

“Mockery”

Proverbs 19:23-20:1

May 31, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

The book of Proverbs talks about sins that are only rarely mentioned in today’s world, and we are taking some time this summer to look at these. We’re looking today at a sin that is mentioned 14 times in the book of Proverbs, translated by different English words. It is variously translated as mockery, scoffing or scorning, or some form of these three words. It basically means to make fun of or to despise something or someone.

It is striking to see how much more seriously this sin is treated in Proverbs than in our own culture. It is said about God, **“Toward the scorers he is scornful”** (3:34). God will despise those who despise him. And listen to this description of the scoffer. **“Scoffer is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride”** (21:24). One commentator summarized as follows the outlook of Proverbs on this sin. “No man earns more universal detestation or deserves it more than he who wears a perpetual sneer, who is himself incapable of deep loyalty and reverence and who supposes that it is his mission in life to promote the corrosion of the values by which individuals and society lives.”

The sin of mockery may be a very serious one in the book of Proverbs, but it is not so seriously regarded in our society, where making fun of sacred things is commonplace. Consider, for example, the mocking ways we refer to the institution of marriage. A husband speaks of his wife as “the old ball and chain.” Or the cameraman at the wedding wants to take a shot of the groomsmen holding back the groom as he is trying to escape. There is also the first cousin to the sin of mockery, cynicism. The cynic doesn’t believe that there can be anything that is good and pure. As H. L. Mencken said it, “A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin.” In other words, he scoffs at all things. I want us to consider three points as we look today at this sin.

I. The Nature of this Sin

There are three verses in Proverbs that give us some insight into the nature of this sin. The first one is 20:1. **“Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”** Wine and beer are personified here as mockers. This verse is speaking of drunkenness, which causes a person to lose his normal and healthy inhibitions. It is good to be sufficiently inhibited so as not to say certain inappropriate things. It is good not to dance

on tabletops with a lampshade on your head. Such behaviors cross boundaries that should not be crossed. The mocking person is like the drunkard who lacks appropriate boundaries of sanctity and propriety. The scoffer or mocker looks down on all that is sacred. He approaches holy things that should be held in honor and respect, but treats them with contempt instead.

Proverbs 21:24 indicates that the central cause of this sin is pride. **“Scoffer is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride.”** The proud person essentially wants to do away with the true God and become as God himself. One result of this pride is a loss of meaning. The world will not make sense without God. So we read in Proverbs 14:6, **“A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain, but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding.”** It helps me to think of it like this. When a person loses the knowledge of God, life will no longer make sense. People respond to a loss of meaning in the world in two different ways. Some become superstitious, by which they impose meaning by making arbitrary associations between things. So the baseball pitcher thinks that if he steps on the chalkline while crossing from foul ball territory to the infield, he will bring bad luck to himself. Or the person noting how well things are going feels that he must knock on wood so as not to jinx the future. There is really no connection between knocking on wood and keeping away favorable future events, so superstition makes arbitrary associations. But that’s not what the mocker does. He too has lost a sense of meaning because he doesn’t know God, but he responds differently than the superstitious person. He responds by denying the possibility of any deeper meaning, because he believes that it is impossible to know anything outside this world.

The scoffer believes that if he can’t see it, it’s not real. I remember when I first starting having difficulty seeing small print while reading. I noticed it first while reading in bed just prior to going to sleep. Initially, I misidentified the cause of my difficulty. I honestly thought that the problem was with the lighting, not my eyesight. The scoffer has the same problem, thinking that his difficulties with life can’t come from himself but must lie outside of him. “If I don’t know it, it can’t be known,” he assumes. In other words, he lacks humility. Proverbs 3:34 is the first verse in the book on this sin, and it identifies the scoffer’s problem as this lack of humility. **“Toward the scorners he is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor.”**

The first cousin to the sin of mockery is the cynicism that is so common in our own culture. I had the opportunity recently to talk with a young man in his late twenties about the topic of certainty. This young man is not part of our church, but he does claim to be a follower of Christ. He was strongly opposed to my deeply-held convictions about such basic Christian doctrines as the resurrection of Jesus and the hope that is ours even in the midst of terrible suffering. This young man was in the grips of the sin of cynicism. It reminds me of Adam’s response after his first sin. When God came to him after his disobedient act of eating the forbidden fruit, Adam blamed God. **“The woman**

whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). His assumption is that this can't be his fault, so the fault must lie elsewhere, and as he traces it up the chain, he ends with God. Cynicism does the same thing because it refuses to consider the possibility that the problem might lie within the heart of the cynic, rather than with God or someone else.

II. The Destructiveness of this Sin

The sin of mockery is corrosive and destructive. First, it hardens the heart of the one guilty of it so that he becomes unresponsive to correction. **“Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury. Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you”** (9:7-8). It does further damage to the scoffer in cutting him off from the grace that could be his. **“Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance”** (14:9). He mocks the idea that a sacrificial offering can accomplish anything of value, but it doesn't change the fact that it does. So he misses out on the acceptance that could be his. The cynical may challenge the idea of certainty and live in their world of dark doubts, but it doesn't change the fact that there is a certainty of hope available to all who believe.

