

Generous and Good

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[0 : 00] So it's great to be together today and it's great to start the year kind of with a spiritual perspective and reminding us of the foundation of our faith and who we're to look for.

So I guess many of us, even many of us as we entered this morning, we said, Happy New Year and you'll have heard that a hundred thousand times over this last twelve hours or so.

And that's a great sentiment, isn't it? You know, it's a tremendous sentiment. Happiness is really important to us and it's very significant and God knows that as well.

And I think what we sometimes forget is that our happiness is founded in a relationship with Him. At a very fundamental level, we will look for happiness in lots of different areas and He gives us happiness in lots of different areas, but not without Him.

Not despite Him. He wants us to enjoy the everyday things of living and life, but He wants us to do it in His strength and focused on Him as our foundation in life.

[1 : 09] You know, we didn't read the beatitudes of the sermon on the Mount, bless it is. I know it's rather a maybe a soft interpretation or translation of the word that we have, that we use happy is, but blessed is slightly kind of more three dimensional and a bit deeper.

But essentially it's happiness and Jesus has given us a recipe for happiness here that we're to recognize and know. And what He's doing in the sermon is really just teaching us the happiness of grace, the happiness of following His ways of grace.

And so just briefly what I want to do is remind us again as we start the new year of the direction of travel that we want to be in, that we want God, that God wants us to be in, the channel that He wants us to follow and recognize that His way is never merely comforting.

I can't simply just spiritually rub your backs and say, there, there, I'll do that as much as I can, but there's also a challenge for us. There's also something to kind of face up to and recognize in the spiritual battle and kind of in the battle and in the difficulties we can say there, there, and know His comfort and know His strength for us.

So really the sermon is about practical, I want to be very, as you know, that's the bent of the direction so often of my preaching is to be practical, to take the theological truth and make it practical, make it real in our lives.

[2 : 52] And the sermon of Jesus is very practical. Take verse, you know, 47, when He says, everyone who comes to me and hears my word and does them, that is what He wants us to do, is to hear His word and do it.

He wants us to live it. He wants us to put it into practice. It is, you know, theology and truth must be for us, but you shouldn't sit here and just think we'll get through this half hour of theological stuff that's not really relevant and then I'll get back to my real life, my practical life.

And it should be that everything that we believe takes its place to allow us blessing and happiness in our practical everyday living.

So that's really, that verse there, verse 47 is really a summary of what Jesus wants us to take from this whole sermon, that we would hear His word and do His word in the strength of the Spirit, you know, not on our own strength, not as a way of earning favor, not in His strength that we would recognize, that as Christians we are empowered to live for Him.

In other words, I've got, and you've got no excuses to be sinful. No excuses to say, hey, well, I'm just a sinner and this is the way I'm living. We will do that, we will sin, we'll fail, but we have no excuse for it because we are empowered to live a different way and when we sin we are empowered to be forgiven and move forward.

[4 : 27] So basically, we're looking at a couple of things here. We're looking at a generosity of spirit and we're looking at goodness of heart, lovely things, okay?

A generous spirit and a good heart. And I'll just take the sections as they're broken down in the chapter that you have if you've got the Bible in front of you in page 863.

So Jesus starts with, the heading is judging others and really it's about a generosity of spirit towards other people. Now we know and we say again and again the gospel is intensely personal.

It's about your relationship with Jesus Christ, you must recognize that you're sin and my sin is what He's taken on the cross and we have this ongoing personal relationship, but God forbid that you take that personal relationship and don't apply it societally or communally or in the church.

Because the gospel that's intensely personal, that is intensely individualistic, powerfully should affect the way we behave in community with one another.

[5 : 35] It influences particularly not just our behavior in isolation but our behavior with other people. And I think this is a really underrated or under focused element of faith.

We like to talk about our individual faith and how it's growing and how we're bearing fruit, but it's often revealed in the way we live and our attitudes towards other people.

And Jesus focuses on that, our attitudes towards others and their failings. So He's saying here, judge not and you will not be judged, condemn not and you will not be condemned.

