“A man who stirs up dissension among brothers” is a long way of describing people who start quarrels or disrupt harmony. These are troublemakers—the kind of people we don’t like to see coming. These people are disruptive in every area of life and they are dangerous in the body of Christ.

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude to me is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than success, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, gift, or skill. It will make or break a company...a church...a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past...we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the string we have, and that is our attitude. I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it. And so it is with you...we are in charge of our attitudes. | Charles Swindoll

We all are familiar with the cause and effect process. Usually, we see a behavior or attitude and then begin searching for explanations or causes. We do this with children, politicians, strangers, neighbors, and sometimes, ourselves. We should always be asking ourselves why we do certain things.

This isn’t something new. The cause and effect relationship can be seen throughout the Old Testament. This led to the introduction of rules. Rules, as we know, always target a behavior. Therefore, there was an attempt to address the effect without regard for the cause. This seldom fixes anything.

Rules can be easily circumvented. We tell our kids, “Don’t hit each other,” only to discover that they decided to kick or bite one another. In their minds, they are obeying the rule. What they fail to see (and what we often fail to see) is the principle behind the rule.

Racism is an attitude or behavior with a root cause. Telling people to stop being racists or challenging them to change their attitudes seldom leads to significant change. According to Kerry Patterson in Influencer: The Power to Change Anything, “It’s the lack of thought, not the presence of thought, that enables our bad behavior.” Simple lectures, homilies, and guilt trips—verbal persuasion as its worst—won’t produce change.

In other words, we can’t talk people out of their bad attitudes. We can try to convince them they are wrong, make them feel guilty, and even get them to agree that their attitude has no place in today’s world, but they most likely will cling to what they think. Why? Because we haven’t addressed the root cause.

So, what causes people to stir up dissension or create trouble? That’s what this lesson is all about.

Matthew 5:21-22

Jesus began His ministry in a rules-laden culture. There were hundreds of rules all intended to help people live in a right relationship with God. But it didn't work. The rules were too confusing. Living for God became a burden. The only people who liked the system were those tasked with responsibility for managing the system—the professional rule enforcers.

So, when Jesus came on the scene offering a different take on how to live in a right relationship with God, the people listened. After all, most of them really wanted to please God. The only people who disapproved of Jesus’ strategy were those professional rule enforcers—the Pharisees.

The tension between Jesus and the Pharisees is in the background of most of Jesus’ ministry. If the Pharisees were actively opposing Him, they were off at a distance plotting their next move. The more Jesus talked about grace, the more they promoted the rules.
We need to take a closer look at the internal process behind our external behaviors and actions. The idea is much like that of a guardrail. A guardrail is place in the safe zone to prevent someone from making it to the danger zone. As Jesus looked at the rules, He saw the problem. His words were a game changer.

“The you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:21-22).

The passage above comes from the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the sermon, Jesus used the Pharisees as an object lesson. So, as He delivered these words, He might have gestured toward the Pharisees gathered at a distance and said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’”

Suddenly, Jesus thrust Himself deeper into the controversy being stirred by the Pharisees. He wasn’t afraid of what they might do or say about Him. Jesus never compromised His convictions for the sake of keeping the Pharisees quiet.

This is why the church must speak up about social injustice. Believers can’t be silent about society’s bent toward perpetuating long-held attitudes rooted in a gross misunderstanding about God’s view of all humanity. Maybe you can justify your attitudes to friends, family, coworkers, and yourself. But you will never be able to justify your ungodly attitudes to God. What Jesus had to say would put the Pharisees on the defensive. It might even put some believers today on the defensive.

What are some attitudes or beliefs you believed when you were younger that have been changed? How has your relationship with Christ affected your attitudes? How do your attitudes affect the way you live each day? What causes bad attitudes? What improves your attitude?

Every attitude we embrace or action we take originates in our minds. Some attitudes or actions are so automatic that we aren’t aware of the thought process that initiated them. But the fact remains that everything we do passes through our mental filter.

Morality and ethics provide the filter through which every thought and action passes. Though morality should be a reflection of our relationship with God, it is possible to be a believer and function from a different moral code. How does this happen?

There are three possible priorities in our lives—achievement, fulfillment, and obedience to God. When achievement is our priority, we are willing to compromise ethically. We can rationalize lying if lying moves us closer to our personal goals. When fulfillment is our priority, we are willing to compromise morally. We will rationalize violating God’s moral standards because doing what makes us happy is the most important thing. When obedience to God is our priority, fulfillment and achievement are viewed from His perspective and things are kept in check.

So, here’s the deal: bad attitudes can slip through our mental filters if our filters aren’t in alignment with God’s Word. Therefore, we can call ourselves believers and still engage in attitudes and actions completely contrary to God’s commands.

Jesus realized the problems associated with wrong thinking. So, he reminded His audience of the way of thinking that was common to them—don’t murder. No one in the crowd argued that murder was a good idea. Few people would accept murder as a justifiable action. But, how does a person get to the point of murder?
Murder begins with a thought. Jesus said the root cause of murder is unchecked anger. In effect, Jesus said that the real way to avoid murder is through dealing with our anger. If you keep your anger under control, murder will never become an option.

Maybe murder isn’t something you are tempted to do. But do you hold any other bad attitudes? What is the root cause of those attitudes?

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires that battle within you? (James 4:1).*

James said that the desires within us create the anger that leads to bad attitudes. Some people have the desire to feel superior to others. Some people can’t get beyond their past disappointments. The truth is that we will never overcome our bad attitudes unless we first allow God to transform our thinking. Many people cling to their attitudes for reasons they can’t explain. They excuse their ungodly attitudes and actions by saying, “That’s just the way I am.”

