

### **“The Ethics of Walking with God”**

St. Paul’s Presbyterian, Hamilton, 16 February 2014

Psalm 119:1-16; Deut. 30:15-20; Matt. 5:17-30; 1 Cor. 3:1-9

Last week we heard Jesus call his disciples the salt of the earth, the light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, a lamp held high to give light to the whole house. These were metaphors for the life in the Spirit which Jesus lives and which is also given to those who follow him.

Just as salt is not a neutral, benign substance but rather a potent one, well able to sting a wound, or to season or preserve food, so also God is not neutral concerning the lives of God’s people. Neither, therefore, can the sons and daughters of God be neutral and unconcerned. No, Jesus said, they are the salt of the earth.

And just as Jesus, the Son of God, is the light of the world, so also are the sons and daughters of God with him. For as the Spirit draws us near to God, we see others with the eyes of the One who is their Creator, and our own. We see them with the eyes of Jesus, whose life is the light of all people. And this light makes us a city on a hill that can no more be hidden than one would light a lamp and cover it up.

Jesus calls us to keep that light visible and accessible to the world around us, and so to really be what he has made us by the Spirit. “Well,” you might say, “this is all very nice but what does it really mean, concretely? “What does our being the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city on a hill really look like on the ground? “How do we actually go about living that?”

Jesus answers such questions in terms of a radical observance of the Jewish law, an observance which not merely keeps the letter but fulfills the spirit. He directs us to a piety, a faithfulness, which penetrates the fallible words of Moses and the prophets uttered within the limited historical context of the life of Israel right back to the mind and heart of the God who gave them to speak those words.

His teaching at this point drops all metaphor, and takes the form of a series of antitheses: “You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...”

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit murder’, but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, if you insult him or her or denounce him or her as a fool, you will be liable to hellfire”.

He doesn’t mean, obviously, that anger is the same as murder. He doesn’t mean that if you are angry you may as well go ahead and kill because you’re already condemned for murder anyway!

Nor does he mean when he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery’, but I say to you that whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart”, that if you’ve looked at someone lustfully you might just as well go ahead and have the affair since you’re already condemned for adultery anyway, so what have you got to lose?

There is a commonsense Proverb (6:27) that sheds some light on Jesus’ meaning here: “Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?”

That is to say that the origin of the deed lies in the thought, and the seed of the thought lies in the non-acceptance of what has been graciously given by the hand of God, in the dissatisfied heart coveting instead what belongs to another.

And since we are all, in our unbelief, our lack of faith and trust in God, prone to this very thing in one way or another, I think there is also implied here in Jesus' words a rejection of all self-justification, especially as compared to others.

As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, "You who would condemn others, are you doing the same thing yourself?" Murder is condemned, yes, for it cuts short a life which God loves and created to be lived out before him.

But you who would denounce the murderer and take your stand on your not having actually killed, do you yourself nurture an anger against another which, if you looked at it self-critically, you would recognize as in fact the spirit of killing?

What goes up to God from your heart concerning this person? Does it come from a spirit of good will, and aim at his or her life and well-being and benefit?

Is it something that *God*, who is who he shows himself to be in Jesus Christ and nothing else than this, would send *down* to him or her? Is it remotely like what Jesus, who gave himself for every last one of us, would ever pray to the Father concerning him or her? If you can't honestly answer "yes" to those questions, if your will and the content of the prayer of your heart are his or her ruin and destruction, then there is a problem between you and God.

God certainly doesn't want to hear about how you are so good just because you, whose thoughts and intentions toward someone else are really poisoned arrows aimed at the heart, have not actually, physically, drawn a dagger and plunged it into flesh.

And as for adultery, yes, it is condemned, for it is betrayal of a sacred trust before God for your spouse, your word, and your promise to be *for* him or her in every way. As breach of trust, it damages, at the very least, lives built upon and depending upon that trust.

But if you can't keep your eyes more or less to yourself and decent thoughts in your head, don't bother prattling on to God or anyone else about your goodness for refraining from doing the deed. God doesn't want to hear you going on about what a great deed, what a big sacrifice it is for you to forego the novel excitement of illicit encounter, as if there were not already the essential betrayal in your heart, secretly breaking trust, damaging and undermining life given to your care.

It's as though Jesus would say, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit such and such a sin.' " But I say, 'Live out in every way, from your own heart, the reason *why* that was said.'" Which is really to say, to fulfill the Law, live by the Spirit of the God who gave the Law. Draw near to God as you regard others with the eyes of the One who is their Creator, and your own. Regard them with the eyes of Jesus, whose life is the light of all people, who looking upon them – and you – gave up that life for us all that we might live.

Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? But it's not easy. What Jesus is really calling for, I think, is what has been called Radical Obedience.

The late German Lutheran New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote about this. I recall how, over thirty years ago, I was in the library at Knox College reading one of his books and came across this electrifying concept of Radical Obedience. Really I was stunned, and it has stuck with me ever since.

Radical Obedience is certainly not coerced obedience, obedience rendered because of the threat of punishment, because of the stick raised above your head and poised to be brought down hard – "God's gonna getcha for

that!" Clearly, in that case, obedience is grudging – one would rather do something else and only obeys because it is less painful.

Nor is it obedience brought about by the enticement of the carrot as opposed to the threat of the stick. Again, one would rather do something else but obeys because it appears to be in one's interest to do so. Nor is it the sort of obedience one renders because one believes it to be right or because of the pangs of conscience. Again, one might otherwise prefer another course of action, a different deed, but does the "right thing" reluctantly, with a sigh.

Even obedience to the Law, to the command of God, rendered to please God, in order to do the will of God, is not Radical Obedience. For if God had not commanded this, we would not have chosen on our own to do it. And if God commanded something else, we would then go and do that other thing instead of the first.

Radical Obedience is obedience from the heart. It would do what is commanded even if it were not commanded, for it has the command of God written on the heart, and owns the will of God as its own will. In fact, it would not do something else even if that something else were commanded, because it is rendered *prior to the command being given*.

Radical Obedience is the result the unity of our heart and will with the heart and will of God. It is obedience that is completely and totally free. For this reason, only Radical Obedience is that obedience which is pleasing to God. Nothing short of it will really quite do.

It is the work of the Spirit of Christ in us, and is the gift of Christ to us. It is characteristic of Jesus himself, and I believe it is promised to us. In fact, I believe it is our possession now, in faith. We possess it in the reality of the Spirit of Christ, in the reality of our being reconciled to God in him and not in actuality.

In other words, in my own case, I believe that Radical Obedience is promised to me, and in fact is my possession in Jesus Christ, even though the empirical facts of my life would mock such an assertion. That is to say that it is our possession in the sense that we are heirs to the whole spiritual reality that Jesus represents.

Does it sound like I'm playing a little theological game? Within our bodily, temporal life, Radical Obedience is elusive, that's for sure. It sometimes it seems as though it teases us, inviting us to grasp it and then disappearing like a will o' the wisp. But that's when we think we have to make it ourselves, that we have to strive for it. That is surely why all attempts of ours to build the kingdom of God on earth result in some caricature or another and finally come to naught.

The ethics of the kingdom of God can only *really* be lived in Radical Obedience, that utterly inward obedience by which life is lived not so much *according to* the will of God as something applied to it from outside, but rather *within* the will of God.

No, what we have to do is hope for it, pray for it, because we want to live in and for God in Jesus Christ. We shall never, in this life, be able to grasp Radical Obedience for ourselves.

If we are blessed, from time to time we may feel it within ourselves, catch a brief spiritual glimpse of it, momentarily giving us a lift above our sinful finitude.

In Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.