That's the whole focus of this section. It's about the kind of spirit, the generosity or the miserly kind of spirit we have towards the failures of other people.

Now when Jesus is speaking here, He's not speaking about being discerning. He's not speaking about making right judgments because we're people that we make choices and we make judgments every day.

[6 : 36] He's not giving us a license to be naive about people and thinking, oh, we don't want to make any judgments whatsoever. It's about judging other people with an ungracious, a graceless spirit or a graceless motive.

It's about being miserly towards the failures of others, sensorious, hypocritical. This is not a very, this is a bit of a clumsy statement, but self unaware.

We're unaware of our self before God, miserly with the grace that we've been generously given. So it's about a generosity of spirit and He's saying that this is what grace is about.

It's about how we live and think about the failures and the mistakes of other people. And He gives three very quick principles that we are to embrace so that we are graceful, generous in our spirit.

As we go into 2018, it's a great thing to put into practice in the church. That's what we want to be in St. Columbas in our community, you know, with all the failings and faults and mistakes that we make.

[7 : 48] And it's so easy to write them down and to elicit them and to remember them and to record them. And He wants us to think differently and be generous.

And He gives us three principles for our lives. It says, firstly, be like Christ, our teacher in verse 40. He tells us a disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.

And so that helps us to be generous, spirited, because we are learners. We'll always have the EI Plate on in our Christian lives. We'll always be someone who is learning.

What is it they have? And people who have passed their driving test now is a P. What does that mean? Probationer? What does it? Pass. Is that what it means?

I thought it meant that you're still learning. I thought it was probationer or something like that. But anyway, we never really lose our P. Plate or our EI Plate as Christians, because we're always disciples.

[8 : 43] And we have to be like Jesus. The tendency Jesus says is to blind this. You know, how can a blind man lead the blind? That's what our tendency is to be spiritually blind.

But He says, I've lavished grace on you. I've given you amazing amounts of grace. Jesus says, I've left the classroom and I've hung on a cross.

What I'm telling you, Jesus, is no mere academic ethic. It's no moralistic code. I've come and I've lived it and I've bled it and I've died and I've risen again in order to give you a life that you're to share with others.

And we sit at His feet as recipients of new life, paid in full, graced, lavished on as undeserved mercy and we are to reflect Christ.

Now you will do that tomorrow or not. And I will do that tomorrow or not. We will either lavish grace on others and especially on the failure of others, of our wives, our husbands, our children, our

colleagues, our neighbors, or we will be miserly with grace.

[9 : 53] I'll keep it all to myself. That's the choice we have. Are we going to be like Christ our teacher? So the second principle is in, you know, tight and strong theological language, stop being a plank.

Stop being a plank. That's what He says in verses 41 and 42. He says, we see a speck that is in our brother's eye but we don't know it's a log or a plank or a trunk of tree, a tree trunk that's in our own eye.

You know, Jesus is making things very clear and very obvious for us the way that sometimes we think. We're very imbalanced and we do things in a very ironically, sadly humorous way in a sense. If it wasn't so serious, it would be funny, I think, in the sense is what Jesus is saying. He's saying is that we're very quick to point out the tiny failings and others but we fail to see this large beam, plank, trunk that's coming out of our own eye.

So he stopped being a plank. Jesus is invoking holy sarcasm to the mean spirited here. He's reminding us of the danger of us saying, oh, I see, yes, yes, I see, I see grace, I see Jesus, I see all that God has done but focusing rather on the minor failings of others rather than being self-aware that grace makes us self-aware.

[11 : 36] We can be Jesus is saying, and Jesus is saying it, I'm glad to say that, self-righteous tree trunks. That's what we can be. Making lumber and cumbersome and unaware, humbly of what grace has done for us.

He says we can be black, we can miss the point, we can be legalistic and we can miss judge. We can focus the judgment on in the wrong way. It should first of all be internal before it finds the external outlet with other people.

The interesting thing is, I think here, that it's in the context of faith. There's a piety about it, kind of rather ugly piety, isn't it?

