

## BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY

Open your Bible, turn to Matthew 5:21-37 and keep it open after looking at this morning's text, which is vs. 22. Jesus had been teaching the eight blessings of the *Beatitudes*. Then He followed them up with His *Sermon on the Mount* that included, "*I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister* (the Greek word used here refers to being angry with another disciple *without cause*, whether it's a man or a woman, that person) *will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,'* (an Aramaic term for *contempt*) *is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.*" WOW!

Now, keep your Bible open on your lap . . . According to Jesus, you better be careful what you say. Anger is dangerous! And if you don't turn your anger over to God, you're going to get into a heap of trouble! It's not good being a hothead! Jesus said you should be a person of peace. Not just in how you act, but in how you say your words.

In Jesus' time, Roman Army soldiers were considered the "Nazis" of their day. They had the legal right to order any Jewish civilian, in any Roman occupied territory, to carry their heavy packs one Roman mile. 1000 steps. It's equal to about a half mile today. Jewish law had set the maximum walking distance on the Sabbath to just a little over one half a mile, which meant you couldn't walk a straight line for more than half a mile in any direction on the Sabbath. It was like a Roman soldier taking a Jew to be used as his pack mule. "Come here, Jew! Carry this for me!" It could weigh 80. 100 pounds. And once the mile was over, the Jew could drop it. But Jesus taught if you carried the load for a mile, then offer to carry it two miles. That would help you regain your status as a *human being*. Now, look at your Bible again. Read on down to verse 41 where Jesus said, "*If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.*" That's right in the middle of the most specific teachings on non-violence taught by Jesus in Matthew 5. *Love your enemy. Give to those who ask of you. Turn the other cheek.* By making this a free choice, a Jew would not only demonstrate the kindness of God but would be putting the soldier into an embarrassing situation. "*You want to go two miles with me? You're going to carry my stuff two miles?*"

Can you imagine how a Roman would react to that? And that's exactly what Jesus meant! He meant, be careful what you say, and how you respond to Roman soldiers. He knew any civilized, law-abiding Jew was no match for those tough, battle-hardened Roman soldiers. If any Jew challenged a Roman soldier, the soldier would always win. Everyone knew that! But can you imagine a Jew carrying a Roman soldier's load for one mile, and then as they neared the end of one mile the Roman soldier would start looking for another Jew to carry his load further. Then the Jew carrying his load would say to him, "*don't worry sir, I'll carry it for you another mile*". What would go through that soldier's mind? Don't you think he would think, "*No Jew had ever said that to me!*" Now, think about that! When you're in a conflict, or when you're up against someone smarter, wittier or stronger than you, you're never going to win! Isn't the best thing for you to do is soften their hearts? Jesus knew it works! And the results can be surprising. That's why you must be careful what you say.

There's an *attitude* today called, "*My way or the highway.*" But there's an even a worse attitude called, *lack of submission*. "*Even not though I know I'm not right, I will never submit to your being right!*" That's how authority is being tested today. Not only by criminals, but by students behaving badly in school. But it's also between Christians and God. Submission pushes the limit of authority. Submission to authority *must* start in the home. Trouble in our schools today comes from some homes not teaching respect of authority. Life is 10% of what happens to you. The other 90% of life is how you react to what happens to you.

So, Christians must stop being hurt in how they react to problems. A Christian must have an attitude of forgiveness. A Christian must let the Holy Spirit guide what action should be taken in certain situations. Just because you can *out argue* everyone, doesn't make you right! And just because you can *push the limits* and get away with it, doesn't mean you're right. God is calling *every* believer to have a *spiritual renewal*. Don't live by the rule of *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*. It's not about *getting revenge or getting even*! When you are a born-again Christian, you're going to have to act on a new level. You're going to have to live by new rules. You're going to have to have a new attitude. If someone makes you to go one mile, go two! If someone slaps your right cheek, turn, and offer your left cheek. If someone hurts your feelings, don't hurt their feelings in return!

God's not interested in just *correcting* your heart. He wants to *give* you a *new* heart! God's not impressed by your arguments, your quarrels, and your offenses. God wants to mend your heart at the foot of the Cross. No more *tit-for-tat* stuff. Live charitably. You've heard, '*Love your friend and hate your enemy.*' No, no, no! Jesus said, you are to *love* your enemies. Keep them close to you! That will always bring out the best in *you*! Not the worst. When someone gives you a tough time, respond with understanding. That's when you're being your true self. Your God-created self. That's what God does. He gives His best to everyone, regardless of the good, the bad, the nice and the nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that! If you simply say "*hello*" to those who greet you, do you expect a medal for saying that? Any sinner can say that. What Jesus was saying was, "*Grow up!*" You're now a child of God. Live like it! Live out your God-created identity. Live generously. Live graciously toward others. Live the way God lives toward you.

Ralph Ellison, author of the *Invisible Man* said, “*When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.*” It’s the same as I told you last week when Bishop Tutu was asked if he was hopeful about the future, and he said, “*I am always hopeful. I am prisoner of hope.*” Repeatedly in Scripture you read about folks who did not know who they were. They struggled. They floundered. But once they discovered who they were, their life changed. And today, many still don’t understand who they are. If Ralph Ellison was right, you’re not *free*. You’re *bound*. As Bishop Tutu said, “*you are a prisoner of hope.*” Bound at the level of effectiveness, influence, and authority. It’s Jesus who can set you free, so you can become who He wants you to be! It’s how you treat those, who treat you badly. That’s what sets you apart. It puts God on display. You act, and look more like Jesus, when you refuse to strike back at those who strike out at you.

Jesus demonstrated that when He was beaten and crucified. He had the physical and spiritual strength to win against His enemies, yet He refused to even open His mouth or lift His hand to take revenge. But some just can't let someone else get the last word in, in a simple argument. Some can't wait until they've had their revenge. Jesus said there's a better way. A stronger way. A more adult way. Turn the other cheek. Be on your best behavior when you've been treated the worst! Jesus was trying to show what a “*Kingdom of heaven heart*” looks like by telling you to be careful what you say! Instead of saying angry words, Jesus wants you to seek understanding, both for your sake, and for the sake of the person who is angry with you. If someone's angry with you, and you let it build and fester, it's going to lead to somethings that's not pretty. Don't allow something someone says, or does, blind you to the value God has placed on every human. When you despise, or hate, those created in God's image, you're showing contempt for God. It's going to hinder your connection with God. Your prayers won't be effective. You won't feel close to God. And yet, He's the One who loves you and wants you to be close to Him!

If you've wronged someone, or even if it's someone who feels *you* have wronged *them*, you need to find a way to settle the issue as quickly as possible. You can say, “*I see where you're coming from. That not what I intended at all!*” And there are some, more than others, who need to know their feelings are recognized, whether they're being rational or not. If you give someone a little more understanding, if you practice a little more patience, that's all you need to do. And five little words are all it takes: “*I'm sorry! I was wrong!*” This goes for husbands and wives. Parents and children. Friends and neighbors. You don't have to make excuses. You don't have to make it look like it was their fault. Take responsibility! Say, “*I'm sorry! I was wrong!*” Even if you are completely innocent! You can say, “*I think I've offended you, and I'm sorry. Can we talk about it?*” Nothing's worth ruining a relationship with someone who has been made in the image of God. And you, as a Christian husband, wife, son, daughter, friend, or neighbor can make it right. But you must remember, always be careful what you say! AMEN