

# EXEGETICAL BRIEF—TWO BAD WORDS: 'Ρακά AND Μωρέ IN MATTHEW 5:22

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<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’

<sup>22</sup>But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell (Matthew 5:21-22 (NIV)).

<sup>21</sup>Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις· ὅς δ' ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει. <sup>22</sup>ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ, ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνεδρίῳ· ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ, Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.

**T**he big point is clear. It is human nature to overlook one's own sin. It is attractive to redefine God's law so that one's own bad behavior feels more acceptable. In both cases, one is deceiving himself. God does hate the obvious sin, murder. But God also hates anger. God hates every outbreak of anger, both in thought and word. Becoming comfortable with godless anger makes one subject to the fire of hell.

The big point is clear.

A fair amount of attention has been paid, however, to the internal logic leading to that conclusion. Specifically, what role do the two bad words, Raca and Fool, play in the lesson Jesus is teaching? Is Raca a worse bad word than Fool, so that Jesus is ultimately emphasizing that even the smallest outbreak of anger—calling someone a Fool—is worthy of the fires of hell? Or is Fool a much worse bad word than Raca, so that the logic of the verse proceeds in an ascending fashion—a small insult should land you before the Sanhedrin, but a really big insult will bring you hell? Or is the relationship between the two bad words of some different sort?

While some have challenged the conventional wisdom, it is generally agreed that the Greek word Raca is a transliteration of the Aramaic רַקָּא or רַקָּי. The term as an epithet is not found in the Old Testament. Its close cousin רַקָּ / רַק, however, is employed on a number of occasions. The term, meaning “empty,” appears in 2 Kings 4:3, when Elisha asks a prophet's widow to collect jars which are *empty* so that they might be miraculously filled with oil, which can be sold to pay off creditors. The word is also used to refer to people. In 2 Chronicles 13:7,

the men who rebelled with Jeroboam against the son of Solomon are called “empty ones”—worthless scoundrels.

While רָקָה or רָקָה as an epithet is not found in the Old Testament, it is found numerous times in rabbinic literature. Dr. Marcus Jastrow, in his *A Dictionary of the Targumim, The Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, offers these definitions: “an expression of contempt, good for nothing! (. . .); worthless.”

But just how bad an insult is Raca? An account is found in the Babylonian Talmud of Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar riding on his donkey alongside a river, feeling proud of himself because he knew much of the Torah. He meets a very ugly man. The man wishes him well, but the rabbi does not reply. Then the rabbi says to the man, “Empty head! What a beast you are! Is it possible that everyone in your town is as ugly as you are?” (*b. Ta’anit* 3:1, IV.3.D). The insulted man told the rabbi to “go to the craftsman who made me and tell him, ‘How ugly is that utensil that you have made!’” The rabbi was appropriately humbled, ultimately forgiven by the man, and convinced not to do the same thing again.

The rabbi had called the man Raca, or empty head. It turns out that the rabbi’s words were hurtful enough to lead the ugly man initially to refuse forgiveness to the rabbi. It was only upon later persuasion by the townspeople that the insulted man softened. It may be difficult to say whether the term Raca all by itself would have crossed an uncross-able line. The insult as a whole was viewed a low blow. Whether perceived as a more moderate or as a harsher term, in the end precise identification is almost irrelevant. The term clearly served well to express dismissive distaste.

Chrysostom does take on the issue of the severity of the term Raca. In a homily on Matthew 5, he says, “But this word, ‘Raca,’ is not an expression of a great insolence, but rather of some contempt and slight on the part of the speaker. For as we, giving orders either to our servants, or to any very inferior person, say, ‘Away with thee; you here, tell such an (sic) one:’ [Footnote in Schaff edition: *The original repeats the emphatic and contemptuous* *σὺ*.—*R.*] so they who make use of the Syrians’ language say, ‘Raca,’ putting that word instead of ‘thou.’<sup>1</sup> While Chrysostom was separated by some time from Aramaic usage in the day of Jesus, he felt confident equating Raca with a contemptuous “you.” In no way was Chrysostom trying to minimize the hurt that could be intended with such a contemptuous “you.” But he does pres-

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<sup>1</sup>In P. Schaff (ed.); G. Prevost & M. B. Riddle (trans.), *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1888), vol. 10, p. 110.

ent Raca as somewhat less volatile than other options that may have been available.

