

Ministers like to choose biblical texts which don't offend the congregation. We like to preach fiery sermons against sin in general and when we preach on some particular sin we try to choose one that no one in the congregation may be guilty of. For example, I have heard some of the most scathing rebukes of drinking alcoholic beverages given to a congregation of teetotalers. I have heard scathing denunciations of communism preached to middle and upper-middle class Presbyterians. They are safe sins to preach against. We preachers have the satisfaction of preaching against sin as God has commanded us without really offending anyone.

Most of the ministers and teachers of Jesus' day were the same as they are now. They carefully chose their biblical texts so that they gave the appearance of preaching against sin while carefully avoiding stepping on toes. It's to this characteristic in ministers that Jesus refers in the opening words of our text. He is talking to his disciples; fisherman, tax-collectors, businessmen, and mothers. "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.'" The Greek tense of the verb "heard" indicates that this is something that disciples had heard

repeatedly from the preachers and teachers of their synagogues. "You have heard repeatedly that you should ^{not} murder; and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment."

It's easy to imagine the situation Jesus had in mind. People would go to the synagogue and hear a sermon on the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." But people who attend church and synagogues regularly are not usually murderers. So they went to the synagogue and heard a real good sermon on Thou shalt not kill. Maybe the rabbi talked about how terrible it was that crime and murder were on the increase. He probably lambasted the judges who meted out light sentences. He defended and advocated the strict enforcement of capital punishment for all murderers. And at the end of the service the congregation would go home feeling good because they were not killers; they agreed with everything the preacher said, and they were glad their preacher was taking a strong stand against sin.

But there was something missing. The rabbi forgot to mention that the law of Moses condemned character assassination, the nursing of grudges, and all destructive expressions of anger. Listen to a few verses from the

book of Leviticus. "Do not spread lies about anyone, and when someone is on trial for his life, speak out if your testimony can help him. I am the LORD. Do not bear a grudge against anyone, but settle your differences with him, so that you will not commit a sin because of him. Do not take revenge on anyone or continue to hate him, but love your neighbor as you love yourself. I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:16-18). The rabbi didn't preach on these verses and so the people never heard that this was also said to the men of old. These verses would step on the toes of some people. They might make the congregation feel guilty. They might offend some generous contributor.

Jesus, however, was not afraid of stepping on toes. In his sermon on the mount Jesus drew upon the Old Testament laws to show the people before him that because of anger and hatred they were as guilty as the killer in the eyes of God and deserved to go to hell. "You have heard (repeatedly from the scribes and pharisees) what was said to the men of old. You shall not kill and whoever kills is liable to judgment. But I say to you that the law also forbids anger and hatred, and everyone who hates his brother is also liable to judgment, not the judgment

of the law-courts, but the judgment of God."

It may have been, although I haven't found any evidence for it outside this passage, that there was a Jewish law which forbid certain expressions of contempt. This might be what Jesus is referring to when he said, "Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council (i.e., he is liable to be taken to court), and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." The word for insult and the word for 'You fool' are nearly the same in meaning. They are practically synonyms. It can hardly be that Jesus was saying that the use of the former was merely a civil offense but the use of the latter damns a person. No! What he means is this. If you insult your brother you have to face not only man's judgment in a court of law; you will also have to face God's terrible judgment. In short, Jesus was telling his disciples, "If you murder you may be executed, but anger will certainly send you to hell."

At this point we need to ask what Jesus meant by anger. It's obvious from reading the N.T. that Jesus was not condemning all expressions of anger. Read Matthew, the 23rd chapter, and you will hear some of the most scathing rebukes of the scribes and Pharisees on the lips of

Jesus. Jesus says, "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...woe to you, blind guides... you blind fools ... you are whitewashed tombs full of dead mens bones... you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity... you serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell." You'd be hard-pressed to find more harsh words than these anywhere in the Bible.

How can Jesus justify this outburst with what he says in our Scripture Lesson? One verse from the first epistle of John will ehlp us interpret the words of Jesus. John writes, "everyone who hates his brother is a murderer." This is essentially what Jesus was saying. The anger that Jesus condemns is the anger of hatred. He is not condemning the anger of love. Jesus expressed a loving anger against the pharisees. He didn't hate them. He loved them and wanted to save them. He was angry with their sinful pride and self-righteousness which blinded their eyes. Jesus was angry with the loving anger of a father or mother when they find their son or daughter playing in the street where they are liable to be killed. Jesus had a loving anger. After he had thoroughly taken the scribes and pharisees over the coals he broke down in tears and cried, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the

prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

So you see, Jesus isn't condemning all expressions of anger. He's not condemning a parent's anger against a rebellious son or daughter. He's not condemning the sudden flaring up of anger when your wife or husband spills coffee in your lap. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Be angry but sin not. Don't let the sun go down on your wrath." And in the words of David H.C. Read, "There is something wrong with a love for our neighbours that never feels anger when they suffer from neglect, oppression, inhumanity or injustice."

Jesus does condemn, however, all hateful anger. He condemns the anger which the book of Leviticus speaks of, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart... you shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Are you holding a grudge against anyone? Are you trying to get back at someone who has embarrassed or humiliated you? Are you happy when you hear that the

worst is true about some neighbor? Do you walk around with a chip on your shoulder daring people to knock it off? Do you refer to your neighbors with terms of contempt? I think of Emily Bronte's novel, *Wuthering Heights*. There is an example, in Heathcliff, ^{of the end result} of the anger Jesus is speaking of. There is a good example of what happens to people who live angry lives filled with hate. That kind of anger eventually leads straight to hell.

