

[Matthew 5:21-37](#)

In last week's Gospel passage from the preceding verses, Jesus said that his kingdom community was being watched by the world and so needed to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

But he then went on to say a third thing: that the world needs to see that we are better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. We are not just forgiven people, we are people on a journey of transformation.

This week's passage puts flesh on those bones. In these verses, Jesus gives us specific examples of how we are meant to be better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law.

Jesus does this by taking examples from the Ten Commandments specifically and the Jewish Law, the Torah, generally. You will have noticed there was something of a formula going on in each example in the reading. First, there is a statement along the lines of 'You have heard that it was said long ago', followed by the law in question, and then Jesus says, 'But I tell you' and he then proceeds to up the ante and make that particular Law even more challenging.

This formula of 'You have heard that it was said' followed by 'But I tell you' is one that several Jewish teachers used. It's a way of saying, 'I have a different and better interpretation of the Law than what you have heard up to now.' Well, you can bet Jesus has!

What is he trying to get over? That it's not enough to obey externally in our actions the letter of God's Law, what God is looking for is more than that. He is looking at our *character*.¹

Now it's easy to see what sort of character faults Jesus is condemning here, but maybe we should take those and reverse them to see what character traits he is commending as worthy of his kingdom.

So let's look at the four examples he gives that we read.

Firstly, when Jesus talks about the command not to murder, he identifies anger, putting people down, and broken relationships as character faults behind the outward action and similar to it. The positive quality he identifies as important for his followers is **reconciliation** (verses 21-26). Be reconciled to the person who has something against you before you come to worship. Be reconciled to the person who is taking you to court for a debt.

We know how this fits into wider Christian theology. Because God has reconciled us to himself through the Cross of Christ, he calls us to be reconciled to each other. The church is meant to be a community of reconciliation.

We reflect this at least in part in our denominational structures in the Methodist Church. If a formal complaint against someone cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties in the local circuit, it is passed onto the District. And the body there which tries to resolve the problem is called the District *Reconciliation Group*.

It's a shame, then, that some people in our churches would rather complain and assassinate someone's character, and even make up false accusations rather than seek reconciliation. And after I first wrote those words, I reflected on the expression 'character *assassination*' – you can see why Jesus links attitudes of the heart to murder there.

When I call for reconciliation I am not asking that we sweep differences or pain under the carpet and pretend they don't exist. That is not reconciliation.

Of course, reconciliation can be difficult, if not downright painful. Sometimes we need a mediator to steer all the parties on a helpful course. It can help to have some mediators who have had particular training and gained certain skills.

But make no mistake, reconciliation is core to who we are as the Christian church. If we undermine it or despise it, then we are undermining our very identity as the church. We become not a place of life but of murder.

Secondly, when Jesus talks about adultery and the adultery of the heart that is lust (verses 27-30), he is calling us to the positive character trait of ***contentment***. For what Jesus is doing here is linking the commandment not to commit adultery with the commandment not to covet. If a man lusts after another woman, he is lusting after someone else's spouse or partner or daughter.

Jesus does not, of course, refer here to passing attraction, "but the deliberate harbouring of desire for an illicit relationship"².

When we are not content with our possessions, we covet buying more. When we are not content in our relationships, we covet someone else.

One of the problems we have with relationships today, and I think I've said this before, is that in the absence of belief in God, we expect too much of our

romantic partners. We expect them to fulfil all sorts of needs – not just physical, but emotional too. We place a heavy burden on them that really only God can fill.

So when our loved ones fail to meet all our needs, the seeds of discontent are sown. And as those seeds grow, they burst through the surface of the soil as weeds that strangle our contentment. We begin to think that someone else would suit us better.

It's a delusion. It doesn't work. And if the thought is allowed to proceed to action, then two families can get destroyed.

As the church, we need to be a community that resists the lies of our world that say we shall only be satisfied with more, more, more. It bankrupts our bank accounts and it breaks up our families and relationships. Betrayed spouses may spend years before they ever trust someone again. Children suffer in their upbringing, however heroic many lone parents are.