And we see it in ourselves because here Jesus says that the person says, brother, brother, sister. And I kind of, there's a false piety about it.

And you say, brother, you say, I really do love you, but my goodness, these tiny sins you've got, I'm going to expose them because I'm holier and more righteous than you.

[12 : 50] And so I feel I should do that. So there is a piety, there's a false spirituality about it. It's not coming from an unbeliever. It's not coming from someone who doesn't acknowledge the truth.

But it comes with pride. And it comes with self-righteousness. So it causes only resentment because it's self-oblivious.

And you know that, don't you? You've experienced that. I've experienced it. I've probably done it as well. But you know that, don't you? When someone comes in a mask of spirituality to expose all your minor failings, you can just see tree trunks all over the place.

Now can I just add something significant there? Jesus is not speaking about genuine accountability here. Genuinely coming and lovingly coming alongside a brother or sister is absolutely commended in Scripture.

And it's something we don't do enough is lovingly, humbly, gently and honestly challenging one another. But it's vital, it's done, with Jesus saying it, it's vital, it's done the right way.

[14 : 04] It's vital, it's done in humility and with self-awareness and with a real degree of recognition, fear and trembling in many ways.

And that's what is amazing in our Christian community where there's that ability to be humble and honest. But we don't want a community that is miserly and ugly in the name of brotherliness or sisterliness.

God's the second principle is about stopping a plank. The third one that He gives us in terms of this is what goes around, comes around, and this is really in many ways the most solemn of them in verse 38.

It says, given it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over it will put in your lap, for with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. The pouring out of grain into the lap.

You know, if you just do it once quickly the grain just fills up. But if you shake it and it settles, there's more room for more grain and that's really the picture it's flowing with as it's shaken.

[15 : 12] All the air bubbles are taken out and there's much more room for the grain and it flows in a generous way as it's generously poured out. And He's saying, He's talking about the kind of

measures we use.

Then are we generous in our judgment or are we miserly in our judgment? In other words, as we go into 2018 and I'm trying to be practical as we move forward, if we're unforgiving, if we're sensorious, if we're quick to judge, if we're miserly, then that will be, God says that will be reflected in the way other people treat you.

It will be reflected, it will be the atmosphere that you start to breathe and it will take you further and further and further away from grace and from God. It's joyless.

It's judgmental. It's a spiral downwards. And the great challenge in it is that there may yet be a real solemn judgment in God that you've never understood grace.

That you've never understood the marvel of grace, that you're merely an ugly religionist. Isn't that awful? Because that's who Jesus is speaking to.

[16:25] He's speaking to those of us who know the truth and who presume on the truth. But sometimes, if we are honest and look in a mirror, we are being unforgiving, sensorious and graceless.

The challenge for us is to be reveling and rejoicing in the miracle of grace and living it in our life with others.

So this year, let's work against the warnings that God in His love and grace gives us sometimes.

Let's work at loving our enemies. Let's work at being merciful.

Let's work at being generous in forgiving the faults of other peoples. Let's work at genuine accountability where people will accept the challenges we give and we will accept the challenges others give us because it's done in humility and with the right motive.

So the generosity of spirit is understanding grace. It's very practical, isn't it, about judging others?

[17:34] The second thing, very briefly, really is goodness of heart. That's the second thing when we think about grace and that's under the heading of a tree and it's fruit. And it's very simple.

You don't need to spend much time. It's self-explanatory, but it's no less challenging. For no good tree bears bad fruit, not again does a bad tree bear good fruit.

Each tree is known by its fruit and then He gives examples of what doesn't happen. It's natural in a sense. It is spiritual, but it's natural.

If we have come to faith, if we have received grace, we are reborn. And we are reborn with the Holy Spirit in us so that we bear the fruit of mimicking Christ and being like God in our own individual lives.

Grounded and rooted in His grace, that should be reflected. The invisible, I'll say a bit more at this end, the invisibility of the roots going down into His grace should be visible in the fruit that we bear.

