

Trees and Foundations

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Date: 02 April 2023

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[0 : 00] it's what's on the inside that counts, like Walter's shoebox. It's what's on the inside that counts. Many, if not most of us here, will remember the old St. Vincent Street church building. From the outside, it was huge. It boasted Gothic columns and tall clock towers, but it also had bushes growing from the roof and was covered with the exhaust fumes of 10,000 cars combined with flaking sandstone.

When you got into the sanctuary, it was a different matter. It was beautifully painted, and the bright carvings depicted the decorations of the temple in Jerusalem.

Our congregation was numerous and lively. From the outside, it was dreary and uninviting, but on the inside, it was colorful and lively. If you avoided the falling plaster, holes in the roof and the leaks. To try and persuade people to look past the austere exterior, we devised the slogan, it's what's on the inside that counts. It was, of course, a slogan with a double meaning because, as Christians, we believe that it's not who we appear to be on the outside which is of primary importance to God, but who we are on the inside. It's our unseen relationship with Jesus Christ through faith that comes before our seen relationships to other people.

The heart of our faith is the faith of our heart. The heart of our faith is the faith of our heart. It's not about externals, but about internals. It's not about outward appearance as much as it's about inward reality. Well, now most of us have left this Inverclevy Street building, and there's no need for us to use that slogan anymore. It's what's on the inside that counts, to try and get visitors into this lovely building here. And yet, the deeper meaning remains just as true. It's what's on the inside that counts. It prompts us to ask the question, does it not?

If what's on the inside is a primary importance to God, what does God see when He looks into our hearts? Does He find faith in Christ? It may be as small as a mustard seed, but is the internal reality of our relationship to Christ as vibrant as our outward relationships to one another?

[2 : 51] These are the questions that Jesus is exploring in this final section of the so-called Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6, 43 through 49. Remember, set in the context of conflict between His followers and both the Roman and Jewish authorities. Jesus concludes His sermon by reminding His followers that strength for the fight isn't found in Dutch courage, but through faith in Him.

It's by faith they'll stand strong against their foes. As they're brought before Jewish religious courts and before Roman tribunals, they'll only stand firm if their faith in Christ is firm.

In a world increasingly hostile to the gospel we proclaim, we too will only stand firm as Christians by standing firm in our faith in Jesus. Victory in life is not achieved through superior fighting strategies, but through sustaining faith in Jesus Christ. It gives us all the more reason to prioritize our relationship with Him, is it not to prioritize our relationship with Him through prayer and the Word, through the fellowship of the people of God, and through serving Him.

Well, in our passage in Luke chapter 6, please follow it with me on your phones, Jesus drives home the central importance of faith in two ways, both having slightly different emphases, but both prioritizing the importance of faith in Him. First, agriculture and accountability in verses 43 through 45, and then foundations and faithfulness in verses 46 through 49.

The primary question God is asking us all this morning is this. If it's true that it's what's on the inside that counts, never mind our external appearances, does God find faith in Christ when He looks into our hearts?

[5 : 19] First of all then, from verse 43 to 45, agriculture and accountability. Agriculture and accountability. Now, Jesus lived in a largely agrarian society where the vast majority of people would have been familiar with agricultural illustrations. Although, if truth be told, none of us need to be experts to understand what Jesus is saying here. Every tree is known by its own fruit. He begins by saying, no good tree bears bad fruit, not again does a bad tree bear good fruit. He proceeds to

give examples of bad trees and good fruit. The bad trees are thorn bushes and bramble bushes. Both were difficult to manage, and in the world of Jesus' day, neither were intentionally planted. They were weeds which produced poisonous fruit. The good fruit are figs and grapes, both staple fruits in the diet of Israel's peoples.

We don't get figs from thorn bushes or grapes from bramble bushes. It's common sense. Now, traditionally, we've interpreted this parable to suggest that we should be able to recognize a Christian by his or her actions by his or her actions, or as Jesus will later say, by the words they speak. And this is certainly true. In the context of Luke chapter 6, Jesus speaks of loving one's enemies and showing mercy. So, we should be able to recognize a Christian by the way in which they love those who do not love them, and they are ready to forgive sins which are committed against them.

