

Thinking Differently

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[0 : 00] Let's pray as we stand. Our Lord Jesus, we ask that you would draw near to us by your word.

We pray that you would search our hearts and cleanse our hearts and change our hearts so that we might love you and love one another in a way that would please you.

For we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please sit down. Amen. Well, if you would like to turn to Matthew chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount.

It's a very good thing to come to church and hear the best sermon that's ever been preached, don't you think? I don't mean mine, I mean Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount. I've preached a number of sermons on this sermon and I haven't heard the other sermons in the series here at St. John's, but there's one thing I can say with absolute certainty, they were nowhere near as good as the original. Well, now in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus bursts on the scene and if you look back with your eyes to chapter 3 and 4, on the previous page, he heals everyone of every disease who comes to him.

[1 : 19] just the last few verses of chapter 4 point out the chronically ill, the blind, crippled, lame, deaf. And he does miracles that have never been done in the world before or since and he preaches that the kingdom of heaven has arrived, words that have never been heard in the world before.

And Matthew is telling us that all the things that God has been promising, all the purposes that are within the heart of God since the beginning of creation are now being fulfilled as Jesus is amongst us.

His purpose of peace, his purpose of grace, his kingdom of heaven. And then chapter 4, verses 18, he calls some disciples to himself.

Their job is fishing and he says, you're no longer going to catch fish, you're now going to catch human beings, men, people. Their focus moves from fishing business, this often happens to disciples, to the concern of heaven, to people.

And the crowds flock, understandably. And then for chapters 5, 6 and 7, we have this sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest sermon, as I say, that's ever been preached. Three chapters.

[2 : 41] And I want you to see how it starts and ends. In verse 1 of chapter 5, we read this, seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

And then in the end of chapter 7, when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority and not as their scribes.

The sermon is aimed at disciples, but it's preached with the crowd listening. Jesus wants to teach his disciples what it means to be a disciple within the context of the crowd and the world.

It's very important, isn't it? He wants us to know what it is to be a follower, to follow him, not often in some secret place, but in the midst of the crowd, in the middle of the world.

And at the heart of the sermon is chapter 6, verse 8. This is like the theme of the sermon or the summary of the sermon where Jesus says, do not be like them.

[3 : 50] It's a great thing if you can summarize a sermon down to one phrase. I've never been able to do it for any of my sermons. But Jesus says this. Here is the sermon on the mount, you must be different.

He says, don't be like the crowd that wants a religion of the externals, but doesn't want transformation of the heart. You must be different. He says, don't be like the crowd that thinks that life is made up of the abundance of possessions and material things, and that this life is all that there is.

You must be different. And from the very first words of the sermon, we see how opposite and how different Jesus expects us to be. Look at chapter 5, verse 3.

Here are the first words of the sermon on the mount. Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's fantastic stuff.

The first word is blessing because the life of the disciple is to stand under the blessing of God. And the essential mark of our lives is not that we're terribly religious, it's not that we have great spiritual abilities or achievement or gifts, it is that you and I are poor in spirit, that we recognise we have nothing spiritually to offer God.

[5 : 15] Last weekend, the New York Times magazine did their whole magazine on debt. They called it America's scariest addiction is getting even scarier.

And in the middle, there's an article by a woman who declared bankruptcy. She was a young mother who had a medical emergency. She was not able to keep up with the minimum payments on even her credit cards. And it's a funny article in a way.

She describes five years of ducking creditors and pretending to be someone that she wasn't. Creditor would call on the phone, she would put on a deep voice and say, yes, I'll send the message along. And then she files for bankruptcy and this is what she writes and I quote, it felt good.

I was full of relief and gratitude for the chance to start again. I did not feel the guilt I feared I would. And the article is titled, Hooray for Bankruptcy.

And spiritually, that is what it means to be a Christian. We recognise that we have a debt toward God that we cannot possibly begin to pay.

[6 : 26] And we realise that it is a burden that we cannot bear, we can never repay it, and we say, he can, hooray for spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus himself is able to bear all the burdens that we carry.

And now, it's very important, Jesus doesn't say blessed are the poor, because poverty is a grinding and demeaning and evil thing. But he says, blessed are the poor in spirit, who know they have nothing to claim in front of God because to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.

