

Sunday, 12th February , 2023

No buts

Materials from Roots Bible Study

Begin with an opening prayer

God of Integrity,
God of truth and wisdom,
we worship and adore you.
Jesus who lived without sin,
who lived life in all its fullness,
we worship and adore you.
Holy Spirit, who leads and guides us
to live with honesty and sincerity,
we worship and adore you.

Amen.

Read : Matthew 5.21-37

Bible notes

This passage is sometimes taken to be an intensification of the law and a sign of sect-like requirements in the strict community for whom Matthew is writing. The context gives the lie to this 'ultra-strict membership' interpretation, however.

The earlier beatitudes contain wide-open categories: it is the merciful who will receive mercy, not those who conform to some strict requirement. It is true, however, that this passage does place all of us in the uncomfortable position of needing to change and improve. It takes us from rule-based, exterior ethics based on obvious actions to interior attitudes and choices. Suddenly the interior world where we fume against someone else, calling them an idiot, is as real as the exterior world in which we might commit an act of violence. The point is not that the act of violence is equivalent to the vocal outburst; it is that, if we 'live by the rules', we can excuse ourselves of some pretty horrendous things because external rules give me the leeway to do this. We might never hit anybody, but if we exterminate them again and again in our mind, judging, condemning and despising them, dismissing them as not fit to live – what has happened to our soul? Do we not have the soul of a murderer? If we would never swear falsely when under oath in court and if we take our commitment to God seriously, but feel free to lie to our friends and family and to renege on our promises to them, do we not remain an untrustworthy liar?

It is possible to keep outward rules and yet not allow them to impact our inner selves very much. In fact, it is possible to use the rules to keep a small pocket within ourselves where we are free to follow our sinful desires because 'I have never done that.' The goal of the passage is not a more intense set of rules, but entering into a process of getting real with

ourselves, working to bring our thoughts and feelings into line with our beliefs, a willingness to look into an inner mirror and work seriously with the faults that we see.

Reflection

Spend a few moments thinking about what stands out for you from the Bible reading. This idea may help.

There is a 'spiritual' (i.e. song) that begins, 'Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standin' in the need of prayer'. This seems like a good way to approach Matthew 5.21-37. All of us are shown up by this inner spotlight in some way. We have certain pockets of behaviour where we excuse ourselves, either because we consider what we do is 'not that bad' or because we keep the letter of the law but refute its spirit. There is no huge guilt trip in this teaching, however, or an existential despair over our inherent sinfulness – rather encouragement to act and change things. Let's do better and be better!

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Jesus, we thank and praise you,
that you have taught us another way,
that you have given us life in all its fullness.

Thank you that when we seek you with all our heart,
we are choosing that life.

Thank you that you have offered us a different path:
a path of truth, a path of humility,
a path of wisdom, a path of integrity,
a path of honesty.

Through your example here on earth you showed us
how to live peaceful lives,
how to reconcile with others,
how to follow you and seek wholeness.

Thank you that we have all of that in you.

You reconciled us on the cross and we are truly grateful.

Amen.

A prayer to conclude

Loving Lord, we want to use
our strong feelings to bring change;
our words to encourage;
our gifts to heal;
our eyes to see as you see;
our hands to give help.

Lord, we choose life, we choose you.

Amen.