If a person claims to be a Christian but curses his enemies and is forever criticizing everyone else, we must question, is that person really a Christian at all? Notice what Jesus is not saying here. Traditionally, we've made up cultural rules to define what a Christian should or should not do. He should not go to the cinema. He should not dance. He should wear a suit to church on a Sunday. He should read a certain translation of the Bible. Jesus blows our traditional standards for what a Christian should look like out of the water. It's got nothing to do with cinemas or suits. It's got everything to do with whether she loves her enemies, whether she forgives sins committed against her, whether she does to others the way she would have them do to her. These are far more searching criteria than the traditional rules we set up in previous generations. Far more searching, far more Christ-like.

[8 : 29] It is absolutely true that the Christian is known by his or her words and works. However, this is not always a safe measure of judgment. For the sincerest Christian can, for a time, fall into sin, and in those times for us to judge them as non-Christians would be the wrong judgment.

But generally speaking, over a period of time, our external actions toward others are a rough marker of our internal faith in Christ. Now, that's the truth. But it's not the primary truth Jesus is teaching in this passage, because he's not driving at the externals of our behavior, but the internals of our belief. He's telling us that without a heart transformed by the treasures of grace, we cannot produce the fruits of righteousness. Unless we ourselves have experienced the mercy of God, we shall not be able to show mercy to others. Unless we ourselves have realized that on the cross of Christ, God demonstrated his love to his enemies, we shall not be able to love our enemies. Unless we have been recipients of God's salvation generosity, we shall not be able to be generous toward others.

The treasure, as Jesus says in verse 45, you see, is in the heart. The treasure's in the heart, and it's from that treasure we bring forth good fruit. What comes first aren't the good words we speak or the good works we do. What comes first is our faith in Jesus Christ, a heart transformed by the grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, where God loves his enemies, shows mercy to the undeserving and forgives the sinner. As human beings, we love black and white rules, but Jesus refuses to be boxed in by our legalism, just as he refused to be boxed in by the Pharisees and their skewed human man-made religion. He's looking into our hearts today. Are we all listening? He's looking into our hearts today.

Are they good hearts or are they evil hearts? Some years ago, an elder in one of our Inverness churches, a well-loved figure in our denomination died from heart failure. Now, we had known for many years that his heart was in terribly bad shape.

He was overweight. Whenever you were with him, his wheezing was painful to listen to you.

Everyone said of him, oh, Callum, he has a bad heart. Physically, it was true. His heart was failing.

[11 : 37] But for those of us who knew him well, the opposite was true. He had a very good heart.

He was a faithful Christian who showed love and generosity to everyone he came into contact with and was always ready to share his faith with non-Christians. He was a great encourager. He had a good heart. The London Underground at rush hour is a seething mass of humanity. Packed tube trains, stop it. Packed stations. And at times like these, the station's announcer, station's, station's announcer's voice used to come across the town when we lived there with a simple message.

Inside out.

Inside out. Let those on the inside of the train exit before those on the platform enter. Luke 6, 43 through 45, Jesus is announcing to his disciples, inside out. Inside out.

Inside the Christian's heart is filled with the love and mercy of God toward her. She lets it out by showing love and mercy to others. If all that ever comes out is cursing and criticism, we must question whether that heart really is filled with God's love and mercy. If we have loving hearts, let's produce loving fruit. The immediately preceding passage we looked at this a couple of weeks ago describes how the Pharisees are more interested in the behavior of others than in their own. They judge others based upon their own set of man-made rules and standards. Of course, they give themselves a bit of an easier time of it. They have logs in their own eyes, but judge others for the splinters they've got in theirs. And in this passage, Jesus is rounding upon them. A Christian must not look on the behavior of others as much as he must look on his own behavior, for he alone is accountable for the state of his heart before God. It's not anyone else's fault that he does not believe in Jesus Christ or that he does not forgive the sins of others when they sin against him. Accountability for one's own belief and behavior is personal. To stop judging others and start judging ourselves, we do not ask the question, does that man have faith in Christ? Rather, do I have faith in Christ? We do not ask, how is that man demonstrating his faith in Christ? We ask, how am I demonstrating my faith in Christ?

