

“Humility Versus Contempt”

(There is no sin so unchristian as the sin of contempt – William Barclay)

Matthew 5:20-26
Sermon on the Mount Series

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight”
Jeremiah 15:16

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Introduction

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount details his behavior to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

The kingdom of heaven is not some Christian Disneyland; rather it is the righteous ways of the Creator, built into Creation, subverted by us, and liberated through the actions of Christ.

Jesus' Sermon as directed to all who follow him, live with him, invites us to share this righteousness: right being; right living; right relating to God, others and the world (all the Sermon virtues) which blossoms into joy among all who embrace it.

Now to be clear about this righteousness, Jesus contrasts it with that expressed by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, or Scribes, in his times and place.

The Pharisees were the most fervent and conservative practitioners of God's Law as explained by the Scribes in the day of Jesus. The Evangelicals of the day!

The Scribes were the Bible School professors.

Listen to William Barclay describe the Scribal Law:

There arose a race of men called the Scribes who made it the business of their lives to reduce the great principles of the Law to literally thousands upon thousands of rules and regulations. . . . The Law lays it down that the Sabbath Day is to be kept holy, and that on it no work is to be done. That is a great principle. But these Jewish legalists had a passion for definition. So they asked: What is work? . . . For example, *to carry a burden* on the Sabbath Day is to work. But next a burden has to be defined. So the Scribal Law lays it down that a burden is 'food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow, honey enough to put upon a wound, water enough to moisten an eye ointment, . . . ink enough to write two letters of the alphabet, reed enough to make a pen – and so on endlessly. . . . They spent hours arguing whether a man could or could not lift a lamp from one place to another on the Sabbath, whether a tailor committed a sin if he went out with a needle in his robe, whether a woman might wear a brooch or false hair, even if a man might go out on the Sabbath with artificial teeth or limb . Writing on the Sabbath, healing on the Sabbath, and on and on, was defined in minute detail as to what was permissible and what was not.

The Scribal Law was not written down; it was oral law, and it was handed down in the memory of generations of Scribes. . . . In the middle of the third century a summary of it was made and codified. That summary is known as the Mishnah; . . . and in English makes a book of almost 800 pages. Later Jewish scholarship busied itself with making commentaries to explain the Mishnah. These commentaries are known as the Talmuds. Of the Jerusalem Talmud there are 12 printed volumes. Of the Babylonian Talmud there are 60 printed volumes.

This was the 'righteousness' of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus said it was not part of the kingdom of heaven. A different righteousness, Sermon on the Mount righteousness was required.

The central principle is that God's gift of righteousness intrinsic to the universe is discovered in the ever dynamic, Holy Spirit-led, way of Jesus.

This is not simplistic. It is discovered in the mystery of the Church's fellowship and worship. It is discovered in the depths of Biblical and Theological study.

Christians do not have the Scribal Law. However, for us, in some ways what replaces the minutia of Scribal Law is the descriptive powers of the secular social sciences.

To get the details on how to live, the right way to live, we turn to psychology, sociology, economics and so on.

The 'interesting' topic of the week was infidelity. Following up on a provocative article in the Atlantic Monthly, entitled *Why People in Happy Marriages Cheat*. Anna Maria Tremonti on the CBC's The Current, interviewed the therapist Esther Perel whose new book is called *The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity*. Hundreds of pages detailing the psychological dynamics of marital cheating.

Not for a moment do I question the professional expertise of Esther Perel and what we can learn from her work and research.

However, the analysis of self-indulgence only goes so far.

As Christians, our claim is that in the faithful following of Jesus Christ, the power of the righteousness of God literally saves us from the power of evil, in this case, infidelity, that works to destroy people.

Do all Christians avail themselves of this power in the faithful following of Jesus – of course not, that is painfully the case. But that does not undermine the truth we proclaim and that countless numbers throughout the ages and around the world experience.

