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Matthew 5:22

“Hard Saying” on Anger

“But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to the hell of fire.”

By speaking in the first person (“but I say to you”) Jesus shows that his authority is above that of Moses and the prophets; that is to say, he has divine authority. No mere man could claim such authority.

“Insults”: practically all translations of this passage transcribe the original Aramaic word, *raca* (Greek, *raca*, an obscure term of abuse). It means “foolish, stupid, crazy”. The Jews used it to indicate utter contempt; often, instead of verbal abuse they would show their feelings by spitting on the ground.

“Fool” translates an even stronger term of abuse than *raca* --- implying that a person has lost all moral and religious sense, to the point of apostasy.

In this passage our Lord points to three faults which we commit against charity, moving from internal irritation to showing total contempt. St. Augustine comments that three degrees of faults and punishments are to be noted. The first is the fault of feeling angry; to this corresponds the punishment of “judgment”. The second is that of passing an insulting remark, which merits the punishment of “the council”. The third arises when anger quite blinds us: this is punished by “the hell of fire”.

“The hell of fire”: literally, *Gehenna* of fire”, meaning, in the Jewish language of the time, eternal punishment. This shows the gravity of external sins against charity --- gossip, backbiting, calumny etc. However, we should remember that these sins stem from the heart; our Lord focuses our attention, first, on internal sins --- resentment, hatred, etc. --- to make us realize that that is where the root lies and that is important to nip anger in the bud.

Jesus command is to defuse anger and work toward reconciliation before the rupture in the relationship reaches a murderous stage.

Jesus requires the same treatment for both those inside and outside the covenant community. Concrete ways to love enemies is to pray for persecutors and welcoming outsiders. The reason for loving enemies is because God acts that way. This is a tie in to the weeds and the wheat parable (Matt. 13:24-30). The landowner wants even the “weeds” (all sinners) to grow providing every opportunity for true repentance and return to the Father.