One more thing before we move on. Namely, the phrase Jesus uses, the good treasure of his heart in verse 45. The good treasure of his heart. What a beautiful phrase to describe the heart of a man who's possessed by the gospel of God's love and mercy in the cross. That's it, is it not? We have the treasure of God in our hearts. Do we believe in Jesus Christ, that our hearts being transformed by his grace? Jesus began this sermon back in verse 20 by proclaiming, blessed are you who are poor.

Now in verse 45, he tells them, the faithful Christian who is poor, but is being shaped on the inside by the love of God, possesses good treasure.

[15:23] Possesses good treasure. When it comes to the fruit of the Christian life, the fruit of love, mercy, and forgiveness, it's what's on the inside that counts. The faith of our hearts controls the faithfulness of our faithfulness of our words and works as Christians. The movement is always inside out, inside out. It's not about keeping up appearances on the outside. It's about the reality of faith on the inside. Man looks at the outward appearance. God looks at the heart. What then does God see when He looks into our hearts this morning? Faith in Christ? Yes, faith. Even as small as a grain of mustard seed.

Agriculture and accountability. Well, secondly, more briefly, verses 46 through 49, foundations and faithfulness. Well, while faith in Christ is primary and must always remain so, faith and works must always go hand in hand. It's not enough that we listen to the words of Christ. It's not enough even that we listen to the words of Christ and with our own words call Christ Lord. We must listen to the words of Christ, believe the words of Christ, and then obey the words of Christ. This again is the inside-out movement of faith. What's on the inside inevitably comes out in what we do on the outside.

Now, before we get into the nuts and bolts of Jesus' parable here, let's remember, what is Jesus commanding us to do? For after all, He commends the Christian who listens to His words and does them.

What are these words? He is not referring to some abstract, historical, traditional version of holiness such as that as which the Pharisees set forth, what a man does or does not do in the Sabbath, what a man does or does not eat, what a woman... how a woman dresses, namely, obedience to a set of man-made standards. Jesus is not talking about these things. He is referring, rather, to the commands and imperatives He has laced through this sermon.

Verse 27, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you.

[18:14] Pray for those who abuse you. Be merciful even as your Father's merciful. Judge not, condemn not, forgive and give. These are the commands of Jesus in this section, all conditioned and themed around the double virtues of the love and mercy of God. That which Jesus commands us to do is not a set of man-made, culturally influenced, black and white, easy-to-obey rules such as, do not go to the cinema, do not smoke, do not put your washing out on a Sunday, and so on. They are altogether more challenging. Forgiveness, generosity, love, and mercy.

Colin Mackay recently recommended a book to me written by the excellent Channel Isle Christian called John Blanchard. I'd recommend it to you all. It's a wonderful book called What in the World is a Christian? What in the World is a Christian? In that book, Blanchard recounts the story of a man who went to preach in a rural church in England and railed against the worldliness of Christians in

that church. His sermon consisted in one long list of do-nots, do not smoke, do not gamble, do not drink, etc., etc., etc. You get the point. After the service, a local farmer in the church took the preacher home for lunch, very smart man, and led the preacher out to see his animals. And the farmer pointed to one of his donkeys and said, that donkey is the best Christian of us all. It doesn't smoke, it doesn't gamble, it doesn't drink.

Blanchard makes the point that the holiness toward which the Lord commands us is overwhelmingly positive.

Love your enemies, something a donkey is not capable of. Show them mercy. Pray for those who abuse you. Be generous toward them. These are the standards of righteousness to which a donkey cannot attain, to which a legalist cannot attain, but which require a genuinely grace-changed, faith-filled heart.

