

5. *Dealing with Others*

I say to you that every one who is angry with his
brother shall be liable to the council

Matthew 5:21-26

Social consciousness

In our day and age the creation of a social conscience occupies a large place in secondary education and in all kinds of courses and training sessions. This stress focuses upon personal consciousness-raising. Man should learn to see himself primarily in terms of his relationship to others. Strangely enough, this emphasis on relationships can produce the unexpected side-effect that our neighbor quickly disappears from view. In reality the issue no longer concerns my neighbor, but *my* relationship to him or her. Whenever the quality of this relationship is lacking, or when no relationship is able to be built up at all, all sorts of people are abandoned in the name of the quality of life. Unborn children are aborted while elderly who appear to have no relationship with their surroundings are turned over to “euthanasia.” These borderline cases in our society, at birth and in old age, testify to the fact that the relationship with our neighbor is in a deep crisis. The increasing conflicts between various groups and races shows this as well. When relationships are disrupted, for example, between a government and its citizens or among the inhabitants of a certain locality, then the choice for “civil disobedience” or support for the Ku Klux Klan quickly becomes a reality.

Endangered species

Our social conscience does not sufficiently protect our fellow-man. God then did not turn our neighbor over to us. He has placed this neighbor under the protection of His Law. The Ten Commandments say: “Thou shalt not kill.” Certain kinds of animals have been declared to be endangered species, but no one less than God declares man himself to be an “endangered species.” God stands in front of our neighbor, looks us straight in the eye and orders us to keep our hands to ourselves. The

Sixth Commandment does not forbid the administration of justice or the death penalty: the verb employed in the Hebrew deals with murder and manslaughter. Primitive revenge and passion are forbidden here. The tendency of man to behave like that is less apparent as long as there is rule of law. But the moment rule of law disappears “civilized” man can suddenly become cruel to his neighbor. In milieus where respect of the rule of law is weak, the stiletto often makes a quick appearance.

The Sixth Commandment doesn't pay us any compliments. Perfect people do not have to be forbidden to kill each other. Apparently we need a commandment like this. Cain already proves it. In his case we can see that man's evil nature is deadliest to those closest to him. The commandment is given within the fellowship of the people of Israel. And Jesus warns about being angry with your own brother. Those who are near to us sometimes hear the harshest things. God wishes to protect this neighbor as brother, friend or co-worker: God Himself defends those we most easily turn against.

Beloved weaker brothers

Jesus sharply focuses this protection of our neighbor in the Sermon on the Mount. Everyone knew from the Old Testament that a murderer was subject to judgment. Jesus now goes further in his instruction. He says that even those who are mad at their brother must stand trial. Jesus shows that this is not a figure of speech by providing two examples which follow: whoever calls his brother “Raca” (empty head) is answerable to the Sanhedrin. This must have seemed like an outlandish assertion to the Jews. The Sanhedrin, the highest court in Israel, could leave murder cases to lower, regional courts. How absurd for someone to land in front of the highest court in Jerusalem for a minor offense (an insult)! and just as strange is the second example. Whoever says “you fool” will be in danger of the fires of hell. Murderers in Israel earned an earthly death through stoning. Does a minor offence (a slur) really result in a much severer sentence, namely eternal death? Using this shocking statement Jesus lets His listeners know how seriously God views unloving behavior towards their neighbor. Most people don't think it is very bad to hurt someone just a little bit. After all, it's not a fatal blow. Jesus teaches just the opposite. The issue is not whether we spare our neighbor the worst, but whether we wish him the

best! The commandment forbidding killing is intended in a positive sense: You are required to do only good things for your neighbor. God Himself demands this kind of a positive attitude.

Interestingly enough, the two examples given in the general rule of verse 22a concern people who are mentally or physically weaker than we are. Fools and idiots. It's easy to put down those who are in some way inferior to us. Thereby we can see how arrogance and pride are firmly rooted in our hearts. This pride permeates the nations which call others "underdeveloped" and people who consider everyone else to have an "inferior education," or from a "lower social class" or have a "limited intelligence." This putting-down of our neighbor, often-times unnoticed, is a deep source of suffering, friction and strife. Jesus teaches us another attitude. Insults hurt! He teaches us love and respect for our neighbor, even when they might be mentally deficient or less-endowed. Real love does not look down on someone, but stands next to him. Jesus Himself went to live among sinners in this way. He did not revile, and He who was strong, became weak for our sake. We may not approach our neighbor with anything less than this kind of love.

Reconciliation

Jesus knows that we sin against this love. Sometimes we remember that our neighbor justifiably has something against us (verse 23). God's commandment then demands both a sense of guilt and reconciliation. People constantly accusing one another are often satisfied with the expression: "Let bygones be bygones." But when dealing with God, real reconciliation is demanded. Not only is a protected neighbor hurt, but our conduct saddens the protecting God as well.

Reconciliation has two parts. First, with our neighbor to whom we confess that we have said or done something wrong. A prayer of forgiveness directed to God without this confession is null and void. Jesus underlines this sharply: better to let the priest in the temple wait at the altar, then to let your brother wait for your confession of sin. Nevertheless, reconciliation to our neighbor is not enough. Some modern theologians allow reconciliation with God to disappear into a reconciliation with our fellow man. Jesus, however, says that we still have to bring our sacrifice to God after reconciling to our neighbor. Our humility before our neighbor is completed with a humble prayer of

confession before God. In this way we learn to deal with one another before the watching eye of God.

It is important to keep this in mind. Coping with one another still takes place in public: a neighbor whom we hold in contempt is in fact busy writing out our summons for the last judgment. As long as we are on earth, walking on the same path, let us reconcile to one another on time and let us be friendly to one another instead of hurling insults. Otherwise our fellowman will become our accuser, and the judge to whom he delivers us is the legislator of the Sixth Commandment. At the last judgment He will enforce the commandment to love one another. The question whether we shall vindicate ourselves to our fellow-man will only be definitively answered by God at the judgment. For that reason reconciliation is a matter of life and death.

Preparing for the kingdom of heaven

By sharpening the 6th Commandment in verses 22 to 26 Jesus shows that He upholds the commandment given to Moses, but that at the same time He brings a more penetrating teaching to the people who are listening at the mountain. His authority continues to speak, connecting up to the Law of Sinai.

This earnest exhortation has everything to do with the coming kingdom of heaven. The era of perfect love is standing at the door. Those who actually believe that, need to start practicing right away. Those who fail to put off insults and learn friendliness for Jesus' sake, will fall further and further behind. Whoever believes that heaven is at hand, will learn to conduct himself differently with his neighbor. Jesus is concerned with that faith. It helps our neighbor and saves our own life.