

## **Murder Begins in the Heart - Matthew 5:21–26**

**21** “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.’ **22** But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire. **23** Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. **25** Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. **26** Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

### **1. The Structure of Jesus’ Teaching**

This is the first example of the formula:

**“You have heard... but I tell you...”**

This is not Jesus abolishing the Law.  
It is Jesus **revealing its original depth.**

He exposes:

- The **root** of murder (anger)
- The **language** of contempt (racca, mōros)
- The **judgment** of internal violence (Gehenna)
- The **urgency** of reconciliation (before worship)
- The **danger** of unresolved conflict (prison)

### **2. The Four Levels of Violence Jesus Exposes**

#### **1. Actual Murder — *External Violence***

“You have heard... ‘You shall not murder.’” This is the *final outcome*, the visible act condemned by the Law.

## **2. Anger – *Internal Violence***

“But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother...”Hidden rage, resentment, simmering hostility — this is murder in seed form.

## **3. Contempt – *Relational Violence***

“Whoever says to his brother, ‘Racca!’...” This is dismissing someone's worth, stripping them of dignity, treating them as nothing.

## **4. Condemnation – *Spiritual Violence***

“Whoever says, ‘You fool!’...” This is the most dangerous: declaring someone spiritually worthless, beyond God’s mercy, essentially damned.

Jesus is deliberately escalating it:

from the **visible**

→ to the **invisible**

→ to the **relational**

→ to the **spiritual**

Murder is the final fruit. Anger is the root. Contempt is the poison. Condemnation is the throne of God usurped.

**“You have heard that it was said to “those of old”, ‘**

In Greek, the phrase is: τοῖς ἀρχαίοις (*tois archaiois*)

= “to the ancients,” “to the people of long ago,” or “to the former ones.”

Jesus is NOT saying: “You have heard it was written.”  
He says: “You have heard it was *said* to the ancients.”

This distinction matters theologically, historically, and rhetorically.

## Why “of old / to the ancients” matters

### 1. Jesus is pointing to *tradition*, not Torah

This phrase signals that He is addressing:

- **handed-down interpretations**
- **oral teachings**
- **rabbinic expansions**  
—not merely the written text.

Jesus is not challenging the Law of Moses itself.  
He is challenging the **interpretation layers built around it.**

This preserves:

- His affirmation of Scripture (5:17–20)
- His criticism of misused tradition (as in Matthew 15:1–9)

### 2. It creates a contrast between ancient revelation and present revelation

He is showing:

- Moses spoke *to the ancients*.
- **Jesus** speaks *to you — right now*.

This intensifies His authority claim:

- Moses gave the Law.
- **Jesus reveals its heart.**

It sets up the shocking formula: “**But I say to you...**”

= A deliberate positioning of Jesus as the one who can interpret Torah properly.

### 3. It hints at distortions accumulated over centuries

By the time of Jesus:

- Pharisaic interpretation

- Scribal traditions
- Oral laws
- Cultural customs

...had formed a *protective fence* around the Law.

The word “of old” highlights:

- This is the **old hearing**
- Jesus is giving the **true hearing**

He is not contradicting Moses.

He is correcting the **cultural lens** through which Moses was understood.

#### **4. It makes the teaching accessible to the crowd**

Most of the people listening:

- Could not read
- Learned Torah through hearing
- Received **oral explanations** of the commands

“You have heard it said to the ancients...”

= “This is what you’ve always been told this means...”

But Jesus is saying:

- “The interpretation you inherited is inadequate. Here is the true intention of God.”

#### **5. A quiet reminder of the danger of inherited faith**

Jesus subtly exposes how:

- Truth can degrade through repetition
- Interpretations can fossilize
- People obey inherited meaning, not actual revelation

**First Line - The traditional understanding:**

**“You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.”**

This is:

- The 6th Commandment (Exodus 20:13) **plus**
- The *traditional legal consequence* the rabbis taught

**Key point:**

It focuses entirely on the **external act** of murder.

Meaning:

- If you kill someone = you face judgment.
- If you don't kill = you are righteous.

This is a *surface-level* righteousness:

- measurable
- visible
- legal
- behavioral
- enforceable by courts

It is “safe,” because it requires nothing inward.

The scribes' teaching essentially said:

**“Avoid murder and you've fulfilled the law.”**

**2. “But I say to you...”**

Now Jesus reveals **the heart** of the command:

**“...whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”**

This is a radical shift in multiple ways:

**A. The Judgment Moves Inward**

**In the old view:**

Judgment applies only to **the external act**.

### **In Jesus' view:**

Judgment applies to:

- anger
- contempt
- relational disdain
- murderous thoughts
- inner hostility
- emotional violence

Jesus expands “murder” to include **internal disposition**. He is not redefining the law — He is revealing its original depth.

