



Images of snowballs from brettberk.com

Whenever I read this passage from Matthew Chapter 5 – the one that warns me not to call my brother a fool, I think about Timmy Lee. The Lee family lived just around the corner from us when my Dad was teaching history at Clemson. The youngest of the Lee children, Timmy was my own age. And Timmy and I were good friends, except he was much more athletic than I was. In the late Winter of 1973, I was 16 years old when a rare snow storm hit the Carolinas, cancelling school for several days. I joined Timmy and my other teenage friends in countless snowball fights. But the problem was that while Timmy, with his athleticism was able to hit me with a snowball on every throw, I couldn't hit the side of a barn. And, laughing deliriously, Timmy called out to me, "You'll never hit me, you fool!" Now, I had just started reading my Bible with some attention. And I thought, not for the last time, "Well, I'll show him! I'll take my superior knowledge of The Word of God and use it to

my advantage!" So, I called back to Timmy Lee, "Timmy Lee, the Bible says 'Thou shalt not call thy brother a fool.'" And without batting an eye, Timmy Lee shouted back, "My brother's not a fool. You are, you **fool!**"

In the opening Collect for this morning, we read that God is the strength of all who put their trust in him." The Collect also assures us that we can do nothing good without God And finally, in the Collect we read that we must, "seek to fulfill God's commandments so that He might be pleased." So, whether we're talking about strength, goodness, or obedience the focus of our actions is always on God. Ah, but is it? Or instead, are we focused on ourselves as the reason for doing, and speaking, and living as we do?

When you launch a ship, or give authority to a soldier as an officer, or agree with a Sculptor to create a new work of art, we say that you "Commission" these people. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses gives his final Commission to the Children of Israel before he blesses them and hands the mantle of leadership to Joshua. And it strikes me that this commissioning of Israel to continue faithfully as God's chosen people is a repetition of the other "commissionings" which happen in the Bible. There is the Blessing and Commissioning of Adam and Eve in Eden which we find in Gen. 1:28 to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and have dominion over all creatures. But then there was the fall and the banishment from Eden. There was the Blessing and Commissioning of Noah and his family. (See Gen.9:1) But then there was Noah's drunkenness and the humiliation practiced by his son, Ham (See Gen. 9:20-22), and Noah's curse on Ham's son, Canaan¹ There was the Blessing and Commissioning of Abraham and his family. (See Gen.12;1-3; 15:4-5) But then, there was the deceit practiced by Abram while traveling through Egypt concerning, the real identity of his wife, Sarai. (See Gen.13:10-20) Over and over again, God seeks to make loving and righteous Covenants with his children, only to see his people betray these agreements. So, no I'm afraid our focus has not generally remained on God, but rather drifts over and over again to ourselves. It's just as the old hymn says, "I'm prone to wander Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the Lord I love."²

In all the Old Testament Covenants that God makes with Noah, Abraham, Moses, Phineas, and David, The Lord God sets before his children clear instructions, and the blessings which are to come from following these instructions. And in every case, there is a consequence – either implied or prescribed – in which God sets before his people the suffering which would come from being faithless and abandoning their covenant responsibilities. And the incredible thing we need to ponder here is that God's knowledge is infinite and unbound by time.

¹ See ESV footnote on misuse of Caanan's cure to justify slavery, 9:24-27, p. 66.

² From the 4th Stanza of "Come thou Fount of Every Blessing" by Robert Robinson, usually sung in the Episcopal Church to the tune of *Nettleton* -#686 in our Hymnal.

So He knew from the very beginning that his rebellious children called “man” would indeed prove faithless, and in every case would abandon the covenant responsibilities. And yet, God made these covenants with us anyway to provide direction, and blessing, and some kind of hope. What does it take to love somebody so much that you are willing to promise your own faithful love, knowing full well that the one you love will eventually abandon you? Why, that seems beyond human ability, doesn’t it? In fact, it is!

The Corinthians were Paul’s problem children. And in the epistle for today you can almost see Paul beating his head against his writing desk. He is bemoaning the fact that even after all Paul’s efforts, the Church in Corinth is still not ready for Spiritual maturity. Even now, he says, they are acting not as people of God but as people “of the flesh,” full of jealousy for each other and quarreling among themselves (see 1Cor.3:3).

Paul goes on to tell the Corinthians that the most basic symptoms of their spiritual failing and immaturity are the divisions which exist among them (see vv. 4-5). Hmm...do these theological and spiritual divisions remind you of anyone? Because, the truth is, if we want to see examples of people who call themselves “Christians” but who persist in living with these same divisions, we need look no further than our present day Church, which is so tragically divided by denominational differences represented by disagreements on how we worship God, differences that it seems to me in the final analysis really don’t amount to very much. Yet we cling to these pitiful differences that divide us so desperately. I think it must break God’s heart..

