

Slaying Anger, Training for Gentleness, Patience, Forgiveness
Matthew 5:20-26
Lent IV Midweek
March 18, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Through the first three weeks of this Lenten midweek meditation, our look at sanctification (and, by the way, sanctification is a difficult thing to hear, and preach, continuously because it demands New Adam thought, and we have Old Adam about our neck, and so we grow weary and tired; and soon it will be time to run to the cross... but, first, instruction.) So, our look at sanctification has urged the exercising of the baptismally given fruit of the Spirit to defend against and slay Old Adam... and specifically Old Adam's sinful disposition as highlighted by the 8th commandment (envy, combatted with New Adam's kindness), then 7th, 9, and 10th commandments (greed combatted with New Adam's goodness), then sixth commandment (lust and even gluttony, combatted with New Adam's chastity and temperance).

You'll notice, in each of those three weeks, we meditated upon slaying an Old Adam sin (habit, *work of the flesh*) that we can readily admit proactively 'goes after' our neighbor and what God has granted our neighbor.

Tonight, we consider a sin (work of the flesh) that's harder for us to tame and slay (and we would all admit that it is) in *this* way:

anger is often reactionary, our gut emotional, “instinctive” response to where we think we’ve been wronged, threatened, harmed, and where we believe genuinely we need to be defended, justified, vindicated, even avenged. Yes, this particular sin / work of the flesh we must learn to slay, and we must exercise New Adam regularly against anger... especially because anger is so prevalent in daily-life as a “natural, basic response” when we believe those in vocational relationship to us have harmed us and disobeyed God... as Jesus even mentioned in our text – your *brother*, when you’re angry with your brother – that vocational relationship.

Consider, when Luther teaches us to confess our sins and how to contemplate which sins to confess, he begins with our vocation – “Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, worker?” His logic of thought moves to sins that disrespect God’s good order of authority – “Have you been disobedient (child-to-parent), unfaithful (spouse-to-spouse/parishioner in the things of God), lazy (employee-to-employer).” And then his line of thought continues with the clash that comes, either as *rebuke* from those in authority, or from *stubbornness* toward those in authority: “Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome?” Notice how both the fourth and fifth commandments are at play here. The clash of hot-tempers (authority versus subject... Fourth Commandment stuff) and angry thoughts of the heart in ‘self-defense mode’ leads to a clash of rude words and gestures, which leads to the quarrelsome

conduct of feet and fists, even hands bearing weapons (now we're firmly into the Fifth Commandment)! What tragedy, the heart of Self-centered man is so filled with anger that he would strike down his own brother! So natural is this to fallen man that it is the first sin recorded after fallen Eden! So natural to fallen man that Jesus must teach us that the one who is angry with and hates his brother has already committed murder in his heart.

Ironically, as natural as this is to sinful man, that same man is completely appalled that the Scriptures would ever say that God is angry – "I (Old Adam says) I have a just cause to be angry, even with God! But the Almighty *never* has a just cause to be angry, certainly not with me!" Old Adam likes to play the victim and expect that God's patience should never run out, that His long-suffering should actually be *forever*-suffering, that His gentleness would never include a word of rebuke (though, gentleness is *prautes* – balance between no anger and excess anger), that His forgiveness would turn a blind eye to impenitence and a hardness of heart.

But, of course, the Scriptures say that God is a jealous God – and rightly so, for all is His – and, as it is, He who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love nevertheless also divinely disciplines and even punishes and even condemns... He is perfectly merciful *and* perfectly holy... and it's all perfectly carried out in the perfect love of His Divine Majesty.

But we who are to *reflect* such perfect love (New Adam, our spirit with the Holy Spirit)... because we have Old Adam about our neck, we are *not* perfect. Thus, Christians must recognize that, where the Scriptures *do* speak of a ‘proper’ dose of anger or discipline, Old Adam will always use the truth of God’s *divine* wrath as an example of and excuse for Old Adam’s *sinful*, seething rage.

We can speak of that rage manifesting itself in Cain versus Abel, and fellow Christian one to another (as Jesus mentions in our Reading), but most often the rage and anger flows from a power struggle, a belief of supremacy of idea or right or office that deserves to be defended and vindicated.

Perhaps this is because God *does* give earthly offices to carry out His will, including His temporal rebuke and correction of evil and wrongdoing.

