

The Difference It Makes

Matthew 5: 9 – 16ⁱ

The Difference

As we noted last Lord's Day, John R.W. Stott wrote.

Jesus emphasized that his true followers, the citizens of God's kingdom, were to be entirely different from others. They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father.

He went on to say:

Thus the followers of Jesus are to be different—different from both the nominal church and the secular world, different from both the religious and the irreligious.ⁱⁱ

This, of course, is true, because when we're talking about followers of Jesus we're talking about those who are in Christ, and as Paul wrote in 2nd Corinthians, chapter 5:

¹⁷ ...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ² Corinthians 5:17 ESV

We're taught this in the Heidelberg Catechism as well when we are asked: "What is involved in genuine repentance or conversion?" and we're taught to answer:

Two things: the dying-away of the old self, and the coming-to-life of the new.ⁱⁱⁱ

See, this is what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. This is what it looks like. It's a change of heart, and a corresponding change of life, and we've been considering just this in the first six of the blessings that Jesus pronounced on those who would turn to Him in faith.

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit... ⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn... ⁵ "Blessed are the meek... ⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness... ⁷ "Blessed are the merciful...

and, of course,

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart... Matthew 5:3–8 ESV

Each and every one of these can be understood as a description of that new creation proclaimed by the Apostle. Each one describes the difference that Christ makes in the heart of one who is truly repentant and truly converted. Having said that, while the difference is made in the heart by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, it can not be contained there. The Christian's faith is not a matter of and internal piety that may well remain invisible to the rest of the world. We are saved to serve. We are created in Christ Jesus

¹⁰ ...for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 ESV

In other words: while being a Christian inevitably makes a difference, the question remains, what difference does it make? And the answer? Well, the rest of the Sermon on the Mount deals with just that. The rest of chapter 5 will be framed in statements that take the form of, “You have heard that it was said...But I say unto you...” and we will see (if the Lord is willing), the instruction that follows these statements will demonstrate in every case that the difference Jesus makes in our heart is always meant to bear fruit in the way that we live in the world.

Blessed are the Peacemakers.

This was already evident in our text this morning, when we read in verse 9:

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Matthew 5:9 ESV

You see, all of the beatitudes can be understood to have both an inward, heart-oriented aspect, and an outward, world-oriented aspect, but this is the first that absolutely brings the difference that Christ makes in our hearts out into the world around. While it’s possible to hold all of the other descriptions of the blessed man in a quiet, internal way (at least at times), it’s simply not possible to be a peacemaker unless we are engaged with the world around.

Now, I don’t want to spend too much time here, but there are those who understand this blessing to have been pronounced on those who are engaged in the business of bringing peace between warring parties out in the world, and they’re not wrong. James Montgomery Boice wrote:

In the same way we may work constantly as God’s peacemakers in all areas of our lives—in the community, at church, in the office school, store, and on the international scene if we have contact with that.^{iv}

And there’s nothing wrong with anything that he wrote there, unless we were to get carried away and assume that human conflict is the exclusive domain of the peacemaker that Jesus describes. To assume that would be to cut this blessing off from all of the others in terms of its orientation toward God. If poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, and hunger and thirst for righteousness all look to heaven, and to the Son of God Himself for a fixed reference point, then surely this must as well.

It would also be assuming that this blessing applies to literally anyone who at any time and by any means seeks to bring peace—the Romans, for example, who brought peace across their empire for 200 years by having and using the most efficient army in the world to keep a boot on the throat of those who might think of rebelling. But Jesus is not blessing those who achieve peace by violence.

Nor is He blessing those who pursue peace at any cost. Again, this completely overlooks the context. Jesus is the one pronouncing the blessing, and He pronounces it on those who have turned away from sin and found forgiveness and grace through a Spirit-wrought faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

wrote John Stott,

...has made us familiar with the concept of “cheap grace”, there is such a thing as “cheap peace” also. To proclaim “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace, is the work of the false prophet, not the Christian witness.^v

So, being a peacemaker is not done by prescribing a peace placebo that might make the sick person or culture *feel* well, if only for a little while.

It is not brought about by compromise with the truth, under the guise of “love”(?).^{vi}

No, it is brought about by *speaking* the truth *in* love. How do we know this? Well, consider the ultimate peacemaker Himself.

He Is Our Peace.

