The Root Beneath the Deed

MATTHEW 5:21-26 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

You can go your whole life never hurting anybody and still be carrying around the exact thing that kills people, because Jesus says the contempt in your heart already counts.

Opening Lines

Raise your hand if you've ever murdered someone. Good, nobody. Now keep your hand down but be honest with yourself: have you ever looked at another person and thought, deep down, that they were worthless? Jesus says those two things are closer than we'd like to think.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to see the muttered 'you fool,' the cold silence, the contempt they never acted on — and feel that Jesus puts it in the same courtroom as murder. They should leave uneasy about a specific person, not vaguely convicted.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the extended courthouse/debtor's-prison history if time runs short; the reconciliation urgency survives without the first-century legal detail.
- Where the moment lives: In verses 23-24 — the altar. When someone names the actual person they need to go make it right with and admits worship rings hollow until they do, that's the moment. Don't rush past it.
- Your prep: Come having already identified your own 'brother who has something against you' — a real name, not a hypothetical. You cannot lead people to an altar you're still standing at.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Classroom opening (3 min). Read Matthew 5:21-26 aloud (3 min). Teach the ladder — anger, Raca, 'you fool' — with the Raca hand-flick image (10 min). Questions 1-3 taken to the whole room, hands up (15 min). Handout fill-in items 2 and 5, silent (7 min). Commitments out loud around the room, then spontaneous prayer over what was named (7 min). Transformation happens in question 3 at the altar. Cut the debtor's-prison history first if you're running long.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Small-group opening admitting the shared muttered-insult failure (5 min). Read the passage, each person a verse (4 min). Teach Raca briefly (6 min). All five discussion

questions, slow, letting silence work (30 min). Handout items 2 and 4 written, then shared if willing (8 min). Commitments and prayer over actual names (7 min). Transformation lives in questions 4-5. Cut question 1 to a quick gut-reaction if time's tight — get to the altar and the 'go first' cost.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Coffee opening — the 'anybody you've written off?' question (4 min). Read verses 21-26 together off a phone (3 min). Talk through questions 2 and 5 only, personally (15 min). One take-home action each said out loud (4 min). Short prayer for each other by name (4 min). Transformation is the whole conversation here — keep it about the actual person each of you named, not the theology.

The Follow-Up Text

This is a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. The drill is the follow-up text: within 24 hours of teaching, you send one short, specific message to one person who said something real in the room. Not a group blast, not a 'thanks for coming' — a message that proves you were actually listening to them. This passage practically hands you the material, because it's about reconciliation you make quickly, before it hardens. You'll be asking people tonight to send a text they've been avoiding. You model it by sending one yourself. Remember week 4, when we asked people to name a commitment out loud instead of just nodding along? The follow-up text is what makes that commitment survive past the parking lot. Pick one person tonight. Write down their name before you leave. Send it tomorrow.

Why This Passage Matters

Most people in your room have quietly filed themselves as 'basically decent.' They've never killed anyone, never even hit anyone, so the sixth commandment feels like a box already checked. This passage is where Jesus reaches into that comfortable file and empties it. He traces murder backward past the act, past the shove, all the way to the flash of contempt that says another human being is empty and worthless. And here's what makes it matter for your specific people: they are all currently carrying a name. A sibling they don't speak to. A spouse they've gone cold on. A coworker they've written off in their head. Jesus says that thing you're carrying is not neutral, and it's not private — it's poisoning your worship and it's on the same road murder travels. But then comes the turn nobody expects: leave your gift at the altar and go fix it first. God would rather have you reconciled than religious. You get to hand people a Jesus who cares more about the brother they wounded than the offering they'd bring him. That is a rare and heavy privilege — to stand in front of people and watch the light come on that the person they've been avoiding actually matters to God right now.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of this, do the exercise yourself. Sit down this week and finish the

sentence Jesus starts: 'Someone has something against me, and it's _____.' Name the actual person. Feel how fast your mind reaches for the excuse, the 'but they started it,' the 'it's not really that big a deal.' That reflex is the whole passage in miniature. Then do the hard thing — send the text or make the call before you teach, not after. You want to walk into that room already having left your gift at the altar. When you tell people to 'reconcile quickly with your adversary,' you'll be saying it as someone who did it this week, and they'll hear the difference in your voice even if you never mention it.

