

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 15”
Matthew 7:15-29

We've arrived at Jesus' final words in this amazing "Sermon On The Mount". This has been Jesus' way of setting out the values of his Kingdom to his new disciples. The people who had downed tools to follow this enigmatic but charismatic preacher and his promise of a new life, had now heard exactly what was going to be expected of them if they stuck with him. They had heard about the attitudes that need to form the foundation of their behaviour and had seen just how it all fitted in with the faith of their ancestors, how what this Jesus was preaching followed on from the plans and promises of God in their Scriptures, our Old Testament.

Jesus has spoken, with aphorisms and illustrations, of **righteousness, religion and relationships**, illuminating their understanding of the Law and of the ways in which men and women are to connect to God and to each other. **Righteousness**, you may recall, is really wanting things to be done God's way, being prepared to follow where he leads and living a life that is fulfilled and satisfying because it is lived according to God's instructions.

Religion, on the other hand, seems to be a way of following God's instructions but with no real understanding of the way in which they are connected to God – doing things without really knowing why. For many people – and Jesus has already singled out the Pharisees, the apparently most devout of the Jewish people – keeping God's Law has become an end in itself and they have completely divorced that from the attitudes and values that God expects in his people. And that has led Jesus to charge these people with hypocrisy, play acting, keeping up a veneer of religiosity whilst their hearts and minds were still very much under the influence of their selfish human nature.

The only way to counter that is to renew the **relationship** with God as the Perfect, Inimitable Father. Jesus has talked about the ways in which his followers are to converse with God in prayer, about the intimacy of that communication, often behind closed doors. He wants his followers to connect with God the Father through their relationship with him, with God's Son, the kingly Messiah. And if they start to get that right, then it will have a knock-on effect on their relationships with others. Their fellow human beings will become more than objects of lustful attention and of angry resentment, hated rivals, and the disciples of Jesus, this new community of God's people, will blaze a trail of love and sacrifice by doing to others what they would like others to do for them. Indeed, so blazing will this trail be that these disciples, these citizens of the Kingdom of God, will stand out like lights in an otherwise shady world, they will function as salt in a gradually decaying culture.

So it's important to get things right. And I hope that we've all been thinking hard about our response to this teaching. I know many of you have, because you've told me so. It's not easy to allow the teaching of Jesus – with the help of the Holy Spirit, which is now also available to us – to re-shape lives that have been moulded by our participation in a culture that has for centuries been moving away from what God intended, but as we do start to allow ourselves to be changed, to allow our minds, as St Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, to be transformed, we start to experience a sense of fulfilment and a peace that deepens as we practise what Jesus preaches. If we truly allow God to take control of us, we find it easier to deal with the stresses and strains of life, with the problems that we encounter simply by virtue of the fact that we are all flawed human beings living in a broken world.

The effect of that, says Jesus in these last few sentences of the Sermon, is that your lives will be visibly different – or, at least, the "*fruit*" of your lives will be apparent. Jesus is still concerned with the hypocrisy that seems to affect so many people. And here he talks about the discrepancy that often exists between what a person appears to be like and what his or her lasting legacy is. It is so easy to be taken in by the outward show of piety or of charity in a person's life, that we can forget or ignore what's really going on. Recent weeks have seen a really powerful example of just what Jesus is talking about here. You're probably as fed up as I am with all the talk about this, but it's a wonderful illustration of this. Jimmy Savile, an apparently tireless campaigner for good causes – and he was, let's not overlook that – a

religious man who was honoured by The Pope, a person who brightened the lives of many, many people in all kinds of ways, has left a legacy of shame and disgust. The fruit of his life has been shown to be rotten to the core. You just can't tell until it's too late.

In Limburg there's a shop that sells those Gummi Bear sweets – I think they're part of the Haribo empire. There are shelves and shelves of brightly coloured and wonderfully flavoured sweets. The place smells amazing as you go in. And my favourites – which I haven't seen anywhere else – are big red and green ones. They look like sugary chilli peppers. Pop one in your mouth and there's a gloriously sweet taste – for about five seconds. Then the actual chilli flavour kicks in and they nearly blow your head off! That's what Jesus is talking about here – things, people, that look great, that initially seem wonderful, but leave a bitter taste when you realise what's really going on underneath.