[20 : 58] This is what Jesus is commanding us to do and to be. Not just those for whom faith is all talk, but those for whom inside-out holiness is expressing itself in love and mercy.

It prompts the question, does it not, is our holiness that of an ass or of a Savior? The Christian who, out of the inside-out holiness of God's mercy in Christ Jesus, hears and does, is like a man who, when building his house, digs deep and lays his foundations on a rock.

By contrast, the person who hears the words of Christ but does not put them into practice, code here for the Pharisees, whose religion consists in obedience to one long list of rules, none of which are based on God's mercy and forgiveness, is like a man whose building, when he builds, lays his building flat on the ground without any kind of foundation at all.

Now, on the surface of things, these two houses may look the same. Both houses have doors and windows and roofs. Both houses are homes. But then during the rainy season, when the rivers overflow their banks and the floods come up through the ground, the reality strikes. The house with a foundation stands firm, but that without, that which does not have a foundation is utterly destroyed.

And great was the ruin thereof. Imagine a huge tower of Jenga blocks. Great was the ruin of that house.

[22 : 40] In days before governments paid for formal flood defenses, the best flood defense was to have a strong foundation. And because the life of the Pharisees did not have a strong foundation, they were swept away. Now, there's a lot more going on here than meets the eye.

There always is when Jesus is speaking. Because the floods to which Jesus refers aren't the so-called storms of life, personal illness, bereavement, unemployment, and so on. The flood to which Jesus is referring is God's end-time judgment. God's end-time judgment. The life of a Christian Christian, compared to that of someone whose religion is of human origin, it might look rather similar now. But on that day, they'll be revealed as being as different as black and white, up and down, salt and sweet. It's only then that the positive holiness created by the inside-out movement of the gospel shall be revealed as God's chosen way of righteousness. It's only on that day that the value of our faith shall be fully vindicated and that it shall be proved true that it's what's on the inside that counts. No one builds a foundation unless they need to. And Jesus is telling us that in the light of future judgment, we need a strong foundation of faith expressed in holiness.

In the first verses of this sermon in verses 20 and following, he's already referred to a great reversal when those who weep now will laugh, but those who laugh now will weep. And now he ends this sermon by referring directly to the day when God, the Lord of time and history, shall judge the world in righteousness and every heart shall be revealed for what it is. On that day, human religion shall be shown for all the empty, sham, and futile vanity it really is. The hypocrisy shall be finally exposed, and the conflict which has been ongoing between God's people and God's enemies shall be finally ended.

Christ and His gospel shall be forever vindicated. Perhaps as he wrote these words in Luke 6, Luke had his mentor Paul's words in mind from Philippians 2, that on that day, at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Well, as we close, I want to go back to the original statement. It's what's on the inside that counts. Last week, Callum broke his hand, and Callum had an x-ray. Perhaps we've all had x-rays at some point in our lives to find out where and how a bone has been broken, and that x-ray looked beneath Callum's skin. The eyes of God see into our hearts today. Every one of us, you all listening? The eyes of God look into our hearts today and give us a spiritual x-ray. Does he find faith in Christ there? Is there faith even as small as a

grain of mustard seed from which the inside-out movement of gospel expression can be launched? Likewise, remember what that inside-out movement produces, the holiness, true holiness of forgiveness, mercy, generosity.

The conflict between the church and all human religion was won by Jesus Christ on the cross, but the final declaration of that victory awaits the last day.

[26 : 58] But be sure to this, we're on the winning side. We may weep now, but we'll laugh then. We may be abused now and hated now, but we shall glory then. We may suffer now, but we shall rejoice then. And it's all because Jesus loved us and gave himself for us, and we believed in him. Have you heard the voice of Jesus speaking to you this morning?

We close now with a marvelous hymn. I heard the voice of Jesus say, come unto me and rest. Lay down, thou weary one. What are you weary with, trying to obey a set of man-made regulations? Come to Jesus. Lay down thy head upon my breast.

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