

Real Love

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[0 : 00] If you would take your Bibles and turn to Matthew chapter 5 on page 4. I'm reluctant to do this because I don't like highlighting one particular anthem over another.

But I just wanted to express our thanks to the choir for that amazing anthem by Benjamin Britten this morning. Thank you very much. Good, you didn't applaud. That's very well behaved, church congregation.

Good, you're welcome. This morning I failed to welcome Bishop Paul Barnett and his wife who were here at the 9 o'clock. I didn't see them here. Bishop Paul is an Australian bishop who is here to teach at Regent and to be amongst us here at St John's for a little while.

And I'm sorry I didn't notice that he was here because I would have brought him out the front and interviewed him about Australia's soccer team. I wouldn't have. That's just, I promised my wife I wouldn't say that but I've said it so there we go.

Now one of the most successful advertising campaigns over the last few years has been the Apple campaign Think Different. I imagine you've seen it.

[1 : 11] And when the ad first came out there was all sorts of tut-tutting and spluttering in the media that think different is not grammatically correct. Which of course is the point.

You've got to think differently. Think different. And the ads featured people who are supposed to be super creative types like Albert Einstein and Bob Dylan and Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi and Amelia Earhart and Frank Lloyd Wright. And the ads became so successful that they spawned a series of parodies. One of the ads I've seen which parodies the Think Different is called Crash Different.

Those of you who own computers, that's a term that means they stop working. I can see this illustration is not going anywhere. Let's...

It's like when you tell a joke and you have to explain it. It's a terrible thing. Let's come back to this most remarkable sermon ever preached.

[2 : 15] And here's my point. In some ways what Jesus is saying is be different. And the reason we are to be different is because of him.

It's because of how different he is. I don't know if you've ever done this, but if you read through Matthew's Gospel, if you look at the next three chapters after the Sermon on the Mount, it's a whirlwind of action.

Jesus heals people. He raises the dead. Raises the dead. And all preaching about the fact that God is now fulfilling all his promises of good since creation.

This blessing and this new life which he wishes us to enter, which he calls the life of the kingdom of heaven. We saw last week that he preaches this sermon at the beginning of his ministry here in Matthew, in front of the crowd but to his disciples.

And the message of what it means to be his disciple and belong to the kingdom is to be different. And the Sermon on the Mount is a bit like a house. There are all these windows that you can come into at any point.

[3 : 25] But if you go in the front door, the first thing you see and the first thing you hear is repeated by Jesus nine times. It's the word blessed. Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed.

Nine points. Because the first thing we need to know about life in the kingdom is that we stand under the blessing of God. And I know the Christian life is basically all about coming to believe that and we never really get there until we get there.

Blessed, he says. Not lucky, not happy, not fortunate. Blessed. How you stand before God, he is telling us. Remember the first beatitude in verse 3, he says, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Those who recognise their spiritual bankruptcy, it's those people the kingdom of heaven belongs to. Blessed are those who mourn, he says. They shall be comforted. It's crazy. I mean, happy are the unhappy. Remember when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, the last time in the Gospels.

[4 : 32] Remember what he does? He stands, Bethany, and he looks over to Jerusalem. He weeps. He sees their hardness of heart and their blindness and their arrogance and their lack of faith.

And this is true for every disciple of Jesus Christ. We look into our own hearts and we look at the world around us and we weep. We've seen something of how wonderful Jesus is and how far our lives are from that.

And we ache for a righteousness from him. And I wonder if you look at verse 6. I just wanted, this is the last beatitude I want to touch on.

Blessed Jesus says, are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. This is the deepest hunger in the heart of every Christian.

It's a hunger and thirst for righteousness. Righteousness. Now, I'm aware that the word righteousness is not a word that drops into conversation easily, is it?

[5 : 35] The last time, although you've used it twice this morning, the last time I heard a group use it, I was amongst a group of Australian surfers. And they talked about righteous waves, which I think means good waves.

But Jesus is speaking about something much more than this. He's speaking about the transforming friendship that we have with God himself. He's speaking about the righteousness that comes from God.

And for those who follow Jesus Christ and have placed their lives at his disposal, we have begun, through Jesus, we've begun to taste that very righteousness of God.

