

Putting your heart into it

Matthew 5: 21-37

Introduction

Please join me now in prayer – ‘Dear heavenly father, we pray that through your Word we may all come to know you better, and that we may develop and enjoy a deep, spiritual relationship with you. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.’

Isn't it amazing to experience something that's purely from the heart? I'm sure you know what I mean. Think of a dancer for example, putting on her very best performance, or a musician – maybe a pianist playing his finest solo piece. What about a choir singing, and I don't mean just singing. I mean really belting out the most amazing sound you've ever heard. There's something about what they're doing, that makes you realise this is something much, much more than just going through the motions – more than just following the rules of the craft they've chosen. There's a passion there, something deep inside them that transforms their performance into a thing of beauty. And as a witness, an observer to these performances, you can often be left breathless, so totally moved by the experience that you're left wanting more, thinking to yourself 'I wish I could do that', 'I wish I could BE like that'.

Well believe it or not, the gospel reading today is based on that very concept, which is why I've called this sermon 'Putting your heart into it'. It's a message that's come from God since the beginning, passed on by the prophets, delivered and confirmed by Jesus Christ, and repeated again and again and spread by the disciples, and YET, the message has so often been misunderstood.

So what is the message in today's gospel reading from Matthew Chapter 5? The message is that God wants us to have the right attitude in our heart, not just putting on a display for others to see. God's Law, in particular the 10 commandments that he passed down through Moses, was always intended to be much more than a set of rules. Being one of God's children is about having a healthy spiritual relationship with him, and handing our heart over to him, so that he can transform us from the INSIDE out. And if we allow this transformation to happen, our outward actions will reflect what our heart truly feels. So if we really put our heart into it, actions that are pleasing to God will naturally follow, and those around us will feel that there's something much deeper inside us, something that may prompt them to think to themselves 'I wish I could do that, I wish I could BE like that.'

Setting the Context

So in order to show you how Jesus Christ is emphasising this message, I need to set the context for you. Matthew Chapter 5 is describing to us Jesus' Sermon on the

Mount. He had been carrying out his ministry throughout Galilee. Matthew 4 v23 says ***‘Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people’***. To all who came, Jesus preached the Good News, that the kingdom of heaven had come and that God is with us. The Sermon on the Mount was given by Jesus on a hillside near Capernaum. It’s also possible that the sermon probably consisted of several days of preaching. What Jesus preaches in this sermon is a summary of life as a true follower of our Lord. He describes the characteristics we should have as those who have been saved. Well as you read through the Sermon on the Mount you will know that none of us display all of these characteristics all of the time, but here is another lesson that Jesus is teaching us – we have been saved by the grace of God because no matter how hard we try, we cannot live a sin-free life and we cannot be saved based on how we obey God’s rules.

Today I’m only concentrating on a part of the Sermon on the Mount, but what is important, is that across his whole sermon, Jesus proclaims his attitude to the law, and what he is telling us, is that God’s law is far more spiritual and heartsearching than many suppose. Now at the time of the sermon he was talking specifically about the Jews and in particular the Pharisees, but he could just as easily have been talking about any generation since then, right up to today, because, as Jesus points out, we get caught up in rules, and being obedient to the written law, when in actual fact we should be practicing obedience to God from our hearts. God wants us to be obedient from the inside out. So whilst words and actions are important, the heart and actions cannot be separated.

Now what’s also important is that just before he starts talking about anger, adultery, and swearing falsely in God’s name, Jesus makes it clear that he has not come to contradict God’s law, as was the feeling held by many at the time, giving rise to the feelings of anger that were growing towards Jesus. In Matthew 5 v17 Jesus says this: **‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.’** So what Jesus now goes on to say in the Sermon on the Mount emphasises how God’s law should really be used, and where God wants to take us with them.

The Sermon on the Mount

Let’s look more closely at the reading. These verses show that Jesus used 3 of the 10 commandments to give us a deeper understanding of why God made the laws in the first place. He talks about, in this order, the 6th commandment – **‘You shall not murder’**, the 7th commandment – **‘You shall not commit adultery’**, and the 3rd commandment – **‘You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.’** I suspect he could have used any of the commandments, and I’m hoping that by the

end of this sermon all of us here today realise that Jesus didn't single these commandments out because they're any harsher or more important than the others. – I want us to realise that the same lesson – putting your heart behind what you say and do – applies to all of the commandments.

