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May Christians Ever Call Other People “Fools”?

Eric V. Snow, sermonette, April 2, 2010, Ann Arbor, MI UCG-IA

Does the Bible contradict itself? Does it say in some places we can do something, but then deny we can do it in other places? So then, was Jesus wrong to call the Pharisees “fools” after saying in the Sermon on the Mount that we shouldn’t call people fools? Although some claim this proves that Jesus contradicted Himself, we shall see otherwise.

S.P.S. So today, I’ll show that Jesus didn’t deny His earlier teachings by calling the Pharisees “fools.”

We’ll also look briefly at the Christian living principle that certain behaviors are permissible sometimes, but almost surely

are sinful when done routinely. Now, how does this relate to the meaning of the Days of Unleavened Bread? Well, do we mistakenly misuse a few texts in order to justify our own bad behavior and to keep on sinning?

First, let's turn to the Sermon on the Mount:

Matt. 5:21-22

“Moros” is a more intense insult than “raca.” “Moros” is the root word for “moron” in English. “Moros” insults a man’s character also, not just his mind. It means “dull, sluggish.” It comes from the root “muh,” meaning, “to be silly.” Vine’s comments about the different meanings of these words (p. 246), “Here the word means morally worthless, a scoundrel, a more serious reproach than ‘Raca’; the latter scorns a man’s mind and calls him stupid; *moros* scorns his heart and character; hence the Lord’s more severe condemnation.”

Matthew 23:16-19

Since the same Greek word “moros” is used here also, there’s no “linguistic solution” to this problem. Instead, we need to examine difference in the situations when this word is used. Do we harshly insult other people as stupid, fools, idiots, morons, ignorant, etc., when they merely have a different political or religious view than ours on this or that subject? That is, if they would score at least a 90 on an IQ test and have a college degree, can they really be stupid, idiots, morons, broadly ignorant, etc.? Aren’t we then letting our emotions get the best of us? Aren’t we then using these words inaccurately and not following their proper definitions as applied to the real world?

Or maybe we insult people when they make mistakes? Well, do we ever make mistakes ourselves? Shouldn’t we remember our own errors at times, and then often cut others some slack? Are we impatiently judging them unredeemable, that they can’t

be taught to think, to do, or to work better? Sure, if you're a boss, you eventually have to fire incompetent workers. But in most cases it pays to counsel with them to see if they can improve their performance over time.

Do we target specific individuals who can hear our insults? Do we specifically name insult certain individuals, whether famous people we don't know personally or friends, family, co-workers, and neighbors who aren't famous but we do know personally. Or do we just condemn broad, general categories of people for sinning, such as (say) all adulterers, liars, murderers, etc.? That's much more acceptable than condemning to their face or behind their backs specific individuals. Should you call an atheist a fool to his face?

Ps. 14:1

Should Christians use personal insults frequently or not? This question is closely

related to whether we should ever judge others and whether we should ever be angry. We insult others when we are angry with them and want to morally judge and condemn them. As a generalization, I think 9 times out of 10, our feelings of anger are sinful, although this will vary from person to person. And our moral judgments are often wrong also.

How often did Jesus use invective? Not often, according to the Gospels. Similarly, He was rarely angry. Do those few cases in which he uses insults and is angry justify us in routinely blasting other people for their faults? Of course, He was God. That means He could read people's hearts perfectly, unlike us. Furthermore, His enemies were out to kill Him although He was totally sinless. I don't think we're exactly in the same position to judge and condemn morally as He was.

Often to be morally correct, we need to balance between two extremes. Although

he was a pagan, the Greek philosopher Aristotle perceived this. For example, we don't want to be cowards or foolhardy, but we should be brave. It's also bad to be either stingy or a spendthrift when spending our money. Sometimes we should be angry, we should judge others, and even sometimes we should use invective. But those cases should be rare, not frequent, when the main weight of the Bible's teaching is considered. The reactions of target of the invective should be considered also: Some people are much more sensitive than others, and a light touch can still work wonders in changing their behavior. Why use a verbal sledgehammer when a mere gentle remonstrance will do the trick?

The Bible Commentator Matthew Henry (p. 1632) explains when calling people fools is allowed: "When this is done with mildness and for a good end, to convince others of their vanity and folly, it is not sinful." John Haley, in his book "Alleged Discrepancies of

the Bible,” (p. 277) similarly said: "As in many other cases, the spirit rather than the words is aimed at in the prohibition. That is, we are not prohibited calling men 'fools' considerately and appropriately; we are forbidden to do so in the spirit of malevolent contempt.”

In conclusion: Jesus didn't contradict His own teachings when calling the Pharisees fools. Since He was God and able to read men's hearts perfectly, He had prerogatives that we don't have. Furthermore, just as we should be wary of most anger and the moral condemnation of others, we should almost always avoid personally insulting specific people. So although all atheists are fools, we rarely should call an atheist a fool to his face!

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