And we are deeply conscious of how unrighteous we are and of how self-obsessed we are. And we are thirsty in our lives and we are thirsty in the lives of those around us for this righteousness.

And Jesus says, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they'll be satisfied.

And then just in case, just in case we missed the point, Jesus makes six stunning applications.

[6 : 47] I think as preachers we ought to take this lead. Six applications from verses 21 to the end of the chapter. And each one is very searching, surgical, and demonstrates that true righteousness is a thing of the heart.

Just look at verse 22 for a moment. Cast your eye down and look at verse 22. Jesus says, if we bear grudges and bitterness towards others, if we're angry and hostile in our hearts to each other, we have murdered them.

Verse 28. If we look at another person with lust, sexual desire in our hearts, we've already committed adultery in our hearts. We commit murder in our words, in our private hearts, and we commit adultery in our minds, in our imagination.

And as I said last week, that means that every church is full of murderers, adulterers, and inveterate liars. And before we, what I'd like to do today is I'd like to look at the very last application at the end of the chapter about loving our enemies.

But I want to take a detour before we get there. I'd like to show you how practical, how real Jesus' teaching is here. And if I asked your permission to take the detour, I would be being dishonest with you because I'm going to do it anyway.

[8 : 08] I'm sorry. So let's have a look at, I want us to see how practical and helpful and down to earth Jesus' teaching is here. Just look at verse 23 on anger.

Take anger and bitterness, for example. Verse 23, he says, if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift.

Jesus' view, if we are harbouring anger or bitterness towards another person, we are in a very dangerous place. And in his view, we need to take urgent, interruptive action.

You may never have let that person know that you're hostile to them. You may have that wonderful ability to be able to cover your contempt with them. But Jesus says you can't hide it from God.

He sees into our hearts. And he says that brother, that sister is so important to you. You've got to stop even your religious activities and go deal with it. And he gives this, I think it's sort of a funny picture really.

[9 : 18] If you were a Jew in those days, from time to time, you would go up to the temple to offer sacrifice for sin. And what would happen is you'd go and buy a goat and you'd bring it up to the priest at the front, which was quite a long walk with a struggling goat.

And you'd give it to the priest. He'd slaughter the goat, sprinkle the blood on you, confess your sins and you would be, atonement would be made. Jesus says, imagine you have gone and you've bought your goat and you bring it up and you're just about to get to the altar and you suddenly remember that your brother has something against you or that there's a relationship which is not right between you and your sister.

And so you say to the goat, no, sorry, you say to the priest, sorry. Say to the priest, would you mind holding this squirming goat?

I need to go and deal with something far more important. And the priest says, yes, I'll just put it with 150 others that I've got to hold on to. See, here is what Jesus wants us to do.

If there's someone in the church community here and you know you've wronged them or you know it's not right between you and someone else, don't go home today without fixing it. It's urgent and it's life-giving.

[10 : 33] It may be painful, but in the end it will save you and save your brother and your sister. It's very practical, isn't it? And you see the same with sexual temptation in the next verses.

I don't think there's ever been a generation in history which has been more saturated with sexual imagery than ours. It pumps into our homes through the television and through the internet.

And Jesus' words here come as life and hope directly to those people whose sexual desires are controlling their lives and ruining their lives.

And Jesus says something even much more important. He says it's actually perilous to your soul. There's absolutely nothing wrong with sexual desire or physical attraction.

They're God-given gifts. But Jesus is speaking about the lustful look, looking at the other person to undress them and desire them, looking at an image to stimulate your own sexual desires.

[11 : 33] And Jesus is saying this before the inception of internet pornography, which has become a huge industry and a huge problem in many, many homes. There are now books that are telling us the way in which internet pornography and the addiction to it develops.

And we're told that there are four stages where you have a physical and psychological addiction where internet pornography gains hold over us a little like heroin or another drug.

And then the second stage is escalation where you need to take on more and more sexually explicit material and you begin to look at antisocial or more degrading images to maintain that same arousal.

There's addiction and then there's escalation and thirdly, there is desensitisation. And what used to shock you and what used to alarm you now becomes acceptable and normal.