How does the word Fool compare? Some view the term as a clear escalation. Having noted that Raca means something like “empty-headed,” Craig Blomberg, in the *New American Commentary* on Matthew, states, “This word (*mōros*) carries overtones of immorality and godlessness as well as idiocy.” John Lightfoot, in his *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica*, suggests, “But what was there more grievous in the word *fool*, than in the word *Raca*? Let king Solomon be the interpreter, who everywhere by a *fool* understands a *wicked and reprobate* person; foolishness being opposed to spiritual wisdom. *Raca* denotes indeed morosity, and lightness of manners and life: but fool judgeth bitterly of the spiritual and eternal state, and decreeth a man to certain destruction” (italics original).<sup>2</sup>

Lightfoot makes much of Solomon’s use of the term Fool in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Solomon’s usage is not insignificant. At the same time, it must be noted that the particular term *μωρός*, while used eight times in the Septuagint, is never the translation for the various Hebrew words for Fool as used by Solomon. Rather, the Greek term *ἄφρων* (“lack of good judgment, foolish”) is repeatedly employed. That said, when *μωρός* is used elsewhere in the LXX, it serves as the translation equivalent for many of the same Hebrew words that Solomon employs. This permits us, then, to view Solomon’s usage as significant.

Would one go so far as to say, though, that the term *μωρός* inevitably ought to be viewed in Matthew 5 as the equivalent of a wicked and reprobate person? This conclusion entails risk. The Septuagint reading of Job 16:7 has *νῦν δὲ κατάκοπόν με πεποίηκεν, μωρόν, σεσηπότα*—“and now [God] has made me very weary, *μωρός*, and rotted.” While not tracking precisely with the Masoretic Text, this Septuagint rendering would be difficult if one translated *μωρός* as “wicked and reprobate.” Here, in a context of physical deficiencies, a translation of “sluggish” or “dull” works well. In fact, this sense of bodily sluggishness appears to be the starting point for the Greek understanding of *μωρός*, which then broadens to a more abstract application of that concept to one’s mental state—a person is dull, stupid, a fool.

What connotation for *μωρός* did Jesus have in mind when speaking about anger? Was he asking his listeners to understand that the angry person had just called another human being “wicked and reprobate,” or had the angry person simply called someone “dull” or “stupid”?

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<sup>2</sup>J. Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica, Matthew–1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), vol. 2, p. 112.

Chrysostom, in the earlier mentioned Homily XVI on Matthew, seems to suggest that whatever *μωρός* means, it is a more serious insult than *Raca*: he calls it “more grievous.” He contextualizes this “more grievous” characterization by noting the greater punishment that Jesus connects to it—eternal hellfire rather than simply standing before the Sanhedrin.

Chrysostom’s analysis may not settle the question of just how serious an insult *μωρός* is. He simply presents a view on its relative positioning vis-à-vis *Raca*—it is more serious than that term. What is evident, however, is that Chrysostom presented his analysis of the terms in close connection with the punishments that Jesus speaks of. Fool is presented as more serious than *Raca* just as hellfire judgment is more serious than Sanhedrin judgment.

One might suggest that Chrysostom’s analysis of the terms had more to do with his interpretation of how they related to the punishments rather than springing from a fundamental familiarity with word usage in Jesus’ day. Even presuming that Chrysostom’s analysis of the vocables is correct, must one conclude that the predominant intended impact of Jesus’ words is to distinguish between lesser and greater word crimes by noting lesser and greater punishments? Is Jesus saying that while all punishments for angry words are more than people might expect, there is an additional lesson to be learned from the gradation of bad words, and the consequent gradation of punishment?<sup>3</sup>

Civil law certainly functions in that way. Increased consequences connect with increased crimes. In this regard, one interpretative position suggests that there is not simply an ascending crime-and-consequence progression of two steps—from *Raca* to Fool—but a progression of three steps. First, there is inner anger of the heart (verse 22a) which results in some kind of a local judgment (seeming to minimize the impact of *κρίσει*); should that anger show itself with a bad word, *Raca*, Jesus is saying that such a person should appear before the Sanhedrin, a more broad-based judging body; should the anger progress to an even more serious word, then one stands subject to hellfire.<sup>4</sup>

The Greek structure of verses 21 and 22 seems to recommend against the three-step progression view. The introductory statement

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<sup>3</sup>As noted in the opening paragraphs, this gradation can proceed in one of two fashions. Either the reader views the two bad words as increasing in intensity, and as a consequence moving in concert with the gradation and punishments; or the reader views *Raca* as the worse word, with the greater punishment of the second pair serving to emphasize that even the smallest outburst of anger is deserving of hellfire.

