

Faith in the Marketplace: Perfectly Equipped 2

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[0:00] I feel the somewhat grander circumstances of today in being up here and hope that you can cope with flowers and all the lovely things that are part of this setting and hope that I can match the setting from which I am to speak.

The subject on which I want to speak is the last in this series of six events in the Sermon on the Mount in which the person of Jesus Christ is working through in this sermon some illustrations of how the kingdom of God works.

And if you recall that the formula by which it is all gone is that Christ said to them in the beginning except your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees there will be no place for you in the kingdom.

In other words you will have missed out on what the kingdom is all about. And he illustrated that in the six subsequent illustrations that I have presented to you over the past five weeks and of which this is the sixth.

And you will remember that the first of them was it's not the man who pulls the trigger who's at fault. It's the man who has the hate or anger in his heart that's at fault.

[1:38] It's not the man who has the lust to rape. It's the man who has even accommodated the lust in his own heart that is at fault.

It's not the man who quickly pursues divorce. It's the man in whom even the concept of divorce resides that is at fault.

And then he says it's not the man who swears by this, that, or the other thing. It is the man who his heart is so mixed that he can't say yes or no that is at fault.

It's not the man who swears to get vengeance on his neighbor, but it's the man who doesn't even love his neighbor.

And then this final illustration, which is chapter 5 and verse 43, and the text of which you have in front of you, in which I will now read to you.

[2:41] You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven.

For he makes his sun shine, his sun rise on the evil and on the good. He sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

If you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Do not even the same. You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect. So Jesus starts out with the same illustration as he does for each of these.

And he says, the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees is in this instance marked by a study of scripture in which they have concluded that you are to love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

[3:53] And having arrived at that conclusion, they find it very congenial and easy to live with, as we all do. And Jesus says, but I'm telling you that the reality has got to be something far more significant than that.

And he says, I say to you, in contrast, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. To love your neighbor and hate your enemy is not really a very singular accomplishment.

It doesn't have anything to do to change the character of who we are. But to be able to love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you is a far more significant event in your life and demands a much more radical change.

You see, what he's trying to deal with here, I think, is the response mechanism that is built into each one of us.

That is, when you're given a situation, what is your first response? And Jesus quite rightly identifies what our first response is. You know, our first response to kill is anger.

[5:18] You know, I mean, you often see it drawn up in cartoon illustrations. The urge to kill, you know, it's very there. It's very close to the surface in all of our lives.

The urge to kill, the lust which is so easily provoked in each one of us, the easily abandoned concept of family integrity, which is so easily given up.

That's the instinct that we have. It comes very quickly to us. The necessity of lying, the necessity of revenge, and the necessity of hating your enemy.

All those are programmed responses built into us as people. They are presumably built into the whole of the animal kingdom, and the animal kingdom survives by exercising these programmed responses, and we don't expect them to do anything else.

We expect them to respond to whatever mechanism is built into their making. But somehow Jesus is suggesting that for you and I as human beings, there is to be an entirely different and far more profound response built in to reveal who we are, essentially.

[6:40] And so he goes on to say who we are in verse 45, that this response mechanism that I want destroyed in order that a whole new kind of response mechanism can be built into you comes as the result of you acknowledging God as your father, in other words, in other words, you are to reveal in your character who you are, and you are to be sons of your father who is in heaven.

Now this means that the primary identification of each one of us is to be a child of God. That's who we are to know ourselves to be.

As you acquaint yourself with yourself, you acquaint yourself with a child of God. And what you need to do is to cultivate that kind of self-realization, that you are in a peculiar way called to be a child of God.

Not a child of wrath or a child of this world, but you're called to be a child of God. Now you may see yourself as distinguished, intelligent, successful, powerful, influential, respected, in relationship to other men or women.

But that is very much a temporary identity, which you may hold together for a little while. The magnificent picture of Canada's most powerful businessman, which is going to come out in this Friday's Globe.

[8:28] That's a picture that is true for a time, perhaps, in anybody's life. But the basic identity you have is as a child of God. That's who you are.

And what you have to do is to build that consciousness into you by relationship with your father. So that the response mechanism with which you respond to the urge to kill and lust and all these other things, that response mechanism will be appropriate to someone who is reflecting the nature and character of his heavenly father.

That means that your primary identity is as a child of God. This is my father's world. This is my father's house. This is my father's book.

I am my father's child. Now, the trouble is, and as a preacher, I run into this very often.

People come up and say that the father that I knew as a child was a drunken and tyrannous bully. And I find it very difficult to say, my father who is in heaven because my mind is so full of associations with a father who didn't respect me, a father who abused me, a father who didn't love me, a father who didn't understand me, a father who didn't care for me.

[10:03] But what I think Christ is saying is that our concept of father is not to come from our earthly experience, but from our relationship to God.