Anger

Jesus teaches about anger by saying from v21 ***'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.'*** So in other words, anger towards your brother, your sister, your partner, your work colleague – in other words, anger towards anyone – is as much a sin in God's eyes as murder. I think this can be a hard one to reconcile – I mean, how can anger towards someone really be on par with taking another life? But I think what Jesus is saying here is this – 'Don't put yourselves up on a pedestal, don't give yourselves some kind of false righteousness, just because you haven't killed someone, because if there is anger in your heart you are still being disobedient to God. And the flow on effect of anger is that we are violating God's greatest command - to love. In response to the Pharisees questioning him about the greatest command in the Law Jesus says this in Matthew 22 verses 37-40 ***'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. 'Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.'*** What has he just said? *All* the law, *all* the rules of Christian living, hang off God's all important commandment to love. So if we're ever unsure if what we're thinking or doing is pleasing to God, if we get bogged down in debates about interpretations of God's written law, we just need to ask ourselves a very simple question, 'Are we doing it out of love?' And the answer is normally pretty clear.

The other important lesson Jesus teaches us about anger is to get rid of it. Well that seems pretty obvious but He stresses we get rid of our anger quickly, before it grows and poisons our lives even further. In fact, Jesus is telling us to drop everything (now) and sort out whatever issues are causing our anger – ***'...First go and be reconciled to your brother...Settle matters quickly with your adversary...'*** Anger has so many ugly sides to it – emotional hurt, stress, isolation, violence. Any way that you look at it, anger acts as a barrier between us and God. And it's one of those emotions that can potentially leap out of control at any time. So Jesus is telling us to remove our anger quickly so that :

1. We can avoid our anger spiralling out of control, and
2. We can improve the attitude in our heart – our words and actions will become more reflective of what is in our heart.

Lust

Now Jesus moves on to the 7th commandment – ‘Do not commit adultery’. He addresses this by talking about lust and divorce, saying that lusting after someone is the same as committing adultery in your heart. Jesus is emphasising again the importance of having the right attitude in our heart. He’s saying that the desire to have sex with someone other than your spouse is mental adultery and therefore equates to sin. We have to have the right intentions in our heart. In this case, putting your heart into it not only helps to sustain a beautiful relationship between husband and wife, it also goes one step further in building our spiritual relationship with God.

Now this is a perfect example of a passage in the bible where we can get bogged down in the letter of the law. Jesus is not condemning natural interest in the opposite sex or even healthy sexual desire. What He is condemning are the deliberate and repeated fantasies in one’s mind which, if acted out, would equate to adultery and damage the sacred union of marriage. And in the same way as he discussed anger, Jesus also tells us to get rid of lust before it turns into greater evils, and he uses strong imagery to highlight how serious this is, for eg, (v29) ***‘if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away’*** and (v30) ***‘if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away’***.

Divorce

As I was preparing this sermon I couldn’t help but wonder how many people - in an age when the divorce rate is at an all time high – actually enjoy preaching about divorce. I didn’t think there would be many. It’s a very delicate subject and it’s highly likely that someone in your midst has been impacted by divorce. So imagine my delight when I saw verses 31 and 32. Some more context is necessary here to understand why Jesus highlights divorce. There was a time back in Jesus’ day when divorce was used for trivial reasons. It became a problem when Judaism was moving from polygamy (where some dealt with marriage problems by taking on another wife) to monogamy. In this case adding another wife was not an option, so it was replaced by divorce. What we also know about that time is that adultery must result in divorce. Jesus says in verse 32 ***‘But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.’*** So to Jesus’ audience on the day, these two acts of adultery and divorce were closely related. But, as usual, the words of the bible apply to every age. So even though in our day the behaviours or expectations around adultery and divorce are different, we can still learn from

Jesus' message that divorce should not be taken lightly and used as an 'escape' from trivial differences in a marriage, and it certainly shouldn't be used as a way to satisfy lustful desires of either spouse. What Jesus really wants is for us to make every effort to forgive, reconcile and restore a troubled marriage rather than lightly entering into divorce.

Swearing Falsely in God's name

The bible reading ends with Jesus teaching us about vows. Again this is a bible passage which, if taken to the letter, can cause some debate. It is true that in our sinful world it is sometimes necessary to have oaths and vows – think of a court of law – but that is usually because with sin comes distrust, and we, as a society, need something more than just the individual's word. What Jesus is talking about here is casually giving your word, or worse still, swearing falsely in the Lord's name to add more strength to your word. If our hearts are pure we shouldn't have to make oaths to have people trust us. Using God's name falsely is not a sign of respect – it's a sign of dishonour. Jesus sums it up very simply when he says in verse 37 ***'Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No' be 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.'***

Finally...

Doing what is pleasing to God has to start from the heart. If the attitude in our heart is one of love, what follows is a heartfelt obedience to God. We can't do it on our own. We continually need to ask for God's help in putting love into our hearts, but if we use God's Law as he intended, and really put our heart into it, we can move people just like the dancer, or the pianist, or the choir, only in our case, people can be moved closer to God. And surely that's the best experience you could ever be a part of.

A final verse from the first book of Samuel: ***'The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'*** Let's put love into our hearts, so that the Lord is pleased with what he sees.

In Jesus' name, Amen.