Much of the time, you and I are still living as “people of the flesh,” unable to get beyond our own preconceptions of “the right way” to think about God and follow Him as Lord of our lives. And so there we are right back there with the Children of Israel listening to God’s Covenant Law, knowing full well that we will never be able to completely live up to the standards that are necessary to be a truly righteous people. There we are as we listen to Moses on the mountain, doomed from the very outset to stumble along in our own darkness as “people of the flesh” with our rebellious human nature, all of us destined to fall short of the glory of God (see Rom.3:23). We need a new kind of law you and I; a law that actually cures human nature of its selfishness and self-centeredness. We need a law that actually transforms the will, not just of the individual but a law which transforms communities as well.

Jesus seems to have a particular regard for the harmony of the community. When Jesus warns us not to call our brother or sister a fool, the word used here comes from the Hebrew word “*Raca*” which originates in the Hebrew verb “to spit.” *Raca* was a strong term of contempt and denigration. It was the equivalent of calling someone “no-count” or “worthless.” This passage from Matthew Chapter 5 is rich in metaphor. Here, Jesus talks about the destructive behaviors of anger, insult, and denigration. When Christ says that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgement, he’s condemning those who harbor or cause anger among the believers to a judgement like that of the community courts established by the Torah in Deuteronomy Chapter 16 – these were the equivalent of the modern day city or municipal courts, which tried offenses of lesser degree. And when Jesus says that, “those who insult others will be liable to the council,” he’s telling us that he who insults another will be subject to a more severe justice such as that handed down by the Council of the Sanhedrin, the ruling authority of Israel which tried cases of major importance at the Temple in Jerusalem. But finally, Jesus says, those who call another “*Raca*” that is “no-count,” “worthless,” – those of us who slander, humiliate, or denigrate their brother or sister are subject to the eternal flames of Hell.³ So, of the three destructive behaviors mentioned here of anger, insult, and denigration, it is to denigrate and humiliate a brother or sister which Christ considers the most serious. It seems to me that here Jesus is saying that if you deprive someone of their self-esteem you have committed the most egregious and destructive of acts. Because we are our brothers’ keepers, and how they think of themselves, and the hope others take into tomorrow with them rests largely in our hands. We were created by God and given to each other, to nurture or to abuse. You see, this safe keeping of the hope of others is a grave and critical responsibility of the Christian man or woman.

³ See Jameison’s *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1961) p. 900, 22.

Surely, this is the reason why Jesus warns us to be reconciled to each other before coming to altar with our offering for God. (See Mt.5:24) For what hope do we have of leading a holy and joyous life if there is anger, resentment, and wounding humiliation between us and others. How, indeed can we come to this house of worship on Sunday morning and seek reconciliation with The Lord, if we are not at first reconciled with each other?

When Donna and I were living in a small town in the south at the beginning of our marriage, we became friends with the editor of the weekly newspaper. The editor told us an account of what happened on the day after a particularly contentious by-election. That morning, one of the candidates who had been defeated came into his office demanding that the newspaper do an expose' on the deceitful practices of the fellow who had defeated him in the election the night before. The angry candidate who had been beaten told our friend the editor that the winning candidate had paid \$25-a-piece for the votes in that precinct. The man then said, "And Mr. Editor, I paid \$50-a-piece for those same votes, ***and that's just not fair!***" You see, It is the nature of man to pervert the law. If it were not so, we would have no need for prisons.

We need a new kind of law, you and I. We need a kind of law that transforms the will, a law that saves us from our pride so that we can actually yearn to be selfless, and humble, and loving. We need a kind of law that frees us from anger and resentment, a law that gives us the ability to let go of our hurt and truly extend the open hand of forgiveness and consolation to those who have wronged us, so that we can leave that self-made prison of anger and hatred (see Mt.5:22-26). What we need is a law of love that frees us from the crushing burden of impossible statutes. We need for God to free us so that the law may be truly fulfilled – not just in the letter of the law but in Spirit and in truth, accomplishing in us the very things that the law itself was designed to bring about but never can – a life of genuine righteousness, of real forgiveness, of complete justice, of absolute truth, and of total devotion (see Mt.5:17-20). We need a law which gives us a life in which our "Yes" to love and joyful service is truly "Yes!" and our "No" to pride and sin is truly "No!" (see Mt.5:37).

We needed a new Covenant from God, a Covenant written not on stone but on tablets of the human heart (see 2Cor.3:3). And God has heard us. And so, he has gifted to us his Covenant where even if you and I prove faithless, He will be forever faithful (see 2Tim.2:13). This is the New Covenant, not dependent on our rebellious will and wandering heart, but rather on the utterly obedient will of the one who gave up His precious person for our sake. That was the Covenant made by God in the priceless blood of His son.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

JWB+ 02/08/17

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise.
Teach me some melodious sonnet, Sung by flaming tongues above.
Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, Mount of Thy redeeming love

O to grace how great a debtor, Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it, Seal it for Thy courts above.⁴

⁴ First and Final Stanzas of "Come thou Fount of Every Blessing" by Robert Robinson.