

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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Sermon: “*Call Someone a Fool—You Become One*”

Sirach 15:15-20 (We can choose to keep God’s commandments)
Psalm 119:1-8 (God gave us His commandments for us to fully keep them)
1 Corinthians 3:1-9 (We ‘plant’ and ‘water’ in the Church; but God gives the growth)
St. Matthew 5:21-37 (Jesus takes a new approach to the traditional Commandments)

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus packs in so many varied and different teachings (about anger, adultery, divorce, the swearing of oaths), a preacher could get 4 or 5 sermons out of just these few verses—or drive the congregation crazy trying to talk about the entire passage.

Instead, let’s look at just *two* verses—21 and 22—from Matthew, Chapter 5. Here Jesus teaches: “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; 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.”

I’m gonna take that last point, first. Whoever says to (or about) another person, “You fool!” will be “liable to the hell of fire”? Wow. Clearly, Jesus never drove on Interstate 83, Route 30 or the Schuylkill Expressway at rush hour. Which of us has never yelled at another driver, “You jerk!” when he’s riding your bumper, or “What an idiot!” (or a worse profanity) when some woman crosses three lanes to make a left turn in front of you, nearly causing a collision?

The Greek word used by the Evangelist here is “*morōs*,” from which we get the English word “moron.” But, like many Greek nouns, it has a multivalent meaning. According to *Strong’s Complete Lexicon of the Bible*, in this context the fullest connotation of “*morōs*” includes: foolish, impious, godless, stupid, heedless, a (moral) blockhead, and someone who (appears to be) absurd.¹

The Bible has more to say about fools: They despise wisdom and discipline (Proverbs 1:7); they reject wise counsel and continue walking in a way that is “right in [their] own eyes” (Proverbs 12:15). Even worse, fools say in their hardened heart, “There is no God” (Psalm 14:1). So to call someone a “fool” is to imply all these condemnations.

But let’s get back to the punishment Jesus promises those of us who curse our fellow human beings—“the hell of fire.” Sure enough, in Greek, it’s literally, “*ge’henna tou forōs*” meaning just that. Once again, Wow. God would send us to hell just for cussing out some turkey? If that’s true, then we’re ALL in trouble. Better do some more digging

In New Testament times, “Gehenna” was considered *equivalent* to hell—a fiery place where sinners were tormented eternally. And yet, the textual equation of Gehenna to hades or hell, is never made. In the apocryphal literature of II Enoch, the “valley of Gehenna” suggests a valley where trash and garbage were burned, and where the remains of human sacrificial victims were cremated.² *Eeewww!* We don’t want to end up there, either. And Ancient Judaism won’t help us. They believed bad people went to “Sheol,” where there was no punishment; neither was there any joy.³ Only *nothingness*.

To truly understand what Jesus is trying to teach us, we have to back up to earlier verses in today’s Gospel, where Christ takes a radical approach to the traditional Commandments. “Thou shalt not murder”? OK, we get that. But Jesus says, if you’re even *angry at* another person, it’s as though you are killing them. Same with “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” Gracious! None of us married people would do *that*. Oh, but Jesus says, if you even *look at* another person with lust, you’ve *already* committed adultery in your heart.”

The common denominator here is that Jesus cares most about the motivations and yearnings of our *hearts*. For it is out of these that spring forth our words and actions. For example, Jesus makes an astounding connection between anger and murder. Where does murder begin? In the angry heart.

Shouting insults furiously at that other driver, or a fumbling athlete on TV, or your spouse or coworker, makes us liable to hell, in that hell is a place of bitterness and rage. And so, consistently harboring anger and resentment without repenting of these sins is the beginning of hell on earth. If left unchecked, such heart-sickness will lead us to eternal hell because it eventually demonstrates unbelief. Moreover, what goes around comes around. According to Ecclesiastes 7:9 (AB), “Do not be eager in your heart to be angry, for anger dwells in the heart of fools.” Ah ... By angrily calling another person a fool, we become one, ourselves! And if a fool is an unbeliever, then *of course* we’re going to hell! Chew on *that* for a while.

Just how much anger we can get away with is debated by church folks. They quote Ephesians 4:26, “Be angry and do not sin,” and point out that Jesus was *very* angry at the money changers in the Temple (John 2:13-16). Now, it’s one thing to be irate at injustice on behalf of God or others, but it’s another thing to be enraged over something personal. If taken far enough, anger and bitterness become hatred.⁴ Listen to how James, the brother of Jesus, warns us in the Book of James, Chapter 3, verses 5-6 about our angry words: The “tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell.” Again, Wow.

