

SERMON TITLE- "You Have Heard . . ."

TEXT- Matthew 5:21-48

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Last week we began a new series. The shift has been from Genesis to The Sermon on the Mount. From the vast scope of time and grand characters setting the pattern of "the ways of God with man".

Now we are turning from that to a specific sermon given on at a specific time and place- an event that is marked in hours rather the hundreds and 1000s of years. The shift is from the macro to the micro. It is a shift that now focuses its attention on the smallest units of human interaction.

In the world of science, such a shift is very challenging and the specific challenge is that the rules of how the universe works on the largest scales don't seem to mesh with how it works on the tiniest scales. For those who follow such things it is the disconnect between the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics. The rules of the behaviour of matter at one end of the scale don't seem consistent with the other end. Frankly there appear to be major contradictions between the two.

I think that there is similar challenge for those who study the Bible.

As we look at the sermon on the Mount, Jesus zeroes in on the details of daily living. His typology is "everyone who is angry with his brother." Suddenly the grand schemes get very personal.

We chose this series because of a very specific question. That question is- "What does Christianity look like when it is applied to daily life- to family, friends and work?"

I think that most of us would agree that is a question worth answering and as I thought about how to approach it- I quickly realized that there is no more practical approach to actual life than the Sermon on the Mount.

Now in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is also setting out a whole new way of thinking.

For those of us who live 2000 years after the Sermon on the Mount was given- the word "new" may not fit as well as it should. As we carry on in our look at the Sermon on the Mount, however, I want us to make sure our "new" glasses are in place.

Let's read-

#1. You have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be

thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent. Matthew 5:21-26

#2. You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery'; But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell. Matthew 5:27-30

#3. It was said, 'whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. Matthew 5:31-32

#4. Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.'

But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil. Matthew 5:33-37

#5. You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-42

#6. You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43-28

This is a big package and if you were listening carefully I would expect that there were numerous places where you might have wanted to stop the reading as ask some questions or make some comments. In fact anyone who takes on a study of the Sermon on the Mount will quickly be overwhelmed by how much has been written on it. And the opinions about what it means are also all over the map.

There is a principle of reading the Scriptures however that I want to remind us of in this context and that is- the Bible was written so that God's people can have His Word penetrate our beings- so let's let that happen.

I also don't think that it is actually very hard to keep the "new" glasses on when reading it. The section we are looking at today is set up specifically in that manner.

Each section begins with "You have heard . . ." and is followed by "But I say . . ."

Obviously with this much material to cover there will be a lot that we won't cover but I want to quickly go through the 6 sections in this text and pull out a principle that helps us understand it.

If It Comes Naturally- Think Twice And Be Very Careful

It begins with the section we began with last week-

You have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not commit murder' . . . But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty . . . Matthew 5:21-22

Last week we closed off with this instruction. I already mentioned this as an overriding principle to take home with us. This ties directly into the old/new contrast.

The old, is not just the OT and the Laws that went along with it- the old also represents the natural instincts and even sense of justice that has been built into us.

This "old" way is also not necessarily wrong- it is just the way it is. We need to understand the way it is.

If you are standing on the edge of a cliff you need to know that stepping off is a very destructive idea. There is nothing wrong with the cliff nor is there anything wrong with the gravity that will drive you downwards and smash you against the rocks below. The problem, if there is one, could well be the choice you make when face with these 2 facts.

The human fact is that sometimes we become very angry with our brothers. Anger is as natural to being human as gravity is to mass.

But Jesus reminds us- the fact that it is natural doesn't make it OK. In fact, He goes on to say- just avoiding crashing down on the rocks isn't good enough. If you are standing on the edge of a cliff- be very aware of what happens, should you slip off. Step away from the edge!

If you are angry with your brother or if he is angry with you dealing with that fact is the highest priority in your life. It is of an even higher priority that going to the temple to bring sacrifices of worship.

If it feels natural- stop and think carefully. Natural also has extreme danger. All those who were listening to Jesus' sermon knew that the very first 2 brothers' story was tragic. Anger had ended in murder.

So under that heading what does Jesus tell us?

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust . . . Matthew 5:27-28

#1. What No Ones Sees Matters The Most

This is one of those extreme contrasts and ends with the famous "cut out your eye" and "cut off your hand" warning. That should be enough to freak everyone out and being freaked out by this is what is supposed to happen to us.

But what is the spirit of Jesus' warning here? The aspect that stands out for me is- "don't let your mind go places that are out of bounds."

There is an illustration I have heard and used before. What would it look like if my thought life were displayed on the screen behind me for everyone to see? I am sure that all of us are very thankful that this is not the case.

During the gun course Sebastian and I took, one of the instructors told a story of how, while sitting in a restaurant he made a derogatory comment about someone at another table- and that person heard him. This caused a problem for him- needless to say. What I did not hear him say, however that he was sorry he said that comment- only that it was too bad that it was overheard. The lesson he was illustrating was- make sure your inside voice doesn't get heard.

"Wrong!" Jesus says. Not only should comments like that not be said- we need to clean up how we think- even if no one will ever see.

Of course, not letting every inside voice get out makes all the sense in the world, but putting a gag on it is never to be confused with getting the job done.

You will notice how Jesus has moved from one very close relationship to another. In fact the relationship of marriage is even more private and mysterious than the sibling relationship.

The Kingdom of God strikes deep into the heart of the place where things are so easily hidden away.

What comes naturally is putting a gag on our voice when it is out of line- the danger is- you have just hidden a deadly disease.