Bring Your Own Story

- A time you said something contemptuous — a real 'you fool' under your breath — and only later saw the person as someone God made.
- A time you kept bringing your religion to God while a relationship sat broken, and how hollow the worship felt.
- A time you sent the awkward text or made the call you'd been avoiding, and what happened when you finally did.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real): Polished — 'I learned the value of reconciliation in my marriage.' Real — 'We ate three dinners in total silence because I refused to say two words, and I sang worship songs Sunday like nothing was wrong.'
- Guardrail: tell it lived-in and specific, but not raw — pick a story that's already healed enough that you're not processing it live in front of the room.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "Show of hands — anyone here committed murder this week? Good. Now the harder one, and you don't have to raise your hand: this week, did anyone drive you to think a word about them you'd be embarrassed to say out loud? Hold that person in your mind. Jesus is about to tell us those two questions are closer than we think."

Start with a self-indictment everyone can safely join, so nobody feels singled out before the passage does the work.

SMALL GROUP: "Let's just admit something together before we read. Every one of us has muttered something ugly about a driver, a coworker, a family member — 'idiot,' 'what is wrong with you,' worse. We do it and forget it in two seconds. Tonight Jesus is going to pick that exact moment up off the floor and put it under a spotlight. Let's see what he does with it."

In a trusting room, open with a shared everyday failure to lower defenses fast.

COFFEE: "Can I ask you something honest? Is there anybody right now you've kind of written off — where if their name came up you'd just tense up? Hold onto that. There's a passage where Jesus says that feeling is a bigger deal than we treat it, and I want to read it with you."

One direct, personal question that invites honesty over performance.

Teaching the Word

The word to teach is Raca. It's Aramaic — not Greek like most of Matthew — which is a tell that Jesus is quoting the actual sneer people flung at each other on the street. It means roughly 'empty-head,' 'you nothing.' Here's the physical image: it's the word you say through your teeth while you do a small dismissive wave of the hand, the gesture that means 'you're not even worth my time.' Do that gesture in front of the room. That flick of the wrist — Jesus drags it into the same courtroom as murder. Not because a wave of the hand kills a body, but because it's already decided the person doesn't count as a person. That's the seed. Murder is just that seed grown up. Sit with the line Jesus lands it on: 'First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.' [Let that sit in silence. Do not fill it.]

Discussion Questions

1. Jesus says being angry with your brother puts you 'subject to judgment,' the same phrase he used for murder. What's your gut reaction to him putting those two things in the same sentence?

Coaching note: Let people push back — 'that seems extreme' is an honest and useful answer. Don't defend Jesus too fast; let the tension sit so the passage can do its own work.

If it stalls: Simple version: does it feel fair to you that anger gets measured against murder? Yes or no, and why?

2. Walk the ladder with me — anger, then 'Raca,' then 'you fool.' What's the difference between those steps? What's actually happening to how you see the person as you go down?

Coaching note: You're after the insight that each step erases more of the person's worth. If someone nails 'you stop seeing them as human,' repeat it back and let it land.

If it stalls: Think of the last person who annoyed you — did you see them as a full person in that moment, or as a problem in your way?

3. Jesus says leave your gift at the altar and go make it right first. Why would God rather have you reconciled than have your worship?

Coaching note: This is the theological heart. Guide them toward Matthew 6:14-15 — our standing with God is bound to how we treat each other. Don't let it stay abstract; tie it to real worship they attend.

If it stalls: Have you ever sung on a Sunday while you were cold-shouldering someone at home? What did that feel like?

4. 'Reconcile quickly with your adversary.' Why 'quickly'? What actually happens to a broken relationship when we let it sit?

Coaching note: Draw out the concrete: grudges harden, stories calcify, the wall gets taller. Ephesians 4:26 — don't let the sun go down on it. Aim for people naming their own delay.

