

Time for God – Take 2

Purpose: To assist the congregation with further reflection on the theme of the Sunday service and in particular with the Congregational Bible passage.

Week beginning Sunday 12 February Jesus Co-Workers

Pray Pray that we would be willing to admit our shortcomings rather than being too quick to point the finger at others and defend ourselves. Ask forgiveness and for grace to be more loving towards God and neighbour

Read Read the passage (preferably in an easy to understand version). Matthew 5:21-37.

Background Old Testament law supplemented by a raft of tradition that had grown up over the years set out, sometimes in great detail, the standards by which people were expected to live, and the punishments they might expect if they transgressed. Things had developed in a fairly severe way but human nature being what it is there were always those who sought to cover themselves. In this passage which covers anger, divorce, lust and making vows Jesus calls people to be less simplistic about what is wrongdoing – and on the face of it intensifies the standards of the law. Underpinning it all, however, is his call to grace, love and forgiveness.

Possible questions/points to consider

1. We may pride ourselves on being understanding and forgiving – and yes, we may well be more open to mercy, forgiveness and understanding than many we know. However, it isn't easy. Imagine picking up the paper and reading about some awful murder or account of a serious sexual assault, or hearing of the ramifications of really tangled and messy relationship breakdown or hearing a blast of particularly foul language what is likely to be our response? No matter how understanding we like to think ourselves to be why do we find it so easy to point the finger?
2. Jesus seems to intensify the requirements of the religious law – in the older versions – “you have heard it said.... But I say to you...” Is Jesus simply making it harder for us to please him or is there some other reason? We all like to be right – some of us more than others! Why is that? Taking the line that he does Jesus makes it impossible for us to justify ourselves. Why is that important? Someone once said “A Christian is someone who knows that they aren't good enough for God but who knows that God loves and forgives them in Jesus anyway, and who loves and serves Jesus and their neighbour as a thank you.” How do you respond to that?
3. We didn't go into detail on the do's and don'ts of whether violence or anger is ever justified or acceptable (or if so, in what circumstances) nor did we explore in detail what Jesus' teaching means in the areas of sexual ethics or relationships. Something tells me that Jesus wants us to be both less condemnatory and more circumspect and loving in our behaviour. How can we be less rule bound yet still rise to high standards? What is the basis for our behaviour – how far is it our righteousness, how far God's grace? What does it mean for the way we live? For the way we treat others?
4. Underpinning Jesus' teaching here is the ten commandments and esp You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord. We might honestly say that we have kept to the letter of these: we haven't murdered anyone, committed adultery or blasphemed. But clearly, Jesus doesn't want us to justify ourselves on that basis – and there is some challenging teaching when we begin to take “what is in our hearts” into account. How might we better understand God's ways if we were to go beyond outward impressions and gave more thought to what is in our heart?
5. Actions speak louder than words. Jesus calls us not simply to think these things through but with his help to begin to live out his teaching. What difference should it make?

Prayer Lord, make us less judgemental, less prone to point the finger at others and more open to your forgiveness and grace, more ready to follow your lead in living out of love. Amen.