

**Hinde Street Methodist Church**  
Sunday 16 February 2020 11.00am  
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### **Why does God seem to be asking something from us that we can never hope to meet?**

How happy are those whose way is blameless, says the Psalmist. We strive to be happy, we strive to be blameless.

God has set before us today life and prosperity, death and adversity. We strive for life, walking God's ways and observing God's commandments, decrees and ordinances.

How far have we got this week on being blameless, being innocent of wrong doing and lacking nothing necessary to be complete? How far have we got in walking God's way and observing God's commandments, decrees and ordinances?

Pretty much every meeting I sit in at work someone will mention the importance of measuring effect. So I'll try to measure myself this week against the Ten Commandments:

Hopefully struggling to church through a storm last Sunday and then spending the afternoon dozing on the sofa counts as respecting the Sabbath

I've not murdered

I've not committed adultery

Took my Mum out for the day on Friday, which I hope counts as respecting a parent

I haven't sworn

I haven't lied

Having had a week off work and therefore a break from the normal demands of life I've done better than usual on loving God

We could have a long debate about whether my internet shopping counts as coveting something, and what counts as a false god.

Overall score: not bad, but as I had a week off work doing nothing much, it would be deeply concerning if I couldn't score well. My blameless score suggests I'm at least on the right path to life and prosperity, to happiness.

Once we get to the New Testament the criteria get simpler to remember but harder to score: Love God and love your neighbour.

Turn to Matthew 5, and the scoring becomes much easier. It is a zero, fail. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes two of the commandments that some of us may have put on the 'easy' list, murder and adultery, and sets a standard none of us could hope to reach. By these criteria, none of us are blameless or innocent. We are all lacking something that makes us complete.

Why has God set for us a standard that we can never hope to meet?

Before we seek to answer that question, let's dig a bit deeper into what this section from the Sermon on the Mount is saying.

### **Thoughts and feelings not just actions**

We can get hung up on the examples given here, but I think Jesus has chosen them because of their everyday nature. As then, so today. Murder is common. We all experience anger, and in some instances we should be angry, as indeed were the prophets and Jesus at times. Adultery is common. We all experience sexual feelings. Sometimes they are good. Sometimes they are not.

How easy it is to notice only outward signs of behaviour, and not what is going on inside.

Take a trivial example. It might seem altruistic to take in a parcel for a neighbour. But is it really? When the delivery driver knocks on the door and says “will you take a parcel for next door” it would be very hard to say no. And if we do say no, they might stop taking in our parcels.

When assessed on the basis of our thoughts and feelings, even a simple act needs reappraising.

God’s law. Commandments, decrees and ordinances. Statutes and precepts. When teaching about the standards God requires of us use legal terminology, it is even more important that we take into account thoughts and feelings as well as actions. Unlike the legal process we can’t, for example, argue we did keep the Sabbath if we spent the day inwardly seething or used it as an excuse to avoid something we didn’t want to do.

This holds for traditions as much as laws. Each time Matthew’s gospel says “you have heard that it was said”, it is drawing on a mix of God’s law and tradition. We are required to apply the same standards to what is passed down as “the right way to do things” as much as formal commandments.

To underline that thoughts and feelings have the same weight as actions, Matthew’s gospel makes clear that the punishment is the same – the law of the land gave the death penalty for murder, under God’s law murderous thoughts and feelings receive the same sentence. (And as an aside, we might be grateful we no longer impose the death penalty).

This affects how we understand what it means to write God’s law on our hearts. If it were only about our behaviour, we’d only have to remember them and worry about enforcement. As thoughts and feelings are as important, writing God’s law on our hearts is about being attuned to and focused on God.

This is true for the teaching on anger and sexual feelings, but also the next two sections on divorce and oaths. Again, these were commonplace activities.

I think what Jesus is saying here is that we shouldn’t assume that going through a formal process is enough.

- You don’t need to have seen the film “Marriage Story” to know it is possible to get a divorce certificate and use that process for revenge and hurting the other person.
- It is possible to have a lavish Church ceremony where promises are made, the prayers long and the meal afterwards sumptuous, but this won’t help you know whether God’s law is written on the hearts of those who promised.
- It is possible to make promises with your hand on the bible, in a panelled court room before judges in fine wigs and robes, but this won’t help you know whether God’s law is written on the hearts of those who swore an oath.

That helps understand the standard Jesus is preaching in the Sermon on the Mount. But we haven’t yet addressed the question: “Why has God set for us a standard that we can never hope to meet?”

