

“FOLLOWING THE KING – 14”

Matthew 7:1-14

Well, Jesus is coming towards the end of this “Sermon On The Mount” now. You’ll remember, I hope, that he has been talking to his new followers and giving them some idea what it’s going to mean to be a member of his Kingdom, what will be the implications of allowing themselves to be under his kingly rule. Here’s a bunch of people who have walked away from their usual day to day jobs and routines to follow this charismatic preacher who seems to offer them a new way of living and a new way of looking at the world: but they need to discover exactly what it is that is expected of them.

And Jesus has told them that they are to be people who “*hunger and thirst after righteousness*”, who are desperate to see things done God’s way, both in their own lives and in the life of the wider world. These are people who are to live without a hint of hypocrisy because their inner attitudes are transformed and demonstrated in their visible behaviour, people who are out to please God rather than their fellow citizens, who want to demonstrate in their own lives the values of this new Kingdom of God.

And part of the reason that Matthew is reporting all this is to let his first readers, the Jewish people who have started to form churches dedicated to learning from the teaching of Jesus and worshipping him – to let them know that this Jesus is the fulfilment of God’s plans and promises as they were proclaimed in their scriptures, our Old Testament.

So now Jesus moves into his closing remarks, as we might call them. (We’re hopping over 6:19-34 as David Coffey spoke on that only a month ago, and I wouldn’t presume to add to what he said.) He draws a number of threads together and offers here a summary of his teaching (in v12) and invites his hearers to make a decision in vv13,14. But around those things there is yet more on the subject of hypocrisy and a bit more about prayer. We’ll look at the three little sections of this passage in turn this morning and see how they relate to us as Jesus’ followers today.

1. THE INSENSITIVE ATTITUDE (vv1-6)

Jesus’ first words here are a warning against moral superiority, against trying to give the impression that you’ve got it all sorted out and others haven’t. “*Don’t judge!*” he says. But surely we need to make some judgements, or we can’t demonstrate any kind of discernment? When Jesus talks in v6 about not casting your pearls before swine, you need to be able to identify the swine (or the dogs). Of course we do – we don’t suspend our critical faculties when we walk with Jesus. This is really about unfair judgement and criticism. It’s about jumping in and making assumptions about other people and using a different yardstick to judge others from the standards you keep to yourself. This is a pretty frequent theme in the New Testament – the clearest warning apart from this is probably in *Romans 2:1*, where Paul writes, “*You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.*”

If you start judging others, it will come back to haunt you. An RKO executive wrote after Fred Astaire’s first screen test in 1933, “*Can’t sing. Can’t act. Balding. Can dance a little.*” And a wisely anonymous Decca Records producer said in 1962, “*Guitar groups are on the way out ... these Beatles have no future in show business*”. You wouldn’t want to be the one who made those judgments, would you? But we all do it, and Jesus is here counselling against the kinds of wrong judgements we make due to our own wrong attitudes. This is not about discernment, but about censoriousness, another form of hypocrisy. As one writer, A B Bruce, puts it: “*Censoriousness is a Pharisaic vice, that of exalting ourselves by disparaging others, a very cheap way of attaining moral superiority.*” It’s about pointing the finger and criticising.

William Barclay says that there are three reasons why we can never really judge another person fairly – we never know the whole facts or the whole person: it is impossible to be strictly impartial: no man is good enough to judge another. Of course we need judges to uphold the law and suchlike, but we don’t all

take on ourselves the task of making value judgements about others. It's the old story of "Don't criticise someone until you've walked a mile in his shoes." (Then when you do criticise him, you'll be a mile away and he won't have any shoes!)

What is perhaps most troubling about this, though, is that Jesus feels he needs to emphasise it to his followers – and that we still seem to ignore it. We all seem to do it at some time or other, often over a cup of coffee after the service. Listen to these words from Rob Warner's book on *The Sermon On The Mount*:

"It is a terrible blight upon the church that a clique of judgementalists who have just shared in Communion with brothers and sisters will then lay into them over coffee or Sunday lunch. Like ravenous piranhas they savagely bite and tear at their prey, discussing what is wrong with the minister, the musicians, the elders or PCC. This is not wise discernment of the kind Jesus commended; it is Christian cannibalism."

And Jesus tells his listeners that the standards they use to judge each other will be the standards he judges them by (v2).

