

### **From the Inside to the Outside**

*From the Gospel: 1 St. Matthew v. 20 ff.*

**20** For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven. **21** Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill ; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: **22** But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say , Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. **23** Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; **24** Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way ; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift. **25** Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. **26** Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Our Lord, throughout the passage we call the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chaps. 5-7) of which today's Gospel is a part, contrasts the principles of a new Kingdom which He inaugurated at His arrival —the Kingdom of God— with the monolithic system of law-observance that that the ruling religious leaders of His day used to wield control. His teaching was immediately recognized by His sympathetic hearers as completely different from that of their rabbinical mentors. The close of these three remarkable chapters describe their reaction: *And it came to pass , when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes* [NIV: “teachers of the law”] (Matt. 7:28, 29)

It quickly becomes obvious that Jesus' paramount concern is with the heart, that core of human existence which gives rise to all external behavior, whether good or evil. It is in that place alone —invisible to the eyes of men, but fully open to God— where all change must commence. It should be clear that if one is to live by internal standards overseen by a God who scrutinizes everything, who is unimpressed with outward shows of righteousness intended to please men, that these standards will be phenomenally high and exacting. And so they are. As we study them, we will see that it's not the *other* person who becomes the object of God's holy and penetrating gaze, but each of us, individually.

*I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment...* Jesus seems to be implying that capital punishment normally meted out for murder will be applied to transgressions which to us seem of an absurdly smaller degree. How can this be? We must first understand His method of teaching. He is not minimizing the seriousness of high crime. But He knows that His audience has lived for generations under the fear-mongering lordship of religious leaders who have wielded the Mosaic Law against the common people like a whip to keep them under submission. His words here are surely ironic, perhaps even sarcastic: “Your teachers, who threaten you with severe judgment for the worst of crimes,

should be prepared to address with the very same punishment heart attitudes of which they themselves demonstrate continual culpability.”

But let’s consider this matter of *anger without a cause* for a moment. Anger permeates this society, as we all know, and it is touched off in these times of spiritual aridity with the ease of a match in a pile of fireworks. We are all affected by it, sadly, and often add to its promotion, instead of exempting ourselves from it. Its consequence is serious, as we will see when we look at the latter part of this verse: *and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.* *Raca* means basically, “You idiot! You empty-head!”

“What’s wrong with a little name-calling?” someone asks. “Everyone does it; we hear it all the time.” But a little name-calling can lead to attitudes of the heart that are far darker than an epithet conjured up in the tension of heavy traffic. We run the risk of satisfying ourselves that by labelling an individual in this fashion we have summed up the entirety of what they are. But that is a grievous act. What have we actually done to them, in our hearts? We have at least begun to shame them, belittle them, judge them, and even imply that in some real sense they are hopeless, irrecoverable cases, beyond the power of even God to redeem.

*Thou fool!* Curiously, the word “fool” used here is derived from the Greek word “moron”. “Idiot” and “moron”, along with “imbecile”, are 19th century medical terms denoting degrees of mental retardation that have long since been replaced by polite euphemisms. No one today would dare be caught belittling the handicapped, but to employ such terms loosely implies that those thus labelled in anger are as impossibly beyond aid as one caught up in a debilitating, lifelong illness. To say, *thou fool*, is to move the matter from heart to mouth... from my thoughts, where at least I retained the option to reject it, into the open air, where it now becomes a weapon of injury, and reaches its full potential to hurt. All of us know how long it may take for such hurts to heal. Sometimes there never is healing.

It is the hard heart that swaggers through life, condemning others to judgments carelessly and glibly dished out, heedless of the consequence, when they could instead have offered the mercy and understanding they would have allowed themselves. Such may indeed be *in danger of hell fire*. Those Pharisees and teachers of the law who regarded the unlearned masses with undisguised contempt would surely be among them.

*Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way ; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.*

In short, these verses advise us that we can’t get around our brother to get to God. It is significant that these words follow directly after a discussion of anger. Our *gift* to God is our worship of Him, whether in praise, or good works, or offerings. My displays of anger, as we’ve already

seen, bear their consequences, and God will simply not allow me to stride over the wreckage I've wrought in the life of another to render God public service which, though it may convince others, will not convince Him.

*Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.* These verses always proved a great mystery to me. I could not relate them to their context, and they always seemed so matter-of-fact as to have little significant spiritual content. Worthy of note is that these same verses in St. Luke are offered in the different context of a discourse on the judgment of God.

Situated within today's Gospel in St. Matthew, one might interpret Jesus' words as meaning that in human conflict, one should with considerable caution assume that they are in possession of the moral high ground, and even if they are fully convinced, tread very lightly and carefully. This touches upon the Christian's engagement today in public affairs, for there is much in the battleground of ideas and principles that causes the believer to take sides, often at considerable cost. Our *agreement with our social adversaries*, those who reject the Christian faith and the consequent position the Church must take on a variety of issues, does not mean accepting nor facilitating their rebellion. But it may well mean refusing to pick fights, to mount unnecessary challenges that only deliver us into conflicts for which we have been carefully and maliciously set up. It may mean to be a people of peace, whose faith affords them such confidence that they need not be provoked into battles which they know that their God, sooner or later, will Himself fully win. Thus they will not put themselves at the mercy of those who are all too ready to make things very hard for them.

These same words, however, viewed within the context that they appear in St. Luke, seem to make God the great Adversary with whom we should be in earnest hurry to agree with, lest we suffer the consequences. But only those who fear God would ever see things this way. It always pays to agree with Him quickly.

*For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.* With these words our Gospel had commenced. To Christ's hearers, this would be astonishing. How could the super-righteous ever be trumped, or even equalled, or even barely approached, by the paltry efforts of the rest of us? It is only by adopting another standard of righteousness: one which commences on the inside and travels outwardly where it finds expression, instead of one that both begins and ends on the outside. For the answer, we will turn to today's Epistle. Recalling a portion of St. Paul's words there:

*..like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. (Ro. 6:4b)..Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of*

*sin might be destroyed , that henceforth we should not serve sin. (vs. 6)..Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (vs. 11)*

There it is. Short and simple. How “innumerable are the benefits procured unto us...by His blessed passion and precious death, his mighty resurrection and glorious ascension”, as we repeat every week during Holy Communion.

*Walking in newness of life.* This is the key. Let us give Him glory and praise!

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*