Jesus came so we don’t have to be the way we’ve always been. Any proclamation that defends old ways of thinking is an admission that God really isn’t at work in your life. God is in the attitude changing business.

☐ What attitudes in your life need to be changed?

☐ What does your unchanging attitude say about God’s power in your life?

### Actions Reveal Awareness

I was approaching a four-way stop and saw another car approaching from my right. Much to my surprise, the vehicle never even slowed down. The young girl driving the car was looking down. Maybe she was texting. Maybe she was reading email. Maybe she lost a French fry and needed to find it. I’m not sure what she was doing, but I am sure she was unaware of the stop sign.

Our actions reveal our awareness. Jesus told the crowd that awareness of anger in our lives would make a difference in many areas of life. We would agree. After all, who wants to go through life being angry all the time? Yet, so many times, we allow ourselves to demonstrate just how unaware we are of our own anger. How do we do this?

- We are rude to a server at a restaurant.
- We ignore traffic signs just so we can get ahead of one more car.
- We ignore a responsibility we once accepted.
- We fire insults at people.
- We send angry emails.
- We park in fire lanes, push to the front of the line, and make a spectacles of ourselves when things don’t go our way.

Those are just a few examples of the some of the actions we take as a result of the anger we entertain. Jesus warned people to control their anger. He said this in ear shot of the most angry people of the day—the professional religious people, the Pharisees.

Religious people often justify their anger by blaming it on God. Some of the most determined resistance to the civil rights movement was fueled by people recognized as being religious leaders. A church pastor in Kansas has made himself well-known by declaring God’s hatred for homosexuals. In the early 1990s, I served at a church that, much to my surprise, stationed deacons at the doors to prevent black people from entering.

These actions reveal that many religious people don’t know what God has to say about how we are to treat one another. Every person deserves respect. No person has the right to be rude, disrespectful, or inconsiderate.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law* (Galatians 5:22-23).

☐ Read Galatians 5:22-23. Which fruits of the Spirit are directly opposed to your everyday attitudes?
What does a person’s bad attitude say about the work of God’s Spirit in his or her life?

People who argue they can’t change are really saying they don’t want to change. They believe that their wrong ways of thinking are superior to God’s ways of thinking. After all, these people who say they can’t change have experienced and accepted a lot of change.

Have you heard people say that they just can’t watch the Tennessee Titans because they can’t accept the name change from the Houston/Tennessee Oilers? What about the move to high definition television? Is anyone complaining about the clarity of the picture and how they wish we could go back to the fuzzy days? What about cell phones, email, self-check registers, and Starbucks on every corner? We are more than happy to embrace the changes we want to embrace.

Jesus angered the Pharisees by pointing out the faults in their thinking. They had developed a rationale that made absolutely no sense to anyone other than the people in their little group. We often do the same thing. The Pharisees weren’t willing to change, they just got angrier. Their anger grew stronger and stronger and eventually, they murdered Jesus.

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22a).

Jesus was right. Unchecked anger has tragic consequences. It did then. It still does today.

What wrong thinking is behind your attitudes?

Now What?

Bad attitudes are the outward signs of faulty thinking. If we never change our thinking, we will have a tough time eliminating our bad attitudes. The only proven way to change our thinking is by allowing God to renew our minds. The process is simple, yet challenging.

Some Christians defend their attitudes with more passion than they defend their faith. They believe they are entitled to exercise judgment on others based on whatever criteria they choose. Bad attitudes are evidence that God isn’t really in control of a person’s life. Some people will argue that’s not true. They will somehow try to reconcile their faith and their attitudes. They don’t believe their attitudes toward other people really affect their relationship with God. That’s just a lie many church people believe.

Coaching Lesson Seven

- Read Proverbs 6:16-19 and call attention to the seventh thing God detests—a man who stirs up dissension among brothers

- Ask: What causes people to stir up trouble at work, in their homes, or in the church?

- Read and summarize Matthew 5:21-22. Explain that the Pharisees were the most religious people of their time yet they were the best at stirring up dissension.

Game Changer

- Discuss Matthew 5:21-22. Use the following question in your discussion:
  - What are some attitudes or beliefs you believed when you were younger that have been changed?
  - How has your relationship with Christ affected your attitudes?
  - How do your attitudes affect the way you live each day? What causes bad attitudes? What improves your attitude?
Thoughts Precede Actions
• Read and discuss James 4:1. Use some or all of the following questions in your discussion:
  ➡ What attitudes in your life need to be changed?
  ➡ What does your unchanging attitude say about God’s power in your life?

Actions Reveal Awareness
• Read and discuss Galatians 5:22-23. Use the following questions in your discussion:
  ➡ Which fruits of the Spirit are directly opposed to your everyday attitudes?
  ➡ What does a person’s bad attitude say about the work of God’s Spirit in his or her life?

No Excuses Allowed
• Reread Matthew 5:21-22a. Use the following questions in your discussion:
  ➡ What wrong thinking is behind your attitudes?
  ➡ How should your relationship with God affect your thinking? What prevents God’s Word from working in your life to change your thinking?

Now what?
Bad attitudes are the outward signs of faulty thinking. If we never change our thinking, we will have a tough time eliminating our bad attitudes. The only proven way to change our thinking is by allowing God to renew our minds. The process is simple, yet challenging.
  ➡ How many of the things God detests are evident in your life?
  ➡ What is your plan for allowing God to change your heart, rewire your mind, and refocus your perspective on life?