



## JUST BREATHE ... AND WALK

Matthew 5:21-37

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Apparently everyone is going straight to hell. All of us! After all, which one of us has never called another a fool! It says it right in black and white in Matthew 5 that Jesus declared, "If you say, 'You fool!', you will be liable to the Hell of fire." Now, I am quite certain Jesus' was using hyperbole. And yet, at the same time this is obviously a very important matter to Jesus. Anger itself is not always wrong, but contempt is. Anger can be a manifestation of aggressive contempt for another human being. It is that kind of anger that leads us to call someone a fool.

Jesus is teaching us about the nature of sin. It is not a matter of degree; all acts against brother or sister are acts of murder, for they seek to destroy and demean that which is of value to God.

James tells us the tongue is a "restless evil full of deadly poison". The tongue's poisonous power resides in its ability to shape another's self-understanding.

The tongue reveals what is in the heart and a heart filled with contempt for God's creation is liable to God's wrath. We have long known "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me" is patently false.

As humans, we understand and define our world through language. Philip K. Dick is a prolific science fiction writer who created numerous popular stories made into movies such as *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, *Total Recall*, and more. In thinking about the future, Dick made several insights that are relevant to us today. "The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words." Jesus condemns name calling so harshly because it can shape how people view

themselves, leading them to believe they truly are worthless fools.

Think about the language used to define those in India on the bottom rung of the cultural ladder – Outcaste or Untouchable. The language defined them as being so low that they did not even deserve to be a part of society. They were literally told they were so tainted that they could not be touched and so foul that they did not deserve being a part of any social group, that they were outside of the caste system. If you and your family were taught this over the course of thousands of years, imagine how it shaped your world. And if you believe that you are less than human, then you will believe that you don't deserve justice, thus giving the oppressor the power to dominate and control you. This is why Jesus was so pointed in today's text.

In Matthew 12 Jesus warns us, "every thoughtless word you speak you will have to account for on the day of judgement." If we are to take Jesus seriously, we must choose our words carefully at all times. We must not let our anger get the better of us.

But holding our tongue can be quite a challenge, especially for those who deserve it! Here we can appreciate the benefit of Catholicism's practice of confession. It can help train you into new habits. After you have told the priest your sins, he makes you recite various prayers a certain number of times to atone for your sins. I imagine those who use their words carelessly by the 40<sup>th</sup> *Our Father who art in heaven...* will truly think twice.

Furthermore, the damaging power of hateful speech works both ways. George Orwell in 1984 wrote, "But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." This means the words we use not only damage others, but damage

ourselves. These thoughts of anger and contempt are a necrosis of the soul, eating away at that which is good within us, pushing out the spirit of God and replacing it with a spirit of darkness. Nobody wins in hateful speech.

There is of course good news for us. There is always good news. If language can destroy, it can also build up. There is a reason that Jesus is called the WORD of God. Words can bring life.

Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen, guides us to use our words well when he wrote,

Did I offer peace today? Did I bring a smile to someone's face? Did I say words of healing? Did I let go of my anger and resentment? Did I forgive? Did I love? These are the real questions. I must trust that the little bit of love that I sow now will bear many fruits, here in this world and the life to come.

Trust can be hard to come by. Believing that using words differently from the way in which the world uses words, can leave us feeling like spineless jellyfish ravaged by the pit bulls of the world. There are times when it seems humanly impossible NOT to take the opportunity to use our words to destroy. As in the following example.

India has more slaves than any other country in the world with a horrifying number of 14 million. Many of them are child slaves sold or kidnapped to work, sleep, and live in open-pit mines. Not too long ago, one of these rapist slaver holders wanted insurance for the afterlife. He was dying and asked a Christian priest to come to his bedside. He wanted forgiveness. But it was obvious the man had not repented. Instead he wanted to bargain – his soul for 6000 children. **IF** the priest gave him forgiveness **then** he would free 6000 children from slavery.

Now the priest knew he did not have the power to forgive but the slaveholder did not know that.

I can imagine standing over that dying man's bed, knowing how many lives he destroyed, wanting to exact the smallest amount of revenge by telling him that not only would he not receive

forgiveness but that he would spend eternity being devoured by the flames of hatred he created, being condemned to live in a literally blazing, hot quarry 10 feet away from icy-cold water, while being tied to a rock by an 8-foot chain. Wouldn't that be justice?

Of course, the priest offered the forgiveness. It was the only way to save the children. But he must have been tempted to use his words for vengeance. But Jesus taught us another path. Trust. Trust that God will bring justice. That is not our task.

We are to trust that using our words to plant seeds of faith, hope, and love will bear fruit. This requires walking on barren paths, perhaps never seeing the fruits of our labor. But it was the path Christ walked and we see how it changed the world.

If saying "you fool" puts your soul in danger then, in the same way, small acts of genuine love open up the kingdom. The kingdom of heaven or rule of Hell is found in the smallest of acts; in the little out of the way corners of life.

Philip K. Dick had another very intriguing thought,

There exists, for everyone, a sentence - a series of words - that has the power to destroy you. Another sentence exists, another series of words, that could heal you. If you're lucky you will get the second, but you can be certain of getting the first."

([Philip K. Dick](#), VALIS)

Philip K. Dick was right, as a nurse practitioner from Maine discovered. Some years ago a Dr. Cindy Milles, author of *Waiting for My Rainbow*, sat across from a patient with soulless eyes, who had experienced severe heartache. Within a year, she had lost her soulmate to a tragic fire, her father to suicide, and her mother to cancer.

Dr. Milles wrote,

There were many moments on that day we sat in silence only looking into each other's eyes. We searched our minds and our hearts for some words or reasons to possibly explain her losses. But no words were found. Medications were available

perhaps to help her escape her sorrow but somehow offering only a pill was not enough.

... Never had I suffered such losses in my life, but on this day her sad eyes were the reflection of her immense pain. I took out my script pad and wrote her a prescription from my heart. [It] was all I had to give her.

Many years later, while at the theater, she happened to see this former patient across the room. She was greeted with a smile. She was married now and blessed with a small child and spoke of that special prescription she had given her. She still had the little torn piece of paper and had read it daily for years. She told her that “simple token of kindness ...with just a few words had changed her life.” All she wrote on the paper was, “Just Breathe...And Walk...”

Words have incredible power. Perhaps more than anything you and I can wield. We don't have to be clever or profound. Offer words from your heart and, who knows how many years later, you might discover the seed you planted helped save a life.