Jesus mentions “*false prophets*”, the teachers and preachers who seem to be speaking from God but their words have no substance and they turn out to be predatory people, looking for what they can get out of their hearers. They're the con men, the charismatic preachers (and I mean that in the sociological sense, not the theological sense) who spot an opportunity and use what seems to be good, godly words to ensnare the vulnerable. I know I've mentioned it before, but there's a great film about such a preacher, starring Steve Martin, called *Leap Of Faith*. If ever you get the chance to see it, do. These people have all the jargon, but no substance. We get them here from time to time: not preachers, but people wanting some money or food, people who come to the door with all the right words and phrases about their church background, but they are soon exposed by a couple of searching questions.

Jesus warns his listeners to watch out for such people, but is also implicitly warning them against turning into such people themselves. What fruit, what lasting legacy will they leave? This isn't about the right words – not even about dropping the right names. Even those who say “*Lord, Lord*” to Jesus aren't necessarily the ones whose fruit will win Jesus' favour (v21). These are like the people who are always telling you about the famous people they know and who seem very chummy with the great and the good, although it's obvious that the great and the good have no idea who they are. Jesus says that it's not all about that – the words, the outward show, the demonstrations of religious (even spiritual) piety. It's not even about miracles and exorcisms! Watch out for such people, says Jesus – but the clear sub-text here is: watch out that you don't turn out like them yourselves. Make sure you are able to produce the right fruit and that you live lives of integrity and righteousness.

The main thing, according to Jesus, is “*doing the will of my Father who is in heaven.*” Sound familiar? “Doing things the way God wants”, or “wanting things to be done God's way” is the way we've been summing up what righteousness is all about. In the final analysis – and I hesitate to say this, but it seems to be what Jesus is saying – this isn't about the way you worship, it isn't about how often you're at the prayer meeting, it isn't about how much money you put in the offering bag, it isn't about the slogans on your T-shirt or the fish symbol on your car or the evangelistic tracts you give out or the people who get healed when you pray for them. This is about the way your life stacks up against God's word, about the sincerity with which you serve him, about the attitudes and values that underpin everything else you do – at home, at work, in your relationships, in your leisure, in your finances, in your consumption, in your language. This is about living lives of true and transparent integrity.

What's so difficult, though, is the ability to spot that in others, and (even more difficult) to model it in our own lives. You see, certainly in a situation such as that in which we live, where most people are pretty nice to one another and there's not much to choose between one law-abiding citizen and another, everyone looks pretty much the same. Our community is full of people who seem, on the face of it, to live according to some kind of Judaeo-Christian set of rules and there are a lot of very, very nice people who seem to get on pretty well without ever darkening the doors of a church. And within the church – here this morning – we all seem to assent to the same things and we all seem to be pretty close to the ideals that Jesus is setting out.

But the problems come when there's a bit of pressure, when a crisis occurs. Jesus says that some people will be exposed in that great final crisis when we all stand before God "*on that day*" (v22). And that idea is found in other places in the gospels, too. Jesus tells a parable about weeds being sown in a field of wheat and they are pretty well indistinguishable from the real crop until the final harvest, then the weeds can be identified because they bear no fruit and they are burned. Many of us, though, will find out whether our relationship with Jesus has been kept in good repair as we encounter the crises that we talk of as "the storms of life". That's what this final little parable of Jesus' is all about.

When we lived in North London, in the streets of terraced houses there were often gaps in the rows of houses, maybe one or two houses wide. You'd probably assume that a couple of houses had been demolished, but, in fact, there had never been any houses there. And while we were there, developers started to build in the gaps – houses that looked just like the ones on either side. One of the older members of the congregation at our church had been a borough councillor for many years and he was outraged at this development. You see, one of his roles in the past had been to plan flood defence schemes just in case they were ever needed, and he told me that the gaps in the terraces were where there were underground streams, which most of the time caused absolutely no problem. But if ever there was a really big storm, those streams would fill up and the ground would subside. The new houses, which looked just like the ones either side, which looked safe and secure, would just crumble into those underground watercourses that today's councillors and developers assumed were now dried up.

I reckon these two homes that Jesus describes looked pretty much the same. The two men built them out of similar materials, no doubt. They put as much care into the construction of each one. They lived in them quite happily for many years, very probably. No-one would have suspected that there would be any problem – until the storm came. Then the dry, sandy wadi under one of them filled up with water and the house crumbled into it – or, rather, crashed into it. It was the crisis that betrayed the foundation.

