

Reality Check

Matthew 5:21-37

The ability of humanity and of humans in general to self deceive is really quite amazing. When I look at family photos I am alarmed at the presence of an extremely bald man, especially when viewed from behind. You see I don't tend to think of myself as bald, thinning yes, but not bald.

The same can be said of body size, I think that I am doing quite well in the weight department but getting dressed can give a reality check, it really is amazing how clothes can shrink in the wardrobe. Such moments give us cause to pause.

We all have seen people who have an "I'm alright Jack" attitude when they are anything but. They need a reality check. But perhaps we all do. We can all have an "I'm alright God" attitude. Yet our passage today will not let us deceive ourselves it is the theological equivalent of a photograph from behind, of having to put on the old outfit. It forces us to have a reality check.

SEEING THE PATTERN

Before we look too closely in the mirror however we need to look at some of the patterns in the passage. If we rush to apply the strong teaching that is here we may miss some very important things.

Our reading today is the first 4 of 6 teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount all of which follow the same rough pattern.

You have heard it said

Jesus has just said to his followers that their righteousness needs to be greater than the Scribes and the Pharisees, so he starts with what they taught.

Their righteousness was based on avoiding doing wrong, a sort of tax accountant approach, with all due respect and apologies to that esteemed profession. As long as you didn't actually break the law you could get away with all manner of things and still be righteous, be in the right standing before God.

Jesus does not dismiss the law on which the Pharisees depended but deepens it meaning, looking beyond the commandment to the character it was intended to produce.

But I say

The way Jesus does this is however extraordinary, but we can so easily miss it as we read the simple statement "but I say". The level of authority claimed here is extraordinary. The Pharisees would argue over their interpretation of different teachers, Jesus simply says "I say". The prophets of Israel would say "thus says the Lord", Jesus simply says "I say".

Jesus is the simply by the way he speaks claiming to be more than a rabbi, more than a prophet. As he deepens our understanding and interpretation of the law he is speaking directly with God's authority.

As we listen to these commands of Jesus then we may need to do a reality check on who Jesus thinks he is, he certainly seems to know

To You

Now what Jesus says are not just general ethical ideas they are said directly to his followers. "I say to you". Jesus is expanding on what it is to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." If his followers are to fulfil this function then they need to heed his word and live out what he says.

But again, as with salt and light, these commands are ultimately for the benefit of other people. Whilst they may be good instructions for us they protect those around us from our anger, lust, unfaithfulness and lies. These are statements are given to Jesus followers for the sake of others so that we can be salt and light.

Warning

To reinforce the seriousness of this teaching there is often a warning attached, and these warnings could not be more serious as it is about facing the judgement of God.

Do something

There is also usually a concrete example of what should now be done, what one commentator has called "Little steps of obedience" (Bruner) Often these are ignored as we recoil from the force of the teaching which Jesus has given but they are there as practical and creative ways to start following the path to which Jesus is pointing.

Mirror and Portrait

Doing this overview may help us then deal with what we are supposed to do with these exacting teachings of Jesus. Sometimes the Sermon on the Mount is seen as simply an example of good ethical teaching, even if not all may now agree that the ethics are good. They can be seen then as a guide that we may choose to follow if we are so inclined.

But Jesus teaching is specifically to his followers and the warnings remind us they are not optional. Remember that this is all in the context of the living as the people of God's kingdom and being salt and light, this is teaching for us and we cannot dismiss this as idealist pious ideals.

Christians have often taken a different tack and seen that the aim of this teaching is simply to induce guilt within us so that we realise that we are dreadful sinners after all and throw ourselves on the mercy of God. Now that is always a good thing, but if that was all that Jesus wanted us to do why are there the little steps of obedience, and why does this teaching come after his announcement of blessing on those who humbly listen to his teaching.

What then is Jesus doing? I believe that he is holding up both a mirror and a portrait

Mirror

I remember once when shopping with my family a series of mirrors which made you look tall or short, fat or skinny, and my younger boys loved them and the distortions they made. The problem is that the distortions are usually in the way that we see ourselves. Unless we look carefully we will see the reflection we want to see.

With this teaching Jesus is saying to take a really good long hard look in the mirror, and ask do we like what we see and does God? Jesus blows away our pretensions to holiness, to righteousness. It is very easy to be a Pharisee. I haven't broken the rules. Jesus says that may be true but what are you really like? Take a look in the mirror.

We may not like what we see, we may not like being pushed to see it but we cannot deal with what we will not see. The greatest hinderance to following in Jesus path and letting him truly teach us how to live is to think we are doing alright by ourselves. By looking carefully to this teaching we cannot but be humbled, but remember that this is the path of blessing and is the way of the Kingdom.

Portrait

For as we read we can also see that Jesus is building up a picture of what humanity could and should be. A picture where relationships are primary, anger is dealt with, people and truth are valued and promises kept and as we shall see next week love rules.