Mockery doesn't just hurt the mocker, but also has a very harmful effect upon society itself. So we read in Proverbs 22:10, **“Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out, and quarreling and abuse will cease.”** Or consider the strong statement of 24:9—**“The scoffer is an abomination to mankind.”** Verses 26-28 of our text describe the harm done by the scoffer. First, he does harm to the most basic unit of society, the family. He does **“violence to his father and chases away his mother.”** We're not told the precise nature of the violence he does to his father, but it is undoubtedly connected to his desire to be right. Remember that his central problem is his pride, by which he must be right. Perhaps the father attempted to correct him and found out the hard way the truth of Proverbs 9:7 – **“Whoever corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse, and he who reproves a wicked man incurs injury.”** The harm the mocker brought to his father was serious enough that his mother was left in a state that was one of the worst in this culture—a defenseless widow.

The scoffer also mocks at justice and makes himself a worthless witness (v. 28). In the days of the Bible, before there was scientific evidence like fingerprinting and DNA evidence, the witness was about the only evidence available. As indicated by the oath still made by witnesses in our courts today, a good witness declares the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. In doing so, he strengthens the whole community by upholding justice. But the mocker doesn't regard truth as sacred, with the result that when he is in possession of firsthand knowledge of an event that could be used to promote justice, his casual view of truth makes him a worthless witness. Such a person hurts everyone by hurting justice.

I believe cynicism is bringing great harm to the church today. It leads to a loss of hope and a loss of the lasting joy that makes us willing to endure suffering for the sake of the kingdom. The cynic questions everything because he has lost the certainty of ultimate meaning. God calls us to turn from our cynicism and scoffing. I can hear someone objecting by asking, “Are you saying that we are to accept mindlessly everything without asking questions?” On the contrary, I think honesty about the questions in our hearts is a help in getting rid of cynicism. I find that cynics are the ones who are close-minded, unwilling to consider things they can’t immediately understand. We are to fight cynicism by humbly asking questions, but this gets us into our next point.

III. The Remedy for this Sin

At first glance through the verses in Proverbs that speak of the sin of mockery, there would seem not to be a remedy for it. Note verse 25—“**Strike a scoffer, and the simple will learn prudence.**” In other words, the scoffer won’t learn anything, but those who observe the hardships brought upon him will profit from the lesson. The same point is made in 21:1—“**When a scoffer is punished, the simple becomes wise.**” But the scoffer himself doesn’t learn. He does not like to be reproved (15:12) and even becomes abusive to any who attempt to do so (9:7).

Is there any hope for the mocker? The structure of this passage indicates that there is some hope for him. There are verbal cues throughout Proverbs that indicate that these are more than individual proverbial sayings strung together in a random fashion. The indications in this passage connect verses 16-23 as one section, with verse 23 serving as a conclusion. Then the next section is verse 23-20:1, with verse 23 serving as an introduction. In other words, verse 23 serves as a bridge connecting these two sections together. So it is a significant verse, and one that holds out hope for the proud mocker. “**The fear of the Lord leads to life, and whoever has it rests satisfied; he will not be visited by harm.**” The mocker needs to wake up to the fear of the Lord in his life. It is the beginning of wisdom for him, and this is the point he has missed that has led to his scornful outlook.

The fear of the Lord remedies the mocker in two ways. First, it humbles him with the severity of God’s judgment. We said back in the first sermon in this series that we fear the Lord when he becomes a weighty presence in our lives. The mocker has not held as sacred such things as truth, family and even the judgment of God. But when God becomes a weighty presence, all that changes.

Secondly, when God becomes a weighty presence in our lives as we come to fear him, even the small things in life take on meaning. We’ve already seen how the scoffer and the cynic have lost a sense of ultimate meaning. For them, the

everyday activities of life are pointless. But notice how a verse like the seventeenth gives meaning. **“Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.”** Giving to the poor could be seen as a pointless, useless endeavor. Poverty will not go away because I give some of my money to relieve the difficulty of another person with insufficient money. But God gives meaning to our efforts to help the poor, telling the one who gives to the poor that he is lending to the Lord. There is meaning to the small things in life even if we can’t see how they are going to make much difference, simply because God gives the meaning. I like that phrase in the hymn we will sing at the close of this service. We are to be those who are “content to fill a little space, if Thou be glorified.” So if you were able to sign up for our Project Read More this summer, when you sit down with a nine-year old child and simply read with him for a few hours, it may not seem like it’s making a very big difference in this sin-scarred world. The scoffer would say that it doesn’t. But God says that it does.

This brings us to our memory verse for the week. It is a verse that tells us to trust in the Lord at all times. The scoffer and cynic need to meditate on that phrase *at all times*. Even when life is filled with a series of activities that seem small and inconsequential, we are to trust the Lord and give these activities to him. So when the mother is making dinner for her family yet one more time, or the bills have to be paid again, or an ailing parent has to be taken to the doctor for the third time in a week, we are to trust the Lord. As we do so, we will avoid the unbelief of the cynic and the scoffer.

CONCLUSION:

The communion service this morning reinforces the remedy available to the scoffer in the gospel. The scoffer needs to come face to face with the grace of God. There is a wonderful picture of that grace in a story about the crippled son of Jonathan, David’s friend. After David became king, he sought someone from the house of Saul to whom he could show kindness. He bestowed upon Mephibosheth the kindness of returning Saul’s land and allowing him to eat at David’s table for the rest of his life. It is a picture of grace, and Mephibosheth responded by saying, **“What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I”** (2 Sam. 9:8)? We are those who come now to eat at the king’s table and to partake of his abundant grace. Like Mephibosheth, we are unworthy servants, but we get to eat anyway. Someone has defined the grace of God as his unmerited favor. I don’t like that definition, because it misses a very important point. The grace we receive from God is merited, it’s just merited by Jesus and his work on our behalf rather than by us. Mockery is ended as we partake of this grace. All mockers are invited to repent and come in faith to the table and receive of this grace.