As we've already said, this is another example of hypocrisy and Jesus illustrates it with this surreal story about the plank and the speck of sawdust. You'll need a bit of discernment to see the speck of sawdust, but don't go making a big fuss when you're even worse yourself. Get yourself sorted out, then you can help your brother. Probably the best story about this is in *2 Samuel 12*. King David, you may recall, has stolen another man's wife – Bathsheba, wife of Uriah – committed adultery with her and murdered her husband to try and hush things up. Nathan the prophet comes to David and tells him a story about a rich man who steals a poor man's only ewe lamb to cook for a visitor so that he doesn't have to use a lamb from his own flocks. David gets very angry and says to the prophet, "*As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!*" at which point Nathan says, "*You are the man!*" Don't get sucked into that kind of attitude, says Jesus: it is insensitive and ultimately destructive, both of the other person and of yourself. Reputations can be lost, relationships ruined, rumours started – and remember the old saying that a rumour can be halfway round the world before the truth has got his boots on.

God is the supreme judge and he looks at all of us, sees the problems and faults and shortcomings which are very much part of our fallen humanity. He knows everything about us and can see what is causing our failures. And he has done something about it in sending Jesus to die for us, so that he can look at us as Judge, but through the lens of grace. We can thank him for that and ask for more of his grace to help us be less critical and less judgemental of our brothers and sisters.

2. THE INIMITABLE FATHER (vv7-12)

As if to highlight the judgementalism of his followers and the grace of God the Father, Jesus moves on to talk about the way God will respond to those who call on him, possibly even those who call on him for help with their own attitudes. And whatever we might be used to as human beings, God will always respond. Jesus says that we are to "*ask ... seek ... knock*" – and the Greek could well be translated as "*keep on asking ... seeking ... knocking*". And he will answer – he will not mock our requests. He does this because he is the Perfect Father, the Inimitable Father. There are, of course, human fathers who refuse to respond to the requests of their children, who treat them with indifference or with contempt. There are human fathers who abuse and diminish and ignore their children. But, Jesus says, even the good fathers among you, the ones who wouldn't contemplate even playing tricks on your kids, well God is an infinitely better father than any of you.

That's why we can come to him knowing that he is loving and kind and really wanting the best for us. Elsewhere Jesus says we can refer to him as "*Abba*", a name which really does denote a close and protective relationship and a name that is found nowhere else in the literature of Jewish prayers. Come to God, having put to one side your notions of earthly fatherhood, your own experiences of fathers, and revel in his love. Look to him as the father you really wish you'd had. And don't be afraid to keep

coming with your requests. The more you talk to him, pray to him, the deeper that relationship will become and the more easily you will spot his good answers to your prayers. It was the golfer Gary Player who once said, “*The more I practice, the luckier I get*” and Archbishop William Temple said something similar about prayer – and about keeping on praying: “*When I pray, coincidences happen; when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening.*” Keep on asking, seeking, knocking – and you will discover what an amazing God we have, what a gracious and generous God we have.

Which is why Jesus begins *v12* with “*So ...*”. Because God is good to you, you should be good to others. And Jesus sums up all that he has said so far in this sentence that has become known as “The Golden Rule”. In fact, it sums up not only Jesus’ teaching, but all the teaching that these first Jewish believers would have had. One of the Rabbis said that this was the essence of the Law – everything else was a commentary on it. Many people would say that this is found in other religions too: it’s not unique to Christianity. But scholars will tell you that in pretty well all other religions, this is stated negatively – “*Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want them to do to you*”. But it’s not difficult *not* to do things. Jesus is putting it positively, take the lead, take the initiative and reach out to other with good things, with the kind of grace that is modelled in Jesus and in his Father. Remember all that stuff in chapter 5 about loving your enemies, walking the extra mile, turning the other cheek. This is all that – with knobs on! Just think what amazing grace God has shown to you. Now share that with others. Show them what being a real follower of Jesus is all about. Show them what his kingly rule means for living day to day.

If you watch programmes like *The Apprentice* or *Dragon’s Den* or (perish the thought) *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, you’ll know that the dominant values and attitudes in our world today are dictated by hard-headed, goal-driven, self-promoting pragmatism. As G K Chesterton wrote, “*The world revolted against the Golden Rule of Christianity: and found itself helpless under the Brazen Rule of Commerce and the Iron Rule of War.*” Jesus is recommending just the opposite. Look to help others before they’ve done anything for you. Reach out with grace and peace. God’s been generous to you, so be generous to others.

