

## Grace and Demand

09.02.14

How Christians can act as Salt and Light     Julian Templeton  
Matthew 5:13-20 (21-48)     Isaiah 58:5-10     Romans 8:3-4

The demands of Jesus can often seem impossibly difficult to achieve. Whenever we've rowed with a family member, whenever we've let down a friend, whenever we've let our own standards slip: the demands of Jesus to be the 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world' can seem like a joke. Didn't Jesus realise when he set forth the impossibly high demands in his teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount that they would be a continual source of discouragement for his followers? We try to turn the other cheek but soon get drawn into retaliation. We try to love our enemies but seldom make the effort to understand them and befriend them. We would like to give to those in need but don't because we're unsure that our giving does any good. The question then arises, what is distinctively Christian about us? Are we like the salt that has become tasteless and will be thrown away and trodden underfoot? Are we like the light that has become completely hidden under a bushel?

If the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is regarded as an extremely high standard to which we are all supposed to aspire, I would have completely sympathy with those who give up and, rather than making the effort to come to worship on a Sunday morning, decide to adopt the more achievable routine of a lie-in, a stroll to the local cafe, and a leisurely read of a Sunday newspaper. But what I wish to argue is that Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is *not* an extremely high standard to which we are supposed to aspire by our own effort alone. The demands that Jesus makes are made of those who have already responded to his call: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near you." (Matt 4:17). They are demanded of those who have been overtaken by a new

nearness of God working among them. They are demanded of those who realise that they have become part of God's saving story; the story that began with Israel, is being fulfilled by Jesus, and will be lived out by the Church.

We heard something of Israel's part in God's story in our first reading from Isaiah 58. Isaiah's word from the Lord to the people is that keeping religious fasts means nothing if they do not also reflect this in right actions: acting justly, relieving the burden of the oppressed, sharing food with the hungry, accommodating the homeless. But when they reflect their religion in right actions, then they will be like light shining in the darkness. They will be what Jesus is demanding his followers to be: like a light on a lampstand that gives light to the whole house, like a city on a hill. But the difference with Jesus's followers is they have been overtaken by an overwhelming new reality: the Kingdom of God. It is by becoming part of the Kingdom of God that persons can be transformed. They can be transformed because the help of God's grace supplies the means for what is demanded: a new way of thinking and acting.

In announcing that the righteousness of the disciples must exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matt 5:17-20), Jesus indicates that his reinterpretation of the Law will demand much more than keeping the mere letter of the Law or outward observance. He will demand that the *intention of the Law* scrutinises inward attitudes as well as in outward actions. All the actions that damage others—actions that also ultimately damage us—begin with sinful thoughts and feelings. Jesus challenges his followers to excavate and expose those thoughts and feelings *before* they are expressed in actions. His approach is a thoroughly practical one: that of nipping sinful impulses in the bud before they get out of control.

- It is not enough to refrain from murder; you need to acknowledge and expunge the anger and resentment and hate that can lead to murder (Matt 5:21-2)
- It is not enough to refrain from adultery; you need to acknowledge and deal with the lust that can lead to adultery (5:27-30)

And there is the practical advice about tackling problems early before they escalate.

- If you are about to make an offering but then you remember that you have a grievance against a fellow church member, go and make peace with her or him and then make your offering (5:23-4)
- If someone sues you, come to terms with him or her and settle the matter before it comes to court (5:25-6)

There is further practical advice about the basis of your relationships.

- Honour marriage; don't divorce except as a last resort, and only then in the case of unfaithfulness (5:31-2)
- Don't swear oaths; plain 'yes' or 'no' is all you need (5:33-7)

Then there are the very demanding teachings about not getting sucked into cycles of retaliation and exploitation, and not being victimised, but acting with intelligence and dignity.

- Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Love your enemies (5:38-48)

These are all the ways in which Jesus's followers will be salt and light. They are the distinctive attitudes and actions that will mark out Christians from others. They are the concrete examples of how the righteousness, or God-like-ness, of Christians will far exceed that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

But all these demands are quite impossible and unachievable by our own resources alone. As Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans:

What the law could not do, because human weakness robbed it of all potency, God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of our sinful nature and to deal with sin, he has passed judgement against sin within that very nature, so that the commandment of the law may find fulfilment in us, whose conduct is no longer controlled by the old nature, but by the Spirit.

Romans 8:3-4 REB

Paul argues that God has done something world-transforming in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All that the law could not achieve because of our weakness of will, God has achieved by sending his Son as one of us. Jesus Christ obeyed and fulfilled the intention of the law in his life. Jesus Christ broke the power of human selfishness in his death. And Jesus Christ has become the representative new human in his resurrection. The astonishing good news of the gospel is all that Christ has achieved becomes ours when we place our trust in Christ. It becomes ours when we die with him to our old nature and are given the grace of new life in Christ by the action of the Spirit. We then live in the tension between the old life in the body and the new life in the Spirit. The old life, as we know, keeps asserting itself; but what has changed is that we are no longer slaves to selfishness. We now have a *choice* whether or not to sin because we are "no longer controlled by the old nature, but by the Spirit." And because the Spirit is guiding us, we want to do what God wants.

When God liberates us from self-preoccupation through Christ's life, when God gives us his grace through the Holy

Spirit's action, and when we become part of the Church as the community of people trying to live virtuously, then those attitudes and actions that were unachievable on a consistent basis—purity, simplicity, faithfulness, forgiveness, courage, unconditional love—become possible.

The Church is both a hospital for sinners and a school for virtue. The Church is the hospital we attend when our own sin and the sin of others has bruised and broken us and in which we receive the medicine of God's grace that restores us to health. The Church is the school we attend in order to learn how to express God's grace in virtuous attitudes and actions. Christians realise that they are ever in need of the Church's medicine and that the Church's school is lifelong learning. The Church's medicine can restore the salty distinctiveness and the bright visibility of the Christian. The Church's school teaches us how we can apply the saltiness of God's grace in order to season and restore, and where to direct the brightness of God's light in order to illuminate.

The medicine that the Church prescribes comes to each of us through the teaching methods it uses: prayer, worship, reading the Bible, and service. Through these methods undertaken jointly—or better, through these disciplines—Christians are given the grace to develop the virtues that mark them out as distinctive. We learn to recognise our impulses and deal with them before they get out of control. We tackle problems early before they escalate. We honour important relationships and speak plainly. We do not get drawn into into cycles of retaliation and exploitation because we refuse to be victimised but act with intelligence and dignity before bullies and manipulators. However, we do not do this alone but always as part of the Church and in total reliance upon God's grace. We don't always get it right, but because the Church is a

community of forgiveness we are gentle with one another's failures. In this way, Christians *can* act as salt and light.

Thanks be to God.  
Amen