

7 The Way of Faith

Luke 6: 31 – 7: 10

Treat others as you would like them to treat you. Show them the respect, the trust, the love that you would like to receive from them. Let that positive vision of how you would like people to treat you be your model for the way you treat others. Don't be guided by ill-treatment, using it as an excuse for being ungenerous with others. Don't merely react, shaping your behavior by what you have suffered at the hands of others. Don't tell yourself you have a right to be angry, spiteful, mean, suspicious, hurtful, because it's the way you have been treated yourself.

Jesus sets up the golden rule – it's not unknown to other teachers – as a positive guide to life. Positive thinking you could call it. Modern psychology has made us so aware of the negative effects of ill-treatment, especially in childhood or early experience, that we can be, in theory, very sympathetic towards miserable, irritating or damaged characters. We have learnt how to make excuses for the criminal. But the ability to excuse others shouldn't be appropriated for our own behavior. We mustn't let ourselves off because we know why we behave so badly. If we do, the results are disastrous.

It is good to understand ourselves, to recognise the roots of our unpleasant attitudes and habits in ill-treatment or unfortunate experiences, but not as an excuse. Such self-knowledge should not become the rationale for our behavior to others, excusing us in our own minds when we behave badly to others. "I can't help it. People have made me like this." Understanding should rather free us from a negative impulse, for another, positive inspiration, to attempt, at least, a way of living and behaving that has its impulse elsewhere. Not the bad that we experience, or see, or imagine, or fear, but the good that we would like to experience from others, is to be our inspiration. That is the teaching of Jesus.

Salvation was welcomed by many in the towns and villages of Galilee when it came as healing, Jesus mending their broken bodies or driving out the hostile powers that held people's spirits captive. But in the mending of the whole human being, where the human spirit, broken, twisted, bitter and proud, is being set free from itself, put right and guided onto the path of peace, there is a process of teaching and learning that calls for deeper, more persevering trust.

Faith is not just believing that Jesus (or God) has the power to do something, but trusting him when he tells us how it is to be done, trusting him when he teaches us how our lives are to change and how

we are to live them, for our own fullest healing. Faith is a matter not of doctrines but of action, of trusting our master and teacher enuf to receive what God does for us and to do what the master tells us.

He teaches us a life governed by different principles. It is natural to love our friends, to do favors where we expect favors in return: "I owe you one." If we live by those normal rules, treating well the people who treat us well, giving food, money, help where we know people will help us in return – they're our mates – we're only doing what everyone does. That is the way that people live in any half-decent society, and even crooks are good to their friends. Probably even terrorists are kind to people who are good to them. Even the marines, when they come back to base from a day of mayhem and killing in Falluja or Baghdad are friendly with their mates.

We lend when we know we will get our money back. We let people borrow our goods if we know they will give them back or lend us their things in return, but all kinds of villains and sinners would do the same. Jesus presents us with a greater challenge, or a better offer, than the normal patterns of bonding by which good and bad all get along in life. "Love your enemies; give your help, lend your money when you know you won't get anything back. If you live like this, your reward will be great: you will be children of God on high, who is himself kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."

Jesus appeals not to our desire to have, but to our desire to be. There isn't a payment for the kind of behavior he teaches, but such behavior is itself a transformation of our lives. We become children of God. Many pious stories and many pages of scripture had been expended in the attempt to show that God is good to the good and not to the wicked, but it just isn't so. Jesus admits, as moral teachers usually can't admit, that God is in fact reckless in his generosity, giving away his gifts to all and sundry, to good and bad alike. When we begin to live like that we become children of God, and that is more than reward enuf.

"Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate." God is our Father – not so that we speculate how the structure of our souls mite mirror the nature of God, or how we mite receive in our nature inputs of God's transcendent life, but as pattern for our behavior, as model for our living. The children will behave as their father behaves. And the more we behave like our Father, the more we will find the good things of our Father's love pouring into us. "Be compassionate. Don't be passing judgement and you won't be judged; don't be condemning others and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and gifts will be given to you: and it won't be like the supermarket, packaging the food so that it looks big and tasty, but is really quite skimpy, tasting only of salt and e-numbers. It'll be real, good quality, and more than you can carry."

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Generosity of mind and soul and property, giving as the characteristic of our lives: this is what makes us like God, children of God, as we are called to be. It's not a law, but an offer. It comes as teaching to be learnt, not an edict to be endured. To trust our teacher, learning to live like this, will be our salvation. It's as we listen and do that we learn, and listening, doing and learning are the life of faith.

