



The Trinity Pulpit



Being Together Instead of Being Right Matthew 5:21-26; Psalm 133

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November 15, 2009

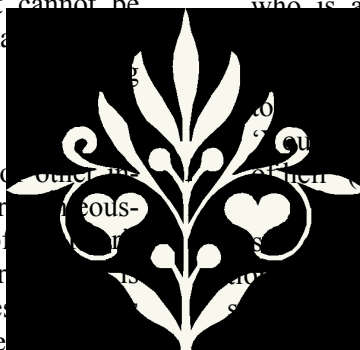
It is better to be together than to be right! There is something that sounds right about that statement and there is something about that statement that doesn't sound quite right. If you are a relationship person, then when you hear that statement you say "Amen. That is right. What really matters is that we love each other and work on our relationships." If you take that line of thinking to the extreme, then one might say it does not matter what one believes as long as they are nice, kind and loving toward others. If you are a person who values doctrine, then you resist such a statement. You say "Wait a moment, Pastor that cannot be right. What you believe does matter. I cannot simply believe anything and then go to God. Being right does matter."

Our focal passage today is a part of the instructions of Jesus concerning our righteousness exceeding the righteousness of the Pharisees. Jesus first tells us that being right about what we believe, is important. Jesus tells us that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. Jesus did not come to tell us that we could believe anything we choose and be pleasing to God or have a relationship with God. What we believe is important. In fact, Jesus came to fulfill what we already knew and believed about God. Jesus came to expand our understanding and complete our understanding of God. Jesus is the full revelation of God. Believing in Jesus would become what is essential in being in relationship with God. The problem with the Pharisees was not that they did not believe enough or that they did not believe the right thing. The problem with the Pharisees was that being right became more important than living right. In particular in their relationship with those who might disagree with them on a point of theology.

Jesus tells us that our righteousness must surpass the Pharisees. Does Jesus mean that it does not matter what we believe? Of course not, but Jesus is concerned about how we live. Jesus is concerned that we do not sacrifice loving others just to prove we are right.

To make this point, Jesus tells us

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." (Matthew 5:21-22).



Jesus describes for us a disruption in relationship that is escalating, as well as the consequence of this disruption. First, there is a disruption of anger toward another.

The Bible has two words that describe anger. The first word is *thermos*, which describes anger that is like a flash. It is the anger that comes on us in a moment of time; it is when our blood pressure goes up we feel it coming, and we have to catch ourselves and our actions and response. Anger like this is not something that should be a constant part of our lives. However, it is something that we all have from time to time.

Yet, the anger Jesus is describing is the anger that is described with the word *orge*. The word for that anger we choose and we nurse. It is not the flash and then it is over; instead, this is the anger we choose to keep in our hearts and our lives. It is the kind of

anger that we look for circumstances and events or personality traits in another so we can continue to stoke and rationalize our anger.

Jesus says that when we are angry in this way toward a brother we should stand in judgment.

Then Jesus takes us another step. Jesus says that if you say of your brother “Raca”, then you are answerable to the Sanhedrin. The word *Raca* is a word that means “empty headed” or “air head”; it is a way of saying that someone’s opinions or view is not worth considering. To say that someone is intellectually empty is a way that we dismiss another. The person who calls someone “Raca” is essentially saying “I am superior.” It is looking at another and saying “I am smarter than they are. What they have to add to this conversation is of no concern.” It is saying to our self “I am more successful than they are, so they really have nothing to offer me.” It is saying “I am more influential than he is, so I don’t need him to elevate my position.” It is saying “I am richer than she is, so I must be more blessed than she is.”

To call someone Raca is to make another an object. It is to dehumanize them to the point that they are of no relevance. When we get to the place we call someone Raca we have come to a place where we have placed someone into a category and no longer see them as an individual but as a stereotype.

Jesus says that when we reach this point with another, then we are answerable to the Sanhedrin. Now, the Sanhedrin was the supreme court of the Jews. We are not supposed to take Jesus’ words of judgment literally. In fact, what Jesus is doing is using hyperbole to show an escalating judgment in regards to how we might dismiss others. Anger brings judgment, Raca means being liable to the Sanhedrin.