At this point I have to say something about Jesus' reference to the hell of fire. We don't like hell fire and brimstone preaching. Some people do but, generally speaking, Presbyterians don't. The idea of hell is offensive to a lot of people. Sometimes we make a joke of it. I've had people say to me, "Well, I guess you think I'm not going to hell." And then laugh about it as though it were not really a possibility. And there are some reasons for this attitude within more sophisticated and well-educated congregations. For one thing it's hard to reconcile belief in a loving heavenly Father with the existence of a place of eternal punishment. Secondly, some of us may be reacting against fundamentalist preaching which used the imagery of hell-fire to scare people into conversion. Thirdly, some of us know that the idea of

was common in the days of Jesus among both Jews and gentiles. The pagans believed that hell was under the earth and that you could enter it sometimes through a cave. And so a lot of more sophisticated people say the idea of hell is part of the mythology of the ancient world which we no longer believe to be true. Fourthly, our view of the purpose of punishment has changed. We think in terms of reforming a criminal rather than torturing. So it's hard for us to imagine God sending someone to a place of eternal punishment where there is no hope of reform or reclamation. These are just a couple reasons people give for not believing in hell. But there have also been devout Christian scholars who have pointed out the shortcomings of all these reasons.

But the point I would like to make is that in all the Bible Jesus is the one who speaks most frequently of the hell of fire. This term is used 12 times in the Bible. Eleven times it's found on the lips of Jesus. Paul speaks of the last judgment and the wrath of God but he does it with rather colorless words. But Jesus preferred to speak of the hell of fire. It almost seems that there was a reticence on the part of the biblical writers to talk about hell in such a horrible way. It almost seems as though they

were saying, "Look, we don't like this anymore than you do, but this is the term which our Lord used when speaking of hell."

The term Jesus uses here is literally translated, "the gehenna of fire." Gehenna means the 'valley of the sons of Hinmon.' This was the name of a valley on the South West of Jerusalem. Before Israel conquered the land of Palestine pagan nations sacrificed their children to pagan gods in this valley. In the time of Jesus it was used as a huge trash disposal where fires were always burning. In Jewish literature "Gehenna" came to be a vivid symbol for the place of punishment for the godless. We have to assume that Jesus used this word the same way as the Jews of his day. In other words we must assume that Jesus believed and taught a doctrine of eternal punishment. If we dismiss this doctrine by saying Jesus was merely influenced by the beliefs of his day then we can just as easily dismiss his belief in God, in heaven, in forgiveness, in the command to love our neighbors, since his Jewish background and the Old Testament certainly influenced all his beliefs. I'm not saying that we have to take what Jesus said literally. We know that Jews often used very vivid pictorial language to get his point across. But even

if we don't take his imagery literally, we should certainly take it seriously. Jesus taught that hatred and contempt and an unforgiving spirit is one thing that leads a person straight to hell. If I confess Jesus as Lord I must also believe the same thing, and it should influence me strongly to check my anger and hatred and quickly seek reconciliation whenever I have a falling out with a neighbor.

Jesus told his disciples, "Before you can truly worship God you must be reconciled with your neighbours." He taught something like that also in the Lord's Prayer where we say, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." If you are unwilling to forgive someone... let me emphasise this... if you are unwilling to forgive someone; if you continue to nurse your anger against your neighbor then be sure God will not forgive you no matter how often we pray for forgiveness. Think of that. The situation is so critical that something must be done immediately. You can't afford to put off reconciliation a moment longer. Using an analogy, Jesus said, if you commit some crime the wise thing for you to do is to settle it quickly and turn yourself in. I once got a speeding ticket going through a little town between Portsmouth, Ohio and Cincinnati, Ohio. I was taken to the

magistrate's office, given a ticket, and solemnly warned that if I didn't pay the fine within ten days they would have me arrested. I paid the fine real quickly.

Should we think that God will let us off any more easily if we persist to treat a neighbor with contempt or refuse to seek reconciliation with someone. If God were to let us off then heaven would be like hell, filled with people who are too stubborn to say, "I'm sorry." Filled with people too proud to find some common ground of agreement with your neighbor. God will not let us get away with that. He is not less, but more just than the civil authorities. He is a holy and righteous God who will in no wise clear the guilty. We therefore should make every effort to make a settlement out of court with our neighbors and be reconciled before we have to face our judge.

In closing let me just say that the most discomfoting passages in the Bible are not found in the Old Testament, nor in the letters of Paul, nor in the book of Revelation, but on the lips of the one we call our Lord. Jesus did not get crucified for saying, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." He didn't get crucified for healing people. He was crucified and rejected by his own people because/the things he claimed for himself and the things he

said which exposed the hatred and sin in their hearts. He was crucified for stepping too harshly on the toes of religious people. He was crucified because he dared to tell his people about a holy God who sees through our pretense and outward show of religiosity. He was rejected and crucified because he made the incredible and seemingly blasphemous claim that he is the Lord of heaven and that he is the only one who can put us right with one another and with God. May we not reject and crucify him again for doing the same thing. May we indeed bow before him as Lord, trust, and obey him, and be reconciled with our neighbors.

AMEN