

THURSDAY 19 May 2022 "Slander or Peace?"

Good morning my "Walking with Jesus" friends,

*I'm sure you've noticed a dramatic change in recent years in the manner in which people **express their disagreement**.* It wasn't that long ago people spoke with basic human decency and even mutual respect as they found ways to express even criticism without slander or malice or what today is called "cancel culture". Perhaps it was in anticipation of the venomous, too often violent, communication culture in which we now live, that Jesus spoke to this issue. In recent days we've been walking slowly through this radical message Jesus gave and Matthew records for us in Matthew 5,6,7.

Jesus said **"Do not judge or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."** (Matt. 7:1,2) In every society of the world there are laws, values, definitions of right and wrong, and protocols for dealing with those who break the law, or who violate the values. Every society develops a system of law enforcement and justice to maintain social order. Jesus was NOT advocating a lawless society, nor that there would be no judges or courts or means of dealing with law breakers or resolving conflict. *But have you noticed in recent years those who disagree with decisions reached by government leaders or those who reject law and order are becoming more and more violent?* "Activists" or "opposition leaders" are now words which often describe those leading riotous movements which often have as their purpose outright civil disorder and even arousing anarchy in society.

What has happened to civility, mutual respect, respect for authority, in schools and in the workplace and neighborhoods and even at sporting events? What has happened to public discourse and political debate with civility and respect? *A profound darkness has wormed its way into the heart of our society, like a cancer eroding relationships and communication among people, beginning at home in the family and infecting every segment of society. Do you agree?*

In Jesus' day there were many who hoped Jesus would become an 'activist', an 'opposition leader' rallying the people to rise up against the Roman Empire authorities. But Jesus made it clear, repeatedly, that His mission was not political, nor was it stirring up division or rebellion, nor was it sedition or even lethargic pacifism. *Jesus' mission was aimed at fundamental life change for all people as people were transformed in relationship with Almighty, Holy God.* Jesus held very strongly to God's values of holiness, truth, righteousness, and espousing a lifestyle of living God honoring lives in every aspect of society, business, health care, education, religion, and social order.

Not once was Jesus part of an uprising, but on several occasions, sensing some of His followers might be building momentum toward that, *Jesus took action.*

John records that after Jesus fed 5000 people with one little boy's lunch that: **"Jesus, knowing the people intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew to a mountain by Himself."** (John 6:16) Remember Jesus scolded Peter and told him to put his knife away when in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested by an angry mob, Peter had cut off a man's ear with one swipe of that dagger! Do you remember Jesus then healed that man's severed ear! (John 18:10,11 & Luke 22:49-51)

I wonder if Matthew scratched his forehead trying to put all this together as he reflected on these words Jesus spoke on the hillside that day, *from the vantage point of several weeks after that Passover/Easter weekend* and all the violence which suddenly had risen in Jerusalem? I'm sure Matthew also remembered what happened the Sunday before that Passover weekend, as Jesus came riding to Jerusalem on a donkey and people spontaneously called out to Jesus: **'Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD.'** (Matt. 21:8,9) Their cry was a call to Jesus to rise up as king and save them from Roman tyranny. But of course, He didn't and in less than a week many were calling for His death.

So, what did Jesus want the people to understand when He said: **"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured unto you."**? We can imagine the scowls on their faces as they looked at those they disliked... like any Roman soldiers who might have been standing among the big crowd watching for any sign of a disturbance? Or maybe tax collectors, like Matthew, who the people hated as traitors? Or maybe Pharisees in their pompous robes and critical scowls? Oh, then as now there were plenty of people to criticize and dislike.

But Jesus continued **"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank of wood in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."** (Matt. 7:3-5) Then as now hypocrisy was a wicked cancer found in every stratum of society from the poor to the palace, from the uneducated to the scholars, from the pagan to the religiously devout. Seems to me Jesus was calling His listeners then, and all who have read Matthew's record since, to several important things *as we try to live honorable lives in wicked societies.*

First, may I call it "Cautious Response".

Hundreds of times each day you and I, and every human being, *react* to what we hear or see. It's instantaneous! Our minds process information and quickly engage our emotions and we *react*! Oh, most times no one knows the reaction going on inside of us. *But the problem occurs when our reaction is expressed in thoughtless words* or anger or clenched fists or throwing things or picking up weapons or... you understand don't you my friends? **There's a big difference between REACTION and thoughtful RESPONSE isn't there? Caution calls for pause and REFLECT before reacting! Caution calls for LISTEN and try to understand before thoughtful response!**

Just think about what you've seen in news reports lately when reactions got out of control. Can you see how caution for pause and reflection before reacting or a thoughtful response could have made a big difference?

Second, I wonder if Matthew remembered a powerful guideline God had given to Moses 1500 years before?

Moses recorded it in Exodus 23:2 **"Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong... do not pervert justice."** *There's something potentially powerful with a crowd isn't there?* A crowd of people can be mobilized to help clean up debris in the wake of a ferocious storm. A crowd can be mobilized to sandbag and build a wall holding back an approaching flood and protecting property and lives. But a crowd can also quickly turn violent and tear apart a neighborhood or a business district. When that happens, the crowd has become a mob bent on destruction! *When you find yourself in a crowd of people what is your influence on that crowd?* Inciting violence or calming emotions before they get out of control or mobilizing lifesaving help?

Third, Jesus was calling for self-analysis before judgment.

It's easy to criticize and even rally others to defamation and slander, isn't it? A few words shouted with anger can quickly inflame a situation. Jesus knew it and experienced it several times in His brief years on the public stage in Israel in the first century. Now with cell phones and real time communication with video and photographs an event which occurs 1/2 way around the world can ignite emotions in seconds and when it goes viral viciousness can spread faster than a wildfire. *But Jesus is saying here that NONE of us is without fault. We all have things in our lives that are not holy, not right in God's sight, not helpful to society.*

Have you ever noticed that when you point at something or someone normally you point with one finger stretched out and three fingers on your hand are curled, pointing back at YOU!? There's an important lesson in that which Jesus is referring to here. *Before you accuse someone else, before you criticize, before you slander or judge or point out fault in another person, first look in the mirror, deeply into your own life and likely you'll see some things that God would like you to deal with.* If we would be courageous enough to do this my friends, can you imagine that most unwise, slanderous, volatile talk would be eliminated as we instead confess and repent, asking God to help us root out of ourselves those ugly things that He sees in us.

Let's pause right here friends and consider what a dramatic change the words of Jesus would bring to every aspect of your society and mine, every city, every business, every school, every hospital, every public gathering. Imagine how social media would change. Imagine how politics would be revolutionized if we applied these words of Jesus? So, what would it take my friends for such a transformation to occur where you live? Of course, this is the change the Holy Spirit of God brings to any person who rejects the slanderous dark kingdom culture and turns to Jesus.

Could it be God desires to bring this revolution where you live? Not a revolution of anarchy or violence or civil disobedience, but a revolution of God honoring living.

Let me leave you pondering one more guideline the Holy Spirit offers us in how to live this radical lifestyle: **"Let not any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth, but only what is helpful for building others up, according to their needs."** (Eph. 4:29)

The powerful song "The Prayer of St Francis of Assisi" fits so well here my friends as we reflect with Jesus on His words to us today.

Today's Scripture is Matthew 7:1-5.