## **B. The Measure of Accountability Changes**

### **Traditional:**

You answer to a human court if you murder.

### **Jesus:**

You answer to God even if you are **angry without cause**.

The Greek phrase “in danger of the judgment” (ἐνοχος τῇ κρίσει) refers to:

- divine judgment
- moral accountability
- the true spiritual court

Humans cannot judge your anger. **God can.**

## **C. The Focus Changes from Behavior to Motive**

The scribes judged the act. - Jesus judges the intent, desire, will, truth.

## **D. The Standard of Righteousness Intensifies**

Under the scribes:

- righteousness = obeying external rules

Under Jesus:

- righteousness = alignment of the **inner world** with the heart of God

This connects directly to the Beatitudes:

- *pure in heart*
- *peacemaker*
- *merciful*
- *meek*

In Jesus' kingdom:

**There is no righteousness without interior transformation.**

### **E. "Without a cause" — a quick note**

Some manuscripts include the phrase "without cause" (εἰκῆ).  
Some ancient manuscripts do not.

Even if included, it does NOT soften Jesus' teaching.

It means:

- You cannot justify anger
- You cannot defend resentment
- You cannot rationalize bitterness

Only *righteous* anger (which is extremely rare) is excluded:

- anger at injustice
- anger at evil
- anger on behalf of others

**Ego-driven anger is always condemned.**

### **MATTHEW 5:22b — THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE**

**"And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire."**

This is the **next two levels** of Jesus' four-part escalation.

## 1. "RACA!" – THE VIOLENCE OF CONTEMPT

### Meaning of "Raca" (ῥακά)

"Raca" is Aramaic *slang*, not a formal word.

It conveys:

- Worthlessness
- Emptiness
- "You nothing."
- A belittling, dismissive spit of disgust

It is not intellectual insult — it is **existential belittling**.it dehumanizes.

### Why is this so dangerous?

Jesus says: "**Shall be in danger of the council.**"

In Greek: τῷ συνεδρίῳ = the Sanhedrin

The Sanhedrin was the highest court in Judaism:

- 71 elders
- Priests + scribes + Pharisees
- The supreme judicial authority under the Law

Jesus is saying:

**Contempt is so serious that it belongs before the highest court.**

Why? Because contempt is the root of social destruction:

- It fractures relationships
- It kills dignity
- It erodes community
- It creates division, hatred, and alienation

“Raca” is the **death of fellowship**. This is no longer internal anger — this is relational violence.

## 2. “YOU FOOL!” — THE VIOLENCE OF DAMNATION

Jesus intensifies again:

**“But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire.”**

**The word “Fool” (μωρέ — mōre / mōros)**

This is not the English idea of “silly” or “unwise.”

In Hebrew and Jewish culture, calling someone a FOOL means:

- “You are morally corrupt.”
- “You are godless.”
- “You are spiritually worthless.”
- “You are rejected by God.”
- “You are beyond salvation.”

This is **pronouncing spiritual judgment** over another person.

In other words:

**It is claiming the authority of God over someone’s eternal destiny.**

This is why Jesus reserves the harshest consequence for this phrase.

## 3. “In danger of hell fire” — GEHENNA (γέεννα)

Jesus does **not** say:

- Hades
- Sheol
- The grave
- Eternal afterlife imagery

He uses **Gehenna** — a specific, real place.

### **The Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna)**

Located southwest of Jerusalem.

Known for:

- Ancient child sacrifices to Molech
- A cursed valley
- A metaphor for corruption, rot, and judgment
- A burning garbage dump in later Jewish memory
- Fires that continually smoldered
- Maggots and stench

Gehenna = **symbol of spiritual decay and moral ruin.**

Jesus is not just saying:

“Be careful or you’ll go to hell someday.”

He is saying:

**“This kind of spiritual violence turns your inner world into Gehenna — the place of corruption, rot, and death.”**

It is a *present condition*, not only an afterlife destination.

### **MATTHEW 5:23–24 — RECONCILIATION BEFORE WORSHIP**

**“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”**

This is not a gentle suggestion.

This is a **command that overturns the entire sacrificial system’s priorities.**

Let’s break it down.

## 1. “Therefore...” – A Key Connector

Jesus is connecting this directly to:

- internal anger
- relational contempt
- spiritual condemnation

He is saying:

**Because anger and contempt are spiritually deadly...**

**because relationships matter...**

**because words wound...**

**THEREFORE... let me tell you what God actually wants.**

This is the practical outworking of His teaching on internal righteousness.

