

“Love and let love”  
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A woman walks into a confessional booth at her Catholic church and says, “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. Last night I killed a politician...” A long stretch of silence passes before the priest responds, “My daughter, I’m here to listen to your sins, not your community service work.”

Unfortunately for us—though fortunately for the politicians—that is not what Jesus says in our passage today.

By his reading, insults and anger are on the same continuum with murder, and they are all sinful.

Of course, if that’s the case, we are in trouble. Insults and anger are about all we got these days. Turn on the TV, pop open Facebook, check Twitter, and there it is: an endless stream of insults and anger, available for your consumption 24/7. And frankly, folks have a right to be angry. I don’t care if you’re Republican or Democrat, most people are fed up with the status quo of politics in this country. While leaders vie over who ends up on top, real people are suffering.

Many of us would settle for a little civility. Heck, some of us are just glad we didn’t punch anyone today.

Of course, there are other—more private—sources of anger too. A hurt, a lie, a disappointment, an injustice, a failing relationship, a loss of power or dignity.

This anger can be so overpowering that the best we think we can hope to achieve is a kind of mutual detente, that good, old “live and let live.” You do your thing, and I’ll do my thing, and we’ll leave each other alone. Avoid the conflict.

It has become the one saving grace of many a family dinner table.

“Live and let live” is the byword of American democracy. It is tolerance. It is equal rights. It is what allows us as a society to exist together despite so many, often competing, differences.

But is it good enough? Jesus doesn’t think so.

A lot of Jesus’ contemporaries had come to regard the Jewish Law as a kind of moral checklist. “No murder today; check. No adultery today; check!” David Lose writes, “Jesus wants more from us. Actually, Jesus wants more *for* us.”

The Law wasn’t created for God’s benefit or as some kind of examination for a seat in heaven. It was created so that we could know how to live together in *shalom*, which means more than mere peace, but a kind of communal wellbeing, a mutual thriving.

Every action God takes in the Bible, after the expulsion from Eden, is designed for one goal and one goal only: the reconciliation of humanity with itself and with God, the reunion of heaven and earth. It is why Jesus lives, dies, and is resurrected—so that what has been torn asunder will be made whole again.

In this sense, then, the command not to murder isn't only about physical violence; it's about anything that further separates us from God, our brethren, and our own internal harmony.

Jesus wants us to know that there are many ways to destroy a person. Words can be as potent and deadly a weapon as a knife. Anger itself, if allowed to fester, can act as a poison in the heart, sealing it shut to love and joy, condemning as much the one who harbors the anger as the one against whom the anger is directed.

Gautama Buddha famously said, "Holding onto anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."

Indeed, the punishing fire Jesus describes may be about, not so much eternal damnation, but rather the kind of world that is created by anger. It's the kind of world we see today. It is the loneliness and the alienation we feel today. When Jesus speaks in this passage of hell, he uses the word *Gehenna*, which referred to a valley south of Jerusalem where the followers of Molech used to practice child sacrifice. It was a literal place on earth where relationships were broken and violence perpetrated.

But even letting go of anger will not save us from Gehenna, Jesus says. We must immediately seek reconciliation. Even indifference is capable of destroying the world.

In the Pirke Avot, a section of the 3rd-century Jewish writings known as Mishnah, which were basically scholarly interpretations of the Torah, "we learn that there are four types of people," writes Rabbi Eliyahu Safran. "Those who say, 'What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.' This is the common or average person. There are those who say, 'What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine.' Such people are ignorant. Then there are those who say, 'What is mine is yours and what is yours is your own.' Such people are saintly. Finally, there are those who say, 'What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine.' Such people are wicked."

The Mishnah goes on to say that you'd probably associate the wicked people with the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, but it's actually the "live and let live" people who are at the root of the cities' evil. Sodom and Gomorrah, those dens of violence, are what happen when people only care about their own needs and do not wish to share in one another's lives.

A world of fenced-off individuals is not part of God's plan. God doesn't want a truce; God wants peace. God wants the transformation of your soul, that it might come to mirror God, who is Love.

We have to break open our hearts and love our enemies. We have to pray for them. We have to forgive them. We have to want them to thrive.

We will note that Jesus, like the prophets before him, gets plenty angry too. But instead of withdrawing into either a “live and let live” or a “destroy them all” mentality, Jesus confronts the relationship. He insists that this relationship is so precious that it deserves time and care. Part of that care may be honestly naming wrongdoing. It may require confession and telling some hard truths. It may require a change to the status quo. It will not mean lying down for oppression or abuse. But it will mean actively working for mutual victory, not defeat.

If we do not approach reconciliation with the desire for the other to thrive as well as we, it is a fraud and will fail.

Truth is, though, it may feel impossible, in today’s world, to do what Jesus has asked of us. And it would be impossible if it weren’t for the fact that it’s already been done. Barbara Blaisdell writes, “The gospel is that God has given us, in Christ, God’s whole heart first. In him we behold that God’s heart is not clenched against us. The forgiveness God asks of us has already been given to us in the one who is speaking.”

Think about a relationship in your life that has been damaged in some way. Don’t jump to blame. Instead, offer that relationship to God for healing. When you receive the gift of the Lord’s Table today, take it with you and share that forgiveness and reconciliation with another.

For you have heard it said, “live and let live.” But Jesus says unto you, “Love and let love.”  
**Amen.**