

# Matthew 5:23-24

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/matt/matt-5/matthew-523-24/>

*Concluding His example of how anger is a demonstration of disharmony (unrighteousness), Jesus shares a way this can be applied.*

There is no apparent parallel account of this teaching in the Gospels.

Jesus's example of *offering* a sacrifice *upon the altar* to God reveals a second Kingdom principle: the quality of our fellowship with God is conditional on our attitude toward other people. This means going out of our way to reconcile with others, prioritizing peace above acts of religious observance.

How we treat others matters a great deal to God. This is true not only of our actions, but also of our words and feelings. It is not sufficient for us to merely avoid murdering or physically harming someone in order to be righteous in our behavior (and therefore be pleasing to God, and gain His rewards.) We also must guard our tongues, which means guarding our hearts (Luke 6:45; Proverbs 4:23). Failing to do so risks missing the benefits of God's kingdom. Failing to do so also exposes us to the very negative outcome of experiencing corruption and death (of relationships, opportunities, etc.) pictured by the garbage dump that is "fiery Gehenna" (v.22). This second Kingdom principle becomes even brighter in what Jesus says next.

Making an *offering* of sacrifice at the *alter* is encouraged in the Mosaic Law for seeking fellowship with God (Leviticus 1). At this point in history the temple still stood in Jerusalem, and all the Jewish disciples listening to Jesus would have regularly made offerings at the Jerusalem temple's *altar* as a matter of religious observance. But Jesus says there is a priority over the religious observance of sacrifice: making peace with *your brother*.

*Therefore, Jesus says, if you are seeking to be on good terms with God by presenting your offering at the altar, and happen to remember that your brother has something against you, stop right in the middle of your observance. Put the offering on pause. This dramatic situation shows the importance God places on His people seeking harmonious fellowship with one another.*

To prepare an *offering* to sacrifice and transporting to the *altar* at the temple in Jerusalem would have taken days for those listening to Jesus near the Sea of Galilee. It is a distance of about 75 miles from the Galilee to Jerusalem. We can imagine the listeners thinking of a trip they had made to Jerusalem to present an *offering*. Perhaps they gathered a lamb, walked four days to Jerusalem, participated in all the ritual cleansing necessary to approach the *altar with their offering*. Now Jesus describes that they suddenly *remember that their brother has something against them*. Jesus now commands them to *leave your offering there before the altar and go first be reconciled to your brother*.

We can imagine the disciples thinking "Why wouldn't I just go ahead and finish the offering and *be reconciled* when it is more convenient?" Jesus insists they stop in the middle of their *offering*

and do what it takes to *be reconciled* immediately. Since Jesus says to *leave your offering there before the altar*, perhaps the *brother* is in the group that made the trek to Jerusalem, and near by. That would mean going out of the temple, being *reconciled*, then going back through all the ritual cleansing and back up the steps to the temple. But perhaps the *brother* is back home. In that case they would be repeating the four day trek, *be reconciled*, then turn around and head back to Jerusalem to present their *offering*. It doesn't seem to matter how much trouble it will take, to *be reconciled* is the priority.

With this example, Jesus is making a dramatic point. He is emphatic that reconciliation between brothers takes priority over religious observance. It seems that reconciliation between brothers is even a prerequisite to effective religious observance, which is why it is worthwhile to go to all this trouble. The Lord's Prayer will have this point as its primary emphasis. Seeking harmony with others is a prerequisite to seeking fellowship with God.

The Apostle Paul echoes this principle with respect to the Christian ceremony of the Lord's Supper, also called Communion. He says those who partake of it in an "unworthy manner" may end up sick or even in death. The answer is for each man to "examine himself." He says "if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged" (1 Corinthians 11:27-32). In each case, religious observance is inferior to having a proper heart attitude.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). Jesus will later say in Matthew that the entire law and prophets stand on the foundation of this greatest commandment, along with the second greatest, which is, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). That means both are necessary for the law and prophets to be on a solid foundation. Jesus is saying that *if you are unwilling to be reconciled to your brother*, God is unwilling to accept *your offering* and be reconciled to you. People are a priority before religious observance. This will be the core point of the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:14).

Jesus is not teaching that religious observance should be neglected. It is a question of priorities. Seek to *be reconciled to your brother first*. Then *come and present your offering* to God second. Righteousness (harmony) does not merely come from the external act of offering a physical sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6). It comes from sacrificing one's pride and seeking reconciliation with those in our house and community. If we understand this, Jesus assures us "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). If we are faithful to actually do this in obedience to God, the kingdom of heaven and its blessings shall be ours to enjoy (Matthew 5:3-10). It will be our great reward.

On reflection, this is a highly practical point Jesus is making. A fellowship of people who resolve conflicts and do not harbor bitterness will bring joy to all its participants. Conversely, a fellowship of people in constant conflict and bitterness will be like living in *Gehenna*. Living Jesus' kingdom principles has a great reward in this life as well.

Once again, through Jesus's application we see two key principles of His Kingdom in action. First, that righteousness is an inward matter of the heart and not only an external work. And

second, that the quality of our fellowship with God is conditional with our heart toward other people.

### **Biblical Text**

**Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.**