3. THE INESCAPABLE CHOICE (*vv13,14*)

So Jesus has set out his stall, as it were. Those wide-eyed fishermen and tax-collectors who had followed him down the beach and off into a new adventure now know what he’s expecting of them. This new Kingdom, under the rule of Jesus the Kingly Messiah, is all about attitudes and values, about love and grace, about a goal in life and the expectation of blessing for those who desperately do want to see things done God’s way. But what are they to do with all this teaching? People down the centuries have admired Jesus’ radical re-interpretation of the Law, his clever illustration of the joys and sorrows of life. Is this just another discipleship seminar? Is this just another sermon about trying harder and doing better? Dick France, in his comments on these verses, writes, “*The teaching of The Sermon On The Mount is not meant to be admired, but to be obeyed.*”

So Jesus sets out the choice. He challenges his hearers, his readers – the first-century converts sitting round in Galilee anxiously wondering where they go next and the twenty-first worshippers in Lichfield complacently assuming they’ve got it all sorted. It’s an either/or choice – it’s not complicated or complex. Are you going to walk the road with Jesus? Or are you going to walk the road with the many people who want the easy life?

The illustration Jesus uses here is interesting. There’s a need to choose the right gate – wide or small – as an initial decision. Then there’s the need to choose to keep on the right road – broad or narrow. The word translated “*narrow*” in *v13* is different from the word translated “*narrow*” in *v14*. The first is to do with size, and, presumably, the idea that you can’t get through it if you’re too encumbered with other stuff – a bit like some of those really narrow gaps on the paths up in the Dales (Milldale and Dovedale, for example). The second has the idea of restricting and has overtones of tribulation and even persecution. But the road is not an end in itself – this isn’t the idea of the journey being everything: it doesn’t really matter where you’re going. Because this narrow road leads to life, eternal life, in contrast to the wide

road which will eventually lead to destruction. This isn't quite so warm and cuddly now as some people would have you believe that Christianity should be.

Yes, God is a God of grace. Yes, he is the Inimitable Father. Yes, he has sent Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, to help us out of the mess in which we find ourselves. That's wonderful! Rejoice! But you've got to make a conscious choice to accept all that and to go on acknowledging it. You don't just drift into being a follower of Jesus. That's why this sermon is here. The first followers of Jesus had kind of drifted into his band of disciples, but now Jesus is letting them know what they're signing up to. In *John 6:60ff* we read of a whole bunch of Jesus' followers who couldn't cope with the consequences of continuing to follow him and they left him.

The Bible stresses time and time again that there is a conscious choice involved in all this God stuff. You have to sign up and you need to stick with it. Listen to some of these uncompromising words from the Old Testament –

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Joshua 24:15

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.

Jeremiah 21:8

Furthermore, tell the people, "This is what the LORD says: see, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death."

This is what judgement is really all about, isn't it? It's about our judgement in making the right response to the invitation Jesus puts before us. We've now seen what this Kingdom of God stuff is all about. We can make an informed decision on the basis of whether or not we want to accept Jesus' kingly rule. Do we want to receive and share God's grace? Are we desperate for things to be done God's way? Are we wanting to spend eternity with God or cut off from him and suffering the consequences of that forever?

And it's about God's judgement of our response. He sees what's in our heart. He knows what our values and attitudes really are. He can see under the respectable and religious veneer of the hypocrites, the ones who try to make it appear that they are following God's ways, but can't quite remember why, or who it's supposed to benefit.

There's a little bit more of this Sermon On The Mount that we'll look at next week, and it really only goes to rub in what's been said already. But the choice is before you all this morning. What's it to be? The way of the world – or the way of Christ? Are you ready to let God's Holy Spirit work on your attitudes and values? Are you desperate for things to be done God's way? You can take the first step on that path this morning, so give it some thought. And don't just admire this teaching – obey it!

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Questions for discussion

1. In which situations do we need to be able to judge? How can we improve our chances of making the right decisions?
2. What do you think *v6* is all about?
3. *v8* seems to imply that we'll always get what we want when we ask God. Is that right? How would you explain what appear to be unanswered prayers? (No platitudes, please!)
4. If "The Golden Rule" *"sums up the Law and the Prophets"*, why do we need to bother with them?
5. Jesus offers a stark choice in *vv13,14* and there are plenty of other examples in the Bible of such a choice being offered. Why are we often reluctant to put that choice before people in our evangelism?