**Matthew 5:21-37 (ESV)**

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ **22** But I say to you that everyone who is 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. **23**  So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. **25**  Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. **26** Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

**“Forgiveness Is Life”**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. The winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia brought the best from around the world. Yet, even the most trained and skilled athletes face harsh disappointment. They can easily watch their place for a medal be shutout by someone else. Deeper heartache comes from disqualification or a mistake that ends it all before they even begin. This drive to compete at all costs ended up coming from one of our American bobsled racers. A bathroom lock jammed on him and his only solution was to break down the door! Amazingly, the character of Olympians is of a caliber that rarely ever shows raging disappointment. It just happened that a door lost to someone who did not want to lose.

Of course, Jesus in our Gospel reading shows what man has lost and no evolutionary theory will let anyone evolve out of it. The Fall into sin is the greatest disappoint hanging over humanity from one generation to the next. It means a sinful world is angry with God and it is what keeps anger burning between sinners. Christ at His Sermon On The Mount tells those who hear Him that they are the salt and light of the earth. This righteousness by faith in Him is what exceeds that of Sadducees and Pharisees. The primary and first place this light of salvation shines out from His Church is by how Christ calms the hostility. Anger against God and man is to face the message of the cross. Jesus reconciles us to God making His forgiveness foundational for our life.

When Jesus unpacks the fifth commandment showing, “everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable for judgment,” He does not condemn anger as if there is no place for it. God used prophets to call Israel back by His righteous Word of repentance. St. Paul showed irritation to the Corinthians church saying, “But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.” Even Jesus turned the tables over in the temple for it was His Father’s House. Luther tells us, “Anger is indeed necessary sometimes, but only in those whose responsibility it is, and only if it does not go beyond the punishment of sin and evil… It is directed at the wrong and not at the person, and it is intended to help our neighbor…If father and mother, judge, and preacher held back their mouths and their fists and did nothing to curb or punish evil, the wickedness of the world would destroy the government and the church and everything” (Vol. 21).

Anger over what is good and those entrusted with it. Is not the same as the foundation for forgiveness that none can find in any heart of man. Certainly, murder shows the most grotesque hatred that stands against another person. It goes back to the earliest times with Cain killing his brother Abel. Laws seek to restrain such darkness, but Jesus knows how deep this unholy anger goes in our hearts. It is hard to see, but Judas revealed it when he betrayed God’s Son. It is evident when the Scribes and Pharisees set up the death of Jesus’ to be by the Gentiles. It is this threat that rages on between spouses able to put to death their marriage. It is anger hiding in the forms of resentment, frustration, bitterness, and grudges. It is contempt beyond men, but against God and His Word. Time cannot cure such darkness and can even make it worse. Forgiveness removes anger and only God gives it in the fullest without disappointment. Jesus makes this the lifeblood of His Church.

The foundation of forgiveness comes from the heart of God for sinners. Who else offers what Jesus gives? He speaks the truth without restraint or fear, but it is always in love to save the lost, the condemned, and the angry. Only “irreconcilable differences” exist when we stand apart from God’s work by the Gospel. St. Paul told the Corinthians, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” Rather than trying to control the behavior of angry people, God seeks to change the hate-filled hearts of sinners. This happens today by the Word and sacraments with Jesus reconciling us by His sacrifice. He shows that our anger is not against man, but finally with God. It is a big reason why more and more just simply want to believe there is no God. Is not this the best way to treat someone you hate, to think of them as dead, to treat them as nothing, to deny their very existence?

Thank God, He does not harbor the same grudge in His heart. The cross has already revealed His wrath. Here is how He has got even with sinners. His full judgment of the Law has had its way with us. Accept the anger of God cannot compete with His love to save. Rather than a murderous spirit, Jesus stands to be in our place of judgment as Savior. Instead of insults accusing us before God, the Son proclaims, “Father forgive them.” In the place of hell fire, Jesus opens heaven by His sacrifice for all in a sinful world. St. Paul reminds us how the light of Christ shines in His Church, “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossian 1:19-20). This reconciling promise by God is the higher righteousness we have by faith in Jesus. God has laid the foundation of forgiveness alive among the baptized, His Church.

The foundation of forgiveness means reconciling love shines for each other. Jesus does not wish any to hide behind false worship of Him where there is need for forgiveness. He said, “…leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” Jesus has already paid for all things without any merit or worthiness in us. What He does not want is to disregard forgiveness needed between those He seeks to forgive by His word and Sacrament. This is what we pray daily to have from the Lord’s Prayer toward those in our life. It is the high standard held up before coming with our brothers and sister in Christ to the Lord’s Supper. Jesus has a deep desire to reconcile lives, to keep things together, to restore broken relationship. He tells us to “Come to terms quickly” both when we sin, but also the call to forgive the ones who sin against us.

Forgiveness is the preeminent mark of Christ’s Church. Is it because we do it so well? Not in the least, Christian marriage has fallen apart to a culture of divorce and cohabitation. Let alone much of forgiveness today seeks to justify false living, looks to change God’s Word, and seeks love different from God’s way of love by the cross. What renews forgiveness has nothing to do with the heart of man. It is turning away from anger to believe in the heart of God for us. As the Lord said to Israel, “Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life.”  
Jesus speaks life by His forgiving Word. He brings His sacrifice to be front and center for His people. What man cannot reconcile, what man fails to do; God redeems and saves by His Holy Name who loves sinners. Jesus reconciles us to God making His forgiveness foundational for our life. It is both for now and why you will be in heaven. Amen. Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, be with your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.