

ISSUE

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BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

September 8,
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Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Justin Smiley
Kevin Wise
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



Should Christians Call People “Idiots”?

By Kyle Pope

It is a common scenario. A reckless driver pulls out in front of us nearly causing an accident. Someone in the grocery store blocks the aisle or takes too long to pay. Perhaps a co-worker or a classmate upsets us. It could be a friend or family member in the heat of an argument as angry words are exchanged. Emotions flare, our blood boils, our mouth opens and we say the words “you idiot!”

This is not behavior that is only practiced by unbelievers. Christians say it all the time. I have heard preachers say this from the pulpit. Friends say it playfully to one another. Brethren say it in frustration about one another. I grew up saying it without a thought. After all, I reasoned, “it isn’t a curse word,” and “I am not using the word ‘fool’—that’s what Jesus condemned, right?” That’s probably what many Christians reason within our hearts.

Some years ago, however, something challenged my thinking on this that has forced me ever since then to revise what I had practiced all of my life up until that time. I had the honor of working on a commentary on the gospel of Matthew. A commentary is basically a written verse-by-verse study of a biblical text. A writer is forced to consider, “*what does this text teach?*” and “*how does it fit-in with the rest of Scripture?*” He must then write it down in such a way that a reader can open the pages and basically, at any time have a one-on-one study with the author about any verse of that particular biblical book.

At one point in my work I came to two verses in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus declared:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire (Matt. 5:21-22, NKJV).

These words were not new to me. This was the text I had used to defend my own practice. Right there it was in print. I would never say “you fool,” but calling someone an “idiot” was not the same thing (or so I thought).



Jesus begins in this section of the Sermon on the Mount a series of antitheses, by which He offers counter-propositions that contrast declarations from the Law of Moses (or their misapplication of Mosaic law) with His own teaching under the New Covenant. This would have seemed quite shocking to the Jews of His day. The Jewish teachers of the Law often taught by saying “it is written,” but Jesus says here, “I say to you” (cf. Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 44). This is undoubtedly part of what led them to say that He taught “**as one having authority, and not as the scribes**” (Matt. 7:29).

In this antithesis Jesus lays down a fundamental principle of the New Covenant: accountability before God for the condition of one’s heart. It is not enough to avoid the external act while holding contempt within the heart. The thought of the heart can place one “**in danger of the judgment**” (5:22a). Civil authority cannot judge the heart, but God will at “**the judgment of the great day**” (Jude 6; cf. Matt. 12:42; Luke 10:14; 11:31-32; Acts 24:25; Heb. 9:27). Jesus taught, “**For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man**” (Matt. 15:19-20a).

Within this context Jesus used an example of an insulting word that was considered unacceptable among the Jews in order to illustrate the error of using a similar insult that (in Jesus’s day) appears to have been considered allowable. The Jews thought that insulting a fellow Jew with the Aramaic term “**raca**,” was an offense worthy of answering “**to the council** (*tō sunedriō*).” A. H. McNeile in his commentary on Matthew explains that this was, “Probably not the supreme court at Jerusalem, but the local court of discipline (Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.8.14; cf. Matt. 10:17= Mark 13:9), which met in the synagogue” (62). According to the Babylonian Talmud, a city with a population of at least 120 would have its own Sanhedrin (*Sanhedrin* 17b). Scripture doesn’t tell us what “**raca**” meant, but the 4th-5th century theologian Jerome claimed that it was equivalent to the Greek word *kenos*, meaning “empty,” and he defined it to mean “useless or empty” and “without a brain” (*Commentary on Matthew* 5:22).*

The related Hebrew word *rêq* meant “empty, vain, or worthless” and was used in the Old Testament of “worthless men” (Judg. 11:3; 2 Sam. 6:20; Prov. 12:11; 28:19).

Jesus infers that the Jews of His day did not consider the Greek term “**fool** (*mōros*),” from which we derive our word “moron,” to be as vulgar. Roger Congdon argues that the use of the older Aramaic term was considered by contemporary Jews “as equal to cursing, a terrible sin, while the modern (to them) word of foreign derivation carried no such odium” (119). He compares this to our own tendency in English to consider some words of Anglo-Saxon background indecent, while words of Latin derivation are considered acceptable. We can illustrate his point in this way: have you ever wondered why we speak of eating “beef” but not “cow”? The word “beef” is derived from the Latin word *bovem*, while the term “cow” comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *cū*. At some point in the history of English our ancestors determined that *cū* just wasn’t quite sophisticated enough, so now one is used of food, while the other applies to the animal. Congdon explains further, “in God’s eyes, an evil word in Greek, Latin, or modern English is just as bad as an evil word in Anglo-Saxon” (*ibid.*).

Jesus isn’t teaching that one insult is worse than another. They recognized that “**raca**” was bad. He calls them to see that a sophisticated or tame sounding insult is just as bad—it can send one to hell! Jesus challenges us to recognize that it puts one in the place of God to speak disparagingly of other souls. We are not the judge. Insults are a type of judgment.

Over the years some have rationalized Jesus’s words to apply only to what the term “**fool**” infers about one to whom it is applied in Scripture. Robert Mounce suggests, “The fool in Hebrew thought was not the intellectually incompetent, but the person who was morally deficient. This kind of fool lived as if there were no God to whom he must account for his profligacy (cf. Ps. 14:1)” (45). Psalm 14:1 declared, “**The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’**” This has led some

Christians to argue, “the point is what the term says about one’s relationship to God,” reasoning “I can call someone a fool (or an idiot), so long as I don’t mean it in that way.”

The problem with this reasoning is what we find in the rest of the New Testament record. After Jesus lays down this law, in apostolic example, while the term *mōros* may be applied to one’s estimation of himself (1 Cor. 3:18; 4:10) or to things that are “**foolish**” (1 Cor. 1:27; 2 Tim. 2:23; Titus 3:9), an apostle never calls someone a “**fool** (*mōros*).” We see the milder term *aphron* meaning “without reason” or “unwise” (Eph. 5:17) directed by apostles to others (1 Cor. 15:36; 2 Cor. 11:16; 1 Pet. 2:15), but this word does not carry the sting or the judgment of a person’s worth that *mōros* does. We also find the example of Michael contending with Satan over the body of Moses. This account shows us that even when one may deserve “**a reviling accusation**” (which Satan certainly did) it was not Michael’s place to make such determinations (Jude 9). If an angel was not right to do it, how can it be right for us? Is the term



5:22. I believe Modern Christians should not minimize the force of Jesus's words. It is wrong to call another person a "fool," but it is also wrong to use other more "acceptable" insults as well. Christians should not call other souls "idiots," "stupid," or "morons" (which is the exact Greek word that Jesus condemned). Jesus says that to do so can place us "in danger of hell fire."

"fool (*mōros*)" any different in meaning from saying someone is an "idiot," or saying he or she is "stupid"?

I believe brother Kenney Chumbley sums this up very well, concluding that Jesus "is teaching that insulting language—name calling, racial, ethnic, and social slurs, etc.—that demeans a fellow human being is condemned by God" (98). I no longer call other people "idiots" because I believe to do so is a direct violation of Jesus's teaching in Matthew

Works Cited

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- McNeile, Alan Hugh. *The Gospel According to Matthew*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965.
- Mounce, Robert H. *New International Biblical Commentary: Matthew*. Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press & Hendrickson, 1995.

* George Lamsa in his *Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Texts: Aramaic of the Peshitta* inserts the comment that "*raca*" means "I spit on you," but this may reflect a more modern application of this word within the Syriac (or Assyrian) community, rather than its ancient meaning.



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