And that that relationship to God as father is then to be interpreted into the circumstances of our earthly life. Our concept of father is to derive from God.

It's not to be imposed on God. We're not to impose our concept of father on God. We're to find out what a father is from God. In other words, for all of us, to some extent, the image of a heavenly father has to be renewed and restored so that we begin to reflect the character of our heavenly father.

Then you begin to see, you see, what the whole ministry of Jesus was about. He came to reveal the father. If you want to know who the father is, the father is revealed through the son.

And Jesus' whole life of obedience to the father, even unto death on the cross, was to reveal the character of the father. And that character of the father is then to be reflected in us as the children of God who are showing or demonstrating by our lives, experiencing in our lives, the reality of being the children of the father.

[11:36] So that you could say, on the basis of this kind of teaching, that probably the greatest human tragedy is a human father who has lost touch with his father, that that becomes, in a sense, the ultimate family failure.

A human father who has lost touch with his father. Now, I experience this a lot, you know, that very often fathers in a family do not go to church.

And I suspect at a fairly deep level, it is because they are somewhat jealous of a heavenly father whose model and performance makes theirs show up fairly badly.

And unless they, as a human father, are recognizing and living in relationship to their heavenly father, then their function as a human father probably borders on disaster all the time.

There is a book, which I never read until quite recently because I was told it was quite scandalous. And that helped me to read it, looking for the scandal, but I never found it.

[12:51] And that's D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, which I think is a profound book about the story of the total failure of a father.

What happens when the father disappears into the dust? And the whole book is about that. I mean, that's a major theme in it. And it's a very profound picture.

And I would be happy to commend the book to any and all of you. D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers. The whole image of the father is lost.

When you go to the end of this, to the end of this passage and look in verse 48, you will see that it says, you therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.

That is, you must, I mean, the ideal for you as a human being is to perfectly reflect the character of your father. And that can only be done if you spend a lot of time with your father, absorbing the character of your father, knowing the will of your father, knowing the purpose of your father, understanding how your father works, so that in the perfection of who he is, that begins to be reflected in your life.

[14:16] And instead of the response mechanisms coming from you, threatened as you are by everything around you, and responding inappropriately, as Christ says, in terms of anger, in terms of lust, in terms of family life, in terms of truth, in terms of revenge, and in terms of your relationship to people who are at enmity with you, all those things you have to relearn.

And there is, in a sense, a radical discontinuity. The embarrassing thing about this series for me has been the plain recognition that we live in a society which accommodates constantly to the inevitability of anger, lust, lying, revenge, and treating your own well and forgetting about the rest.

That's so natural to our whole way of life. That's so built into our culture. That's the way our society works. And I have felt very embarrassed standing up here like an idiot and telling you, there is another way.

But I don't know that you can see the impact of the argument that Christ develops in this passage without coming to the conclusion, yes, there is.

There is a totally different way. And it's occurred to me as I've worked with this passage that living as we do in a pluralistic society and being profoundly embarrassed as we are as Canadians to suggest, as Canadian Christians, to suggest that there is a uniqueness to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and that you can't, like some, a member of our congregation phoned recently and said, I have a friend who is a Muslim who wants to find out about Christianity.

[16:11] Well, in Canada, Muslims don't find out about Christianity. They have their own destiny. They have their own value system. They have their own beliefs. And the basic reality is that you must respect them.

don't be caught converting them. Well, it's hard to live with the New Testament if you come to that conclusion. But the question is, I can't see how, if you take the whole span of humanity, no matter what language, what culture, or what religion, religious banner, they may wave over them, that they don't have to look at what this teacher, Jesus Christ, says about the basic human response mechanism when confronted by anger, lust, family life, and so on.

All those things must surely apply. And surely you could go to anybody of any religion and present this teaching to them. Now, I think you would have to come to the place in absorbing and thinking about what's being taught here, you'd have to come to the place where you say, well, just who's teaching this?

Then you're on, perhaps, to more delicate ground. But I don't think that there is any question that the teaching here is of universal application.

Nor do I think there's any question that it leads you to confront ultimately the question, who is Jesus Christ? And to have to come to terms with that question. Well, that's how our lives are to be lived.

[17:55] They're not to be lived out of our own gut. Because our own gut is programmed to do all the wrong things in terms of being the children of the Father.

We are programmed to do that. And what has to happen is that there has got to be a great breakthrough from self-interest.

You know, modern contemporary secular philosophy has undoubtedly arrived at the conclusion that the only ultimate motivation for humanity and for society is self-interest.

It may be enlightened and informed and sophisticated, but it is still basically the motive of self-interest. And I think the reason that I hate, and maybe you do too, the inundation that we are suffering from as we approach the elections next Monday, not forgetting the ones on Saturday, but as we approach the elections next Monday, is that there is nobody who treats the Canadian citizen with enough respect to suggest that he is motivated by anything but self-interest.