See how opposite it is? Well, look at the last beatitude in verse 11. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you, say all kinds of evil things against you falsely on my account.

What's the response? Rejoice and be glad. You follow me, Jesus says, you're going to be insulted, looked down on and persecuted, so rejoice.

See how different it is. And Jesus drives the point deeper. He uses three pictures of what it means to be a disciple.

[7 : 37] He says, if you're a disciple, you're like salt, you're like light, you are like a city set on a hill, and the one thing they have in common, all those three things, is that you cannot hide them.

That they stand out from what is around about them. In fact, they function as they are different. And verse 16 sets us up for our passage today.

Verse 16, Jesus says, let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Now, Jesus' disciples are meant to live in front of the world and in front of the crowd in such a way that people look at our lives and give praise to God.

And I think that is much more difficult and much more creative than perhaps we first imagine. See, when we do good things, what people usually do is they praise us.

[8 : 41] You know, you contribute some money or you contribute your time downtown at a homeless shelter. These are things that young people are encouraged to do now at high school. And they're meant to write it on their CV so when they go and apply for their first job, the employer will look at them and say, what a very good person you are.

But our works are meant to be different, so different, so unusual, that people look at our works and say, not what a good person you are, but how good God is.

You see, our works are meant to be unusual and odd, divinely inspired odd, different from what people expect. People are meant to go, whoo. And I think that's what it means to fish for people.

You know, in those days, when I was a boy, I learnt to fish. It was a brutal experience. Metal hooks kill the fish when they come up. But in those days, it was a net experience.

You cast nets. And I think what Jesus is saying is that our lives are meant to be lived in such a way, so differently from the world, that we can't help spreading the net of God's kingdom and his love and other people just get caught up in it.

[9 : 57] What does it look like? Well, Jesus gets very practical and he gives six practical applications of living differently from verses 21 to 48.

And if you've read the sermon, and really, I encourage you to do so, you could do much better, much worse, than learning it off by heart. And in each of the applications, Jesus begins and he says, you've heard it said to men long ago, and then he says, but I say to you, there's this repetition of me.

And the reason for that, and I never tire of saying this, that at the core of the Christian life, at the heart of Christian ethics, is Jesus himself. That what makes us different, in the end, is him.

That the question for every disciple is, how can I serve Jesus here in this thing? What does it mean to surrender to him in the circumstances of today? And these six applications of very searching, Jesus eviscerates every vestige of self-righteousness and legalism.

And you know, the first two applications, verse 21 through to 30, he shows the real intentions of the commandments are not just about behaviour, but about the heart.

[11:24] He says, I haven't come to destroy the commandments, I've come to deepen them, to fulfil them. So he says, anger, hatred, and bitterness is really murder.

Here we are as a congregation, if we refuse to forgive one another, if we bear grudges, Jesus says, you're murdering people. Just the same way he says, a lustful look or looking at a person to get them to look lustfully at you or lustful imagination is no different than the act of adultery in God's mind.

We commit murder with our words, we commit adultery with our hearts, which means every church is full of adulterers, murderers, and chronic liars, which is why the fundamental requirement of a disciple is that she is poor in spirit.

Now, Jesus gives very practical teaching of how to deal with this ongoing issue of murder and adultery and lying in our hearts, and it's brilliant and wonderful and life-giving, and we don't have time to deal with it today.

I'm going to deal with it next week. Today, we only have time to deal with the third application in verses 31 and 32. Let me read them to you so that you have them in your heart again.

[12:47] Verse 31. It was also said, whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce. But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

I want to spend the rest of our time on this issue, but before we start, here are two things that I need to say. The first is this, that divorce is complex and controversial and incredibly painful.

It is like an emotional atomic bomb and it leaves deep craters and spreads fallout on many who stand by.

Some of us have been touched by divorce and we know very personally what this means. And I need to say as we talk about this topic today, that every single one of us are very weak and fragile and very sinful and there is no marriage in this congregation that may not be threatened by divorce one day.

You cannot listen to this teaching of Jesus as a sort of an academic, dispassionate game. And that leads me to the second thing. While it may be difficult, we must deal with this.

[14:19] I must say, I came back from holidays and I saw that Dan had given me this passage in divorce. I said, thanks, Dan. I've preached sermons on marriage.

I don't think I've ever preached a sermon on divorce before. But Jesus thinks that this is so important, he includes it in the Sermon on the Mount and then again later in Matthew.