In the Large Catechism, Luther explains that the Fourth Commandment “forbids *everyone* to be angry, except those... who are in the place of God, that is parents and government.” Yes, St. Paul tells the Romans, Caesar does not bear the sword in vain, but the wrongdoer should fear Caesar’s punishment (righteous anger from God). Likewise, parents are not without divine mandate to discipline their children in the instruction and fear of the Lord. And, just as for fathers of the household, so also fathers in the faith, as pastors have a divine command to rebuke the sinner, not as a heartless authoritarian, but as loving under-shepherd... to work to

safely separate the sheep from the sin that endangers him because he loves him so much. Martin Luther wrote lightheartedly to a friend regarding the benefit of pastoral anger, “I have no better remedy than anger. If I want to write, pray, preach well, then I must be angry. Then my entire blood supply refreshes itself, my mind is made keen, and all temptations depart.”

But, lest one hold on to that too quickly and think officeholders should cling to this supposed right, that same Luther also taught,

“God wants to remove the root and source by which the heart is embittered against our neighbor.... We learn to calm our [own] wrath and to have a patient, gentle heart, especially toward those who give us cause to be angry.”

Notice! – “those who give us *cause* to be angry” (think of all the instances in daily life where you are angry; often because you think you have *cause*) – that could be a veiled appeal to officeholder authority. Yes, if we are *not* in a position of authority, we have *no* cause to defend with anger – for the Lord will vindicate... and vindicate precisely through those of the Fourth Commandment who carry the authority, even authority over *us*. And, even when we *do* have *cause* by the authority of the office (as parent, for example), we still ‘govern’ with certainty that the Lord will vindicate His will, as He sees fit. And such certainty gives us ability to govern with gentleness and compassion.

Luther concludes his treatment of the Fifth Commandment this way:

“Here again we have God’s Word, by which He would encourage and teach us to do true, noble and grand works such as *gentleness, patience, and in short, love and kindness* to our enemies....

Notice how beautiful and holy are these words, gentleness and patience. **Gentleness** is not merely that which is taught to calm toddlers when around newborns or puppies or even delicate, breakable objects in the house; gentleness is the fruit of the Spirit that relaxes our white-knuckled fists and stills our seething hearts. **Patience** is not merely that which is taught children to await with confidence the mindfulness and timing of their parents; patience is the fruit of the Spirit that enables the children of God to await with confidence the mindfulness and timing of their heavenly Father. Indeed, isn’t that how Luther concludes that discussion on the Fifth Commandment. Again,

“Here again we have God’s Word, by which He would encourage and teach us to do true, noble and grand works such as *gentleness, patience, and in short, love and kindness* to our enemies....(and then Luther concludes) **“He is our God, which means He will help, assist, and protect us in order that He may quench the desire of revenge in us.”**

God will help and assist and protect your cause; which means He will also help and assist and protect you from desiring revenge. And, as this is so – as God *will* vindicate all who seek to do His will on earth as it is done in heaven – then should not fellow Christians be gentle and patient and forgiving toward one another? Should not even ‘authority and subject’ be gentle and patient and forgiving toward one another?

Now, one might say (and we especially hear this of the discipline and raising up of our children), “Careful! Spare the rod, spoil the child!” True... and the Old Adam in those little sinners will take a mile when you give an inch... thus, we ought always raise them in the fear and faith of the Lord. Yet, if they are to love His holy will, they must be shown to reverently fear it without being *bitter* toward it; and so to govern only with blows and punishments is never God’s intent for parents, government, or pastors.

Thus, as we *know* we are not going to be perfect in our offices, would it not be better when we must give account to God to say, “Lord, because I *knew* you would vindicate Your cause, I tried faithfully to reflect and confess Your mercy and compassion”, rather than have to say, “Lord, because I was *unsure* you would vindicate Your cause, I wanted to make sure those little sinners felt your wrath!”

In other words, it is sinful for those in authority to be *angry for Self*, with fits of anger and unfettered rage. Such is not true

discipline, but the vengeance of Old Adam. The same Scriptures that say, “spare the rod, spoil the child” also say, “Fathers, do not *provoke* your children to anger, but raise them up in the fear of the Lord.”

Notice that text... by their own anger, fathers *can* provoke children to *anger*...