And the constant appeal to self-interest is the way people expect to be elected. It reminds me of going to the, going to Stanley Park and standing there and throwing bread to the ducks and they all come swarming at you in order to get a nibble to eat.

[19:27] And our politicians seem to treat us exactly the same way, that we're motivated to respond in exactly that way. And if they can throw out more than anybody else, we're going to come.

But you see, what Christ is saying here is that there is the possibility that a human being can live for something higher than self-interest.

And the pinnacle of his teaching about that is in this passage where he says it should be possible for you to come to the place where you recognize that what you need to do to be fulfilled as a person.

See, even I appeal to self-interest. I don't want to wipe out that last sentence. What the potential is for you as a person is to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

That should be possible. The ultimate denial of self-interest. And the grounds for that denial of self-interest is because who you are as children of the Father.

[20:35] Now, the way Jesus presents it to you is he says there is the good guy. I don't know if I'll fade out of sight, but this is the good guy here.

And this is the Christian here. Now, there's no really distinguishable difference between them. But Jesus says, all right, look at the good guy.

Who is he? The good guy in our society is the guy who loves those who love him. He's not cantankerous.

He's a nice guy. He loves those who love him. He goes on to say he salutes those who salute him. He enjoys the rain, he enjoys the sunshine, and thanks God for it.

He is the universal good guy in every civilization. And this good guy is the great enemy, Christ says, of the New Testament.

[21:38] You can meet this good guy at every golf club, at every private club, at every business meeting. You can meet him in every corridor. He's there. You wave at him, hiya, Joe, great to see you.

He's a good guy. And when you wave at him, he waves at you. When he's left by himself for a week, he perishes on the vine because there's nobody to love him, and there's nobody to wave to him.

And he has no other identity, but that identity which he's picked up in that way. He's suffering from the good guy syndrome. And Christ says, there's lots of good guys.

You love those who love you? Tax collectors can do that. You salute your brethren? Any Gentile can do that. Christ says about the Christian over here that the thing that has got to mark him is that he's doing something more.

If you salute only your brother or sister, what more are you doing than others? And implied in that question, is there should be something more that you're doing.

[22:57] And what is it? Well, what it is, is this. You're recognizing that the basic human response mechanism built into you needs to be completely overhauled.

That anger, lust, divorce, lying, revenge, hating, you needs to go. there is something beyond self-interest.

There is a radical discontinuity between the good guy and the Christian. The good guy never does it. He never gets there where something more is happening.

And when Christ says that, the more is that you are to be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect. Bonhoeffer, way before the war ever started, wrote to tell us what it means to love your enemies.

And he wrote in the most graphic way how when their eyes are bloodshot and they are persecuting you and they're about to kill you, your response to them must be to love them.

[24:08] Now how is that humanly possible to do that? Well, Christ says that it's humanly possible if you are sons and daughters of your heavenly father and you're not carrying on your own vendetta with the people around you.

You are the instrument by which they become aware of the love of a God who in his capacity as creator allows the sun to shine and the rain to fall on everybody, the good and the bad.

love of a God. He is the one who loves us no matter who we are. His unconditional love is to be reflected to our enemies through us.

We are to abandon our personal vendetta in order to do it. Now what I think this means and one of the ways that you can illustrate it is to say simply that when Christ was being nailed to the cross, John Stott points this out in his commentary, he says, Christ prayed, Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

That is the men who were actually driving the nails through his wrists. He was saying, Father forgive them. And the tense in which that's expressed suggests that Christ went on praying like that.

[25:36] He did not create a personal vendetta between him and the people who were nailing him to the cross. He reflected the love of the Father. And that's what God has called us to do, to reflect the nature and character of the Father by loving our enemies.

Well, I think the church really tries to avoid this. You know, and I think the church stands there and tells the sinners they're going to go to hell and tells the saints they're going to go to heaven.

And what the church needs to do is to tell the sinners that they are welcome in heaven and the saints to tell them that they have lots of sin that surrounds their lives.

And it can be easily demonstrated simply by reading this passage. That God does not desire the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn and live.

Christ begins the sermon by saying, blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. What I think he's calling us to here is the awareness that who we are and who we are meant to be are those who are children of God, our heavenly Father, and by our life reflect the perfection of God's care and love for all around us, even to the extent of loving our enemies, which is so totally alien to who we are in ourselves, and praying for those who persecute you.

[27:20] That you can move in beside your worst enemy, and standing beside him before the Father, pray for him, to the Father, that he might know the love of the Father.

Now that is a picture of humanity, and what it means to be a person, which I think transcends anything, anywhere, in the whole of human history, as a picture of the glory that belongs to being a person.

Amen. Amen.