

Epiphany 6

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Deuteronomy 10: 12–22; 1Corinthians 3: 1–9; Matthew 5: 21–37

Live according to the intention of the commandments not just according to the rules.

How well do you know the 10 commandments? Honour your father and mother, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet your neighbours stuff, and yes I know there are others. Basically, those I have mentioned are what our gospel today is about. Jesus is pointing out that these basic laws have, over time, been twisted slightly and while people still follow them, they do so in a literal way, so they can continue to say they are 'good', but their day to day actions are not in-keeping with the intention of the commandments. People could say, I am good, I do not kill, I am not an adulterer, yet their attitude to others is just as bad as if they did. Jesus is saying it is not enough to put a good outer covering on your life; – what you think, your attitude to others, what you say about others is as important as your actions.

On the surface, when we read today's gospel, we could be forgiven for throwing up our hands and saying, 'it's all too hard', 'I haven't got a chance' because I sometimes do have bad feelings about other people, that 'other person' often gets my blood boiling and I just react to it, I wouldn't ever kill anyone, but gee sometimes it feels like I would like to. But Jesus' purpose in this was not to prove to us that we are beyond redemption but quite the opposite. Today's passage is near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, and Jesus is simply offering, not more rules, he is offering teaching about the intention behind the ones they all knew very well. Jesus has said, he 'did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them'. He is asking his disciples to be people of integrity, people who are faithful to their promises, people who have no need to swear to the truth because they are truth-tellers.

Jesus' message is about dropping the pretence and dealing with our real problems of being in relationship with others by being honest, genuine,

straight-forward and humble. Make peace with those with whom you have a disagreement, settle your ill feeling toward others, deal with that grudge you feel toward that person, be honest about your feelings. Do it now, live by kingdom values now. Straighten out your life now, make peace. The kingdom of God is here, now, the spirit of God is giving you strength for all the changes required in your life, now. The love of Christ is forgiving you and inviting you to forgive others, now. Now. Now. Now.

Jesus is telling his disciples that not only are you not to write that other person off as a lost cause, but don't write yourself off either. Everyone is worthwhile, everyone is precious to God. Modern living and modern society is, unfortunately, very good at putting people into categories; these people I like / love; these people I don't like / hate; these people I don't even know, so I don't care about them. But these attitudes only allow negative 'blanket attitudes' to grow, and they also feed racism. They allow us to separate ourselves from the need to think about and engage with 'difficult' problems, 'unfamiliar concepts', 'alternative' ways of living. It allows us to develop a 'them and us' attitude. But Jesus is saying 'sort it out' 'deal with your problems', approach people and problems with compassion and prayer. 'Don't bottle up your problems', you may actually explode; 'don't gossip', deal with it. Jesus said, 'blessed are the peacemakers', he did not say blessed are those who sweep it under the carpet, or those who lie to themselves that everything is alright and that they are not hurting. He is saying, if you are hurting, say so, deal with your pain, help others who are in pain or conflict. Be a life-bearer, not a death-bearer, both for your sake and for the sake of others.

When we look at the 10 commandments, we can see just them as a set of rules by which we are called to live. Do this, don't do that. But we are also invited to see them as more than that. We are invited to see them as a guide and exhortation in the formation of our moral character. While we are doing this, and not doing that, we are building within ourselves an honest character. By following these 'rules' and repeatedly thinking about what we are doing and why, we are becoming formed into people who live righteously, who act honestly.

Paul has a similar message for the Corinthians, c'mon guys, stop bickering, stop pretending you have different messages, stop this attempted one-upmanship'. This faction fighting is not helping, you are destroying the message. You are here to share the message of Jesus, not your own, not your mentors, but Jesus message. The life Jesus has called us all to transcends morality, it has consequences for our behaviour, but it requires inner transformation. This is not something we choose for ourselves; it is the work of the Spirit of God. And Paul finishes with a crescendo, I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but it is God who gives it the growth. Nothing we do will amount to anything without God being part of it. If the work we do is built on other convictions, if it is not centered on God, then we are not doing the ministry of the gospel, we are working toward different goals to the ones God is calling us to.

We follow the commandments, not because they are good rules to follow, we follow them so that we may become, i may become, the person God is calling me to become. A person formed and fashioned for life in the kingdom of God. God gave us the commandments as guides in the formation of our character, so that we may become people pure in heart, so that we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and our neighbour as ourselves.

The prayer we have all said at the beginning of our service today, speaks to our gospel today. Turn back to p119 and look at it with me.

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hidden.

We cannot hide anything from God, we may think we are putting on a good front, we may successfully fool the whole world, but God sees through it, God sees into our hearts, God knows our desires, nothing gets past God.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name.

Wow. Clean me, may all my thoughts be pure, unsoiled, send your Holy Spirit into me that my love for you may be complete, and all I do may magnify your name.

Think about it, pray about it, and next time, and all the other next times after that, think about these words as you say them, and think about what you are asking God to do.

We do not pray in order to get to know God better, or that God may get to know us better, God knows us perfectly. We pray that we may get to know ourselves better through the workings of the Holy Spirit within us.