Text

So when Jesus says: **For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven**

He is telling us kingdom of heaven righteousness does not look like Scribal law

Rather he goes the opposite direction from the Scribes and plummets into the profundity of God's Law. He gives us six examples, the first, his explanation of **You shall not murder. (You shall not extinguish a person to whom you are related)**

Look at the structure of Jesus' words:

He leads us to the underlying motivation of murder: anger (**But I tell you anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment.**)

Then he gives two examples of how this anger is manifested through insults.

Finally, two practical applications are reviewed: going to worship and going to court.

A bit of background information:

There are two different words for our English 'anger' in the underlying original. One word describes anger that flares up in response to an incident and then once addressed, cools off and dissipates.

The second word describes anger that arises and is then nursed; the flame is fed; it becomes a grudge and a decision is made to carry it around and constantly act on it.

Jesus uses this second word.

Next, think about the examples Jesus uses to describe anger: two levels of insult.

What does this tell us about the nature of anger?

I do not think we can adequately translate the insults Jesus comments on.

For example, during the Arab Spring we witnessed leaders being insulted by people taking off a shoe and pointing the sole toward the leader.

A great insult in the Arab world, but in the West not at all meaningful.

Suffice to say the insults are great and deserving of the punishments Jesus mentions: court and hell!

How do we understand this? (How these insults describe the anger?)

I found what the American philosopher Karen Stohr said in her article *Our New Age of Contempt* helpful:

A fundamental feature of contempt is that it is globalist, meaning that it is directed at the entire person, rather than just some aspect of that person. It is thus unlike other negative attitudes, like anger. If I express anger toward you, I am engaging with you. If I express contempt toward you, I am dismissing you. The distinction is crucial. . . . This is how contempt accomplishes its dehumanizing work - by marking its target as unworthy of engagement and thus not a full member of the human community.

When Jesus defines anger, which gives rise to the murder commandment, as expressed in contemptuous insults, he tells us relationships with other people (and especially Christian people – Remember the Sermon on the Mount is for the formation of the Church.) can be destroyed by ongoing anger and by humiliation as well as by murder.

Do we not all painfully know this?

It is why Barclay said: There is no sin so unchristian as the sin of contempt.

Application

By way of application, three considerations:

The seriousness of Jesus' word. Contempt, especially in the Christian world, is rampant.

Whether between churches, wherein we discount and dismiss congregations unlike us and treat them as if they do not exist.

Or at the personal level, where out of relational discord, we insult one another, put up boundaries and basically erase another person from our relations.

Jesus condemns such behavior. Anger and contempt have no place in the following of Jesus.

And beware of constructing an ethic of excuse to minimize this.

Whether by discounting this command of Jesus by finding some other Bible verse that takes the sting out of what Jesus tells us here

Or by embracing Western secular ethics that deny some behaviors are intrinsically and always wrong. That excuse wrong behavior if consequentially things work out.

(If at the end of the day my infidelity gave some good insights to my personal development or even some improvement to my marriage, so it was okay.)

When Jesus tells us do not be angry, do not nurse your grudge, do not destroy your relation with another through contempt, he is telling us something absolute.

Second, in the applications Jesus gives us, he recognizes anger will arise in our human condition and within our human relations and therefore he directs us to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the mark of the follower of Jesus.

Reconciliation is necessary to ensure the integrity of the worship of the living God who (**Leave your gift there in front of the altar, First**) The Bible says, **All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

And reconciliation is necessary to keep you out of jail or its equivalent. The destruction of relationships leads to the imprisonment of the soul.

Finally, humility.

Jesus began with: **Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

Jesus began this way because first and foremost this is who he is – poor in spirit.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount details his behavior to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth.

Christ Jesus: who, though he was in the form of God, . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.

Humility is the first mark of the Christian and humility's primary work is reconciliation; rejecting smoldering anger and contempt toward others and discovering the joy of righteousness. Amen.