And the reason is, it's not just relevant for some disciples, this is relevant for all disciples and the words of Jesus are light and love and life.

This is not the whole teaching of Jesus on divorce in Matthew's Gospel and I want to turn to the fuller passage on this, but before we do, there are just two things to notice about these words if you just cast your eyes down.

If you look at verse 32, in certain circumstances, Jesus says that the remarriage of a divorced person or a remarriage by a divorced person is adultery.

[15:25] They may be legally divorced, but maybe not in the eyes of God. The second thing to say, and this is a little more technical, is that the last two references to adultery in verse 32 are not active, but passive.

Let me explain. In Jesus' day, it was much easier to get divorced than it is now and there's evidence that it was more frequent than today. There's evidence that it could happen very trivially.

A husband could divorce a wife within Judaism if he did not like her cooking. And if a man, for some trivial and selfish reason, casts a woman aside and she remarries, says Jesus, it's not she who commits adultery.

She is the victim of adultery from her first husband. And the man who marries her is not guilty of adultery, but he has adultery committed on him by the first husband. Isn't that interesting?

Well, let's turn, shall we, to Matthew 19. We need to look at where Jesus deals with this a little more fully. I'm aware we can't cover all the bases, but this is certainly a longer passage and a deeper passage.

[16:48] On page 19, Matthew 19, we begin with verse 3. The Pharisees come up to Jesus and test him by asking, is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?

Now, in Jesus' day, there were two schools of thought and Judaism. One was more strict than the other. Pharisees are not really interested in the will of God here. They want to find out whether Jesus is a liberal or is he a conservative.

They want to find the loophole. They want to know how far they can get away with. How can we dispose with our wives legitimately? And Jesus' answer is absolutely brilliant.

He does not even answer their question. He takes them back behind marriage to God's purpose in creation. You see what's happening? They want to keep pushing out of marriage and Jesus keeps pushing them back into marriage and back into the purpose of God.

Verse 4. He answered, Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female and said, for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother, be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh?

[18:00] They are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder. See what Jesus is saying?

Marriage is not just a two-way human contract. It's God himself who stands witness to the marriage vows. It's God himself who calls us to account for marriage vows.

And that is why, incidentally, back in the Sermon on the Mount, the very section after the section on divorce, Jesus speaks about vows. But here is the miracle of marriage.

It is that God does the joining. Do you know, I've been in ministry for many years and I didn't realise that until just halfway through last year.

Since the creation of man and woman, it's God himself who does the joining together in marriage.

And that is why marriage, in God's view, is different than cohabitation.

[19:02] Cohabitation, in God's view, is sexual immorality. But in marriage, God takes two people and makes them one flesh, which is much more than just the sexual union.

It's the creation of a new public social unit. It's the creation of ties deeper together than even affinity and blood kinship.

And what Jesus is doing is he is exposing the agenda of the Pharisees. Marriage, he says, the purpose of marriage transcends the couple.

It's not a private institution for the meeting of my private needs. It's not even an end in itself.

Marriage is given to be used in the service of God. This is very important.

See, traditionally, there are three reasons given for marriage. The procreation and care of children, companionship, for the public good, and all three reasons are biblical and all three reasons are right and all three reasons are secondary to the fact, this bigger issue, that marriage is the gift and invention of God and is meant to be used for his glory.

[20:16] Let me speak to you about it this way. If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, you are meant to think of your marriage in terms of how it may serve God, just as you are to think of your singleness in terms of how it may serve God, just as you are to think of anything and everything in your life as to how it should serve God.

You and I are to make decisions about our marriage and about our singleness in the light of the kingdom of heaven. We're meant to live in this area as in every other area before the crowd in such a way that we bring glory to God.

You see, it's the opposite of some legalistic calculation as to, you know, when it's right to divorce or remarry. But the Pharisees haven't finished in verse 7.

They say to him, why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and put her away? And Jesus said to them, for your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives.

But from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity and marries another, commits adultery. The Pharisees quote scripture.

[21 : 28] Well, actually, they misquote scripture. They go back to Deuteronomy 24 where Moses never commanded divorce, but it is a concession.

See, we live outside the Garden of Eden. And in his graciousness, God did grant divorce in the Old Testament. He doesn't approve it necessarily. He doesn't condone it.

