

The Power of Contempt

Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. -Psalm 123:3

Read: Psalm 123

Reflect: Researcher John Gottman can, in analyzing one hour of a couple talking about seemingly trivial matters, predict with 95% accuracy whether the or not the marriage will end in divorce. In observing for just 15 minutes, though, his accuracy rate plummets to ninety percent (in *Blink: The Power of Thinking without thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell).

In years of study, Gottman has learned to pay attention to a rapid cognition style of decision-making. Marriages have distinctive signatures, he notes, which he collects from detailed emotional information given mostly in body language and tone of voice. How has Gottman gotten so good at this "thin-slicing"? He focuses on "the four horsemen" of communication: defensiveness, stonewalling, criticism, and contempt. Contempt, he insists, is the single most important sign that a marriage is in trouble. Contempt is qualitatively different from criticism. It's an insult, an attempt to put a person on lower level. Having someone you love show contempt for you is so stressful it affects the immune system, and spouses who endure it from their loved ones suffer significantly more physical illness.

Rolling your eyes quickly is a classic sign of contempt. A patronizing, lecturing voice, in combination with another's defensiveness, are others. When one partner asks for credit, the other cannot give it.

No wonder the psalmist begs for mercy. Unwarranted accusation, contempt, and ridicule from an enemy are disheartening enough. Contempt has absolutely no place in a healthy marriage - or a healthy faith community.

Respond: Kyrie eleison. Mercy, Lord. Kyrie eleison. Amen.