

SERMON TITLE: "A Good Word Avoids Anger, Insults, and Oaths"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 5:21-26; 33-37
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 20, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I made plans for this sermon series on "A Good Word," I knew that it would be relevant. Who of us doesn't need to take more care in the way we speak with our family members, friends, co-workers, and neighbors? But it seems like the events of this month are making the relevance of a good word all the more clear. Two weeks ago, we were worrying about the words being spoken back and forth across the Pacific Ocean between Kim Jung Un and President Trump—words that had nuclear implications. Then with the protests and violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, last weekend, there's been a steady stream of statements—some harshly and hatefully racist, some that rationalized that racism, some that shifted blame, some that condemned the prejudice in our society, and some that called for our leaders to break their complicit silence. If ever we needed a good word, it would be now.

This series is based on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter five. Two weeks ago, as we started with the Beatitudes, we saw that a good word begins with a blessing. Last week, as we read verses 13-20, we recognized that—like the purity of salt, the safety of light, and the fulfillment of the law—a good word glorifies God. Today, as we delve deeper into Matthew 5, I invite you to consider Jesus' wisdom that a good word avoids anger, insults, and oaths.

1—AVOIDS ANGER

Let's begin with verses 21 and 22. There we see Jesus' teaching that a good word avoids anger. Throughout this section of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus began each topic by a reference to the Old Testament law. Everyone there in Jesus' audience would have been familiar with that Jewish instruction. Using effective instructional style, Jesus started on common ground. OK, folks. This is what we all know. In ancient times, it was taught, "You shall not murder." You can imagine the crowd on

mountainside nodding their heads and murmuring in assent. Sure, of course. That's one of the Ten Commandments. That's Judaism 101. We Christians might struggle a little bit to name all 10 of the commandments real quickly, but, "Thou shall not murder" is one *even we* could speak in our sleep, right? No problem. We're with you, Jesus. We've got this.

But, then, just as soon as Jesus focuses our attention and confidence on this very basic and historic tenet of our faith, he throws a curve ball. He switches it up. He adds another layer of expectation. He makes the rules much harder. It's no longer $2+2=4$. Now he's asking us to do 2 times 2, or maybe 2 times 7, or maybe 2 divided by 7. When I was much younger, I remember hearing teachers talk about the difference between third and fourth grade. Third-grade content built upon kindergarten through second grade, but fourth grade required a big leap. The abstractions of division and fractions were introduced. And no longer were students just learning to read. Now they were reading to learn.

That's the kind of shift Jesus was making here in Matthew 5:21-22. No longer is the prohibition just about the obviously extreme and evil action of murder. Now, Jesus is saying that we shouldn't even be angry. Now, Jesus is saying that if we're angry with a brother or a sister, we'll be liable to judgment.

Wait a minute! How can we control an emotion like anger? Doesn't it just happen? Well, yes, anger can just happen. And Jesus knew that. The gospels tell us that Jesus himself got angry enough to curse a fig tree when it didn't have any fruit to feed his hunger, and we recall the story when Jesus turned over the money changers' tables and chased them out of the temple with a whip. That demonstration of anger came just days before Jesus was crucified. So, when Jesus spoke of the dangerous consequences of anger, he knew what he was talking about. While there might be times when we can use our righteous indignation to promote a just and worthy cause, we do have to be careful how we speak—not just for our own safety, but also for the safety of others. All too often, our expressions of angry words do great harm, harm that can't be undone or overcome, no matter how many times we might beg for forgiveness.

In his book *Words that Hurt, Words That Heal*, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin writes about the expression of anger. He admits that there are times when anger is justified and the expression of it is necessary—to stop bad things from recurring. But he repeatedly warns that we should carefully limit the expression of our anger to the specific incident and the extent of the incident that provoked us. We're not fighting fair if our lambasting is way out of proportion to the offense. Telushkin writes, just because "you feel rage does not entitle you to inflict emotional pain on others any more than feelings of sexual attraction entitle you to rape the source of your attraction."¹ Even justified anger must be kept within ethical limits. A good word does all that it can to avoid anger.

2—AVOIDS INSULTS

According to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, a good word also avoids insults. In verses 22 through 26, Jesus spelled out the consequences of insulting someone. One could get in trouble with "the council," "be liable to the hell of fire," or even be "thrown in prison." If we go around calling other people "fools," they're not going to like it very much, and we might suffer as a result.