What used to be repulsive and disgusting is now desirable. And then the fourth stage is acting out. You become so desensitised and your conscience is so burned that you begin to act out and the usual result is the destruction of a family.

[12 : 59] Well, look at Jesus' words in verse 29 and 30. Jesus is using deliberately extreme language.

He's shocking us. And the reason he's doing it is because he loves us and he knows that we can become so gripped by this that it will take us to hell.

And Jesus' call here is for us to deal with this drastically, even painfully. Now, of course he is not talking about physical mutilation.

Has he not just said that this is an issue of the heart? If you read through Matthew's Gospel, you'll find that this is not the only place he uses this image of cutting off limbs to preserve us from all kinds of temptation.

What is so practical and so helpful about this, I think, is that Jesus is not just calling us to reject sin, but he is calling upon us to decisively and ruthlessly reject what leads me into sin.

[14 : 25] Anything that leads me in this direction, Jesus says, must be cut off. Now, I know we are all different, but if this is an area in which you struggle, Jesus' teaching is that you have to eliminate certain things from your life.

There are certain books you're not going to read, there are certain websites that you're not going to look at, there are certain films you're not going to see, there are people you may not associate with. As one of the commentators says memorably, it's better to go limping into heaven than leaping into

hell.

And again, you know, we see how different it is to be a Christian because the world says, I've got to have it all, I've got to experience everything. And Jesus says, no, no, the disciple says, the kingdom of heaven is worth more than everything to me.

There is no sacrifice too great for me. And it takes a lot of courage to do this, to cut it off. And you will not always resist successfully, but Jesus doesn't condemn us for failing.

The condemnation here is for pursuing lust without trying to fight against it. I want to encourage you, don't fight against this on your own, in silence.

[15:49] There are steps that you can take. There are people in St. John's who have made this very courageous decision and have begun to meet together in groups to make themselves accountable to each other.

I want to urge you, if this is a difficulty for you, acknowledge before God what it is and come and speak to someone. If you're a man, come and speak to me. If you're a woman, speak to Edie afterwards.

Well, that is the end of the detour, brothers and sisters, and we need to get down to the end of this passage and have a look at the last application, which is loving one's enemies. I had a haircut on Thursday.

And while the young woman was cutting my hair, she came to that terrible place in the conversation where she asked me what I did. And I said, I'm a minister. And she said, oh, wow, that's really interesting.

I said, it's a bit of a conversation stopper, really, isn't it? No, no, she said, it's just that none of my friends are Christians. She said, I don't know any Christians, at least none of my friends are practising Christians.

[17:03] I said, what would it look like if they were practising Christians? She said, you know, practising their beliefs. And I said, like what? And she said, oh, you know, don't have sex before marriage, as if anyone would do that.

I said, trying to move the conversation very quickly, I said, what about loving your enemies? She said, who believes that?

I said, it's something Jesus taught us. She said, nobody's going to put that into practice. She said. So, verse 43, you've heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies.

Pray for those who persecute you. Jesus is quoting what the Pharisees taught and what many people believed in those days and you get it today in a slightly different form.

The way it comes today is, you know, Old Testament religion, Old Testament God, primitive, spiteful and vengeful, but we're much more sensitive. That, of course, is a complete perversion of the God of the Old Testament.

[18:15] For example, you'll never find this statement, love your neighbour, hate your enemy, in the Old Testament. Let me ask you this. Where does this verse come from?

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If he's thirsty, give him water to drink. Is that Jesus? No, it's the book of Proverbs deep in the Old Testament. The law taught kindness to the alien and to the stranger.

And what Jesus does here is he takes all the intention of the Old Testament law and brings it to the sharpest possible focus by saying what nobody else has ever said. You love your neighbour and you love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you.

This is very difficult. Revenge is a deep part of each of our DNA. And the easiest illustration is, if you don't believe me, just watch next time your reaction when you're cut off in traffic.

What's interesting here is that Jesus is not content by saying just don't take revenge. He's not saying just turn the other cheek.

