

January 29, 2017
Sermon Manuscript

A Selection of Proverbs

12:16 The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult...

14:17 A man of quick temper acts foolishly, and a man of evil devices is hated...

14:29 Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding, but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly...

16:32 Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city...

19:11 Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense...

22:24 Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, ²⁵ lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare...

25:28 A man without self-control, is like a city broken into and left without walls...

29:11 A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back...

14:16 One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil, but a fool is reckless and careless...

18:2 A fool takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion...

26:11 Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.

Matthew 5:17-26

(Jesus said,) ¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.

Clarifying Anger & Contempt (Matthew 5:21-26)

This morning we are continuing with part 4 of our series on Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and I will once again be drawing heavily from Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy*. This morning our focus is on the second paragraph from our gospel reading: verses 21 through 26 on anger and contempt. Here, Jesus begins by teaching,

21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.

So Jesus first quoted the 6th commandment – “you shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.” But then he insists that “everyone who is angry with his brother” – and he uses the exact same phrase that had been used for murdering someone. He says they, too, will be “liable to judgment”. Then Jesus goes on to say that “*whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council;*” that is: to stand before the court of the Sanhedrin. “*And whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.*” Whew!

Well, understandably, I'm sure it's not difficult to see why this passage has been received by many through the years as bad news. Not only does Jesus seem to have raised the bar from the 6th commandment, but he makes it sound like anyone who calls someone “you fool” will have Hell to pay! Just reading this makes me think of all the names I called my sister growing up, and I assure you some of them sounded much worse than “you fool!”

But is this what Jesus is up to? Is he condemning anyone who calls someone a fool to an eternity in hell? No, he's not. That's not what Jesus is saying.

And we can be assured of that because of the context he says this in. Over the past three weeks, Jesus has revealed some remarkable truths to us through the first parts of the Sermon on the Mount. First, Jesus made clear that the life of the kingdom of heaven is available to *all of us* right now if we will give up trying to run our own show and surrender to his rule. Then two weeks ago, we learned from Jesus that nothing we have done *or might do* can disqualify us from being able to turn to Jesus and rely on him in this way. But so long as we go our own way we are missing out on some tremendous promises. And finally, last week we looked at the paragraph that began our gospel reading today, where Jesus helped us to see that it is only through his help that any of us can gain victory over sin because sin comes from inside us, and only he can change our hearts!

It is that context that helps us rule out the straightforward interpretation of our passage: that Jesus is condemning anyone who calls someone a fool to an eternity in hell. Instead, what Jesus is trying to do is to help us understand the enormous impact of anger and contempt.

The reason why Jesus is going beyond the 6th commandment (of “do not murder”) here is because the assumption of many people – both in his day and ours – is that so long as they don’t murder anyone, they don’t really cause harm.” Evidence of this today is how liberally people throw around what I call “good person” talk after someone dies. At almost any funeral you go to, so long as the deceased person wasn’t a serial killer, you’ll hear everybody say, “Ole Bobby Lee really was a ‘good person’.” While in truth Bobby Lee may have inflicted untold harm on people, maybe by habitually acting in anger toward his family behind closed doors or by holding people – or *groups* of people – in contempt, because that’s what everybody in his social circle did.

Well, here Jesus is trying to call attention to that by saying that anger and contempt can be just as damaging as murder (!), and in some extreme cases might even make murder look like a mercy.

But let’s talk for a bit about why that is; and let’s begin with anger. I chose about 8 proverbs for our first lesson this morning that address anger. But we should first of all be clear that anger, in its simplest form, is not wrong. To the contrary, anger is a God-given emotion that occurs when someone crosses our will. That is, it’s a feeling we get when somebody does something we don’t want them to do or obstructs us from doing something we want to do. As Willard says, “Anger in this sense (or at this stage) is no sin”. Though he says anger is “still better avoided where possible,” because it is so powerful!

For example of how powerful anger is, just think about when we discover a person is angry with us. Even if they haven’t acted on that anger in any way, just knowing they are angry wounds us. In many cases *that alone* – just knowing they are angry – will cause us to stop whatever we are doing and change our course, won’t it? I’ve heard some people describe from the upbringing one of their parents having that look – where mom or dad didn’t even have to *say* anything: just giving that look alone would cause them to stop in their tracks.

But knowing someone is angry with us may also provoke our anger in return, because suddenly now there is a restraint on us and our will is crossed. “The sense of self-righteousness that angry people have simply provokes more anger and self-righteousness on the other side.” Thus anger feeds on anger.