[18:42] And again, that's very practical. And sometimes I think we mystify faith too much and we leave it at the invisible thing.

Yes, you have faith, you have trust, you have heart, joy, love, peace, all these things. But we don't make it practical. But if we have these things, they will bear fruit in your day-to-day life and mine.

So we're to make prayer and meditation the workbench where we begin to fashion the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

And that's hugely significant. I think we are going to spend some time in the new year in our evening service going through the fruit of the Spirit. It's great, brilliant part of the Bible.

And we're going to go through the fruit of the Spirit, its love, its joy, its peace, its forbearance, its kindness, its goodness, its faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, against such things there is no law.

[19:47] So we bear fruit. We don't get turnips from apple trees. You don't go to a butcher for vegetarian food, nor to a curry house for semolina.

Let's be people who say we're Christians and Jesus says then, who live out as Christians, not so much in our heads, but practically in our lives or taking what's in our heads and applying it to our lives.

I'll finish with this, the conclusion. The conclusion is a case study in verses 46 to 49 that we know very well about the two different people that build their house.

That is their life. It's a picture of their lives. And it's very interesting. It's a really, I mean it's a very well-known picture. It's very interesting. Identically, I mean outwardly, they're identical.

There's certainly no evidence in the picture that we're given of the two men who build their houses and build them differently. That they have the same skills.

[20 : 51] We're not told that one is an expert builder and the other is just a jack of all trades or a fly-by-night or whatever. They've got the same task.

We're not saying that one is a great house to build and the other is just a simple shack. They're both building homes. Everything appears to be equal in the picture that Jesus gives here as he sums up the sermon on the Mount.

But it's not so much about the type of house or the characteristics of them or the qualities or the gifts of the men. It's about the preparation.

It's about how they prepare to build their house. That's the key. One digs deep. One researches. One puts huge effort into the foundation.

Before anything becomes visible, he puts a lot of work, kind of unseen work, into the foundation. He understands the nature of the house that he's building and what it needs to be founded on if it's going to withstand the storms.

[21 : 58] The other, he looks for a quick roof over his head. They might have been using the same blueprint. It might have looked exactly the same, the house on the outside.

But one of them just wanted a good looking house. One of them gave no thought to the future and no thought to the foundation that was needed.

And that's the difference between the two. That's what Jesus is trying to point out. He's trying to point out, it matters what the invisible work, the foundational work that we do, we can counterfeit grace, we can counterfeit being Christians, but it will always out.

It will always be revealed particularly in the storms of life. And so Jesus said a couple of things. He's saying, one, it's possible to have a counterfeit faith.

And that's very significant. Verse 46, he says, Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do I tell you? You know, there's another passage in the New Testament. He said, People will say to me on that letter, Lord, Lord, and He will say, depart from me, I didn't know you.

[23 : 06] Very solemn words. And he's saying to church people, he's saying to St. Columbus people, he's saying to us as Christians, as professors of Christ, he's saying it's possible to have a counterfeit faith, to have an outward edifice that looks the same as the next person, but one is a genuine believer and the other is not.

It's possible to talk a good game, but not have the spiritual foundation, the heart, the grace for the storms of life, to have a wrong expectation of what happiness to go right back to the beginning or blessing from God is.

And so sometimes when we think that we are following Jesus and then we don't get the kind of happiness that we expect, the blessing that we expect, we turn away from Him, because the blessings we've expected are on our terms.

We don't want the battle, we're not interested in the sufferings, we blame God for all His unanswered prayers and His carelessness towards us, and the storms of life turn us away from Him, because we've been wanting our happiness and our blessings, not the blessings that He offers with His grace.

We can know that our faith is in danger of being counterfeit when we're tempted to turn away from Him, all of us are tempted to turn away from Him, and that's a great challenge for us.

[24 : 47] But if your answer, if your fixed position in life, in the battles, in the struggles, and in the things you don't understand, is to turn away from God, to fail to see God as good, and to fail to understand the cross as His deepest guarantee of His love and His good will towards us, then the danger is we haven't understood grace, we haven't understood our own hearts.