Of course, we all know of times when we and other people have seemingly gotten away with speaking insults. Isn't that why such behavior continues--the offender isn't held accountable? At least this side of death, sadly, this kind of abusive language often goes unpunished. Sometimes we speak insults because we're angry, and we want to lash out. Sometimes we say mean and nasty things about other people because we're afraid. Sometimes we speak that way because we're bullies. We like to exert our power by making others look and feel weak. Maybe we make a cruel joke about someone, to get other people to laugh. Maybe we speak gossip as a way of getting other people to bond with us in a secret that may or may not be true. We exaggerate and lie in order to paint others as inferior. We want to show ourselves as ranking higher on the social scale, so we put someone else down.

But just because we reap some evil gain and don't suffer immediate negative consequences doesn't mean our words are without consequence. As Jesus was trying to say, we don't have to murder

someone to hurt them very badly. Our words can destroy lives. When we claim free speech to say things like “Jews will not replace us”, that gives permission for people to drive cars into crowds.² That’s why, in verse 23, Jesus says that, if we’ve hurt someone with our insults, we can’t just come to the altar to worship God like nothing bad has happened. We must go first and be reconciled to our brother or sister before we can expect God to receive our gift of worship. A good word avoids insults.

3—AVOIDS OATHS

According to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, a good word also avoids oaths. We see this in verses 33-37. Again Jesus was beginning with one of the Ten Commandments. Number nine in that famous list of rules says that we should not bear false witness. That means we shouldn’t tell lies, and we shouldn’t make promises that we can’t keep. Jesus agreed with all that. But he added another layer of complexity. Jesus said we shouldn’t swear at all.

Although Jesus probably would like it if we cleaned up our profanity—by “not swear at all,” he wasn’t talking about our use of four-letter words. Jesus’ concern here was that people were going around securing their promises on heaven and earth, Jerusalem, or their own head. It’s like when you “pinky swear” or “pinky promise” or when you say “cross my heart and hope to die.” Should we really have to make these extra assurances that we’re telling the truth?

Now, let’s be clear. Jesus wasn’t saying that we should be gullible or stupid. We can’t just trust someone who calls us up on the phone and promises that they’ll send us money if we tell them our bank account and Social Security numbers. In this day and age, we have to see things in writing and actually read the fine print. It would be lovely if we could do business on a handshake and a good name. But we’ve learned, often the hard way, that we must have legal documents and signatures up front.

In fact, when my husband and I were trying to adopt our kids, we had to get all kinds of documents ready. Then we had to have them notarized. Then we had to send the notarized documents to the secretary of state’s office to get them apostilled. An apostille is the state government’s seal of

approval that says the notarization was done correctly. You'd be surprised how often the notaries didn't do them correctly, and we'd have to start all over again, getting a brand new original document, then having it correctly notarized, and then finally apostilled. What a time-consuming headache that was!

Why, as a human society, do we have to require such burdensome processes? Because people don't tell the truth. People lie and cheat. People exaggerate their abilities and misrepresent their motives. People cross their fingers behind their backs. People swear on a stack of Bibles and their grandma's reputation, and then they still aren't trustworthy.

And Jesus says that's not right. People ought to be able to believe us because we ought to tell the truth. A simple "Yes" or "No" might not be sufficient for a legal contract in the 21st century, but you get Jesus' point. If we're honest, we shouldn't have to swear by God's footstool or anything else. A good word avoids the need for oaths.

CONCLUSION

All of us who have been baptized in the United Methodist Church or become a member of the United Methodist Church in any recent decades have participated in a ritual that asks us to "renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sins." It asks us to accept God's power "to resist evil, injustice, and oppression." It asks us to do all this in unity with "people of all ages, nations, and races."³ The events of this week caused me to think of that statement of faith. It's a lot like what Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount. A good word rejects policies and speech that hurt, marginalize, and deceive other people. A good word avoids anger, insults, and oaths.

¹ *WTHWTH: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well* (William Morrow: New York, 1996), p. 72.

²White Supremacists chanted these words on Aug. 11, 2017, in Charlottesville, VA, before one of them drove a car into an anti-fascist protest crowd on Aug. 12, 2017, killing one person and injuring at least 18 more.

³ (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), p. 34.