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Sermon

Light to the World

Is 58: 1-12; Matthew 5:13-20; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

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For the next four weeks we shall be exploring the Sermon on the Mount. Due to the strange fact of movable feasts and the resulting effect on the Lectionary, we have missed reading its first section. I'm sure you are all familiar with those words:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.
Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. ¹

If we are honest, isn't this extended teaching (Matthew chapter 5-7) confusing for most of us? We don't quite know what to do with the extremes. Jesus raises the standard very high – how do we respond to that? This teaching has attracted the attention of many great minds both Christian and not. We could summarise the interpretations into five camps²:

1. Entrance Requirements for the Kingdom

Tolstoy, Kierkegaard and others thought that Jesus was listing the moral and ethical standards you must have to **become** his follower. It seems to me this confuses the results of the Kingdom lifestyle with the means of entering and living in the Kingdom.

2. An Impossible Ideal

Martin Luther regarded Jesus' words as an impossible level for humans to reach. Therefore, he thought it was an ideal intended to show us our need of salvation.

¹ Matthew 5:3-12

² Wilkins M.J., 2004, The NIV Application Commentary – Matthew, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, p195-198

However, it is clear that Jesus was mainly speaking to disciples who had already responded to his call to repent. Yet, some of his teaching was intended to draw unbelievers to him.

3. An Example for Another Age

Schofield and Albert Schweitzer saw the Sermon on the Mount as instructions for the age just before or after the Second Coming. Both of them thought it was not directly related to our lives before Jesus' return. We can argue that the coming of the Kingdom is less confined than this. Jesus has introduced it in part and it will be fulfilled at his return. But nonetheless the teachings apply in the meantime.

4. An Optional Elitism

Thomas Aquinas taught that these teachings were given for a select group who would pursue a higher ethical and moral life. The select group were clergy and monks. However, one of the principles reclaimed by the reformation was the priesthood of all believers. The only distinction which is made in the text is between believers and unbelievers. All his followers are called to follow him; there is no suggestion of an elite.

5. The Essence of Kingdom Life for All Ages

There are some truths in these interpretations. The fifth view is that Jesus tells us what Kingdom life looks like. It is not about our earning our acceptance. This Kingdom life is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus died for our sins on the cross. When we put our trust in him, God forgives us and gives us new life. We are filled with the Spirit. It is from this transformation and empowering that the Kingdom life can start to grow.

The true Kingdom approach is from the small to the large, from the inside out. Elsewhere Jesus told the parable of the woman adding yeast to dough. A little yeast affects all of it. Here in the Sermon, inner life will inevitably transform the outer life.

Isaiah

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah speaks of the same contrast between external performance and inner reality. What use are religious actions if the heart is far from God? God rejected the fasting of people who at the same time quarrelled and exploited others. Fasting is about disciplining our bodies to obey our spirits. It establishes which part of us is in charge. It says to God we are serious about seeking him. Yet that message is easily drowned out by our selfishness and greed.

What does God call for? The Living Bible puts it like this:

... this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

If you are an employer, there is a check here – how do you treat your employees?

What about those times we meet people who are hungry or sleeping rough?

The Foodbank and Op Shop are both ways for us to help those who must stretch a budget. Well done again to those of you who support these channels of generosity. We know the welfare state does much good. It spreads a burden of care across society and ensures there is means of getting aid to the needy.

But it can also make us hard-hearted to those in need because we say, "It's not my problem, WINZ will look after them." Some needs are missed by social welfare. Sometimes it is too slow or hidebound. The difficulty for us is to distinguish between the genuinely needy and those who would con us. I have been impressed with the real generosity of spirit amongst this congregation to those in need even taking needy strangers into your home. Let's be careful to remain alert for those who are not so well off and may need some help and watch our hearts to make sure they are not hardened.

God says in his message through Isaiah that if his people live with this generosity of spirit, his blessing will rest on them. He will be quick to answer, help, provide, strengthen and guide. His presence will be around us to protect us with light, healing, righteousness and glory. “Then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.”

Light to the World

Jesus also spoke about our being the light of the world. He who is **the** light of the world makes us to be the light of the world. And that light is to shine forth. That’s the purpose of being a light. He explains the obvious by saying you don’t light a lamp in your house and then cover it with a bowl; you put it on a stand so its light can shine forth. So too, a hilltop city cannot be hidden – it is plain to see. The light of Christ in us will shine out and give glory to God the Father. If there was any doubt about whether this is about human effort or Spirit-inspired fruit, doesn’t that make it plain? People will give glory to God the Father, not to the sweating disciple who is trying to attain the Kingdom through good works!

Jesus’ other analogy is to salt. We have all heard it before so I won’t labour the point. Salt is used to preserve food and to flavour food. It is a minor ingredient which makes a big difference to the rest. We need not be surprised at being a minority in society. Jesus said we would be. The percentage of salt in a recipe is tiny yet it makes a big difference to the taste.

Jesus declares we have a role of flavouring and preventing decay in society – if we keep true to our nature. If not - we are worthless.

I want to apply this salt and light idea to telling people about Jesus. In NZ and much of the western world, we are too silent: we try hard to hide our saltiness and shield our lights under any sort of bowl, bushel or billy we can find. Can we change that?

I spoke last week about the Hope Project going ahead this year. It gives us the chance to learn to engage in conversations naturally and without being objectionable; to ask questions and help others think about their faith. We will have some more training in March and then at Easter a wonderful opportunity to practise as Graham Braddock provides a focus with his pavement, chalk drawing of his painting, “The Road to the Cross.” Later in the year, the main Hope Project will go public in the lead up to Christmas 200 years after Samuel Marsden first preached in the Bay of Islands.

Most of us think we cannot persuade people with eloquent arguments. That is alright: in the epistle Paul said he did not preach with clever words and expressions. It wasn’t the cleverness of his rhetoric which convinced them. He wasn’t his great wisdom. Rather he says it was the simple message of the crucified saviour.

He didn’t speak with great eloquence but in weakness and fear – can you identify with that? I can!

It was the Spirit who took his offering of willingness and worked through him to convince people of the truth of the gospel.

Let’s take courage and start to open up to people. Maybe we start by praying that God would use us: remember the “use me” prayer? Try praying, “Lord, use me,” in the morning. You could pray that God would give you natural opportunities to have a conversation about spiritual matters. How about praying he would give you courage and opportunities? You might pray that the Holy Spirit would make your words count. How about praying for those you will speak to later on, that God would prepare their hearts and minds?

Do you mourn over the brokenness of our society? Do you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Maybe, just maybe, as we engage with the opportunity we are being given this year, we will contribute to the change of society for the better. We would be “... repairers of broken walls, restorers of streets with dwellings.”