“Anger,” wrote Benjamin Franklin, “is never without a reason, but seldom a good one.” Ambrose Bierce, a 19th-century American author, once quipped: “Speak when you’re angry and you will make the best speech you’ll ever regret.” And Joseph Joubert, an 18th-century French moralist and essayist opined, “The best remedy for a short temper is a long walk.”

So what’s our way out of this mess? Where’s the exit ramp? It may sound like a pat answer, but try “free will,” something God gave us, intending that we use it for good choices. In our first lesson today, we heard: “*If you choose*, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of *your own choice*. ... [God] has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin” (Sirach 15:15, 20).

Choosing not to express anger destructively, not to call other people names, not to undermine our fellow men, women, or children, takes *self-control*. And in Galatians 5:22-23, we read, “the fruit of the Spirit [not of our fleshly nature] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, *and self-control*.” Moreover, in 2 Timothy 1:7, we are reminded: “God did not give us a Spirit of fear but of power and love and *self-control*.”

But what does fear have to do with loss of self-control when we are angry? When we are absolutely irate, if we dig deep enough, we will realize we are actually *afraid of something*—such as: loss of control; looking bad; thinking we won’t get our due or are losing out on something; having an indiscretion or failure revealed; feeling we’re not good enough, and so on.

Once more, turning to Scripture, the antidote to fear that rises to anger is opening ourselves to God’s *love* for us—even as miserable, het up, or fed up as we may be feeling. The New Living Translation of 1 John 4:18 reads: “love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear. If we are afraid, it is for fear of punishment, and this shows that we have not fully experienced [God’s] perfect love.” The true love of God the Father, internalized in our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit, can drive bitterness or rage from a heart that is surrendered to Christ.

As sinfully stubborn and self-centered as we all are, we cannot exercise the will to obey God’s commandments or the self-control necessary to restrain our tempers, without the Lord’s help. We need His grace and mercy, His forgiveness and encouragement, to be able to live rightly.

Also, repentance is a good place to start. We *know* when we've behaved badly. We sin by thinking we are entitled to such behavior. Yet, if we come to the Lord saying “we are truly sorry and we humbly repent”⁵—*genuinely regretting* our words and deeds—His forgiveness and mercy will be poured into our hearts, shaping our choices into ones more in line with God's will.

Often, the angriest people in life are those who have never felt loved. And so, following upon last week's sermon about a new kind of evangelism (loving the people who come to our church), we might reflect on, in this coming week, how to extend kindness, care, and love to someone we know who has a poor self-image, is insecure, or is even angry at life or the world. I understand that's not easy. You might be rebuffed, refused, or re-insulted by such a person. But God isn't interested in tit-for-tat. *You* do the right thing—that's what matters to Jesus.

Let us pray: Gracious God, forgive us for the times we have given in to anger, malice, or fury, and for when our disordered emotions have caused us to lose our self-control. Loving Lord, we pray for those with whom we've been angry—for whatever reason. We ask that You would soften our hearts toward them and help us to move on from the hurt or conflict by which we felt wounded. Lord, have mercy on our souls and show us Your kindness. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, help us to show Your love, patience, kindness, and compassion to all whom we encounter—and to ourselves, as well. This we pray in Jesus' name. *Amen.*⁶

¹ “Lexicon: Strong's G3474 – mōros,” *Blue Letter Bible* © 2023 <<https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/g3474/rsv/tr/0-1/>> 6 February 2023.

² W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, Transl. “Matthew,” *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 26 (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. 60-62.

³ “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII (New York, Abingdon, 1951), p. 296.

⁴ Adapt. Natalie Regoli, “Matthew 5:22 Meaning of Verse and Simple Commentary” 31 March 2020, *Connect Us Commentaries* <<https://connectusfund.org/matthew-5-22-meaning-of-verse-and-simple-commentary>> 6 February 2023.

⁵ Words from the Confession in the *1979 Book of Common Prayer*, Holy Eucharist, Rite II, p. 360.

⁶ Adapt. Tim Goodfellow, “4 Prayers For Anger Management And Peace” 27 July 2022, *Glorify* <<https://glorify-app.com/4-prayers-for-anger-management-and-peace/#:~:text=Lord%2C%20I%20want%20to%20live>> 7 February 2023.