such outburst of anger from His followers, whether the anger is righteous or otherwise.

He turned and rebuked the impatient disciples and said, “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of.” There’s that same “you do not know.” The sixth commandment is the one that many professed Christians during the Dark Ages have broken and didn’t know what they were doing! Instead of being angry at this village that would not “receive” Him, Jesus quietly, calmly withdrew. “‘For the Son of man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.’ And they went to another village” (Luke 9:51-56). There was a better solution to the problem than getting angry; “another village” welcomed Him.

His same character of calmness under provocation is what He gladly gives to anyone who will believe the prologue to the ten commandments. What a blessing! You become a prince or princess among

your fellow men. You are greater than the sports stars, more powerful than army generals. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city” (Prov. 16:32).

“But my problem is that I don’t know how to control my anger!”

“When I become angry, my eyes get red, I start to shake all over, my temper goes wild, and I can’t control myself!” Ah yes, you are the one who needs the good news in this sixth commandment!

It’s not some little trick of magic that Jesus has promised you; it’s deliverance that He has already given you from this terrible sin.² “I have brought you out of this ‘house of bondage,’” He says. The chains are broken already; you can say, “I will walk at liberty, for I seek Your precepts” (Ps. 119:45). In other words, you will walk in freedom because you “seek,” that is, you love, these ten grand assurances of righteousness by faith in Christ.

Not everybody understands how good the good news is!

How many once-happy marriages are ruined by one or both spouses blowing his/her top in an angry exchange of bitter words. Then, once spoken, the angry exchange smolders like fire and the formerly tender relationship is killed or at least wounded. Children and parents are forever alienated by such

² “As surely as the oak is in the acorn, so surely is the gift of God in His promise. If we receive the promise, we have the gift. Faith that enables us to receive God’s gifts is itself a gift, of which some measure is imparted to every human being.” *Education*, p. 253.

bitter outpourings of anger. Friends are separated. Wars, massacres, and ethnic cleansings come from such bitterness. “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?” (James 4:1).

Jesus was sent from heaven with the specific assignment to “save the world,” and He has done it! He broke the devil’s neck and has paralyzed him. Satan can no longer force you to do his bidding; he is a paraplegic. Christ has set your will free; you are no longer in the “Egypt” of slavery to sin. “Learn from Me,” He says, “for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29, 30).

There are sincere, good people who know they are chained in a prison. They don’t want to be slaves to their lust, their passion, or their satanic evil tempers. To their neighbors or to co-workers at the office they appear on the outside to be “saints.” But when they are at home, or in some place where they think they are on top, then the pressure builds and they explode. Some spend thousands of dollars on psychiatrists, hoping to find deliverance.

To all comes the good news: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). That is, believe and appreciate what He has already endured in your behalf. Then you can’t break that sixth commandment:

Appreciate what He accomplished by His sacrifice in Gethsemane and on His cross. Let your selfish heart become entwined with His heart, identify with Him.

Kneel down beside Him as He prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Watch Him as He accepts the suffering and death of the cross, the eternal separation from His Father, all for your sake. The death He died was not what we call “sleep,” but the real thing.

Thus He died your second death, endured the curse of God, that you might go free. Sin has already been forever vanquished!

Get on your knees, and thank Him.

A newspaper published an article that said, “The exercise that you need is to get down on your knees and pray.”

Yes, not to convince God or beg Him to bless you (He is more willing to give a blessing than you are to receive it!), but your prayer is to thank Him for already delivering you from “the house of bondage.” Your prayer of thanksgiving will be the beginning of your realized deliverance!

The elephants we see in zoos are usually gentle animals that walk around slowly, and act like somebody who is at peace with the world. Have you ever seen one that was angry and wild?

There was an angry elephant! He was flailing around this way and that way, flapping his enormous ears wildly, and trumpeting so loud that you could hear him from far away. He was acting like he would threaten anyone who came close, starting at you as though he was attacking you. Then he would back off, and start in a different direction.

It wouldn't have been so bad if this were happening in some remote place, but this was in the middle of the main highway. The cars going east had to stop because he acted like he would jump on them if they came closer. And the cars going west had to stop, too, for the same reason. There he was, this enormous elephant taking over the main highway. And having a temper tantrum!

The people stopped there said that someone must go and get the game warden. So someone got the warden who came in his Land Rover, but there was nothing he could do to calm down this huge beast. Finally, very sorrowfully, as a last resort, he decided he must shoot this strange elephant because he was a threat to everybody. The animal seemed out of its mind.

Can you guess what the problem was? Was he really a rogue animal, a bad one?

No. When the game warden examined him as he lay dead on the grass, he found that he had an abscessed tooth that had been hurting him badly. Probably he had never before had an abscessed tooth in his life. As the people were watching his anger all this time, nobody guessed what his real problem was. If only some dentist could have helped him (of course, no dentist could do that on an elephant!), then the once angry elephant would have calmed down and been as gentle as any other elephant.

Have you ever seen a person who was very angry, and you were afraid to be near him? Maybe you have thought that person was just a bad person. It's possible that there was something in his (or her) life

that perplexed him, something that had brought him much pain, and he could never understand why God had permitted it to happen to him. The Bible says, "A person becomes an enemy of God when he is controlled by his human nature; for he does not obey God's law, and in fact, he cannot obey it" (Rom. 8:7). Many people can't understand why they are like they are. And we don't want to make the mistake of thinking they are hopeless, when in fact if they only could understand the gospel of God's love, their "toothache" of heart would be healed.

It's possible that person was not at heart intending to be a mean or bad person. Let's not judge someone without knowing why he seems to be so angry.

There was nothing the game warden could have said to the angry elephant to "convert" him, sorry. But if you or I could give some good news from Jesus to the person whom we don't understand, it's very possible that we can bring healing to him. People hurt, just like that elephant hurt. And Jesus is the world's great physician. A wounded heart can hurt more than an abscessed tooth; what heals is the truth of how much the Lord Jesus loves us and thinks about us. There are no animal doctors among us, but I do hope that you will choose to learn from Jesus how to heal people who are sick at heart.