

MATTHEW CHAPTER 5

5: 1-12 – The Beatitudes

Like Israel, Jesus passes through the Red Sea (Baptism), is tested in the wilderness (40 days for Jesus, 40 years for Israel), and is at the foot of the mountain with the people (Like Moses at Sinai). He begins to call 12 disciples (representing the 12 tribes of Israel), and he ministers to people who are looking for liberation from slavery to all that ails them. Now he ascends the mountain just like Moses, but with some significant differences. First, he is not receiving the law/word of God, but is proclaiming it himself. Second, his intention is to fulfill the law. Jesus is radical not because he throws out the law and the prophets, but because he fulfills them in a way no Jew could have imagined. By fulfilling them himself, moreover, he will open up a path to the promised land of communion with God and hope for the world where the people of Israel failed.

He begins with the “beatitudes” (Latin for “blessed”) which are like the commandments. The beatitudes have sometimes been called “blessed attitudes” but they are much more than just attitudes to be practiced. Jesus is saying that those who in the typical world are “cursed” to perpetual disappointment and sorrow, are those who in God’s kingdom, will be the most blessed. Jesus is bringing God’s kingdom with his words, actions, and his life (culminating in the cross and resurrection). In God’s kingdom, the world’s values are turned upside down. The kingdom of heaven is invading the kingdoms of the world and calling people to conversion. A world where power and force is rejected, a world where love, peace, kindness, openness and trust succeed, is a very different kind of world. It is a world where the humble in spirit, pure in heart, those who grieve, the meek, merciful, peaceful, and just are totally at home, while those who only know how to throw their weight around by force, tantrums, tyranny or control, cannot function at all. This is the kingdom Jesus is starting in the world. Who will join in? Eventually those who don’t join in will be crowded out. Do we believe this?

5: 13-20 – Salt and Light, The Law and the Prophets.

Jesus is challenging Israel to become salt and light again. If they fight darkness with the methods of darkness (force, vengeance, military/political maneuvering), they have no salt and light in them, even if they succeed and win (which they won’t, as Jesus will predict again and again). The only way to be true salt and light in the world is to live the love of God. This will require incredible courage, at great personal cost when the world is governed by force and violence.

This is why Jesus also says not only that he has come to fulfill the true intent of the law and the prophets, but that the righteousness he is teaching and calling Israel to follow (the costly way of self-giving love) is much greater than that taught by the scribes and Pharisees, based as it is on retaliation and violence towards Israel’s enemies. Pharisees believe that if Israel becomes obedient to the letter of the law, God will come down to save them by destroying Israel’s enemies.

5: 21-26 – Concerning Anger

Anger is one of those things people can justify. It's the same with murder. Under certain conditions, killing is not considered murder. While life may be complex, is it not also true that we let ourselves off the hook a little too easily? Anger ruled the life of Israelites - anger at their leaders, anger at the Romans, anger of one group against another, one family against another, siblings and neighbours against each other, spouses with each other, parents and children, etc, etc. Anger is an energy that can make the world go round, but it is also a poison that destroys all that is truly precious and good in life, beginning in our own lives. We can't just focus anger and then be done with it. It breaks through barriers we impose to infect all our relationships. Following Christ's way of love means refusing to use anger as a weapon for controlling other people or tearing them down.

5: 27-37 – Concerning Adultery, Divorce, and Oaths

Following the way of Christ affects all our relationships. Divorce was a fairly common practice in ancient Israel, but there was serious inequality between men and women. Women were vulnerable economically and sexually. Being divorced left them destitute, unless a father, brother or son took them in, or they were re-married. Men were also freer to divorce their wives than wives were to divorce their husbands. By speaking against divorce, Jesus was binding men to greater responsibility and commitment to their wives, and pushing for greater equality between husband and wife. Divorce should not be as easy for men as it had become.

Second, though, by talking about adultery in the form of lust, as well as honesty and truthfulness, Jesus was striking at the root of what can attack and break up a marriage. When we think about the world we live in now, as much as the world then, infidelity and dishonesty are major factors in the break-up of marriages. Certainly, there are other factors as well, but Jesus wants to address those things we can do something about morally speaking.

5: 38-48 – Concerning Retaliation and the Love of Enemies

While "an eye for an eye...." was a way of keeping retaliation from getting out of control, Jesus goes much further. He says that the way of living love is neither 1) to strike back, nor 2) to be passive, cave in and fall to one's knees. By turning the other cheek, a person resists by standing tall and shaming his/her attacker without resorting to their methods. Jesus is speaking to Israelites who feel oppressed and put down by their Roman overlords. Such an experience of humiliation then infects how Israelites relate to each other in terms of religious, class and gender divisions that are used as ways of tearing each other down. Even if we cannot stop someone who is attacking us, we can shame them by our stubborn dignity and refusal to attack back as we are attacked.

This approach is also applied to lawsuits and forced labour. Instead of someone just taking what you have or forcing you to do something, by choosing to act further to

what they force upon you, you take charge and shame them by your refusal to hate them or attempt to get even.

Jesus then extends this approach of love to the overall attitude toward enemies. Israel had enemies, and it was natural to hate those who hated them. To pray for enemies instead of hate them, was so counter-cultural, so radical, it made little sense to most everyone in Jesus' day. But Jesus declares that God is like this. Love is impartial and doesn't make judgments based on who deserves what. Only by loving others is there a chance to overcome the cycle of violence and hate that has so infected the people of God. It's not a question of distinguishing right from wrong. That has to be done, always. But you don't extend or withhold love according to judgment about a person's moral worth. You can love people differently, and recognize their dignity, even if you have to impose penalties, punishment and discipline. Tough love is still love and sometimes much more difficult and costly a love, because you are committed to the person and relationship no matter the pain and risk involved.