

SERMON TITLE- "Christianity Applied- Beginning At Home"

TEXT- Matthew 5:21-24

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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This week, around the world a very special day was celebrated.

There are of course several answers depending on what your focus has been. It could be-

-Valentine's Day

-the one year anniversary of the 2010 Winter Olympics

-Karen Travers' birthday

For me however, this week was notable because it was Charles Darwin's 200th birthday on Feb 12.

So why would that be notable and worth celebrating? Isn't Darwin the enemy of Christianity? Many people think so but I don't. Certainly he said many anti-Christian things but in my opinion Darwin's contribution is that he introduced a very Biblical view of human nature to a world that has always been confused about it.

And what did Darwin say about human nature? That as human beings we are driven by one thing and one thing alone- survival. A famous book by Richard Dawkins on Darwinism is in fact entitled, "The Selfish Gene."

And why is that a Biblical view of human nature? Because the Bible and specifically the NT describes the challenge of being human as a battle against a fundamentally selfish entity.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? . . . Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:18-25

What a description of the predicament that rises out of human nature as Darwin describes it! Inside of us there is nothing propelling us towards anything good- if it does not somehow also make us feel good.

Christians have known this for 2000 years, of course, but what Darwin's theory should kill off is a mystical view of human nature that says that our battle is against spirits waging war inside of us. "No!" says Paul, "our battle is bringing our natural bodies into subjection to God's commands." It is not correct to feel like an evil spirit makes us do bad things. We do bad things when our natural drives control us rather than God's commands.

ASIDE In Ephesians 6 Paul does seem to say something differently when he says-

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Ephesians 6:11-12

This seems to contradict Romans 7 but in fact it doesn't because Ephesians is talking about the challenge of the Church on the grand scale while Romans 7 is talking about our battles on the individual level. More on that to follow.

Darwin of course leaves out what believers in God know- that along side of human nature- God placed His image in each of us. What we learned in our study of Genesis is that while we are made of flesh and blood- of appetites and desires- our first service is not to them but to God Himself. Sin entered the world when Adam and Eve chose to place their appetites above God's command.

There is a battle inside of us- but it is a battle between our selfish human nature and obedience to what God tells us is right and wrong. Getting this right is very important. It sounds spiritual to blank evil spirits for the bad things that we or other people do- but the reality of the situation is that this evil grows naturally and inevitably from our human natures.

We need a way to deal with that. That solution will not come from Darwin- he states the problem will but leaves us there. The solution must come from God.

Reading Darwin helps us to accurately understand the problem- reading the Bible directs us to the solution. Both have roles to play.

Today we are making the shift from Genesis and I want to use an image of the Powers of 10 to illustrate it. If you Google "The

Powers of 10” you will come to a site that takes on you on a journey through 40 powers of 10.

What it does is zoom you from the very largest scales right down to the tiniest scales. At both ends they are far beyond our ability to really grasp.

The book of Genesis is written to help us grasp something and it is at the far end of the human experience- the biggest possible scale. The shape and origin of the cosmos.

Today we are beginning a look at the other end of the scale. This end is not at the molecular level but rather and the scale of daily life. It is marked off in seconds, hours, months and decades.

To look at this we are going to look at one of the most practical parts of the Bible- the Sermon on the Mount.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ explanation of His purpose and program. This summer I did a series on the Beatitudes. They give the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. For the next weeks we will look at the Sermon itself.

Jesus begins-

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them . . . For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:17-20

#1. Jesus Is A New Chapter Of The Old Story

When Jesus began to preach what was very clear to His listeners was- something new has come. For hundreds of years the teachers of the Law had been driving home and refining the commands of God. As happens too easily, they found ways to use those laws as a club against people who opposed them.

One of the downsides of being a public person is that what I write is read by people who sometimes take issue with me and occasionally I get a hand written letter with verses underlined to drive home my errors. Now there is nothing wrong with that at one level- but occasionally it feels to me like the Scripture are being used as a club to hit me. When I get a letter like that I try to think of times when my use of Scripture might be seen that way.

When people have been under oppressive type of teaching and a new option appears, however, there is a very natural reaction- freedom!

One of the themes of history is that when people have been under some level of oppression- the first chapter of release from that oppression is usually anarchy or antinomianism. It seems to be a natural, predictable response. People seem to love to riot.

If we had time we could go through a very long list of examples. Some of the most famous are the aftermath of the French and Russian Revolutions. A similar thing took place with the fall of the govt in Iraq. In fact a similar thing takes place when team win major sport prizes. People congregate and when they think that the law won’t touch them- they burn, destroy and loot.

Jesus came and it was very clear that He was bringing something radically new. But Jesus was also very clear- He did not come to bring lawlessness at any level.

While He challenged the legal assumptions of the teachers- He was not endorsing any kind of revolution.

In fact Jesus was very clear about the fact that while something new was coming this new thing would build upon- not destroy what had gone before.

But Jesus drives this point home, however is with a comment that is especially important for our time.