Willard describes anger as something that “seizes our body and immediately impels us toward interfering with, and possibly even harming, those who have thwarted our will and interfered with our life.” But make no mistake: when our anger gets to the point that Jesus is describing here, it is usually something we have chosen. You see, even though anger arises spontaneously at first, it is then up to us whether we actively *receive that anger* and decide to *indulge* it. And, as Willard laments, “we usually do.” ☹️ But he goes on to explain that even if we don’t act on anger – even if we keep it inside – it will still be quite poisonous. He observes that when we are angry, all of our “mental and emotional resources are marshaled to nurture and tend the anger and our body throbs with it... (And) energy is dedicated to keeping the

anger alive as we constantly remind ourselves of how wrongly we have been treated.” Can anyone else relate to that as you reflect on times you’ve been angry?

Well, some have moved beyond isolated incidents of indulging anger, to become an angry person, these are the folks where it seems like almost “any incident can evoke from (them) a torrent of rage that is kept in constant readiness.” Has anyone ever been in a place in their life where they’re like that? Some are even “addicted to the adrenaline rush (that comes with anger)” so that they “never feel really alive except when their anger is pumping.”

And perhaps the reason Jesus addresses anger with murder is because anger is almost always murder’s precursor. Of the 44 murders that occur every day in the U.S. (over 16,000 per year), almost every one of them is preceded by anger. Or, to put it another way, if any *one* of these killers were simply able to *not* indulge their anger, a life would’ve been spared. But even when it doesn’t progress to the point of murder, *whenever* “we actively receive anger and decide to indulge it, rather than waving it off, it will include... some degree of the intent to harm another”.

Now, some may wonder why Jesus is making such a big deal about a little bit of anger? Part of the reason it may seem strange to us is that we now live in a consumer society that intentionally encourages us to be angry. There is a considerable amount of media out there that is designed to inflame our anger, because many of us get a hit off of being angry, like a drug, so they know the angrier we get the more we’ll keep tuning in.

But what Jesus wants us to understand is that whenever we feel wronged – whenever we feel our will has been crossed, whether it be by some politician or talking head on TV, or by our spouse or child or some guy in traffic, “the answer is not to harbor anger, but to right the wrong in persistent love,” lest we only add to the wrongs. And even though our society tells us that sometimes anger is necessary and even good, the truth is: **“there is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.”** Do you believe that? “There is nothing that can be done with anger that cannot be done better without it.” You’re not gonna hear that message very often, but it’s true. As Willard says, “To retain anger and to cultivate it is... ‘to give the devil a chance’ (Eph. 4:26–27). (And) he will take the chance, and there will be hell to pay.”

The problem for us, of course, is that often the temptation to indulge anger – is more powerful than we can withstand, especially if it’s become a habit for us. Well, we’ll get to what we can do to overcome anger in a minute, but first let’s look at contempt.

You’ll notice that Jesus assigns an even greater condemnation to contempt than indulging anger. “Everyone who is angry,” he says, “will be liable to judgment,” but “whoever insults his brother,” he says, “will be liable to the council.” Here, in the original Greek, what is translated ‘insults’ is the word “raca”, which is actually a word in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. Raca is believed to have originated from the hocking sound one makes in

their throat before spitting. While equivalents in today's English might include calling someone a dork or a twerp, some filthier examples would be racial terms like the N-word or sexually derogatory terms like F-A-G or slang terms for sexual anatomy.

Willard contends that, **"Filthy language and name calling are always an expression of contempt."** Now, I've found this really helpful because until I read Willard I had a hard time really explaining why filthy language was wrong: it was just one of those, "because the Bible says so" type of deals. Although I'd noticed the more I walked with the Lord whenever I would hear cuss words or say them myself the more toxic it would feel to my spirit, but I could never really put my finger on *why*. But Willard nails it! **"Filthy language and name calling are always an expression of contempt."** And I was thinking about that this week: obviously it makes sense that using filthy language toward someone is contempt, but there are sometimes it is used – or I have used it – when it doesn't seem to be directed toward *anybody*. So how can that be an expression of contempt? But then I realized, when I'm doing that, I *do* have contempt directed either toward life or the world as God has set it up, or toward *myself*. ##

What makes contempt so problematic is that its intent and effect is always to exclude someone, which makes it easier then to hurt them. As Willard says, **"To belong** is a vital need based in the spiritual nature of the human being. Contempt spits on this pathetically deep need." And unfortunately in almost every social situation the potential for such contempt is waiting in the wings. I have a theory that the primary reason so many people look on junior high as one of the *worst* periods of life is because puberty makes almost everyone an easy target for contempt: many faces are peppered with acne or this girl is taller than all the boys or this boy's voice hasn't dropped. Easy reasons for excluding people abound! The only problem is many people never grow out of using contempt, and so in the workplace or the party or even the *church*, contempt can often be waiting in the wings.

But there is even one final level of contempt Jesus identifies, when he indicates, "whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

Now, this one can be hard to understand because we don't really have a sense of what "fool" meant in Jesus' day. The last three proverbs I included in our first lesson fleshed it out a little. But Willard explains that "in biblical language, (the fool) is a combination of stupid perversity and rebellion against God and all that sensible people stand for. He is willfully perverted, rebellious, knowingly wicked to his own harm." So in today's language, the word "fool" doesn't really suffice. Modern equivalents would probably be more like calling someone the b-word or something that begins with the f-bomb (~~like f-ing jerk~~).