The next point Jesus makes goes further into that very private world. In many ways this is a sub point to the previous one and even how it is introduced indicates that. But it is a very important sub heading.

It was said, 'whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife . . . Matthew 5:31-32

Minimum Standards Miss The Mark

The reality of life is that relationships break down tragically and sometimes irreparably. One of the questions that we are regularly asked is "Are Christians allowed to divorce?"

That is a real and important question for anyone going through a broken relationship- But what Jesus is absolutely clear about is- this is question easily misses the mark in an important context.

The question is often asked in the context of what the basic standards of Christian behaviour are. Politicians have elaborate codes of conduct that they are expected to live by. There is a very famous case in the US at present where the Governor of Illinois seems to have attempted to sell Obama's Senate position.

His argument in defense looks very weak. He claims he played by the rules as they were written.

The problem with his argument is- the whole situation looks terrible.

Jesus' answer to this question is- marriage breakdown is inevitably a cascading series of calamities. Once you start down that road one disaster leads to the next. Anyone who has experienced divorce knows how true this is.

Divorce happens. We know that to be the case- but asking when it is OK misses the point of all the pain that accompanies this fact of life.

Jesus next point builds on that but now moves a step out of the most private and hidden places beyond the front doors of our homes into the market place.

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not make false vows . . . But I say to you, make no oath at all . . . let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no' Matthew 5:33-37

#2. Keep It Very Simple

In the market place, life then was the same as it is now. People/we are untrustworthy. We have a way of shading the things we say to give the right impressions. When it comes to buying and selling the self-interest of the process brings that aspect of human nature right to the surface. How we say things- so that our products sell- has a way of shifting into deception so very easily.

Because of this we have ways of confirming things to make sure that we get the true goods.

“Tell me the truth, now.”

Similarly when we want to be very clear we say, “I’m not lying.”

When we need even a higher level of trustworthiness we sign statements and even go to have them witnessed.

In ancient times people took oaths to solemnify their statements or claims. They had rules around this.

But Jesus’ response is- this is all wrong. Just as we are to have one standard of behaviour for both our inner and outer behaviour- we are to have one standard of trustworthiness.

Keep it simple wraps this up very well in my opinion.

The natural state of affairs as a human being is to have all kinds of different layer within our personality and behaviour.

We are very complex beings. One of the simple things that we can do is keep the parts of life that don’t need to be complicated- as simple as we can make them.

This directive- like all of the points in this summary challenges our natural make-up.

We are complicated.

The decisions we make are complicated.

Being properly understood is difficult.

We need time and space to properly explain ourselves.

There are times to solemnify what we say.

Jesus’ instruction counters all of those- no oaths at all- let yes be yes and no be no. This doesn’t mean being rash or thoughtless. In fact if we have listened to the challenge of getting the inside and the outside voices to line up- prior to saying yes or no we may have to say, “I am not yet able to answer.”

But when we do- Kingdom people are to be people who don’t require simple answers ratified by oaths.

And now Jesus moves one more ring outward- from what is supposed to be the safest most private place, our family- to the next ring- our work place- to that area of life where we can expect to encounter adversaries. It is the place where we presume that things are going to go wrong.

Of course, we know all too well that things go very wrong in our families and work place and that there may be adversaries there- but we hope they won't be. There are however parts of life where it is assumed that we will find them. It is why there are police forces and armies.

You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evil person . . . turn the other cheek. Matthew 5:38-39

#3. There's No Place For Vengeance In Kingdom People

Here again Jesus picks up a deeply ingrained aspect of being human- our personal sense of justice.

Justice, of course, is one of the primary attributes of God Himself. I believe that the craving for justice is in fact one of the marks of God's character that shows up in human beings. This quest for justice makes the movie industry billions of dollars every year.

Get Clint Eastwood or some other sympathetic character unleashed in the defense of an otherwise helpless victim and you have the basic formula for movie success.

We love to imagine ourselves in the role of dispensing swift and complete justice.

But of course life is rarely as simple as a movie plot and the reality of how our quest for justice actually works itself out is when someone touches our space in some way- when someone slaps us on the cheek seldom, if ever ends in a satisfying and "just" manner.

The response for justice is also the quest for vengeance and in fact the justice of the old way was that vengeance had to be limited to no more than an eye for an eye. Vengeance rarely stops there.

But Jesus directs His people to a very different and possibly the most dramatically counter instinctive instruction of all.

When your sense of justice/vengeance rises up within you-resist the natural way- in fact turn the other cheek. Now be very clear- you are turning your own cheek- not instructing others to turn theirs. You are putting your own rights and on the line because of a higher calling.

Justice is natural. It has its place- it however is not the calling of Kingdom people, for themselves.

This leads to the close of this section-

You have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies . . . Matthew 5:43-44

Summary- Love Is The Great Commandment

And now Jesus wraps it up with the great summary. The grand principle that covers the whole sermon is the new commandment of love.

This is not some Hallmark card version of love making the world go round. This is a hard type of love that sums up the opposite of what comes naturally. This love is not

based on family ties, it is not based on our natural drives and passions- it is a love that is the simple instruction Jesus gives to Kingdom people.

And it begins, not in the natural normal places so that it can grow out into the rest of life- it begins in the most counter intuitive of all places- loving our enemies.

This is such a challenging instruction that the closing summary fits it very well: Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:48

That is not designed to make us give up- but rather make very clear what living as a Kingdom person is all about- we are God's children and He remains our example.