

August 23, 2015

THE LAST PENNY

Matthew 5:21-26

Stairway to Heaven, by Led Zeppelin...

There's a lady who's sure all that glitters is gold
And she's buying a stairway to heaven.
When she gets there she knows, if the stores are all closed
With a word she can get what she came for.
And she's buying a stairway to heaven.

There's a sign on the wall, but she wants to be sure
'Cause you know sometimes words have two meanings.
In a tree by a brook, there's a songbird who sings.
Sometimes all of our thoughts are misgiven.
It makes me wonder.

There's a feeling I get when I look to the west
And my spirit is crying for leaving
In my thoughts I have seen rings of smoke through the trees
And the voices of those who stand looking
It makes me wonder.

And it's whispered that soon if we all call the tune
Then the piper will lead us to reason
And a new day will dawn for those who stand long
And the forests will echo with laughter.

If there's a bustle in your hedgerow, don't be alarmed now,
It's just a spring clean for the May queen.
Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run
There's still time to change the road we're on.
And it makes me wonder.

Your head is humming and it won't go, in case you don't know,
The piper's calling you to join him.
Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow, and did you know
Your stairway lies on the whispering wind.

And as we wind on down the road
Our shadows taller than our souls
There walks a lady we all know
Who shines white light and wants to show
How everything still turns to gold.
And if you listen very hard

The tune will come to you at last.
When all are one and one is all
To be a rock and not to roll.
And she's buying a stairway to heaven.

You cannot buy your way to heaven. *"If you are offering your gift... at the altar... and, there, remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there, in front of the altar. First go... and be reconciled to your brother or sister, then come and offer your gift..."* (Matthew 5:23-24) Our priorities should include setting things right with others even before we try to honor God through our generosity. If you can't be right with your brother or sister on earth, you probably are not right with God in heaven! Of course, here is a problem... most of us, if we took this passage literally, would rarely be able to offer any gifts at all. The issue is the priority of being reconciled, and, that our generosity is not what gains us access to heaven!

Anger works in two directions. You can be angry with someone else, and, someone else can be angry with you. *"I tell you, if anyone is angry with his brother or sister, they are just as subject to Judgment as one who murders."* (21-22) Actions begin with thoughts. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches this hard truth. Anger can turn into murder. Anger starts out as an emotion. But when it is nursed and rehearsed over and over, not only does it grow, it builds a darkness between you and the person toward whom you are angry. It generates resentment, creates a wall, and diminishes you and that person into something less than human. It creates hatred. We don't want to relate to that person in any other than a negative way. There develops an animosity, a grudge, a bitterness, rejection ...we become adversarial, there grows an ever deeper darkness. And... *the danger of the fire of hell!*" (v. 22c)

Likewise, it is possible, most of the time, to realize that someone is holding a grudge against you. You may be right in whatever the issue is. You may be misunderstood. It may all stem from some small disagreement. But it has blossomed into something completely negative. You may think: "That's their problem." But... it becomes your problem...when they want to murder you!

"Anger is just an emotion," they say. Is it? When it creates such obvious divides... When it results in bitterness and resentment... When it is allowed to fester... it becomes infectious. That infection causes a fever...and a prolonged fever affects the brain. Thoughts may turn dark, evil deeds can be considered, and violence could result. Oh, they may not want to literally kill you, but, they may definitely want to get rid of you. We may not want to murder someone, but we will take it out on someone, maybe even on ourselves. We can hate ourselves for hating others. Before that, though, we may become cynical. Cynicism often expresses itself through sarcasm. We will be insulting, and, mean-spirited. It may start behind someone's back. But it will, usually, go beyond that.... eventually.

Anger creates a cognitive dissonance: Conflicting thoughts that distract us, disable us. Your boyfriend looked at another girl. Your girlfriend looked at another guy. The government raised your taxes, spent too much on defense, expanded gambling, bailed out the wrong corporation, _____ (fill in the blank). There are a multitude of things about which we can be angry. Channel your anger against hunger, poverty, abuse, distortions of politics, religion, a lack of morality. Imagine someone who

disagrees with a decision made by the government, or, ... by the Administrative Council at Church. They are just a little upset... at first. But... See where I'm going... Imagine someone who disagrees with something the pastor said in a sermon! (Never happens!) They are just a little upset... at first. A dissonance develops... a dis-harmony. On the one hand, you're supposed to love; while on the other hand, there is this growing animosity. What happens? It breaks people. They step back. They leave!

What does Jesus say? Deal with it!

"First go and be reconciled!" (24) *"Settle matters quickly with your adversary..."* (25) We want to get out of these sorts of situations, but most people don't know how to deal with their anger. Anger can be channeled into positive action. If it's a political issue, it doesn't just have to create a rejection of the whole political system, it can generate reform. If it's a moral issue, we don't just shake our heads and consider someone a degenerate, we can gently call them to righteousness. If it's a matter of money... either pay what you owe as best as you're able, or, be as lenient as you can if you are the creditor. Money should never be a cause of anger... It can't buy your way into heaven. So settle matters quickly... *"Or you may be handed over to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison."* (25) If it's a disagreement, talk to the person with whom you disagree. You may simply misunderstand where they're coming from. It is better to try to have some reconciliation, than to reject someone and then *act* as if everything's okay. It's not. Anger, rejection, animosity are just as much a sign of something wrong as the feeling of fear can be. If someone is wrong, our priority is to make things right, not just complain. Now, if that's just not possible... as when the person who was angry with you, or, with whom you were angry is dead; or, when someone is unrelenting in the process of reconciliation and still holds a grudge. Admit it; go on as best as possible, always holding out an olive branch.

Anger is a sort of prison, and we can't get out until we've *"paid the last penny."* We may think we can buy our way into heaven, either with our wealth or our good works. But nothing makes up for the things that are wrong in our lives other than doing what we can to make things right. The stairway to heaven is not built on good works, but on good relationships! Especially a good relationship with Jesus Christ!