



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
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SPARTANBURG

YOU FOOL!

Matthew 5:21-24

February 16, 2020

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Some passages are a treasure of comfort for the promise of grace they offer. Others are filled with poetic beauty showing us the glory of this life. Still more open deep truths which lead our mind to wonder. But there are also certain passages in the Bible that I would just as soon avoid. Especially today's text – given all the events of last week! God's timing is impeccable and for this passage to appear this week shows God has a devious sense of humor as well.

Last week, after waiting two and a half months with a hole in our kitchen ceiling, our bathtub leak was finally fixed! The plumber said we had to wait a few days for the silicone to dry, but he guaranteed no leaks! Then last Friday after dealing with the tornado, I decided I wanted to take bath. So, I filled the tub and soaked the soreness away. "Tom! Water is pouring out of the ceiling!" Wendy shouted. Apparently, the plumber hadn't attached the pipes to the tub, nor tightened the joints!

At this point rather than telling you what I said, there are children present after all, I will leave it to your imagination. Let's just say when I read Jesus' words in our text, "Those who say, 'You fool!' are liable to the hell of fire", I started feeling EXTREMELY hot!

Perhaps you will feel the same. Let's turn to our text and listen to the Lord,

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgement." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; 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 hell of fire. 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.

Jesus' words truly convicted me. I had to laugh, because I could not believe this was the lectionary passage this week!

As I read this passage closer, Jesus' warning for my words seemed all out of proportion, unfair! He begins by acknowledging that murder makes you liable to judgement. He proceeds to say the same thing about anger and insults. Making it seem like the punishment for anger and insults is the same for murder! Finally, most confounding of all, he tells us if you say, "You fool" you are liable to the Hell of Fire. I imagine most everyone here feels indicted by these words. Whether it is the so-called help line for tech support, the person who cut you off in traffic, or the family member who drives you crazy we have said and thought what we should not. And if we are going to take Jesus seriously, we should be worried.

We should not presume too quickly on God's mercy. Jesus intends to put fear in our hearts in order to spur us to change our thoughts, to change our words, to change our lives. Jesus has a path for us to follow that, frankly, won't be easy. Not for any of us. Especially me. But it will be the path to wholeness, a path to peace, and a path of unity for our country.

Anger and insults are leveled up during stressful times; Jesus' teachings are especially important in the election season we have begun.

Here are some quotes that convey the problem,
...Several decades ago ... partisanship was something people took to the ballot box, "Today, it's something we bring home

and take to bed. It's very personal, and it's very visceral."

...The partisan polarization is driven less by the fact that people love their own party as much as that they hate the other one. They really see each other as the enemy...

We are going to find in Jesus' words a mission for the Christian church and for each of us. A mission for us to live amid the politics of polarization in a different way. It does not mean you need to give up your strong opinions and well-reasoned positions. But it will mean we relate to them and those we disagree with in a fundamentally different way.

This understanding begins by grasping what Jesus is trying to teach in these verses. Each of the sins in this list presumes to usurp God's role. Murder takes something that belongs only to God and not us. God is the Lord of life. Anger presumes Lordly righteousness. Jesus does not say anger will convict us. Clearly, anger is the appropriate emotion in certain instances. But be careful, for it can quickly bleed into a presumption of moral superiority. Insults demean that which God values.

The worst punishment comes from the seemingly most minor infraction – "You fool". To call an act foolish is one thing. Clearly, we have all done foolish things. But to call a person a fool is something else entirely. We are implying that their essence is foolish, indeed that their very existence is void of any rational purpose and value.

But God created that person. God placed the divine image within that person. If we are calling this person worthless, we are not so much impugning them as we are the God who made them. Because, if they are foolish by their very nature, then it is surely not their fault.

Furthermore, calling someone a fool drives you apart. It creates a fundamental distance between you and that person. It establishes a baseline justification for having nothing to do with them. This is the great problem with modern politics.

Currently, it drives us apart from each other rather than drawing us together.

And this is where the Christians' special role in this year's election comes in. Jesus bridged the infinite gap between us and God when he came down from heaven and became one of us. This powerful movement of our Lord is contrasted with a story from Jesus that, as a child, left me with a sense of dread and foreboding. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, at the end of the passage Lazarus was in heaven and the rich man was in Hell. He cried out in agony, "Father Abraham have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony of this fire."

It was Abraham's reply that truly disturbed me,
Between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.

This implies an infinite distance from God and that is what put dread in my heart. It disturbed my sleep and left an empty hole.

A hole that was not truly filled until I read Karl Barth's *Dogmatics on the Doctrine of Reconciliation* in seminary. In it, he explains that Christ traveled that unbridgeable chasm and that he shrunk the distance between us and God to zero – the ultimate Evel Knievel. Infinite movement means infinite love. Furthermore, Jesus' sacrifice was effective not just for some people but for every single person, from your dearest friend to your bitterest enemy.

In light of this reconciliation that he has done for us, Christ demands we do the same in return.

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember your brother or sister has something against you, first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then leave your gift at the altar.

This offering was the *Korban* offering that would have been a rare event for the common worshipper. Normally, the priest went to the altar on behalf of the believer. So going to the altar

directly meant going closer to God. To delay this sacred event would take something very important.

Jesus wants us to fully appreciate and understand two things. One is best understood in I John, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). We cannot and should not go to God with hatred or anger in our heart. If we don't love what God loves, then we cannot truly love God.

Secondly, how can we appreciate and understand the vast distance that he traveled to connect us to God, if we are not willing to travel an infinitely shorter distance by picking up the phone, writing a letter, or making a visit to offer a much smaller reconciliation than what Jesus has done for us?

By first reconciling with our neighbor, as difficult as that may be, we are more ready to appreciate the vast mercy and love our Lord offers us.

For this year's election we are charged by Christ to be agents of reconciliation. This means it is never acceptable to think someone a fool or hold hatred in your heart, however much you disagree with them.

To move toward them, to shrink that distance means a willingness to understand them; to understand why they hold the views they do. It means having empathy for their position, even when you do not agree. Since Jesus did the same for all of us on the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

Paul puts it to us plainly in Philippians:

*though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death -
even death on a cross.*

He begins this passage with the words I would like to leave us all with for today:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Amen.