

36:6;17-23

Surely God is mighty and does not despise any; he is mighty in strength of understanding...But you are obsessed with the case of the wicked; judgment and justice seize you. Beware that wrath does not entice you into scoffing, and do not let the greatness of the ransom turn you aside. Will your cry avail to keep you from distress, or will all the force of your strength? Do not long for the night when peoples are cut off in their place. Beware! Do not turn to iniquity because of that you have been tried by affliction. See, God is exalted in his power; who is a teacher like him? Who has prescribed for him his way, or who can say, "You have done wrong?"

MATTHEW 5:43-48

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect.

THOUGHT CRIMES

Job 36:6;17-23
Matthew 5:43-48

I want you to know that your pastor is a hardened criminal. And for the last several months I have been on an unprecedented crime spree. While my offenses are not found in the criminal code, I have nevertheless been guilty of harboring ugly thoughts against the many idiots out there who have lodged in my craw. I have committed what can only be described as Thought Crimes against multitudes who have earned my scorn through their bad behavior.

Why don't we begin with Amy Cooper, the white woman in Central Park who called 911 screaming she was being threatened by a Black man who was bird watching and had the audacity to ask her to leash her dog as required by law. And all the while he was videoing her with his phone. She lost her job as an investment counselor and has now been arrested for making a false report. What an idiot!

Speaking of idiots. Have you read about people mostly in their twenties who are holding Covid-19 parties where everybody throws twenty bucks in a pot and the first one to test positive wins the money? This behavior led to a tragic ending for a thirty year old woman who subsequently died from the virus. Her last words were, "I think I made a mistake. I thought it was a hoax. It isn't."

And one more just for fun. Did you know the starting left tackle last year for the Cleveland Browns was arrested after the season with 57 pounds of marijuana in his trunk? What an idiot!

And which of us doesn't take great delight when one of those idiots is brought to justice—either poetically or legally? My current favorite is socialite Gheisel Maxwell who recruited young girls for Jeffery Epstein's sexual gratification and who was arrested at her one million dollar mansion in New Hampshire for which she paid cash and was using as a hideout from police. The judge denied her bail as a flight risk and she will have to sit in jail until her trial

date...set for July 21, 2021. I guess she'll find out how the other half lives!

And I have plenty of wrath for those who arrogantly refuse to wear face masks in the public forum strutting around like peacocks, just flashing the bird to the rest of us who care enough about them to put one on.

For the most part, my crimes are mental irritants which have not actually afflicted any harm to anyone else—though perhaps they could have. And soon enough, we usually shrug off whatever bugged us and go about our lives. But at other times, we might make a snide remark or cast an ugly frown in the direction of the perpetrator. And it could go further. Consider the actions of a maskless man who took umbrage with a woman waiting in front of him at the checkout counter when she politely requested him to step back to an appropriate distance. In his rage, he repeatedly coughed over both her and her infant who was in a stroller.

It does make me wonder though. How many times have other people considered me an idiot for something I said or did or for something I believe in? The world is full of them so how could I not be included among them? Unfortunately, I don't think acts of idiocy come with exemptions. Remember, a significant percentage of the country will think we are idiots for the way we cast our ballots in November.

These are hardly crimes against humanity. For the most part, they might be considered as no more than Thought Crimes that are committed privately in our own heads even though we may give verbal expression to them from time to time. And in that sense, they are probably harmful to no one but ourselves. Nevertheless, from a spiritual perspective, they are highly problematic for a number of reasons.

First, Thought Crimes make us angry people, even if just for a moment. They raise our blood pressure and cause the brain to release cortisol and adrenalin which put us into flight or fight mode; tense our muscles and rob us of any peace of mind we could be experiencing. For the most part, we are the only victims of our Thought Crimes. The author of Job speaks to this when he says: *Surely God does not despise any; he is mighty in strength of*

understanding...But you are obsessed with the case of the wicked; judgement and justice seize you. Beware that wrath does not entice you into scoffing, and do not let the greatness of the ransom turn you aside.

In so saying, he also identifies the second problem with Thought Crimes. The anger stems from our judgment of others. Without any knowledge whatsoever of the other person, their motives, their life histories, their present circumstances—the entire context of who they are and where they are coming from, we presume the worst about them. Furthermore, in order to do that, we must automatically exalt ourselves. Isn't there a scripture that says, *How can you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own?* I think there is another one too that says, *Let he who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.* Hmm... there's a little food for thought.

Job then leads us to the third consequence of Thought _Crimes. *Do not long for the night when peoples are cut off in their place. Beware! Do not turn to iniquity; because of which you have been tried by affliction.* For isn't it true that our thoughts precede our actions? Thought Crimes are the source of all hatreds, discriminatory practices, and social and political policies that can easily escalate into crimes against humanity. When we view other people negatively—for whatever reason—we are actively building walls between us.

But are we supposed to be building walls or are we supposed to be building bridges? Which brings us to our scripture in Matthew: *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your _Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

There is a hidden key under the mat to loving our enemies that we need to open the door of our hearts to enhance our ability to do this. Because it isn't easy! I can think of fewer spiritual practices more difficult. In order to pull this off, we must carefully remember not to take their actions or their beliefs or their attitudes or whatever else has ticked us off personally. In

other words, we have to stop self-referencing. Everything is not about us and when it becomes so our lives are being dictated by other people and outside events. If it rains, you get wet. If a bird poops on your windshield, you clean it up. It's not personal.

Our spiritual frame of reference has to be larger than this. It's like the wonderful Native American fable in which the young boy says to his grandfather, "There are two wolves fighting inside of me. One is full of rage, is jealous and fearful. The other is full of peace, of joy and love. Which one is going to win?_" And his grandfather replied, "Whichever one you feed."

As Jesus said, it is easy to love those who love us, but what about all those idiots out there whom we unconsciously assume want to make our lives miserable? Do we really want to give them the power to determine whether we have inner peace? Who are we going to blame for COVID-19? The more Thought Crimes we commit, the less peace we are going to have. Do we want to conquer or be conquered?

Living a Christ based life has never been easy and it never will be. But really, when you stop to think about it, the question is not about easy; the question is about better.

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