But what he does is God allows divorce and sets boundaries around it to limit the damage, to limit the fallout, not to encourage the bomb to explode.

In fact, when we come to the book of Malachi in the Old Testament, you remember, God says, I hate divorce, just as every person I know who's been through divorce who's spoken to me about it says, it is so painful.

God weeps with us as we weep in this. But the clear direction of Jesus' teaching is this. If you are married and if you wish to know the will of God, stay together, don't divorce.

[22 : 37] And if you are thinking about how to end your marriage, Jesus' teaching to us today is to say, go to the limit to persevere and maintain and nurture your marriage.

All of Jesus' words and all of his resources are directed towards maintaining marriages rather than breaking them. And if we come to him, he promises to share with us his resources of faithfulness and forgiveness and to help us.

But, we have to say, while Jesus has not changed, neither have we. And we need to be real and honest about the fact that Christian marriages crack and crumble and break.

And here in Matthew 19 and in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus himself recognises that adultery can cause a marriage to break down. It does not have to, but it may.

And Jesus recognises the need to remarry after divorce. And we do not have time to look at this this morning, but let me just tell you that when we come to the letter of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul, in my view, says that there may be other reasons to remarry after divorce.

[23 : 53] To be honest with you, not all Christians agree with this. In 1 Corinthians, there are people who have become Christians, new Christians in Corinth. And in a number of marriages, one partner has become a Christian while the other remains an unbeliever.

And Jesus writes to them and he says, if you are a Christian wife or husband and you have a non-Christian spouse, remain faithful, stay with that person, love that person.

But if your unbelieving spouse leaves you and divorces you, the Apostle Paul says, you are not bound. And I take that to mean you are not bound to the marriage.

and therefore you may be free to remarry. So where does that leave us this morning? I'm very conscious that each of us are in unique situations.

We represent a whole range of circumstances. How do we move forward together? And how do we take the word of Jesus seriously and live the life of the kingdom of God in the daily circumstances that we find ourselves in now?

[25 : 08] And to finish, I want to turn back to Matthew 5 and remind you of where we started. Matthew 5, verse 3, the first words of the Sermon on the Mount.

I want these to weigh in our hearts. blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And if that is true, we need to ask two questions. Here are two questions for me to leave with you this morning. The first is this. How can we be different here and now?

If we're all murderers and adulterers and liars, as Jesus says, what does it mean to belong to the kingdom? What does it look like to be poor in spirit?

If we struggle with all these things until we die, how can we live now in such a way that people will see our good works and give glory to God the Father in heaven? And I take it part of the answer has to do with the preoccupation and direction of our hearts.

[26 : 15] And I need to warn us about this. It's possible to become legalistic and pharisaical and self-righteous about marriage. If we say, well, I've never been divorced, this is not relevant to me, we're straight back where the crowd is and the Pharisees are.

I mean, what does Jesus say to those partners who maintain a loveless marriage and are proud of it? What does he say to the husband who will not love his wife sacrificially as Jesus does?

Or to the wife who will not submit, who stands on her own rights? I think being different means recognising that it's in my heart, in our hearts, where the source of murder and lies and adultery come from.

And that we need to pray for his help, pray for the help of Jesus so that we become someone who mourns, people who are meek, people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, not for self-right, not for self-justification, but for the righteousness that comes from him.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That is how we be different, I think. And the second and final question, and I finish with this, is this, is the cross of Jesus sufficient for us?

[27 : 38] Very important that we finish with the word of the cross. It has to be the last word. The same Jesus who preached this sermon came into the world to save us from our sins.

This same Jesus says in Matthew 11, come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. The same Jesus is the one who dies for us on the cross.

Is the cross of Jesus sufficient to forgive us from our murders, and our adulteries, and from our frequent lives? Is the cross able to bear the burden of my divorce?

Divorce is not the unforgivable sin. Can I come away from a divorce absolutely without guilt? Can the cross, is it sufficient to wash away all my guilt, even if I am the guilty one?

Is the cross enough for my unwanted singleness? Does the cross of Jesus have the resources of faithfulness and forgiveness for a loveless marriage?

[29 : 01] Is the faithfulness in Jesus and the forgiveness of Jesus at the cross, is that really available for us today? Yes. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Thank you.