## 2. “If you bring your gift to the altar...”

**This is temple language – enormous significance**

In the first century:

- Worship centered around the Temple in Jerusalem
- The altar was the holiest earthly space
- Sacrifice was the supreme act of devotion
- People traveled long distances for this moment

Jesus is speaking to Jews who believed:

**There is nothing holier than offering a gift to God.**

But Jesus is about to overturn that belief.

## 3. “...and there remember that your brother has something against you...”

Notice Jesus’ precision.

He does **not** say:

- “If *you* are angry at your brother.”
- “If *you* have something against someone.”

Instead He says:

**“If your brother has something against you...”**

This means:

- Even if YOU are not upset
- Even if YOU think you're fine
- Even if YOU believe they're overreacting
- Even if YOU think they're wrong
- Even if YOU did not intend to hurt them

Jesus places the burden of reconciliation on the one who is:

- spiritually aware
- awakened
- convicted
- humble
- kingdom-minded

In other words:

**You are responsible for trying to heal the relationship if you become aware of the fracture.**

**4. “Leave your gift there before the altar...”**

This is the most shocking command in the entire Sermon to this point.

What Jesus is saying is effectively illegal in temple practice.

For a Jew in 30 AD, this would sound like:

- “Pause your worship.”
- “Interrupt your sacrifice.”
- “Stop the holiest act you can do.”
- “Leave the offering unfinished.”

This is an **abrupt, disrespectful, almost scandalous act** — unless God Himself commands it.

Jesus is revealing God's priorities:

**God values reconciliation more than ritual.**

This is a massive theological reversal.

## 5. “Go your way. First be reconciled to your brother...”

**The order is everything.**

Jesus is saying:

- Reconciliation comes *before* worship
- Peace comes *before* sacrifice
- Unity comes *before* devotion
- Love comes *before* liturgy
- Relationship comes *before* religion

This is the heart of Jesus’ teaching:

**The spiritual life is relational before it is ceremonial.**

**You cannot love God while rejecting peace with your brother.**

John later echoes Jesus directly:

“If you do not love your brother whom you have seen, you cannot love God whom you have not seen.”

(1 John 4:20)

## 6. “...and then come and offer your gift.”

God *still* desires worship.

He is not replacing devotion — He is purifying it.

Steps Jesus gives:

1. Stop the ritual
2. Repair the relationship
3. Return to worship

This reveals:

- Reconciliation makes worship *authentic*
- Peace makes sacrifice *acceptable*
- A whole heart is the true offering

Worship without reconciliation is:

- hollow

- hypocritical
- surface-level
- a show
- a lie we tell ourselves

Jesus is telling the crowd:

**Your relationship with people IS part of your relationship with God.**

### **MATTHEW 5:25–26**

**“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.”**

This is Jesus finishing His teaching on **the escalating consequences of unresolved conflict**. It is a parable set in the world of First-century Jewish civil law.

## **1. What Does “Adversary” Mean?**

The Greek word is:

**ἀντίδικος — antidikos**

Meaning:

- Opponent in a legal case
- Someone bringing a claim against you
- A creditor
- Someone accusing you in court
- A rival in a dispute
- Someone who has a legitimate complaint

In the first century, an “adversary” is not:

- An enemy
- A villain
- Someone you hate

It is **anyone who has a dispute with you that is moving toward legal judgment.**

In Jewish civil life, this could include:

- someone you owed money
- someone you wronged financially
- someone you injured or offended
- someone who had a grievance against you
- someone who believed you failed in a duty
- someone demanding compensation

In other words:

**an adversary is simply anyone you are in conflict with who is moving toward formal resolution.**

This fits perfectly with the previous section where Jesus said:  
**“If your brother has something against you...”**

## **2. Why Does Jesus Use Legal Language?**

In that era:

- Many disputes didn't go straight to court
- People often walked *together* to the court to present their cases
- If they reconciled on the way, the case could be dropped
- Once at court, things became formal, rigid, and costly
- The judge could assign severe penalties

So Jesus uses a **common real-life scenario**:

Two people walking side-by-side toward the courthouse.

This image is incredibly vivid for His audience.