The reason why contempt is so much worse than anger is because we can be angry at someone without denying their worth; but contempt is a deliberate attack on someone's worth. By its very nature it is "withering to the human soul." Therefore, according to Jesus, for someone to call another one of these modern day equivalents of a fool signifies they have gotten to a place where they are totally out of harmony with God's kingdom. ## ## ##

Well, Jesus' indictment of anger and contempt probably hits some of us harder than others, though I'm sure none of us come through unscathed. But what are we supposed to do with this insight into the seriousness of anger and contempt?

Well, probably the worst thing any of us can probably do is to respond to this passage today by simply adding anger and contempt to a list of things to avoid. Certainly Jesus doesn't want to us to **do** them, but that's not the point – like we talked about last week: that would just be like cleaning the outside of the cup. The truth is: we can't avoid anger and contempt by **trying harder** not to indulge anger or contempt. We only begin to **do those things less** as we begin to **value people more**. As Willard says, *"When I treasure those around me and see them as God's creatures designed for his eternal purposes, I do not make an additional point of not hating them or calling them twerps or fools. Not doing those things is simply a part of the package."* As a change occurs in our hearts where we value people as Jesus values them, any problem we've had with anger and contempt will begin to fade. And *that* sort of transformation – of seeing people (and ourselves and life) as Jesus does will only occur as we live under his rule and develop the habit of surrendering our anger to him. (That's the "how".) ####

But what about the rest of our passage. For example, in verse 23, he says, ²³ "So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." Well *this is the first of two examples* Jesus gives of what a heart under such kingdom transformation is capable of.

Now, it can be hard for us to grasp the full impact of what Jesus is saying in verse 23 if we fail to understand that for faithful Jews, to stand with Temple officials before the altar was "one of the holiest moments" in their religious lives. For us, this would be akin to standing at your own wedding (there before the priest and all the people) until suddenly you remember a friend who is mad at you. And just the thought of it – the pain of that break between yourself and your friend – causing you stop the ritual to go find him and reconcile. (!)

*But we **must** understand: Jesus is not giving a law here that we must never carry through with any religious practice if someone has something against you.* Unfortunately, in the past I believe I've taught you guys this very thing in respect to Holy Communion: that we should always abstain from taking it when there is some outstanding amends we need to go make. But I will confess, when I've taught that, something hasn't felt quite right about it. And Willard has helped me to understand why. The picture Jesus is painting is not of someone who flees the altar to go reconcile because of some law or because God won't accept him until he does. This man is fleeing the altar because he just can't help himself! In other words, this is an illustration of someone with kingdom heart that **values other people** like his heavenly father does, therefore he knows God would be most pleased for him to go seek reconciliation and return later to offer his sacrifice, because God desires mercy more than sacrifice (Hosea 6:6).

But there is a second way this verse can be misunderstood that needs to be corrected as well, and that is: just because Jesus describes a positive outcome here, does not mean we will necessarily get a positive outcome when we seek to reconcile with someone. As Willard says, *“We don’t control outcomes and are not responsible for them, (we’re only responsible for) our contribution to them.”* Which is to say, that if we take responsibility for our part in the breakdown of a relationship and the other party chooses not to forgive us, that is on them; that’s not something we can control. ##

So that’s Jesus’ first illustration of the kingdom heart. The second is in verse 25, where he says, ²⁵ “Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Here Jesus is painting a picture of a believer who is being taken to court by someone – something we know a thing or two about here at Saint Matthias. But being willing to “come to terms quickly” indicates that the accused doesn’t have a win-at-all-costs attitude. A willingness to try to resolve the matter before it goes to trial shows that he values his adversary as a human being more than he values being victorious.

But here again we have to make clear: Jesus is not forbidding Christians from ever going to court! “Yet,” as Willard says, “how many people, looking for a law, have falsely supposed he does.” “To be of a kindly or favorable mind toward an adversary or anyone else **does not mean** to do what they demand. It means to be genuinely committed to what is good for them, to seek their well-being, (which) may even require that we not give in to them.” But certainly, as verse 26 implies, there are much greater possibilities for a positive resolution if we approach the situation in love, rather than hate or defensiveness. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy (from God)” (Matthew 5:7). ## ## ##

To have a heart capable of the love we see in these illustrations: isn’t that something we all desire? As Willard says, “(With) these two illustrations we finally see the kingdom goodness *placed **side by side** with the mere goodness of not killing, which (suddenly) looks quite empty by contrast.*” Well, the good news this morning is that, as we seek to live under the rule and power of Christ, as we ask him to clean the inside of our cups and persist in surrendering our anger to him – Jesus will begin to give us hearts just like that; hearts like his.

Amen.

Source used: The Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard.