

**Virtue, not legalism  
Reflections on Matthew Chapter 5**

**Sunday 13 Feb 2011**

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**Readings:**

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Psalm 119: 1-8

1 Corinthians 1: 18-31

**Matthew 5: 17-26**

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It is difficult to preach on the Gospel passage for this Sunday, (a) because there is so much material there and (b) because this whole part of the writings of Matthew (Chapter 5) needs to be dealt with together, rather than dealing with just a few of the bits into which it has been sliced and the small portions of that which we have read, all to make it more easily read-able and digest-able for us on a Sunday.

In addition, there is much of value in the OT reading and Psalm that supports the Gospel passage (references made to these readings). [No focus on NT reading today.]

So here's my attempt at it – with references to other parts of Chapter 5 that have NOT been read this morning but which were either read in the last 2 weeks or are due to be read on the next 2 Sundays. It also comes with grateful thanks to commentators and a couple of online resources, which have helped me in my task: to offer something instructive and useful in listening to the Scriptures and reflecting on how they apply to our lives.

[Sermon incorporating Matthew 5: 1-12, "Duty to God", 30 Jan 2011, also posted online. Sermon on Matt 5: 13-16, "Salt and Light", not in note form.]

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Ex tempore: Highlight topics dealt with in Matt 5

I want to focus on something called "virtue" – which these days, might sound more like a name for a sweet little girl in Victorian times, but the word "integrity" is also very similar. Let me explain ...

There are two ways to read Matthew, including the Sermon on the Mount which featured in the previous two week's readings, and the verses chosen for this week. One is to read them as rules, in which case Jesus is getting into some really heavy rules. The other way is to read Matthew as describing Virtue.

Keeping our word – one of the topics Jesus dealt with in these words of Matthew – is something we comment on with surprise these days, not so much among friends and family but certainly in public and professional life where we are so used to people failing to keep their word or to being trustworthy, that when we DO sometimes experience it, it seems worthy of positive comment!

Here's a story someone told to illustrate Virtue:

In the IT firm for which I worked there was one overriding rule: *Never, never, ever order hardware or software until you have a signed acceptance of your written quotation to the client. Never, ever.* Given that the machines we worked with were sometimes \$10,000 apiece, this was a good rule!

But there was one exception. The boss said that if this one client said to go ahead, then we went ahead, and did the paper work later when we had time. His word was better than paper.

This exceptional man was not only honest and trustworthy. He was humorous. He was "down to earth." He was a deeply committed Christian, but not stuffily pious. Some of the staff seemed to confide in him as something of a father figure.

He was, if I describe him with a single word, virtuous. It struck me how similar he is to (several members of my family, and some friends and mentors. All of these people have faults and limitations and irritations in their makeup, but there is a deeply attractive air about them. This is virtue. They are good by second-nature.

There is an ethical theory called "Virtue Ethics". The idea of Virtue Ethics is that ethical behaviour is not a matter of adherence to rules. It consists rather of being virtuous. It is a state of being, rather than a code of behaviour. Virtuous people will do the right thing simply because they are good and they have no need of a list of rules. So rather than learning the rules, we need to cultivate virtue.

The Christian life is not a list of do's and don'ts – it is about a transformation in our hearts.

Matthew's Gospel is more than simply a description of Virtue Ethics, but when read in that light, it is transformed. It is no longer a list of rules, but a wonderful invitation to a new quality of life. It changes from a focus which can be profoundly draining in the light of human failings, to one that is promising.

**Firstly:**

Matthew tells the story in a way which further emphasises that Jesus is Messiah. This clever strategy outflanks people who say Jesus is overriding the Laws of God given through Moses.

Do not think - says Jesus - that I have come to abolish the law (17). On the contrary, I have come to fulfil it. Not one little bit of it will pass away. (18)

This will be music to the ears of the law'n'order brigade. Then comes the phrase: *You have heard it said, but I say to you...* said multiple times, crashing headlong into the legalism.

There is no doubt that Jesus is adding to the law by making us look at its implications or its "spirit." He is, effectively, saying "You have heard it said, but I say to you... **that it goes much further than you realise!**"

So, when he's speaking about divorce and adultery for instance, it's as if he's saying, Don't think you're being virtuous because you have not made a play for so and so! Just lusting after her in your heart is the same thing. You're still turning her from a human being into an object for your own purposes. But Matthew and Jesus are going much further than this sort of imperative.

Jesus' way of speaking is emphatic, decisive, perhaps offensive! "But I say to you!" Bruner, who has written a penetrating commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, states this about the way Jesus speaks of himself: "Jesus' word, 'I say to you,' adds no supporting authorities, no argument, no reasons, no justification, not even any Scripture, but remains all alone, as if by itself sufficient. Jesus is in effect relocating all religious and ethical authority from the Torah (the Law of Moses), to himself. From now on Jesus is Lord even over Scripture. Jesus does not displace Scripture. But now Jesus assumes messianic place over Scripture as its authorized interpreter."

Jesus scandalises some of his listeners, the ones who are tied to the religious status quo, even as others were delighted that he taught with authority and not like the scribes. (Matt 7:24ff)

Virtue has its own reward, we are told. Part of the reward is outlined in Matthew 5:10-11: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.... If we seek to be a Jesus person, we too, become a judgment for some people.

Virtue is in stark contrast to legalism and rule keeping. It has no rules. It is simply... good. It can be untidy and messy, and struggles to see a way through moral and ethical dilemmas. It is wasteful and extravagant in its love. Unintentionally it mocks the neatness of rules as it goes so much further. And it is a blessing.

### **Secondly:**

To repeat, Chapter 5 is a whole. What we commonly call the Beatitudes are a description of Virtue or Holiness. The verses which follow are commentary and example, not rules.

Virtue goes further than Jesus' commentary on hatred or lust or keeping your word. There are aspects of anger and hatred which Jesus does not cover. There are understandings of marriage and adultery which did not exist in Jesus's day.

We do not, for example, insist that adultery ends a marriage; it well might anyway, but we do not make a religious rule of it, however in Jesus' day it was the religious law. Rules can limit us as much as they protect us. Rules *remind* us of our foundation, but they are *not* the foundation themselves. Our foundation is that Jesus-inspired virtue which causes us to be blessed.

Virtue is what causes us to become whole. At the end of Chapter 5 Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Scary words, unless we look at context and translation! The word "perfect", in its context, is more about completeness and wholeness than our modern sense of having no fault (which, of course, is a ridiculous thought).

The context of the verse is, again, *You have heard that it was said... But I say to you....* It is not only the last example in the series, it is the completing example.

46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Virtue is so much more than rules. Everyone keeps rules. We are called to much more than rules. And if we accept that invitation, we are blessed. In fact, this is virtue's own reward! It is not pay-back-from-God type blessedness, where we have been good - so God blesses us. Instead, being God-like, "perfect as our heavenly father is perfect," we share in the experience of God.

**Lastly:**

Consider the pieces of the Law which Matthew quotes Jesus as using for his examples.

Anger, adultery, divorce, straight talking, retaliation and love are central to the human experience. In his examples Jesus chooses to deal with central aspects of our relationships with each other, not religious arguments that others were having, for instance, about how one should tithe spices and herbs one has grown (which sound absurd to us). This is because virtue is central to successful relationships. Virtue is about relationship, not abstract law.

Perhaps a key point to remember is summed up in the word “you.” *You* have heard... but I say to *you*...

All the way through this chapter Jesus is not speaking to *me*. It is - as the Americans might say - “you-all” ... all the way through, from the blessings, to remembering the law as it was said, and on to hearing the new and greater law. Virtue, for the church, is not a solitary pursuit.

We are a new community of virtue. We are not simply rule keepers. Among us should be found generosity of spirit amongst merciful peacemakers who hunger and thirst after justice. People may be scandalised by us, but should never be bored or offended by our stuffiness and legalism.