## **3. “Agree with your adversary quickly...”**

This does NOT mean:

- compromise truth
- agree with lies
- surrender your soul
- accept abuse

The Greek idea is:

**be well-disposed toward, make peace with, seek resolution, settle the matter.**

The point is:

- don't wait
- don't delay
- don't cling to pride
- don't harbor resentment
- don't escalate conflict

In modern language:

**“Make peace before things get worse.”**

This fits with Jesus' previous command:

**FIRST be reconciled...**

#### **4. The Legal Escalation**

Jesus describes the natural progression once conflict is ignored:

- 1. Your adversary hands you over to the judge**  
— the conflict leaves your control
- 2. The judge hands you over to the officer**  
— now the system controls you
- 3. You are thrown into prison**  
— your freedom disappears
- 4. You will not get out until you pay the last penny**  
— consequences run their full course

This is a metaphor for:

**the spiritual consequences of unresolved conflict.**

## **5. What is Jesus Is Actually Saying Spiritually?**

This is NOT just about legal issues. This is about the inner world:

- unresolved anger
- unspoken resentment
- cold relationships
- festering wounds
- ignored offenses

**When not dealt with, these things:**

- take on a life of their own
- grow roots
- become bondage
- steal peace
- imprison the soul

Jesus is describing the **psychological and spiritual downward spiral** of anger that is allowed to harden.

**Gehenna spreads when you refuse reconciliation.  
And eventually it locks you inside.**

## **6. Cultural Insight: Debt Prison**

In Jesus' world:

- Debtors could be imprisoned
- They stayed until the debt was repaid
- Often family members had to pay on their behalf
- It was a shameful, humiliating outcome

Jesus uses this image to show:

**Unresolved conflict becomes moral debt.**

**And moral debt becomes a prison of the heart.**

**Make peace while the conflict is still small, or it will grow into a spiritual prison you cannot escape on your own.**

**THE DEEP ROOT: FEAR → ANGER → CONTEMPT → VIOLENCE**

In the biblical world, “anger” is not simply irritation.

It's **the eruption that happens when a deeper wound is activated.**

And that deeper wound is almost always **fear**.

**Fear of rejection**

**Fear of shame**

**Fear of losing control**

**Fear of being powerless**

**Fear of not being seen**

**Fear of being hurt again**

**Fear of being exposed**

**Fear of being unworthy**

**Fear of losing something precious**

**Fear of one's own internal chaos**

In other words:

**Anger is the bodyguard of fear.**

It rises to protect the fragile places.

This is why Jesus goes beneath behavior and language and directly into the **human heart's architecture**.

Let's reframe the whole progression with fear as the originating point.

**THE TRUE SPIRITUAL ANATOMY JESUS REVEALS**

**1. Fear — the unseen root**

Every conflict begins here.

Fear tells you:

- You're threatened
- You're small
- You're unsafe
- You're not enough
- Someone is going to hurt you
- You're about to lose something
- You must defend yourself

Fear is the soil in which anger grows.

## **2. Anger — fear's armor**

When fear rises, anger puts on the sword.

Anger says:

- "I'll protect myself."
- "I'll push you back."
- "I'll take control."

This is why Jesus goes after anger:  
He wants the child underneath to be healed.

## **3. Contempt ("Raca") — fear's attempt to regain superiority**

Contempt is what people do when they feel small.

When someone feels:

- afraid
- weak
- exposed
- vulnerable

They degrade others to elevate themselves.

Contempt is fear trying to reclaim power.

This is why Jesus connects contempt to the **Sanhedrin**, the highest court —  
because contempt tries to put yourself *above* another human being.

#### **4. Condemnation (“You fool!”) — fear pretending to be God**

This is fear’s final evolution.

When fear is deep enough, and not healed, it becomes:

- judgment
- hardness
- spiritual arrogance
- the need to declare others unworthy

“You fool” isn’t just an insult.  
It is fear trying to sit on the throne of God.

Fear whispers:

- “If I lower them, I rise.”
- “If I condemn them, I am safe.”
- “If I judge them, I am righteous.”

Jesus says:

This is walking toward **Gehenna**, the valley where idols were worshiped —  
because this is the heart making *itself* the idol.

### **RECONCILIATION IN LIGHT OF FEAR**

Now the reconciliation teaching becomes even more beautiful and human.

Why does Jesus say:

- leave the altar
- go make peace
- settle matters quickly
- do not delay
- do not let conflict harden

Because every minute fear is left un-addressed:

- the wound deepens

- the story grows darker
- anger strengthens
- contempt forms
- judgment hardens
- the heart builds its own prison

**Reconciliation is not just a moral act —**

**it is a *healing act*.**

It is how fear is dismantled.

## **THE KINGDOM REVELATION: WHERE FEAR HAS NO PLACE**

The Beatitudes already told us:

- the poor in spirit
- the meek
- the merciful
- the peacemakers
- the pure in heart

These are people who have *let fear go*.

People who no longer need anger to protect themselves.

People who no longer need contempt to elevate themselves.

People who no longer need judgment to justify themselves.

Because the Kingdom of Heaven is a space where:

**Love > Fear**

**Mercy > Pride**

**Peace > Control**

**Humility > Self-defense**

**Jesus does not simply forbid anger — He heals the fear that anger is trying to protect.**