This is what life in the Kingdom of God will be like, it is particularly attractive, and it is no less than a portrait of Jesus who dealt with anger, treated people with dignity, kept his promises, told the truth and loved his enemies.

It is no surprise then that the person of Jesus in the gospels is attractive drawing people to himself, both then and for centuries afterward.

We should never understand these commands of Jesus to push us to be some kind of religious freak, a weird religious loner, it is a call to true humanity, to really live, and to live now as we will live in the kingdom come. Because of this it will appeal at a deep level to those who will look.

So Jesus holds out an attractive portrait of what humanity should be, how we should be, and in him. will be. He calls us to follow him, and he promises to be with us as we are salt and light in the world

PUTTING THIS INTO PRACTICE

With all this in mind looking both for the portrait of Kingdom living and at our own reflection let us examine some of the specifics of what Jesus commands and we will do so in the reverse order to that in which they are given.

Truth telling

Jesus speaks about the habit of making oaths. In those days there was much debate about what were binding oaths and what weren't. So for instance swearing by Jerusalem wasn't binding, but swearing toward Jerusalem was. Jesus cuts through all this and calls us to let our "yes" be "yes" and "no" be "no."

Kingdom people are to be simple people of the truth, to be transparent and trustworthy.

This leaves no place for white lies, self protecting omissions, self aggrandising exaggerations, and broken promises. Have people been hurt when your "yes" has in fact been "no"? Are there people that you need tell the truth to?

Divorce

It is for obvious reasons it is pastorally difficult to preach on Jesus teaching on divorce and it should also be consider with other biblical data. If this raises issues I will be available after the service or during the week.

Jesus here attacks the then current practice of easy divorce as a way of changing sexual partners. Jesus scandalously calls this legalised adultery and points to the way in which it causes damage in future relationships. The law may allow this but it is not God's intention. Remember the idea of the portrait, we are to be people who keep our promises and are faithful to our partners. This is not so much teaching against divorce but for marriage. Interestingly perhaps the best way do that is to pay close attention to the other things that Jesus teaches here about dealing with anger, lust and truth telling.

What portrait are you painting in the way you deal with your spouse? Do you need to be working on strengthening your marriage?

Lust

Jesus teaching on the dangers of lust seem almost incredible in our sex saturated society, and may seem the most impossible to keep, how are we to stop what can seem like a natural human reaction. But as I am sure we all know there is a big difference when faced with beauty between "Whew", and "Woooah", between seeing and looking, in fact Jesus words could be translated as "looking so as to lust"

Jesus language as to how we are to deal with it is extremely strong and graphic, perhaps this is because it can seem too innocuous, but if lust is allowed to fester then relationships are broken, lives damaged and people objectified. This is not the way of God's kingdom or his people. Remember Jesus aim is not so much guilt as dealing with reality and looking to change.

Are you training yourself to resist lust or to get away with it? How is your internet history? Are there areas where you need radical surgery?

Anger & reconciliation

I have left what Jesus dealt with first to the last to give it similar prominence, it is the longest section of Jesus teaching. I have often heard people say that they are a good person they have never killed anyone but Jesus cuts such pretension down to size by pointing to the way that anger shows the sinfulness of our heart. When we are angry, or insult or belittle people we are expressing a wish that they were not there which is no so different from making them not there.

God's desire is for the reconciliation of all things in Christ and so when we are working against this it runs counter to God's purposes hence the strong warnings. The use of of brother or sister in this passage reminds us that this should be particularly true in the Church.

So the steps of obedience relate to putting relationships together. There is the advice to sort things out quickly before things get to court, on which I have legal advice is a very good idea. But more strikingly Jesus teaches that reconciliation takes precedence to religious observance and please notice something rather odd that Jesus says in v23. "If you brother or sister has something against you" It is not if we are angry with someone but it is more pointed, if we know they are angry with us."

We are to be proactive in putting relationships back together and reconciling. As we think through this we can see that following such teaching is not *anti* the gospel but clearly *a living out and proclamation* of the gospel of reconciliation that Jesus bought, but will we do it.

Is there someone you have belittled or ridiculed, is there an anger that you nurse in your heart, a jealousy, a slight. Is there someone you know has an issue with you. The call is to deal with it, it is more important than taking part in this service.

The early church understood this and so had time of reconciling before partaking in communion, the peace is the only part left over from this. Perhaps today you truly need to offer peace to someone here today.

CONCLUSION

In this service today given the nature of this sermon we are confessing our sins late. As we have a reality check and look at ourselves in the mirror of this teaching we may have much to bring to God, but we do so knowing that there is forgiveness in humble repentance. Such forgiveness is just as much part of God's reality as our sinfulness. But we also look at the portrait of God's kingdom and check the reality which is to come and in seeking to live it out be salt and light in this world and so bring others to check out the reality we have in Christ.