

Think of someone who makes you angry.  
Preferably someone close to you.  
Someone who gets your goat, winds you up, makes you see red.  
Got someone in mind?  
Do you realise that you've as good as killed them?  
At least, that's our traditional understanding of the sermon on the mount.

## Traditional Understanding:

### Traditional Righteousness

#### Matthew 5:21:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment" (author's translations to follow the Greek verb forms more closely).

### Jesus' Teaching

#### Matthew 5:22-26:

But I say to you that everyone being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire. (Illustrations: So if you are offering your gift at the altar . . . make friends quickly with your accuser.)

Traditionally, this passage is split into two parts. In the first part, Jesus tells us what traditional righteousness is - "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement."" Then Jesus goes on with his own teaching, "But I say to you that everyone being angry with his brother will be liable to judgement; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire." This is then followed by illustrations of making peace.

So the traditional understanding is that Jesus has raised the standard. He tells us that murdering was banned in the past, and now tells us that being angry and calling someone a fool leads to the same consequences, that it leads to judgement – that it is the moral equivalent of murder. The focus is on what is in our hearts rather than our actions. Fair enough, what goes on in our hearts is important but it's a bit tough isn't it? I can cope with not murdering. I've never murdered anyone in my life and don't intend to start now. I have always figured that this is the commandment I was always going to find it easiest to keep. But having to face judgement for being angry? Well I'm good at getting angry. Especially with my family. It's the people who are closest to us who push our buttons the best isn't it? If getting angry at my brother and telling him what I think of him is the wrong path, then I'm in serious trouble. It's times like these that it's helpful to look at Jesus' example. But Jesus got angry. Jesus called Pharisees "fools". And if Jesus can't control His anger or His tongue, what chance do I have? At this point, most of us give up trying to live out this teaching of Jesus in despair, admire it as a great ideal and chuck it all out the window. Which leaves us in the somewhat uncomfortable position of being Christians who are not following a teaching of Christ. I

was delighted to learn a different approach at BTC and my tutor Sue Patterson has allowed me to use some of her work.

What Sue showed me is, that if you look at the Greek words, the imperatives - these are the words that command, instruct, that tell us what to do, these imperatives are not in the verse about getting angry or calling people fools, but in the illustrations that follow. So, if we look at it with a change of emphasis like this it all looks a bit different:

A different understanding:		
Traditional Righteousness	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
<p><b>Matthew 5:21:</b> You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment."</p> <p>(In the Greek, "shall not" and "shall be" are not imperatives, but futures; as translations of the Hebrew in the Ten Commandments, they do of course imply a command.)</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:22:</b> But I say to you that every one being angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council, and whoever says, "You fool!" will be liable to the hell of fire.</p> <p>(No imperatives in the Greek.)</p>	<p><b>Matthew 5:23-26:</b> So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, <b>leave</b> your gift there. . . and <b>go</b>; first <b>be reconciled</b> to your brother, and then coming, <b>offer</b> your gift. <b>Make friends</b> quickly with your accuser.</p> <p>(Red marks the Greek imperatives.)</p>

Now this passage is divided into three parts instead of two. The first part is the same – the traditional righteousness of “You shall not kill.” The second part now looks a bit different. There is no command to not be angry. In fact, the “being angry” in verse 22 implies an ongoing condition – a staying angry. Not so much that first flush of anger as the ongoing stoking of the flame. So now verse 22 looks less like an admonition and more like a warning of a vicious cycle that we can get into because of the attitudes we hold in our hearts. The third part, the illustrations, that is what’s called a “transforming initiative” – that is, action we can take to transform our relationships – these illustrations are where the imperatives in Greek are. It is telling us that if we are offering a gift at the altar and we remember that our brother or sister has something against us that we *must* leave, and we *must* go and we *must* be reconciled before coming back to offer our gift. The brother and sister referred to are not our biological relatives, but our spiritual siblings. This is the reason why we share the peace before communion. Maybe it’s how Jesus got away with calling the Pharisees “fools” – they weren’t His spiritual kin.