<sup>4</sup>For further analysis of this view, see W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, New Testament Commentary vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973), pp. 297f.

ὅς δ' ἂν φονεύσῃ, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει presents a generally accepted truth. If you murder, there are universally recognized consequences. Murder is clearly a sin. The claimed “first step” in the subsequent progression, πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει, seems to stand as a clear counterpart to the previously referenced portion of verse 21. (Notice the precise match in wording at the end of each of those clauses, including the term τῇ κρίσει.) If verse 22a does serve as a balanced counterpart to 21b, then one can presume that it conveys a similar general truth. Hearers, all agree that murder incurs judgment. Hearers, being angry with your brother incurs the same universally recognized judgment. The two statements about Raca and Fool that follow, then, would be viewed not primarily as building upon the concept of anger and judgment (i.e., giving more intense examples of anger, and providing more intense examples of judgment). Rather, the two statements that follow would be viewed as a rhetorical driving home of the universal truth that Jesus had just stated. Let me show you just how far I’m willing to push this, Jesus is saying. Let me show you to what degree I’m exposing anger as a sin. Let me show you how seriously you ought to take even those seemingly inconsequential expressions of distaste. If you say a bad word, Raca, in God’s eyes you have done something that is worthy of facing judgment. You ought to stand before the Sanhedrin for that.<sup>5</sup> His hearers are stunned. Jesus continues. Yes, if you say a bad word, Fool, in God’s eyes you have done something that is worthy of facing judgment. You ought to suffer eternal hellfire for that. His audience is more stunned.

But not because Jesus’ initial mention of anger deserving judgment (τῇ κρίσει) didn’t already say it all. It did. But in order to make sure that they understood exactly what he was saying, the subsequent two phrases help bring clarity to the general, all-encompassing statement.

So while there surely is some distinction between Raca and Fool—they are different words—and while there surely is a distinction between standing before the Sanhedrin and experiencing hell, the distinctions seem to recede in the face of the larger flow. The point is not to draw attention to the distinctions, but rather to drive home the initial claim that anger deserves judgment.

Said another way, Jesus’ purpose in adding those two statements wasn’t primarily to emphasize increased punishments for progressively greater sins. That could be seen as militating against the larger point of this section of Matthew 5, where he is making the case that one ought not view sins as greater or lesser; one should view all as

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<sup>5</sup>Note that the presumption being made here is not that there was already a rule in place stating that one saying “Raca” had to appear before the Sanhedrin. Rather, this statement would serve as a demonstration of how seriously such words *ought to be* viewed.

worthy of God's damnation. Yes, a focus on gradation at this point might unduly emphasize distinction at the expense of recognizing that Jesus is simply trying to nail home a single point: anger in all of its manifestations is sin, and sin brings judgment.

But what if we are still curious? Is Raca worse than Fool, or is Fool worse than Raca? If one were to engage in a similar discussion about various English terms of mockery, there may be some words where we could easily say, "That is definitely a worse word than the other." But there might be other pairs we might compare which would leave us uncertain. It might depend on the context, we would say.

Could something similar be said here?

Even if one might feel a degree of confidence in suggesting that one of the terms is a bit more pejorative than the other, such an analysis need not be the critical feature in understanding this section. Jesus doesn't seem to be leading his hearers down a path where the focus would need to fall on such a distinction in the words—which word should bring Sanhedrin judgment and which word should bring eternal judgment. Jesus is saying, "Don't use any of those words. In fact, go deeper than that. Do not have in your heart even a trace of anger against your brother."

Yes, it is not a matter first of the words. It is a matter of that feeling that arises so unexpectedly inside, a feeling of anger toward a fellow human being. They have done something, or failed to do something, and it makes us angry. Jesus wanted his original hearers, and he wants you and me, to understand how dangerous that is. Sin can crouch at our door too. Hate that sin. Assault it with every weapon of divine law, including these precious words from Matthew 5.

Then rejoice that the heart of love which motivated Jesus' striking words in Matthew 5 was a heart that never even came close to the anger we so easily struggle with. Clothed in his righteousness through our baptisms, we possess a transplanted heart, one that not only has never prompted an inappropriate word, but it has never experienced an inappropriate thought.

We are eternally grateful.

In such gratitude, we treasure Jesus' reminder of just what true obedience is. The New Person wishes us never to use any angry word, but the New Person desires so much more—it wishes us never to grow angry. May the Lord work in us both to will and to act in line with his good pleasure.

And may he continue to shower us with his forgiving love.