The Great Antitheses

Matthew 5:21-48
The Antitheses

- Matt. 5:21-22 - "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, . . . 22 But I say to you . . . (subject – murder)
- Matt. 5:27-28 - "You have heard that it was said, . . . 28 But I say to you . . . (subject – adultery)
- Matt. 5:31-32 - "It was also said, . . . 32 But I say to you . . . (subject – divorce)
The Antitheses

- Matt. 5:33-34 - “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, . . . 34 But I say to you . . . (subject – oaths)
- Matt. 5:38-39 - “You have heard that it was said, . . . 39 But I say to you . . . (subject – retaliation)
- Matt. 5:43-44 - “You have heard that it was said, . . . 44 But I say to you . . . (subject – love of enemies)
Matt. 5:21-22 - “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the 

**gehenna** of fire.
“You shall not murder” – the quotation is from the LXX of Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:18 (the LXX order of commandments is not the same as the Hebrew and English)

The following words – presented as a quotation – “whoever murders shall be liable to judgment” do not occur in the OT or any known Jewish literature
The phrase appears to be a paraphrase of Exodus 21:12 – “Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death” or Leviticus 24:17 – “Anyone who kills a human being shall be put to death”

Jesus’ use of “judgment” rather than “put to death” may emphasize the process of Law that was to be followed, but the OT was clear that murder was punishable by death.
We should also note Deuteronomy 17:8-13 - If a judicial decision is too difficult for you to make between one kind of bloodshed and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another—any such matters of dispute in your towns—then you shall immediately go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose, where you shall consult with the levitical priests and the judge who is in office in those days; they shall announce to you the decision in the case. Carry out exactly the decision that they announce to you from the place that the Lord will choose, diligently observing everything they instruct you.
The Greek word for murder φονεύω occurs 12x in the NT, 8x quoting the sixth commandment.

φονεύω is used for both murder and killing, but the Hebrew word in the Decalogue רָצַח (rāṣaḥ) clearly means “murder” (intentional) rather than the more general word for killing.

Modern versions correctly translate “murder” rather than “kill” as in the KJV and RSV.
The OT basis for the prohibition of murder was that all life belongs to God. Thus the termination of life should be in the hand of God, not in the hand of another mortal.

To take another’s life is to act in God’s stead – usurping the place of God (except in the case of the death penalty which had been given by God already).

Murder violates the order of God’s creation.
V. 22 – But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to the judgment – Note that the final phrase (liable to the judgment) is identical to the final phrase of verse 21

A correct translation of verse 22 enlarges Jesus’ teaching – “everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable . . .”
The effect of the identical consequence implies that Jesus was equating anger with a brother or sister to murder.

Quite literally anger with a brother/sister and murder cannot be treated as equivalent; the outcome of murder is irreversible while the outcome of anger may be reversible.

However, at the level of motivation there is a chilling similarity between anger and murder.
Murder claims the right of God to determine life and disregard the other as worthy of God’s gift of life

Anger disregards the other as one created in the image of God and deserving of grace

Anger claims the right of God to determine who receives grace

Jesus’ “fulfillment” of the Law pushes the prohibition from action to motivation – a deepening of the commandment to the level of the heart
The modifier “without cause” does not appear in manuscripts prior to the 5th century and was clearly added to soften the demand of Jesus.

That the anger is directed toward a brother or sister indicates that Matthew (?Jesus) understood the prohibition of anger to only apply within the community of faith.

However, the logic of the “fulfillment” teaching suggests that it should not be so restricted.
The following two phrases in verse 22 provide further explanation:

- And whoever says to his brother or sister, “Raca,” will be liable to the council.
- And whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to the *gehenna* of fire.

*Raca* transliterates into Greek a contemptuous insult in Aramaic – “empty-headed, good-for-nothing, fool.” It communicates worthlessness and disregard for the other’s personhood.
The final phrase (saying, “You fool!”) uses the Greek word μωρέ (mōre) from μωρός from which we derive the English word, “moron.”

Raca and mōre are essentially synonyms and no distinction should be pressed between them.

The two words represent an attitude of contemptuous disregard for the other which helps define what Jesus meant by anger with a brother or sister.
One must ask whether the three “liabilities” are rough equivalents or represent increasing liability for punishment – judgment, council, gehenna of fire.

The word translated “council” is συνέδριον (synedrion) from which we derive Sanhedrin, though the word was used of local councils as well as the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

The function of these councils was to pass judgment – so it is doubtful that the council means something different than judgment.
The word *gehenna* referred, in the first place, to the valley curving from the southwest corner of old Jerusalem around the south side of the city to the Kidron Valley that ran east of the city. This valley of Hinnom was the garbage dump of the city and often smoldered with the fires set to burn the refuse (and reduce the smell and putrefaction)

The word/phrase came to describe the place of torment of the dead who had been wicked
The primary point of the *gehenna* of fire was its place of punishment by death.

Punishment by death is, in fact, what the Old Testament prescribed as the punishment for murder.