#2. Getting It Right Matters- A Lot

This is something that pluralistic times struggle with. When there are all kinds of options around there is a tendency to make sense of them by flattening them out as all being equal.

In modernity the idea that as long as we believe something with sincerity- it must be right- is pretty well standard. You have your truth and I have my truth and as long as we are nice to each other that’s all that matters.

Being nice to each other is a very good thing- but being sincere doesn’t equate to being right and in some things it matters a great deal.

I heard a graphic example of this recently. Sebastian and I took a firearms acquisition course in January. We were taught how to handle firearms safely and we told repeated how potentially deadly failure to do so can be.

The story was told of a father and his teenage son who decided to go hunting together. It was supposed to be the best of what families to. As they crossed a fence the father passed his rifle to his son- muzzle first. The son took the rifle from his father and as he

pulled it the father's finger hit the trigger. The gun when off- killing the young man.

It was a terrible story but illustrated several things that the father and son did wrong in their handling of the firearm. The point of the story- getting this right matters. In fact it is a matter of life and death.

Jesus drives this point home to His listeners. Disregarding the Law has the most serious of possible consequences. Not only does obedience to the Law need to be taken seriously, failure to do so means that- **“you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”**

It is important to get this right!

Of course, as you will note from the gun example I gave- getting it right is not just about heaven and hell- it also matters in the ordinary affairs of life.

And He carries on with this theme-

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Matthew 5:21-22

Those who don't get this are in danger of hell. There is no more serious consequence.

Getting things right is very important. This is something that the father who accidentally shoot his son understands- albeit too late.

That is a very blunt beginning but unavoidable. The stakes are high-

#3. But It Is A New Chapter

From this point on Jesus begins to lay out what is new in the Good News He brings. 6 times in the next verses Jesus uses the phrase or a variant of- **“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago . . .”** In what follows He will lay out the contrasts and similarities between what has gone on in the past and what the implications of the new chapter are.

Jesus now begins with what His listeners know and then contrasts it with what the “new” is. Everyone knows that murder is bad- even Darwin. Everyone also knows that murder has many

variations and those who commit murder will be subject to the court as they face the appropriate consequences for what they have done.

But Jesus says, in the kingdom of God the person who is angry with their brother will have to stand trial for that anger. From that the severity of the consequence escalates rapidly.

Next week we will look more directly at what this means. Obviously, even just letting anger run our lives is a very bad thing.

Today we won't go beyond that simple statement other than noting that Jesus uses this example to bring out a contrast from how things have been done in the past.

I repeat this principle at lot because it is so important. The Bible is divided into 2 book- 2 testaments- 2 covenants. We need to understand that when we read it. The first chapter of a book sets the stage for the rest of the book- but drawing conclusions. If you read an instruction manual you know that it is the last steps that make the first steps make sense.

A lot of people miss that part of understanding how to read the Bible.

This is a new chapter and while it clearly builds on what has gone before- what Jesus will now begin to teach is the differences.

A simple rule that you can already take with you today- as it regards the matter of anger is- “what ever comes naturally needs a serious double-check.” The phrase “you have heard it said” is synonymous with- “that's the way it has always been done.”

Jesus answer to that is- “There are different rules in the Kingdom of God.” A new chapter is being written- listen up.

But there is another thought that I want you to take home with you and it comes from where we started with the macro/mirco imagery. In the old way of thinking the big picture dominated the story- the way of the Kingdom. It is about huge expanses of time.

But the Sermon on the Mount is different. It took place, possibly in the course of a couple of hours. And the words Jesus said in those hours are zoomed in on with great detail.

But it is more than that. Genesis took place in the world. The Sermon on the Mount takes place in the smallest place we know-

#4. It Begins At Home

Jesus introduces His teachings with the closest relationship you have- your sibling.

This is where He begins His instructions to His followers.

Now if you remember Genesis you might make a very quick connection. Where did human suffering really begin? It began with the first 2 brothers and it ended with one killing the other. That was the first recorded conflict between 2 people and it set the pattern for all the wars and pain that follows.

All the conflicts through history began in a conflict between brothers- now when Jesus comes to earth to set out God's new plan- it is no coincidence that he goes back to the place where all the grief began- the relationship between brothers.

And why does that begin between siblings? I think it is because sibling relationships are the most unrestrained in every way- both good and bad.

And so when things go wrong in this area- the wrong easily blows right up and so often it does.

If relationships between siblings have such high stakes then what Jesus says next follows very easily-

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Matthew 5:23-24

Offering sacrifices to God is one of the most special things a person can do. It is the action of the command- "love the Lord your God with all your heart . . ."

But what does Jesus tell His followers? Even if you are there at the temple, preparing to offer a sacrifice and there is an unresolved issue with your brother- go home and get that business taken care of first.

This sets forward a powerful and overriding principle of the Kingdom of God. The rules of the Kingdom begin at the closest place and then work outward from there.

The problem begins in the closest and most personal relationship. Ultimately the problems begin with what Darwin articulated so well- our drive to look out for ourselves.

And now Jesus will begin His instructions to God's people about how they are to set an entirely fresh way of behaving- beginning at home.