[19:30] He's saying we actually need to love that person who struck us on the cheek with active, ongoing love. You see, it's one thing not to strike back, but it is a completely supernatural thing to love the person who has treated you as an enemy, who has said those terrible things about you and done those terrible things to you.

The reason we are meant to be like this is that this is the God whom we belong to. It's the kind of God. This is who he is. He loves his enemies. If God had not deliberately sacrificed his own right for revenge, we wouldn't even be here this morning.

You remember? God shows his love to us in this and that while we were his enemies, Christ died for us. And one of the most practical and down-to-earth things we can do for our enemies is to pray for them.

Not praying that God would get them, but praying God's blessing on them. It's been my experience that it's very difficult to keep hating someone if you are sincerely praying for them.

This is what God is like. He makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the good and the evil. Every day. Do you know the sun doesn't come up by itself? It's an act of God's love.

[20 : 54] And he makes the sun shine both on those who are good and those who are evil. If you are a follower of Jesus, you're not going to be selectively warm and loving, but you will be someone who rejoices in being persecuted for Christ's sake, who prays for the person who persecutes you.

Only Christians do that. And if I can just say a little aside here, it may well be for us as a Christian church in the midst of a denominational mess, we well may have the opportunity of doing something very Christ-like in this regard.

Look at verse 46. If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you salute only your brothers, sisters, what more are you doing than others?

Don't even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father. is perfect. I know it dates me to tell you this, but James Taylor used to have a song that had a chorus, shower the people you love with love.

That's a very good thing to say. But everyone believes in loving their own, their own kind, their own family, even the tax collectors. But Jesus says, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be different.

[22 : 22] Our love of other people is not controlled by their niceness or their deservingness or what we're going to receive in return. It is controlled by the love that we have received from Christ.

I wish I had more time to do this. You see, receiving the love of Christ makes me the freest person of anyone in the world. I'm free from trying to justify myself.

I'm free from having to retaliate. I'm free from that dreadful pursuit of trying to make myself lovable.

I'm free to love others. So let me finish.

I need to finish with three questions. The first is in verse 47 and it is Jesus' question. If you look down at that verse, he says, what more are you doing than others?

It's a very good question, isn't it? Every single one of us have people in our lives who has treated us as enemies. People who have demanded the coat, people who have ridden on our generosity, people even who persecute us.

[23 : 28] And Jesus is not encouraging us to allow what is illegal or to allow ourselves just to become the doormat. What he is saying is he is calling for radical, personal, active, different love.

I have a friend, some years ago he came home one evening and there was someone breaking into his house as he got home. And being a rugby player without much thinking, he tackled this guy and his wife called the police.

And they charged him, they had him arrested and they brought charges against him and then they began to visit him. And then they began to visit his family and then they invited his family around to their home. That expresses the love of Christ.

If you belong to Jesus you have a new heart, a new Lord and a new life. We do not take our standards from the crowd. We don't take our virtues or our morality or our decisions from the community or the culture but from Christ, the Son of God and he asks us what more are you doing than others?

Secondly, what on earth does Jesus mean in verse 48? you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. We have a mathematical and Greek view of perfection.

[24 : 46] But this word really means qualified. In Jesus' day it was used of a thief, a perfect thief. And I guess a perfect thief is a thief who doesn't get caught.

Jesus does not expect us to be sinless in this life. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. And then in the next chapter he teaches us each day to pray, Father, forgive us our sins.

But to be perfect means to reflect the love of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit and to grow in that likeness to God in such a way that we begin to love even our enemies as God does.

God the Son and the Son and the Son and then the third question of course is where does the power come from to do, how can we do this? And the answer is that the ability only comes from Jesus himself.

Jesus is not asking us to do anything that he didn't perfectly fulfill himself. He was completely unrighteously arrested.

[26 : 00] He was beaten and abused and flogged and mocked and you remember on the cross he did not retaliate. On the cross as they're driving nails into his feet and hands you remember what he prays and in the original he prays and keeps going praying, keeps praying he says Father forgive them they don't know what they're doing.

We do not have the power to help us we do not have the power to change ourselves and here is the one word for us this morning come to him come to Christ because his promise is this blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness they shall be satisfied they shall be satisfied Amen