

“THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT - 10”

Matthew 7:7-14

Those of you who can remember back to when we started this series on Jesus' great Sermon On The Mount may be able to recall that we said a couple of general things about it which have provided a bit of a thread throughout the subsequent weeks. Firstly, we said that this is a sermon which is much admired, even by people who wouldn't think of themselves as Christian or even religious, people who are wanting to live "good" lives and see this as a pretty good guide to behaviour. We also said that it's not really about how we behave – about modifying our behaviour – but it's about transforming our attitudes, about adopting a completely different way of looking at the world with the help of God's Holy Spirit.

Well, we're approaching the end of the sermon now and it's all starting to get a bit serious. It's time to make some decisions. Jesus' teaching is reaching its climax and he is getting to the point of asking his listeners – and, down through the centuries, his readers – to make a response. Donald Carson, in his little book on this sermon, writes this:

“Nothing could be more calamitous than to meditate long and hard on Matthew 5:1-7:12 and then to resolve to improve a little. The discipleship which Jesus requires is absolute, radical in the (etymological) sense that it gets to the root of human conduct and to the root of the relationship between God and men. A person either enters the Kingdom or he does not ... There is no third way alternative.”

Jesus is speaking to people who are interested in what he has to say, people who have recently been invited to join him, people who are disciples in the sense that they are learning from him, but they are people who have yet to commit themselves wholly to following his way. That's probably the position many of us here are in this morning. We find the way of Jesus attractive. We like this talk of the Kingdom of God and appreciate its values. We recognise that we need to take very seriously what Jesus has to say and that his teaching is something that is very different from that of any other teacher. But we haven't quite decided what we're going to do about it yet. Well, for you, this is where the proverbial rubber hits the road.

A couple of weeks ago we heard about the attitude we should have to judging others and we've discovered quite a bit about our attitudes since Liz kicked off with the Beatitudes back in April. But it's very difficult, isn't it, to get those attitudes instilled in our lives, to get to the point where we are thinking in a Christian way even before we start speaking and acting. Well, here Jesus tells us what we need to do to try and get ourselves into that way of thinking. It's exactly what James tells us in his letter (*James 1:5*) – we need to ask God for the help we need. That's what those first sentences of our reading this morning are all about. You see, you have to look at the context in which Jesus says this.

Many people just want to pull these words out of the things Jesus says around them and make them fit any and every situation. This isn't about simply asking God for whatever you want and getting it. Experience will tell you that it doesn't work like that. This isn't the kind of slot machine approach to prayer that has caused so much difficulty for so many people. This is about wanting to have our attitudes transformed and praying persistently that God will enable that to happen. The words Jesus uses – not just asking but also “seeking” and “knocking” – are suggestive of people who really are serious about getting an answer to their prayers for a transformed set of attitudes, people who really do want God to change them.

I suspect that many of us are actually quite happy with things as they are and an occasional prayer at the end of a powerful sermon or a challenging chapter in a book are somehow enough to keep us thinking that we're going in vaguely the right direction. But Jesus is talking here about fervency, persistence, keeping on praying for God's help. It's so easy to allow our thinking – which is powerfully but subtly influenced by the values and attitudes of the world around us – to slip back into the old ways, the selfish ways, the ways which are inimical to what Jesus is asking of us here. So we need to be constantly on our guard and be constantly asking God for his help in this.

And, Jesus goes on to say in vv9-11, we can always be sure that he will respond to us graciously and lovingly. If even flawed human fathers know how to give their children what they ask for, how much more will God, the perfect Father, give us those things that we need! He will answer our prayers because we are asking for the things he wants us to have anyway – transformed attitudes and new ways of living and behaving. And that’s a promise. The veteran preacher and New Testament scholar John Stott, in his comments on this section of The Sermon On The Mount, reminds us that the difficulties we have with prayer are usually because we concentrate on our “*prayer problems*” rather than on “*Christ’s prayer promises*”. We focus on how we should pray and the reasons we don’t seem to get what we want and getting the words right and all that, rather than on the promise that God *will* answer and give us the things we need to live as he wants us to.

And when he does respond – Jesus says “*So ...*” at the beginning of v12 – our transformed attitudes will be demonstrated in the way in which we relate to others. This little maxim – the so-called “Golden Rule” – is the one which so many people find attractive in this Sermon On The Mount, the saying which everyone would like to be able to stick to, the words which many people maintain show that Jesus’ teaching is the same as that of the other great religions. The problem with that is twofold. Firstly, it is not at all easy to keep. And secondly, in pretty well all other religions it is stated in the negative – “*Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want them to do to you.*” Now that’s much easier, isn’t it?

William Barclay puts it like this:

“It is perfectly possible for a man of the world to observe the negative form of the golden rule. He could, without any serious difficulty so discipline his life that he would not do to others what he did not want them to do to him; but the only man who can even begin to satisfy the positive form of the rule is the man who has the love of Christ in his heart.”

As with so much of what we have read in this Sermon, Jesus goes far beyond what others have said. It’s very easy to legislate for the negative of this – that’s what most of our laws are about: “Don’t do this or that.” But there isn’t much that encourages us to do the positive stuff. (In fact, an awful lot of legislation over the last three decades has actually driven us to be more selfish.) We are talking here about wholly unselfish actions. This isn’t even do what others have done to you – if they give you a gift, give them one back; if they scratch your back, scratch theirs. This is about doing what you’d like them to do to you, even though they haven’t done it, or might be very unlikely to do it. It’s the attitude that characterised all of Jesus’ ministry, that is at the very heart of all God’s laws, proclaimed and expounded in the Old Testament. And, at the risk of being very repetitive, let me say it again – this is not just about modifying your behaviour, it’s about a root and branch transformation of attitude, about thinking as Jesus thinks, about being increasingly in tune with God and his ways.