I've quoted before in weddings the old saying that the bride's aims and goals on a wedding day are Aisle-Altar-Hymn. But we need to accept one another's imperfections and frailties, showing some of the grace that God has shown to us in Christ. We need to be less concerned with changing them for the better (and if they don't, changing them for a newer model) than with changing ourselves.

Thirdly, when Jesus talks about divorce (verses 31-32) the positive character trait he has in mind is *faithfulness*.

We do have to read Jesus' words here in parallel with what he says elsewhere in Matthew (in chapter 19) where he underlines sexual immorality as grounds for divorce, and what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7, that if a Christian is married to a non-Christian and the non-Christian wants out, that too is a ground for divorce, but what is at the root of this teaching is that marriage is meant to be one man and one woman exclusively for life. The New Testament scholar Craig Keener says that Jesus and Paul

... exonerate those who genuinely wished to save their marriage but were unable to do so because their spouse's unrepentant adultery, abandonment, or abuse de facto destroyed the marriage bonds.³

Jesus in his typical use of extreme hyperbolic language is not here sending abused wives back to their abusers, as I have sadly heard some Christian ministers do, but calling on those who have done wrong to mend their ways.

The other week Byfleet church hosted a wedding blessing for another church – one that doesn't have its own premises. As the pastor took the young couple through their vows, I noticed that when he asked them questions such as 'Will you be faithful to her/him until you are parted by death?' their answer was 'I will.'

Now that's fine up to a point. 'I will' indicates both that it is a promise going into the future, and that sometimes love and faithfulness is an act of will. Because for all the joys of marriage, it will also be tough at times.

I much prefer our marriage service, where the bride and groom don't say 'I will' but 'With God's help I will.' God is ready by the Holy Spirit to help us with those challenging assignments he gives us.

And that isn't just about marriage. It's about us in the church being faithful to Jesus and faithful in our commitment to each other. Does Jesus see faithfulness to his teaching and to one another among us?

Fourthly and finally, when Jesus talks about whether or not you should swear an oath in court (verses 33-37), he has in mind the positive character trait of *integrity*.

Jesus' banning of oaths wasn't an unique position, but it was rare, and of course there are examples of oaths in the Old Testament, where the expectation is that if you make an oath you must keep it, even at great cost to yourself. It also warns against foolish oaths.

The intention behind Jesus' teaching is probably similar to the ancient Greek view that your word should be as good as your oath. It makes me think of my late father's experience of working in banking in the City. When the so-called 'Big Bang' happened in the financial world in 1987, my father bemoaned the fact that what disappeared overnight was the notion that a gentleman's word was his bond. So much business was conducted in the city on a well-founded basis that if someone gave their word they would keep it. A handshake sealed the commitment of both parties. But this was replaced by lies and suspicion that had to be kept in check by laws.

Jesus is calling his people to be so known for their commitment to truthfulness that our reputation means no-one needs to ask us to back it up in some legal way. He calls us to remember that when we speak, we do so not merely in the presence of human witnesses, but in the presence of God. Yet how much do we live our lives in the knowledge that God is present? Should that not have an effect on our commitment to truth?

In Jesus' day, some people thought it OK to break an oath and deceive people if they swore on something trivial, such as their right hand, but he wants his people to be different. In our day, we know how easily some people find it to engage in bare-faced deceit. Sadly in the last couple of years we have had too many examples of that in Parliament, but it's not the only arena where we've witnessed this disturbing trend. Some people think they can say anything they like on the Internet, and there will be no consequences. They are wrong.

So if Jesus calls us to be people who are habitually known for their truth-telling, it is another way in which he is calling us to be distinctive in the face of the watching world.

The same is true of the other character virtues we've been thinking about today. His call to faithfulness comes to us in a society that has replaced lifetime faithfulness with serial monogamy, and now 'throuples'. His call to contentment comes to us in a society where we are forever meant to buy bigger and better things, regardless of whether we need them, relationships included. His call to reconciliation comes to us in a society where we seem to have caught the American disease of 'If it moves, sue it.'

How is God calling me to be distinctive as a Christian today?

How is he calling us as a church to be distinctive?

How indeed shall we be the light of the world?

¹ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, pp 180-182.

² *Op. cit.*, p189.

³ *Op. cit.*, p192.