Thus it does not appear that Jesus was trying to create an ascending order of severity of either the sin or the punishment in verse 22.
Jesus’ point in the first antithesis seems to be that contemptuous disregard for another is, at the heart of the matter, the motivational equivalent of murder.

Positively, this means that another human being is always worthy of being treated as one made in the image of God and deserving of honor and respect.

Two illustrations of how this might work follow.
Verses 23-24 - So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Simply put – one’s relationship with another is more important than one’s actions in worship.
In terms of the context of Jesus, the “altar” at which gifts could be offered was only the altar at the temple in Jerusalem.

Thus Jesus paints a picture of a person taking a sacrificial animal from Galilee to Jerusalem and there remembering a broken relationship in Galilee. The importance of that relationship is such that the worshipper should leave the animal in Jerusalem and return to Galilee to make the relationship right.
This indicates the rarity of such an action
As France puts it, “The improbability of the scenario emphasizes Jesus’ point, that the importance of right relationships demands decisive action.”
The use of brother (/sister) language envisions another application in the life of the church; if while bringing one’s offering to the communion table one remembers a broken relationship, one should go to the brother/sister in the room and make the relationship right before completing one’s offering
The unusual wording – your brother or sister has something against you – may imply anger in the person making the offering.

However, it is more likely that the brother or sister has anger against the offerer. One could easily plead then that the other was responsible for the reconciliation, but Jesus instructs us to reconcile regardless of who is at fault.
The second application appears in vv. 25-26 - Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

This is a more complex illustration than that of vv. 23-24, but again highlights the importance of right relationship with another
In this application the listener/reader is the object of legal action

Jesus does not raise the question (usually important to us) of whether the listener/reader is guilty or innocent

The implication of these verses is that listener/reader is going to lose the court case

How one should “come to terms with” the “accuser” is not answered
These verses are not providing legal advice
How one might settle out of course with the accuser when it appears the accuser is going to win the case is not clear; it may be impossible
Jesus’ point is that restoration of right relationship is of utmost importance
Interestingly, the 2nd person plural in vv. 21-22, shifts to 2nd person singular in vv. 23-26. The applications are individual responsibilities
In reality Jesus did not introduce anything in this paragraph new or contrary to Judaism.

The equation of hatred/anger with murder is not specifically made in the OT, but it appears to lie within the presuppositions of OT Theology.

Jesus indicates that God expects the life of his followers to move beyond obedience to legal ordinances.
By setting his teaching in a form of contrast to the *Torah* Jesus insured that his teaching would be remembered.

It would also cause people to ask about Jesus’ identity – what sort of person teaches like this?

In contrast to later Christian interpretation Jesus makes no allowance for justified anger, holy hate, or the wrath of the state.
As it stands, Jesus’ prohibition of anger is unqualified. This moves Jesus beyond the wisdom tradition and might well have struck his listeners as something new and different.
This antithesis (as well as the others) should be preached in relation to Matt. 5:17-20.
In particular this is an example of Jesus’ fulfilling rather than destroying the Torah.
It is also an example of a righteousness that exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.
The sermon should make clear that vv. 21-26 do not contradict v. 18 that neither the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass away from the Torah.
Any sermon on an antithesis must steer a clear interpretation between accusing Judaism of being a legalistic religion and proposing a legalistic interpretation of Jesus’ words.

The sermon must not lessen the demand of Jesus’ words in order to make obedience easily achievable by any church attender – making exceptions for justifiable anger, holy hate, or giving cart blanche to the state to disregard people created in the image of God.
Preaching the 1st Antithesis

- Draw on the theological resources of the Old Testament:
- Human creation in the image of God is part of the motive for Jesus’ words
- Remember the promise of Jeremiah 31:33 that God will write the Torah on human hearts in the New Covenant Era
- Remember that usurping God’s role in determining life and the value of a human being is ultimately idolatry
A simple didactic sermon

1. Jesus equates Anger with Murder

2. Jesus equates Anger with Contemptuous Disregard for Persons Created in the Image of God

3. Jesus teaches that Unresolved Anger with another invalidates Worship
A Textual Inferential Sermon

Resources for Overcoming Anger Against Another

1. Remembering the Other is Created in the Image of God

2. Remembering that God Can Write His Law on our Heart

3. Remembering that Anger Invalidates Worship
Preaching the 1st Antithesis

- An Inductive – Not this, nor this, nor this, but this Sermon
- God’s Design for Our Relationship with Others
  1. Not Anger
  2. Not Disregard or Contempt
  3. Not Bypassing the Other to Relate to God
  4. But valuing the other as created in the Image of God, worthy of life and grace
An Inductive – Explore, Explain, Apply-Sermon

The Importance of Our Relationships with Others

1. Explore how Jesus considered anger, hatred, and disregard of another as equal to murder

2. Explain how anger and murder arise from similar ways of diminishing others and exalting ourselves

3. Apply this text to the priority of relationships over worship activities and over our typical excuses