And that leads us to the choice that Jesus lays before his listeners, the stark choice with which we are confronted today in vv13,14. This is where it all starts to get really serious, eternally serious. You’ve got to come down on one side or the other – there is NO middle way. John Stott writes, “*Everybody resents being faced with the necessity of a choice. But Jesus will not allow us to escape it.*” You cannot reply to Jesus, “Oh, I don’t mind,” or “I’ll take the middle way”. There is no middle way.

The image Jesus uses here to illustrate the choice is not really that important. Many people have read an awful lot into this idea of two ways and two gates. Some of you may have come across the picture on the screen and there’s a framed copy of it here if you want a closer look afterwards. The Broad Way is on the left, crowded and full of such appalling things as a lottery, a theatre and so on. The Narrow Way is on the right, very austere and almost deserted. We used to have one hanging on the inside of the cupboard at Sunday School when I was small and it scared the life out of me every time I saw it!

Anyway, what is important is the destination and the starkness of the choice. Jesus is simply saying, “Right, you’ve heard what I’ve got to say. Are you with me or not?” You cannot dither. You cannot

leave the choice to the last minute because you don't know when that will be. You cannot avoid the choice or kind of explain it away. John Stott points out that here "*Jesus cuts across our easy going syncretism.*" It's either/or. And although it comes as a very clear, inescapable couple of alternatives, it's very much in the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. Moses tells the people of Israel that they have to "*Choose life*" in his sermon in *Deuteronomy*. Joshua later tells the people that they have to "*Choose this day whom you will serve.*" *Psalm 1* makes the choice explicit once again. And it's there right down to Bob Dylan's "*You Gotta Serve Somebody*".

What's your choice? Are you going to make that conscious choice to follow Jesus, to follow his narrow way and work for his Kingdom, allowing him to transform your attitudes and values, so that eventually you will join him for all eternity? Or are you going to wander off down the broad way with everyone else, content to let your values and attitudes be shaped by the priorities and desires of this world – this world which is so heavily influenced by the powers of selfishness and evil – and spend eternity, as you have spent your life, cut off from God and all the good things he has for you? Let me say again, you have to choose. To refuse to choose is to follow the broad way to destruction, I can't really put it any more clearly than that. Jesus uses a couple more illustrations which Jeremy and Gordon will explore in the next couple of weeks, but I can't elaborate or expand on this simple decision any further – it's up to you to choose.

Maybe you've chosen already – you chose to follow the way of Jesus, the path of the Kingdom – but without realising it you've been drawn back to the other path and now you're in danger of getting stuck on that again. You need to do some of that asking, seeking and knocking this morning, praying that God will help you back to where you know you belong. Maybe you've never thought about that choice. Well, here's the opportunity to make it before it's too late.

We were going to sing a hymn that sums up that decision, but I'm just going to read you one verse of it – Bryn Rees's hymn about the Kingdom of God (it's on the screen or at 651 in *Mission Praise* if you want to refer to it later). This is verse 3.

*The Kingdom of God
Is challenge and choice.
Believe the good news,
Repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
Brought Christ to the cross,
Our crisis of judgement
For gain or for loss.*

Your "*crisis of judgement*". How will you respond?

"THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT - 10"
Matthew 7:7-14

Jesus' teaching is reaching its climax and he is getting to the point of asking his listeners to make a response. Jesus is speaking to people who are interested in what he has to say, people who have recently been invited to join him, people who are disciples in the sense that they are learning from him, but they are people who have yet to commit themselves wholly to following his way.

Jesus tells us what we need to do to try and adopt the attitudes he is setting out in this sermon – we need to ask God for the help we need (see also *James 1:5*). That's what the first sentences of this reading are all about. This isn't about simply asking God for whatever you want and getting it but about wanting to have our attitudes transformed and praying persistently that God will enable that to happen. The words Jesus uses – not just asking but also "*seeking*" and "*knocking*" – are suggestive of people who really are serious about getting an answer to their prayers for a transformed set of attitudes, people who really do want God to change them.

And, Jesus goes on to say in vv9-11, we can always be sure that he will respond to us graciously and lovingly. If even flawed human fathers know how to give their children what they ask for, how much more will God, the perfect Father, give us those things that we need! He will answer our prayers because we are asking for the things he wants us to have anyway – transformed attitudes and new ways of living and behaving.

When he does respond our transformed attitudes will be demonstrated in the way in which we relate to others. This "Golden Rule" is often stated in the negative – "*Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you.*" But Jesus goes far beyond what others have said. This is about a root and branch transformation of attitude, about thinking as Jesus thinks, about being increasingly in tune with God and his ways.

Which leads us to the choice that Jesus lays before his listeners, the stark choice with which we are confronted in vv13,14. This is where it all starts to get really serious, eternally serious. You've got to come down on one side or the other – there is NO middle way. And what is important is the destination and the starkness of the choice. Jesus is simply saying, "Right, you've heard what I've got to say. Are you with me or not?" (Look at *Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24; Psalm 1.*)

Questions for discussion

1. Do you see vv7,8 as a general promise or a promise about being able to live as God wants? What led you to that conclusion? How does it work in practice?
2. Verse 12 is often called "The Golden Rule". Why do you think that is? Is it better/easier in the positive form (as here) or the negative form (as in many other religions)? Why is it so difficult to observe in the positive form?
3. In what ways does "The Golden Rule" "*sum up the Law and the Prophets*"?
4. How much attention should we pay to the detail of Jesus' illustration about the two gates/ways? Is he saying that there are very few people who will actually be saved? What are the implications for our evangelism?
5. Why do people resent having to make such a stark choice?

6. What do you find the most difficult aspects of Jesus' teaching in The sermon On The Mount? Why?