Jesus says that this has its parallel in the lives of his followers. We all look the same. Most of us here this morning have been singing the songs, muttering our "amens" at the end of the prayers, doing all the things that you'd expect in worship. Afterwards we'll talk over coffee and use the right words, give the right impression, appear, to all intents and purposes, that we're all the same as followers of Jesus. But then the storm blows up – the illness we weren't expecting, the financial problems we hadn't foreseen, the family crisis that comes from nowhere: eventually, the standing before God, our Creator and Judge. It's how we behave in those circumstances that betrays how much we've really wanted to do things God's way.

It may not even be that drastic. It may be the moment tomorrow morning when something at work goes wrong and you respond with a volley of curses. It may be the moment when someone else messes things up for you and you start to plan your revenge on them. It may be the moment when you can see a way out of a dilemma but it involves betraying someone else. Whatever it is – and the one thing I can say is that we will all have to face that final audience with God, however trouble-free the rest of our lives have been – whatever it is, that is when it becomes apparent whether we have done what Jesus says, whether we have allowed our attitudes and values to be shaped by him.

As so often, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase hits the nail squarely on the head. Listen to how he translates vv26,27: "*But if you just use my words in Bible studies and don't work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.*" Jesus says that the ones who will really find a place in the Kingdom of God – and hence will spend eternity with him – are those who not only hear his words, but "*put them into practice*". Hearing + doing = obeying. We need to be obedient to Jesus, to follow his ways, to put his words into practice in our lives, really to want to do things God's way. My New Testament lecturer at college used to talk of the seminars he went to in Cambridge where the great scholars would sit and discuss the Bible. These were men, he said, who could quote you the whole New Testament off by heart – in Greek! They knew it inside out and there was no sentence that they couldn't parse and interpret. But, he said, most of them didn't believe it: it made no difference to their lives at all.

How about you this morning? Many of you will read the Bible day by day, no doubt. All of you have heard some of it today. Some of you will go along to a housegroup later this week and discuss it all. Some of you will read books about it. You've sung God's praise, as we've said, and you'll pray and possibly even tell your non-Christian friends and family about Jesus. But are you obeying it all? When the chips are down, when the storm blows up, when you're really under pressure, will your attitudes and values and habits be those that God wants of you. Are you cultivating those habits, embracing those values, allowing those attitudes to develop in your life? Are you, as we have said several times over the past few weeks, desperate for things to be done God's ways, "*hungering and thirsting after righteousness*" ?

Captain Chesley Sullenberger was the pilot of a US Airways flight out of LaGuardia Airport on January 15th 2009. He'd been a pilot for many, many years and every flight he'd piloted he'd been through all the safety procedures and checks, even though he'd never ever had to use any of them. But on that January morning something did go wrong and, as you no doubt remember, Captain Sullenberger managed to land the plane on the Hudson River without a single passenger suffering any injury whatsoever. How could he do that? Because he'd been cultivating that ability for years – it was habit that he'd formed and his attitude was just right when the occasion demanded it.

I sincerely hope that we all manage to avoid the crises that life throws up, but how will you cope if they do arise? And what will you say to God when you stand before him at the end of this life? How is that worked out in your life day by day? Can other people see that you are an authentic follower of Jesus? Can they spot the marks of a true citizen of the Kingdom of God in the way you live your life? We all say we follow Jesus, I'm sure, but our lives need to demonstrate that not just in here on Sunday, not just in your prayer group or housegroup. Hypocrisy is one of the charges that is most often levelled against the church and the people who fill it by those who have chosen to reject the way of Jesus. It's one of the charges that is most often levelled against the people who claim to follow God's way by Jesus himself. My prayer is that we will be able to learn from the Sermon On The Mount – and from the rest of this Gospel of Matthew – and live lives of such obedient integrity that others are attracted to Jesus rather than put off him. Are you starting to "*hunger and thirst after righteousness*"? Pray that God will help you to today.

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Questions for discussion

1. Do you ever stop to think about what will happen when you stand before God? If you do, what is your reaction? If you don't, why not?
2. What do you think Jesus means by what he says in vv22,23? How does that make you feel?
3. What happens if we just listen to Jesus' words and don't put them into practice? How will that be obvious in our lives?
4. What do you think about this Sermon On The Mount? Which bits have been particularly important for you?
5. What are you going to do about the things Jesus has been talking about?