Jesus continues this escalation by saying “When you say ‘You fool’, you are in danger of hell fire.” Now is Jesus saying that if you call someone a fool you are going to hell? No, because only rejecting Christ as Savior and Lord causes us to choose to go to hell. Yet, Jesus is showing us the ever-escalating seriousness of how we treat others. It begins with a nursing anger, and continues to calling someone empty and without purpose, and culminates by calling someone a fool.

What does it mean to call someone a fool? The word for fool is *moros*. It is where we get the word *moron*. It does mean to refer to someone as a moron, but the word had a deeper meaning. The word means also to call someone godless. It is to accuse someone of not believing in God. Remember the Psalmist writes, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 14:1; 53:1) To call someone a fool is to suggest that person does not believe in God and is separate from the people of God. Jesus says such an action is so serious that you put yourself in danger in hell.

Why would Jesus use such strong terms? Well, we have to go back to the setting of this teaching. Jesus tells us that this attitude of anger and this action of name calling is toward a brother. Jesus is telling us that we better be careful when we start deciding who belongs to God and who does not. We better be careful when we conclude that this person who claims to be a follower of Jesus is not because they do not agree with us. To call someone a fool is to decide, in our judgment, that this person is no longer a part of the religious community, or in our case a Christian, because we have decided so.

Here is where we have our challenges. We live in a contentious time. In our culture there is a continual divide around politics, religion and socio-economics. I know of democrats who are convinced that republicans are not Christians because of their party’s view on health care and poverty. I know of republicans who are convinced that democrats are not Christians because of their party’s stance on abortion or homosexuality. I have heard each say to each other “How can a Christian support this party or that party?” Be careful... be careful.

We have the same experience in religious life. There are Baptists who are convinced that a Baptist who believes a woman can be in leadership in the church cannot be Christian. In the same way, there are Baptists who embrace God’s call to both men and women and consider anyone who does not agree with them to be raca or the fool. Be careful... be careful.

One of the great experiences I have had the past few years has been to go with several men from our

church to the National Prayer Breakfast. The most encouraging part of this trip is to be in a room of congressmen and women who are both republican and democrat. They may have just come from the Hill where they have voted differently on a bill; yet, as we gathered for prayer, they had the understanding that although they might disagree on a political agenda they were brothers and sisters in Christ. There was something that superseded politics and even theological differences.

Jesus says that it is bad enough to nurse anger toward a brother, worse yet that you would dismiss someone as intellectually useless. But we better be careful when we start judging whether someone is no longer a follower of Christ because they might disagree with us.

Instead, Jesus tells us to value our relationships with each other. He suggests that our relationships as brothers and sisters in Christ must be a priority. To make his point Jesus gives us two illustrations. The first reminds us of the importance of our relationship with each other.

Jesus says “If you come to the temple to offer your gift of sacrifice and in that moment you remember that your brother has something against you, you are to get up and go and be reconciled to your brother and then return to the temple and offer your sacrifice.” Now, Jesus’ words would have been received as ridiculous by the original hearers which are what makes them more effective. First, the person who is offering the sacrifice remembers that someone else has something against them. It is not that they have something against a person, but they are reminded that another has something against them. It would logically seem that the person who is holding the grudge should seek reconciliation. Yet, Jesus takes right relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ to the extreme. Even if it is not our fault or we are innocent, having a right relationship is so important that it does not matter who takes the initiative.

Second, for person to get up and leave their sacrifice and return home is very improbable. Here is Jesus in Galilee saying “After you travel to the temple and do all that one must do to prepare to offer a gift of sacrifice, you are to get up and go

back home and reconcile and then return to the temple.” That seems extreme. That seems like a lot of trouble. That is exactly right. Being reconciled to one another is that important.

Thirdly, to place reconciliation with others before reconciliation with God is surprising. To offer a sacrifice was to seek forgiveness of your sin and to be reconciled with God through the offering of a sacrifice. Jesus says that the priority is to seek out the person whom you need to forgive or who needs to forgive you.