If it stalls: Is there a text or call you've been putting off? How long has it been sitting?

5. Is there someone right now who has 'something against you' — or someone you've written off? What would 'going first' cost you, and what's stopping you?

Coaching note: This is where transformation lives and where someone may open a real wound. Watch the room. If it gets heavy, hold it warmly but don't let it become a therapy session — see the note

below on handling that.

If it stalls: You don't have to name them out loud. Just answer this: yes or no, is there a name that came to mind right now?

Questions You May Hear

"Doesn't 'angry without a cause' mean some anger is fine? So this doesn't apply to me if I'm justified?"

That's the escape hatch everyone reaches for. The point isn't licensing anger you can justify — it's that the contempt behind our words puts us in danger of judgment just like the act does. Even Jesus got angry; the sin is when anger writes a person off as worthless.

"What is Gehenna? Is that the same as hell?"

Gehenna is the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, where children were once burned in sacrifice, and it became a byword for judgment. Jesus uses that vivid, smoking image his hearers all knew to talk about the seriousness of where contempt leads.

"Why does Jesus keep saying 'But I tell you'? Is he changing the Law of Moses?"

He's not amending Moses — he's revealing what Moses always meant, driving the command down to its root. And notice: no rabbi talked that way. Rabbis quoted earlier rabbis; Jesus speaks as the authority himself, which is a claim only God can make.

"What's the deal with the prison and the 'last penny' at the end?"

In first-century Judea a small unpaid debt could actually cost you your freedom — the prosecutor hands you to the judge, the judge to the officer, and off to debtor's prison. Jesus uses that real terror to press the urgency: settle before you arrive, because the road is short.

For Experienced Leaders

- When someone opens a genuine wound tonight — a marriage cracking, a diagnosis — the room will tip toward them, and care is right, but don't let it become their therapy session. Stop, look at them: 'That's heavy, and I'm glad you said it. I want to give it the time it deserves, so can you and I talk right after?' Then actually stay, and text them tomorrow. That protects the person and the room, and it teaches everyone that pain here is handled with care, not spectacle.
- Someone will try to win the room by justifying their anger — 'but you don't know what they did to me.' Don't argue the case. Just gently return: 'Maybe you're right that it's justified. Jesus still asks who goes first.'
- Watch for the person who gets quiet and stops talking at question 5 — that's usually not disengagement, that's the passage landing. Let the silence hold; don't rescue them out of it.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Before anyone leaves, go around and let each person say out loud one concrete thing: 'This week I'm going to _____' — a text, a call, a conversation at dinner. Not a feeling, an action with a name attached.

Close by praying out loud over the actual names and actions people just spoke — the text someone's been avoiding, the spouse someone's gone cold on. Don't reach for something written; saying their own words back to God is what makes it real.

If you run out of time: If the room is still wrestling honestly with question 3 or 4 when time runs out, stay there. Getting one relationship named honestly beats rushing through all five to say you finished.

Midweek follow-up: Next week, before you start, ask lightly: 'Anybody actually send the text?' Don't shame the ones who didn't — celebrate the ones who did, and it'll pull the others along.

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/5-21-26/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The last person who drove you to mutter something ugly this week — you don't have to name them, just write one word for how you saw them in that moment:

- Finish Jesus' sentence about yourself: 'Someone has something against me, and it's _____.'

- Have you ever brought worship to God while a relationship sat broken at home? Write what that felt like:

- 'Reconcile quickly with your adversary.' What are you afraid will happen if you go first? Be honest:

- One action, with a name attached, that you'll actually do this week:

Take-home actions:

- In your next argument today, catch the contemptuous sentence forming in your mouth — the muttered 'you fool,' the tone that says a person is worthless — and swallow it. Say something instead that treats them as a person God made.

- If your spouse or someone close has 'something against you,' deal with it before you sleep tonight. Name the specific thing you said or did, and say plainly, 'I was wrong, and I'm sorry' — no excuses attached.

- Send the text or make the call you've been avoiding today, while the day is still yours, before the resentment sets like concrete.

Reconciliation you make today lightens the heart of someone who's been carrying that break alone.