If it's much easier for us, and as a default position, we judge other people, we measure ourselves by them, we balance how good Christians we are, compare with other people, and make ourselves feel good about ourselves, rather than always taking ourselves to the perfect one, who exposes the motives and the hypocrisy and the blindness of our hearts, then we have to ask where our foundation lies, with all our knowledge and with all our upbringing, with all our tradition and with all our background.

It's a date, it's what you will do, and I will do is we rise from here as we go into life. So, it's possible to have a counterfeit faith, and that's a challenge and a warning.

And lastly, within that conclusion, heart change is what we need to focus on as we go into 2018.

There's a great verse in Isaiah chapter 29 and verse 13, right in the middle of the Old Testament.

The Lord said, because these people draw near to me with their mouth and on them with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and they only fear the commandments that are taught by men, and He goes on to expose that.

[26 : 50] Hearts being far from me. Heart changes the foundation. That's the right, you know, we talk about resolutions, let's forget about resolutions, but let's just remember the focus of 2018 is our heart, and our heart relationship, dealing with our heart, having that deeply rooted honesty with God, which then is reflected in that deeply rooted honesty and forgiving perspective towards others.

No one else can do it for you, only God. You can only do it as you plug in to a relationship and an honest wrestling of your own heart and soul with God, and no one else can do it for me, in a living, daily, dependent relationship.

We're going to encourage that this year. We're going to encourage a church-wide Bible reading program, which encourages us individually to read through the Bible, to encourage one another to do it, because it's tough, isn't it?

To daily, every day read through the Word, listen to His voice, and take that and apply His truth to our lives. We'll launch that soon. I know it's the beginning of the year, but we will launch it. You'll catch up.

And that's the first project for each of us. Are you going to change the world? Are you going to change your circumstances?

[28 : 17] Go first to God to change your heart. That's the most important thing in 2018. That priority never shifts. And as He changes our hearts, yeah, our circumstances may or may not change.

Certainly, our attitude to them will. But He may or may not change the world, but we hope He will do a new thing. And we pray He will do a new thing. And we're longing to see fruit.

We're longing to be people more and more who are not just hearers of the Word, as James says, but doers of the Word, because we're enabled, we're brought to life to be doers of the Word.

Let's have that outward obedience, which is the dirty word today, stemming from an inward change, taking responsibility, partnering with the Holy Spirit, bearing fruit, not blaming God or others or circumstances, but dealing with the sinful separation from the living God.

So that's a real corporate and a personal challenge for 2018 to remember who God is and where our foundation must lie. That's great, it's great, because He has provided all we need.

[29 : 34] And we needn't wrestle in our own strength. We needn't be paralyzed by our own failures, because we all have them. And we needn't judge ourselves in relation to other people and make ourselves feel good about ourselves because we're better than others and can judge them.

Let us just get right with Jesus Christ and allow Him to enable us to be counterculture and counter community in the way that we live, in a generosity of spirit and in a goodness of heart.

I mean, let's pray briefly. Heavenly Father, help us to be like You. Forgive us when we are so not like You.

Forgive us when we do that horrible thing of grasping grace like it's a big, expensive present and then not sharing it with our siblings, our friends, our neighbors, not sharing it really with our heart, but simply possessing it in some kind of jealous way that misunderstands that it is, it's smell, it's perfume, it's beauty.

It is only real as it is shared and broken and gifted out to others and experienced and expressed.

[31 : 00] Lord, help us because we struggle with that and our default position is selfishness. And help us to overcome these things by Your grace.

Help us to persevere. May we not be paralysed by the whispers of the evil one who says, we've gone too far. We haven't understood enough.

We are hypocrites. Lord, quench that desperate voice that often whispers in our ears. He is defeated and he is thrashing about in his defeat to try and bring others down.

And we pray that we would not let him remind us of the battle we are in this year, but also remind us of the victory in Christ. We ask it in His precious name. Amen.