Jesus, again, is making his point in escalating manner. Seek right relationship even if it is not your fault, even if it takes some effort, even if it means putting off worship because we cannot truly worship God with malice or hatred in our hearts.

John reminds us that we cannot say we love God and hate our brother. If we hate our brother, we are not in the light but we are still in the darkness. John says “Love one another.” Jesus reminds us of the priority of relationship.

Jesus’ second illustration reminds us of the urgency of relationship. Jesus’ second illustration is of two men on their way to court and Jesus’ instruction is to settle the matter before you even get to the court. If not, then you might lose everything. The picture Jesus used was not uncommon. It was not uncommon for there to be a citizen’s arrest and see two people on their way to court, sometimes with one dragging the other. Jesus says settle it right there in that moment. Don’t let it go.”

Jesus is speaking of the urgency of right relationship. There is no need to put it off but settle the matter quickly. Do not let it fester or go further. The truth is, the more we let disagreements fester or continue the less likely we are to find reconciliation. Sometimes, we find ourselves in conflict with people and we cannot even remember how the conflict started. We just know we don’t like that person and we are in a disagreement with them.

I remember an old Andy Griffith episode that featured two feuding families. There was a young couple who wanted to get married; the only problem was that their families had been feuding for years. Andy, of course, was going to try and help

this young couple, so he went to the fathers of the young man and young woman to learn why the Wakefields and the Carters were at war with each other. The great conversation comes with Mr. Carter. Andy asks him why the families are feuding.

Mr. Carter says "Because he is a Wakefield."

Andy asks "Well, what does that mean?"

"It means I have to shoot him."

"Well why do you have to shoot him?"

"Because he is a Wakefield."

"Well, why do you have to shoot a Wakefield?"

"Oh that is easy, because we are a feuding."


Have you ever been in a relationship like that? There are some times that we forget why we dislike someone. Some small conflict which was not settled has become something much larger and much bigger than it was ever supposed to be. Some times we even get to the place where we cannot remember why we are in conflict in the first place. Jesus says "Settle it quickly." Relationships are important and we should have urgency for reconciliation.

Let me ask you what situation should be settled years ago? What relationship is strained and gets more strained every day because you simply did not settle the conflict early? I don't know how many adults I talk to who lament the fact that they have let conflict go unsettled. Jesus says "Being together, that is, being reconciled, is so important we must have urgency for it to occur."

Wade Burlson is the pastor of the Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Oklahoma. Rev. Burlson is someone that we would define as a Southern Baptist conservative. He served for years with the International Mission Board. He pastors what anyone would define as a very conservative Baptist church. He has served twice as the president of the Oklahoma Baptist Convention, one of the most conservative state conventions. This is a convention that would never have a woman speak or preach or have leadership. Yet, recently in a sermon he gave at the New Baptist Covenant in

Oklahoma, Rev. Burlson wrote these words.

The people I pastor know what type of Baptist I am. I am Calvinist in my soteriology, partial preterists in my eschatology, open communion in my ecclesiology, conservative in my theology, an innerantist in my bibliology and a continuist in my pneumology. I held these views when I began to be a pastor and hold them unto this day. I have not changed what I believe. But I have changed in one very critical area over the past year. I now believe deep in my heart that Jesus is more concerned with how we Baptist treat each other more than what we teach each other. The people loved by Christ particularly those who differ from me are to be more precious to me than any point of theology believed by me. Jesus did not say it would be by my truth that they would know I belonged to him but by my love. The only description ever given of Jesus Christ was that he was a person of peace and truth. Word order is important in scripture. Grace should not just precede truth, it must permeate it.¹

Jimmy Allen meant when he said "We need a love that reaches beyond our theology." Maybe a love that reaches beyond our theology is what Jesus meant when he said that we must have a righteousness that is greater than the Pharisee's. Maybe Jesus does expect us to want to be together more than to be right. Is it better to be together than to be right? At the very least, we should give it some thought. 

¹Wade Burlson, "Love Beyond Your Theology" in *Christian Ethics Today*, Volume 15, No. 4 Fall 2009 pp. 7-8.

²Burlson

