

Insults and Grudges

“First go and be reconciled to your brother...”

Matthew 5:24b

As we continue on our journey of reflection on the Sermon on the Mount we now come to the nitty-gritty of what Jesus’ words in the preceding verses mean for our lives. This is where things get practical ... so buckle up; it’s going to be a wild ride!

The first real-life practical issue that Jesus deals with is also the single most important aspect of our lives; our relationships with other people. Relationships are sacred and we cannot live without them. Our relationships make us who we are; they define us (in many ways) and often determine the very direction of our lives. We cannot possibly over-estimate the value of good and strong relationships.

But, as we all know from experience, our relationships are also fragile and prone to breakdowns and fallouts of various kinds. So it goes without saying that our relationships demand special care and attention – if we want our relationships to remain healthy and life-giving we will need to work at them

We owe it to ourselves and to others to make sure we do all we can to keep our relationships healthy and meaningful. And this is exactly the point at which the text meets us – In these few verses from Matthew 5, Jesus addresses this most fundamental aspect of our lives; our relationships. And as we reflect on what Jesus says in this passage we see three things that we should always be on the lookout for when it comes to our relationships; three things that we should avoid at all costs.

Firstly, we should avoid the kind of anger that lingers. All of us have made ourselves guilty of holding grudges and harbouring bitterness toward others, so let’s not pretend. Jesus tells us that he who is angry with his brother is just as guilty as the one who commits murder. But the anger Jesus is referring to at this point is not the momentary anger that rises in a flash and just as quickly dissipates... Jesus is referring to that kind of anger which is far more dangerous and devastating to the health of our relationships... the anger that lingers. The problem with anger is that it feels so good, so right – we human beings have developed an unhealthy addiction to anger, which we more often than not mistakenly see as righteous anger, justified because of the wrong we have been done, but actually it’s usually just self-righteous pettiness.

Secondly, we should avoid developing a sense of pride that leads to treating others with contempt. Jesus says quite plainly that he who is willing to insult his brother by calling him 'raca' is liable to severe judgment. The word 'raca' essentially served as an insult born out of pride – it was a deeply contemptuous word that made it clear to the one being insulted he was not worthy of the one hurling the insults attention or care or concern. The danger of pride is that it feeds on goodness... we tend to become proud of the things we are good at and imagine that our goodness over-qualifies us for the company of others who do not share our good gifts. There are very few things as damaging to our relationships as a sense of pride that leads to us imagining we are above others.

Finally, we must avoid (at all costs) the nasty habit of spreading rumours. When Jesus says that he who calls his brother a 'fool' is in danger of the fires of hell he is not referring to the kind of foolishness that we often attach to this word. He is not using it in the sense of someone being told they lack common-sense or that they are not too bright. He was referring to an accusation of moral foolishness; in other words the warning comes against those who accuse their brothers of being immoral, of loose standards or not quite up to our level of goodness. Often born out of an over-inflated sense of our own morality or goodness, a misguided notion that we are more righteous than others, our human habit of spreading rumours and feasting on the news of others' mistakes is more devastating to our relationships than anything else – because this is the one thing we can never undo. We can always let go of our anger, we can always strive for greater humility in our dealings with others, but we cannot (ever) undo a word spoken in malice, a rumour spread through gossip, or an ill-informed accusation of someone else's moral failings.

We live in relationship to other people – we cannot exist without these relationships. Whether we like to admit it or not, the simple truth is that we need each other. Our only hope for the health of our relationships is that we become intentional about what Jesus demands of us, that we don't allow anger to linger and keep us hostage, that we put away all pride and arrogance that leads to contempt, and that we always keep a our tongues in check when we are tempted to gossip and spread rumours.

Food for thought:

In our relationships with other people...

The SIX most important words: "I admit I made a mistake."

The FIVE most important words: "You did a good job."

The FOUR most important words: "What do you think?"

The THREE most important words: "After you please."

The TWO most important words: "Thank you."

The ONE most important word: "We"

The LEAST important word: "I"