Now, perhaps we can see ourselves in that position of Authority (as parent or employer, for example), but now put yourself in the position of Subject. Subject – whether child toward parent, Christian toward pastor, citizen toward government, employee toward employer... such truth that fathers can provoke children to anger is not your justification or excuse to be angry... as if to say, “This sinful officeholder made me do it; he or she is to blame! If they would have been gentler, more patient, kinder, I would have responded better. But, as *they* were not, I did not!” No, subjects may not blame God’s chosen officeholder for their own sinful anger...especially to shift blame and flee the intended correction. In other words, *sinful* anger isn’t just a one-way street (namely, proper authority improperly delivering discipline toward the sinful subject); anger is also the subject’s improper *response* to *proper* authority faithfully delivered, even if imperfectly delivered.

So then, just as those in authority are to be gentle, patient, and forgiving with those under their authority; likewise, those *under* authority are also to be gentle, patient, and forgiving with those in authority over them. This can sometimes be more difficult because

you worry that you have no recourse: “Who is going to plead my cause? Who is going to vindicate my perceived right?” And so, Old Adam ‘rages’ at his supposed victimization because he has no confidence – not only in those in authority – but, at the heart of the matter, no confidence in the God who *put* the officeholders in authority.

New Adam must be exercised; because New Adam has *faith in* God. And New Adam must use these occasions for proper godly exercise, first, by recognizing that all authority is answerable to God... and, therefore, *if he is right* in his perception that the authority has wronged him, he must commend his cause to God and he *will* be vindicated in the way, and when, God knows is right.

But, then, if the Christian subject *knows* he will be vindicated, he ought have the deepest *sympathy* – not *anger!* – toward those in authority... for anyone who must bear the proper rebuke of God needs our fervent plea, even if they have sinned against us. Where Old Adam seeks vengeance and gleefully cries with bloodthirsty insincerity, “God have mercy on your soul!”, New Adam does not *delight* in such vengeance, but shares God’s desire to spare the sinner from divine vengeance, and so New Adam tearfully cries with genuine sincerity, “God have mercy on his soul.” New Adam humbly prays that God will be merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (recognize that? Ash Wednesday!)

and that these sinners-in-authority will not be destroyed, but will be forgiven and safeguarded in Jesus' righteousness.

But, then, if New Adam knows the very imperfect authority is a Christian who faithfully hopes *in the same Christ*, then New Adam knows Christ will gently intercede, the blood of Christ will cleanse all unrighteousness, and the officeholder will be compassionately treated by the patient and forgiving God... and thus, New Adam knows that *he* (the subject under this imperfect authority figure) *he* should also act with compassion and gentleness and patience and forgiveness... even toward imperfect authority.

And *then*, when he sees this imperfect authority as a child of God safe in Jesus, as faithfully accountable to and trying (albeit imperfectly) to carry out the will of God, *then* the subject may also recognize that this authority figure still has his office and authority from God ...and then New Adam gladly desires – as the Small Catechism says it – to “honor, serve and obey, love and cherish” this authority. And we finally have come full circle.

This all sounds so beautiful on paper. Among us sinners, not so simple and not so beautiful. Who wants to be patient, who doesn't grow weary of being patient, when it seems vindication is nowhere in sight? Who wants to answer forcefulness with gentleness when it seems forcefulness only respects a stronger forcefulness? Who wants to forgive fully and completely when it

seems the one who has sinned against us is not fully and completely penitent?

This, again, reminds us that Old Adam lives and breathes the theology of glory, but we Christians (New Adam!) are to live and breathe the theology of the cross. Even in the mandate of a divine office (parent, government, pastor), the officeholder must recall that he or she represents the patient, gentle, and forgiving Lord. And, even though the divine office of parent, government, pastor is occupied by imperfect sinners, the subject under authority (whether child, citizen, or Christian) must recall that he or she confesses and hopes in and even encourages the imperfect officeholder to proclaim to him the holy will of the merciful Christ.

And, as neither authority nor subject, neither Christian nor fellow Christian can perfectly recall this, then we must all look to the cross and see Christ hanging there for us all; we must flee to His gifts and receive Christ forgiving us all there; and we must pray to Christ to intercede for us all, that the holy God would be patient, gentle, and forgiving toward us all. We *must* pray, and – thanks be to God – *may* pray with certainty, that Christ cover us all with his righteousness, that he soften our hearts in the love of repentance and forgiveness as the daily rhythm of the baptismal life, and that He sacramentally strengthen New Adam to have faith in God and fervent love toward one another.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son

And of the Holy Spirit.

+ AMEN +

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March 18, 2026