## **Humility**

There are a number of ways to respond to an impossible standard. Not bother to try to meet it. To rage at the unfairness of it. To try to subvert it or bend it so you can meet it. To pretend it doesn’t exist. To set our own more achievable standards. To feel bad at our failure. To think badly of the one who set it.

These are all understandable responses, but not how God wants us to respond. God wants us to respond with humility.

The dictionary defines humility as the quality of having a modest or low view of one's importance. Modest is a key word here, neither too great or too small. Not pretending that if we tried hard enough we could meet God's standard. Not pretending that our good intentions are enough. Not seeing ourselves as so low that God could never love us.

Humility is a theme that runs through the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks ago, we began looking at this collection of Jesus' key teaching, starting with the Beatitudes, including "blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth". After the section we are looking at today, Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies. He encourages us to give in private and pray in private and not let anyone know we are fasting. We are told not to worry about food and clothing. We are told not to take the speck out of our neighbour's eye while ignoring the log in our own. Finally, the golden rule: "in everything do to others as you would have them do to you".

It might seem a little tame to be preaching a message of modesty, verging on the dull even. We may expect to hear from the pulpit a message condemning those who turn away from God's way coupled with a message about God's love for all. Some people will only hear the message of condemnation and dwell on the bad things they have done. Some people will only hear that God loves them, and conveniently forget God loves those cowering under the weight of their sin just as much. Humility isn't a middle ground, neither one thing or the other, but a way to ensure we hear both messages. We all fall short and God still loves us.

Please don't miss how dramatic this can be because modesty sounds dull. If we take a modest view of our own importance it has the potential to change our relationship with God and to change our relationship with other people.

### **Changed relationship with God**

For many of us it is hard to rely on God. Perhaps we want to be in control. Perhaps we want to take responsibility for ensuring we are happy, to actively choose life and prosperity. Perhaps we have been let down by others too many times to want to leave the important things at the mercy of someone else. However, this section of the Sermon on the Mount reminds us that what we can do alone can never be enough, no matter how hard we try.

We can't look God straight in the eye, but instead have to rely on God. Rely on God to forgive us. Rely on God to keep showing us the way to happiness, how to choose life and prosperity. Rely on God to rescue us with unfailing love.

That changes our relationship with God from one where perhaps we like to tell God what's what or one where we are desperate to please, to one where we can be with God, express what is deep within us (at times anguish, at times joy), and rest with God. Rather than worrying about whether our prayers are good enough, our spiritual life good enough, our devotion sufficient, we can take a modest view of its importance, accept it will never be enough and instead rely on God to guide us closer to God. Diminishing our own importance a little, approaching God humbly can free us to encounter God without getting in our own way.

### **Changed relationship with other people**

It is not new to talk about moving from zero-sum relationships where there is a winner and a loser, to win-win situations, whether in relationship counselling or in international negotiations. But that doesn't make it any easier, or any less necessary. Matthew's gospel is as true today as when it was first recorded: "Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown in prison." What it doesn't highlight is just how hard it can be to come to terms quickly with your accuser when you know that they have done something quite seriously and fundamentally wrong.

It can be really hard to differentiate between justice and wanting to make someone suffer as some sort of recompense for the suffering we have gone through. To differentiate between putting things right and wanting to come out on top.

I know when I've been in situations where I feel I've been wronged just how hard it is to stand back and say 'I haven't been perfect either even if I tried my best'. Especially if I think my failings are less bad than someone else's. To ask myself why I want to do something – is it to try and put right the situation or to make me feel better? It is a constant effort to do so and can open us up to even more hurt. I know I have to repeatedly take a deep breath and ask myself whether my hurt feelings are stopping me from seeking a way that works for all involved.

## **Conclusion**

At first glance, this section of the Sermon on the Mount seems to be setting an impossible standard. And I admit it initially left me frustrated – why would Jesus tell us to do something we can never achieve? But dig deeper, and the theme of humility comes through as we face the reality that even if our behaviours match up, our thoughts and feelings never will.

Rather than impossible standards, it reminds us to look at the modest importance of ourselves, so we think realistically about ourselves, neither too highly or too lowly. It encourages us to rely on God rather than our own ability to meet God's standard. It encourages us to stop our righteous indignation getting in the way of an approach where no one loses and we all have something to gain.

It is when we strive to write a reliance on God on our hearts that we walk a path to happiness, to life and prosperity.