Jesus then goes on to command us to make friends with our accusers. It is this part that is the directive for how we are to live and avoid the vicious cycle that leads to judgement. So now the passage reads, that in the past murder was prohibited, but be careful, because being angry and calling people names will lead to problems, so instead, make your peace with those you’re angry with and make friends of those against you.

Is that a bit more achievable? Now, instead of trying to not be angry and failing miserably, we are told, that if we do get angry, to actively try and change that around to become a peacemaker, and work on making your enemy your friend. Can you see how this understanding gives us a way to live

with each other? To show God's grace to each other? That we look out for the vicious cycle, identify what may lead us astray and change our behaviour to prevent us descending into more trouble than we can cope with.

Let's look at another example. I hope that you will allow me a little licence with this one. It's the teaching on adultery. I have decided, unilaterally, that it is indicative of how to deal with temptation in general because while not all of us have the energy or opportunity for adultery, most of us can find the energy and opportunity for being greedy or putting our own desires ahead of God's will for us. So let's see how it looks with the traditional understanding.

Traditional Understanding:	
Traditional Righteousness	Jesus' Teaching
<b>Matthew 5:27:</b> You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery."	<b>Matthew 5:28-30:</b> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman with the intent to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Illustrations: If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away...)

Again, this passage is traditionally seen in two parts. Once again, Jesus refers to what was prohibited in the past – in this case adultery, or as I would like to put it to you, acting on temptation when you know full well it is the wrong thing to do. Then Jesus teaches us that looking at someone with the intent to desire them, has already committed adultery in their heart. This is followed by illustrations for removing whatever body part causes you to sin. Once again, Jesus has raised the bar by telling us that the attitudes in our hearts are the key – that they are the sin as well as our actions. In my experience, resisting temptation is hard enough, but not feeling temptation in the first place is close on impossible. We know that Jesus didn't act on temptation and we know that because we know that He was tempted. If it had been easy for Jesus to resist the temptations Satan set before Him while He was hungry and lonely, the story loses a large part of its power. By the way, the illustrations of gouging out your right eye and cutting off your right hand are generally considered to be over the top for dramatic effect. Have you ever wondered how we'd all look if we took that literally? What parts of you would be missing? I suspect there wouldn't be much of me left... A different view, looks like this:

## A different understanding:

Traditional Righteousness	Vicious Cycle	Transforming Initiative
<b>Matthew 5:27:</b> You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."	<b>Matthew 5:28:</b> But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman with the intent to desire her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.	<b>Matthew 5:29-30:</b> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.

The traditional righteousness of "You shall not commit adultery" remains the same. Giving in to temptation is prohibited. The vicious cycle is being in the presence of temptation with the intent of succumbing. The concept of intent is important in this. Being in the presence of temptation is going to lead you astray and make it harder to behave the way you know that you should. The transforming initiative, the action we must take, is to radically cut temptation out of our lives. Rather than gouging out our eyes or cutting off our hands, don't hang out with people who tempt you into the wrong behaviours – sexual or otherwise - regardless of how much you like them; if your job means that you focus more on money than anything else, then you need to consider a change; if building a church of bricks and mortar takes over from building a church of God's people, then you need to reprioritise. You need to identify what is potentially going to lead you astray and be ruthless about getting yourself away from it. Cut it out of your life.

There are 14 groups of verses like this in the Sermon on the Mount. They start with Jesus saying, "You have heard it said..." and include Jesus saying, "But I tell you..." They are traditionally held up to be a wonderful ideal way to live. Also a somewhat impossible way to live. All of them can also be read in light of identifying vicious cycles and actions to transform relationships. This is a different understanding where the focus is not on what we need to avoid but the positive actions we can take. This is all about stopping things going wrong before they start to go wrong. It is about deliberately, consciously living a life whereby we choose to live by showing God's grace over our own desires. It means that despite how we feel, we can live more or less harmoniously with each other according to the spirit of the law rather than the letter.

I encourage you all to have another look at the Sermon on the Mount in light of this understanding. Rather than falling into despair at the difficulty of living up to impossible standards and hoping that God's grace is sufficient for our human fallibility, have a look at how Jesus tells us to live out God's grace constructively with each other.