

**February 16, 2020 – Choosing Life**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

We are all familiar with the proverbial phrase by the English poet Alexander Pope, “To err is human; to forgive, divine.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The message is to go easy on ourselves and others because all make mistakes. We often quote this line when we encounter intolerance and want to remind people to use understanding and compassion with others, especially if we are involved. Yet, how easy it is for us to forget it when others wrong us or make mistakes we deem inexcusable? Maybe that happens when we judge ourselves superior to or more capable of others. Maybe that also happens when we judge ourselves and become impatient and unforgiving with our own mistakes. Is it because we don’t want to be seen as incapable and imperfect by others? What internal voice are we trying to quiet down when we seek perfection? And how is that criticism eroding our confidence? Is criticism a good motivator to do better? Isn’t it based on the fear of not measuring up, of not being accepted by others and, ultimately, being ostracized? Is our criticism of others becoming a barrier to achieving a healthier relationship with them? Would acceptance and love of self be a more suitable way of reaching perfection? What is this *perfection* we seek anyway? Isn’t perfect and unconditional love the love we show to our imperfections and to the imperfections of other people? Is it *failure* we try to avoid? We know we can learn from errors if we pay attention to them. The only failure we need to worry about is when we are skydiving. Maybe what we need to work on is learning how to love ourselves with compassion and forgiveness. If we cannot use compassion towards self, can we honestly hope to be able to use compassion towards others?

Criticism leads us to anger, and anger to hatred. It all stems from our thinking, from what we think of ourselves and others, from our judgments, and how we feed ourselves negative thoughts. It has to do with how we assess other people’s intentions and actions and how we convince ourselves that they are hurting us. The steps from judgment to aversion, and from aversion to rejection and resentment are very short. It’s then from this place of anger that all sorts of evil are born and spread around like an infectious disease.

Anger is not the issue. It’s what develops out of anger that can create problems. No wonder Jesus speaks against it (Matthew 5:21-37). In a way, Jesus attacks the root cause of the problem: even if you don’t go as far as to murder someone, your anger (derived from your thinking) gets you liable to judgment. Our corrupted thinking is behind our greed and lust and causes our hand, our eyes, and, I would add, our heart to wrong our neighbor. We misplace our wants and desires in the pursuit of happiness. We tend to construct our own reality and to believe what we think. We lament that if the terrible thing we are experiencing had not happened to us or horrible times had not befallen us; if he had not done or said what he has done or said; if she were not around...our life would be much better. If we could have all we wanted and whenever we wanted it, unconcerned with the impact of our actions on other people and on God’s creation, we would be better off and would enjoy life indeed. In fact, that is what European settlers did to the natives by robbing them of their land, or how the modern economy has been built on the kidnapping and forced labor of African people and on the racism that evolved out of it.

On the surface, others seem to be the cause of our suffering. Ultimately, it is our thinking that gets in the way and sets us up for failure. Jesus calls us to deal with our internal “stuff” before our words can cause injury to another person. Plucking out eyes and cutting off hands is hyperbolic language to indicate the gravity of the situation. Desires may look innocent at first, but may turn damaging to ourselves and others later on, just as a rush judgment or a negative thought about someone may develop into a demeaning word or even worse into violent and cruel acts. That’s why Moses encouraged people to choose life over death ([Deut. 30:15-20](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+30%3A15-20&version=NrsV)). It’s not that they would *knowingly* choose death; it’s that they could choose death *thinking* that they were choosing something that was lifegiving and pleasant. These “lesser” gods can become our idols and require our loyalty and devotion. By believing that they are alive and give us life, we incur death, and this is “futility of mind” forcing us to live “alienated from the life of God.” ([Ephesians 4:17-32](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A17-32&version=NrsV))

To be people that choose life involves truth-telling to ourselves first and eventually to others. When I get angry and become defensive, I need to stop and ask myself what it is that is triggering the anger. Moving beyond scapegoating and finger-pointing, what’s the thought that is generating my anger? What is it that I am not willing to see? Do I want to be right at any cost or am I willing to swallow my pride and acknowledge to have made a mistake? After all, that is how we learn and grow. A life of integrity compels us to be honest with ourselves: “Let your word be, ‘Yes, yes’ or ‘No, no;’ anything more than this comes from the evil one.” ([Mt. 5:37](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3A37&version=NrsV)) That is why the author of the letter to the Ephesians instructs us not to “let evil talk come out of [our] mouth” but use only words that are constructive and edifying. ([Eph. 4:29](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A29&version=NrsV)) Our life, to be *true* life, ought not to be in contradiction with God’s purposes and therefore alienate the Spirit of God. ([Eph. 4:30](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A30&version=NrsV)) That’s how we choose life.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, source of every good gift, guide us to choose lives of integrity ad truth. Let grace and wholeness be evidence of the seal of the Holy Spirit which marks us for the day of redemption. We pray in the holy name of Jesus. Amen.

1. An expansion on the ancient Latin proverb “*Errare humanum est.*” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)