In Ephesians, chapter 2, Paul wrote:

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ **For he himself is our peace**, who has made us both...

that is, Jew and gentile, the old covenant people and the new, He

...has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. Ephesians 2:11–16 ESV

¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. Ephesians 2:17–18 ESV

So, the saving work of Christ does make peace between Jew and Gentile, but not by bringing them together in some sort of ecumenical, interfaith unity, rather, by bringing both to God through His sacrifice on the cross. Through the cross He created in Himself “one new man” in place of the two, so making peace.” And this is the message that was preached to both tribes. We’ve seen it in Romans too. Romans 5, verse 1:

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, **we have peace with God** through our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 5:1 ESV

The Lord Jesus Christ came and made peace, not just between people in conflict, but between people who were at enmity with God and God Himself, and this is the same peace that we are to proclaim to the world around us. William Hendriksen wrote:

A blessing is here pronounced on all who, having themselves received reconciliation with God through the cross, now strive by their message and their conduct to be instrumental in imparting this same gift to others.^{vii}

This is why peacemakers “shall be called sons of God,” because the ultimate peacemaker is The Son of God Himself, Jesus Christ our Savior. Furthermore, this is why we are not called to bring peace at any price—peace through compromise—the “cheap peace” that I mentioned

a moment ago. That which cost God the life of His only begotten Son cannot be proclaimed at any lesser cost.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, **and entrusting to us...**

(that is, “to the church”)

...the message of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:17–19 ESV

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Matthew 5:9 ESV

Blessed Are the Persecuted.

The thing is, as we go into the world proclaiming this message, and seeking to call men to peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord, the Apostle says that

¹⁵ ...we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing...

So far so good, but,

¹⁶ ...to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life... ²
Corinthians 2:15–16 ESV

See, the preaching of the cross is the wisdom of God and the power of God to those who are being saved. Jesus’ sheep hear His voice, and He knows them, and they follow Him, and He gives unto them eternal life, but

¹⁸ ...the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing... 1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV

So,

When the faith of God’s children has developed sufficiently to be outwardly manifested so that those who do not share it begin to take notice, persecution results.^{viii}

And this is the link between the preceding seven beatitudes and the eighth. This is why we go from this marvelous description of our calling in Christ—“Blessed are the peacemakers...”—to

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:10 ESV

In the fourth beatitude, Jesus proclaimed,

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Matthew 5:6 ES

In other words, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled with exactly what they long for, but now we find that it’s just that righteousness that

brings the contempt and, sometimes, the outright hostility of the world toward those who believe. As Jesus said:

¹⁸ “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. John 15:18–19 ESV

Later, John, who was heard Jesus on that occasion, wrote,

¹³ Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you. 1 John 3:13 ESV

But I think we are. I think sometimes that we have forgotten that the message of reconciliation is not universally popular; that the Gospel is foolishness to the world; that Christ is

³³ ...a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense... Romans 9:33 ESV

We have forgotten that Jesus not only called us to follow, He called us to take up our cross and follow.

We have then forgotten...

wrote Bonhoeffer,

...that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering. The Psalmist was lamenting that he was despised and rejected of men, and that is an essential quality of the suffering of the cross. But this notion has ceased to be intelligible to a Christianity which can no longer see any difference between an ordinary human life and a life committed to Christ.^{ix}

And we'll have to pick up at this point next week, if the Lord is willing, but for this morning, let me call your attention already to verses 13 and 14, just to get a sense of where we are going.

The Light of the World.

Having pronounced His blessing upon those who discover that the cross we are called to take up is not cushioned and upholstered in velvet, Jesus goes to say:

¹³ You are the salt of the earth... ¹⁴ You are the light of the world... Matthew 5:13–14 ESV

This is the reality, and this peacemaking, the persecution that follows, and the way that we react to such persecution is the means. In the ultimate sense, Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,”^x and we can't make too much of that fact.

⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men. John 1:4 ESV

But when those who profess to follow Jesus truly follow Him—when they deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow Him^{xi}—they reflect His glory. When we do all things without grumbling or disputing that we may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, *then we shine* as lights in

the darkness, holding fast and holding forth the word of life^{xii} to a world that needs to hear the message of reconciliation to God.

It won't always be easy. The hymn-writer asked, "Is this vile world a friend to grace, to help me on to God?"^{xiii} and the obvious answer is no, absolutely not. But we are not called to friendship with the world. We are not called to make peace with the darkness. We are called to be light. We are called to reflect Jesus Christ, the light of the world, into the darkness all around us. Being in Christ—believing His word and being born of His Spirit—makes a difference, and this is the difference it makes.

If God is willing, we'll speak more of this, but for now, hold fast then to the word of life, go out into the darkness as peacemakers—ambassadors for Christ—and

¹⁶ ...so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. ^{Matthew 5:16 ASV}

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
 - ii John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture, The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 18, 19.
 - iii Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 19" in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 54.
 - iv James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1972), 55.
 - v Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 51.
 - vi William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 279.
 - vii Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, 278.
 - viii Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, 279.
 - ix Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1959, 1995), 89.
 - x Cf. John 8:12; 9:5.
 - xi Cf. Luke 9:23.
 - xii Cf. Philippians 2:14–15.
 - xiii "Am I a Soldier of the Cross? > Lyrics | Isaac Watts." n.d. Library.timelesstruths.org. Accessed April 28, 2024. https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Am_I_a_Soldier_of_the_Cross/.