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Who can teach others how to live? It's not possible for a blind man to lead the blind. They'll both end up in the ditch. You need at least one eye to be in charge of the blind. We have to learn first. The disciple is not more advanced than his teacher; we'll take a lifetime of training before we start to come up to the standard of Jesus. But some of us are far too ready to teach, to instruct and improve as if we were already masters of the art of good behavior. It's so easy to see the faults in others and to get busy setting them right. "Brother, let me tell you something for your own good." "Friend, you've got a speck of wood in your eye; let me take it out." Full of ourselves, we see quickly enough how we can improve others with a bit of constructive criticism. But we're woefully unaware of serious defects in our own character. Hypocrites to ourselves, we don't see we have a block of wood in our own eye. We need to get that out of the way before we can attend to the notes and specks in someone else's eye.

We're all familiar with the figure of the moral or religious busybody, telling everyone how to behave, how to maintain better standards, and annoying everyone with their total ignorance of their own faults. They go about preaching morality, law-abiding and God-fearing decency, or even love, but they themselves are monumentally selfish, arrogant, narrow, suspicious and vindictive – and they don't even see it.

We know well enough the kind of person Jesus is telling us not to be, but we don't see when we are being that kind of person, especially when we have others around us to back us up and confirm our judgements with their own. Perhaps the most obstinate hypocrisy is when a whole church, or class, or nation, becomes so convinced of its superiority that it corrects and lectures others, heedless of its own deficiencies. We all join in, because it's our side, which of course even God agrees is morally superior. It's the enemy or the heretics or the foreigners who are wrong. When you're lined up with your own side against outsiders, it becomes not only difficult but positively disloyal to mention the specks in your own collective eye.

For decades in the second half of the twentieth century, the United States of America lectured the Soviet Union about the rule of law, freedom of speech and liberty. The fact that Russia had suffered successive invasions, massively destructive, especially the most

recent, under Hitler, was held to be no excuse for denying human rights and overriding basic freedoms. Britain and Australia backed America, confident in our own credentials as democratic, freedom-loving nations. Wasn't our liberty enshrined in laws that were equally binding on all, which no leader could claim to be above? We shone a light to shame all those dictators who could not tolerate rights or freedom.

And then, in the early years of the 21st century, some fanatics attacked the World Trade Centre in New York, and the Pentagon in Washington. It was a shock not only to America but to the entire world. Three thousand people were killed and although that was only a small fraction of the casualties of war in Russia or China, the whole facade of commitment to justice, human rights and the rule of Law cracked and tilted dangerously. Overnight American gulags came into being, human beings began to disappear from countries in many parts of the world, without the right to trial, representation, protection of the law or even the right to know the charges or evidence against them. Torture was suddenly acceptable, the American Commander-in-Chief was above the law, and wars were unleashed that have already killed three hundred thousand civilians. Britain and Australia followed suit.

Our excuse: national security. The vital security of the nation was at stake – the same excuse that Stalin and Hitler had claimed. Guantanamo Bay serves George Bush's America as the Bastille once served France and the Siberian camps the Soviet Union. The difference between our democracies and tyrannies modern or old was not what we had been pretending. It was only that we hadn't yet been pushed as hard as they had. Once tested, by one attack, we rushed for safety down the path of tyranny.

We should have been a bit more thoughtful before we lectured.

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Jesus' action in gathering disciples and teaching them is a guarantee that the way of life he teaches is possible: that God is offering us the opportunity. He will not teach us what we cannot learn. But neither is he commanding us to do something we already can, but might have been unwilling to (that's what the law does). Nor is he waving a magic wand to make us instantly different creatures, automatically behaving in the desired way. He is teaching us, and if we trust him, believe in him, we will be learning to do what he teaches.

When we look at Jesus' teaching, asking ourselves, "Can we do this? Is it really possible?" we sometimes try to take it as a law – the New Law – and then we begin to think that we can't carry out this law – "not in the real world". So we conclude that it must be just an ideal,

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ment to raise our sights and inspire greater generosity – a noble ideal to applaud in church or bible meeting, before we go back to the real world and live as everyone has to live. When Jesus comes again (the magic wand) that other kind of life will be possible.

But that will not do, for Jesus is teaching us the kind of life we are to live now in this world, the only world and time in which all our experience lies. If he is our ruler and savior, come from God to guide our feet into the way of peace, he is so as our leader in the life we are now living. Faith is not believing certain facts about Jesus, especially future facts about Jesus, but believing him, trusting him by doing as he teaches us. Faith lives in obedience.

Being a disciple is a matter of life transformation – becoming good. Like a good tree that bears good fruit, the true disciple of Jesus will be recognised by what their life produces. In the end, hypocrisy is not sustainable, for our lives become a revelation of our selves. What is truly within us will come out. The good person draws good out of the store of goodness in their heart. The bad person inevitably draws evil from the badness of their heart.

What's the use of trying to be a hypocrite? – especially in the presence of our teacher. We can cry out “Lord, Lord,” before Jesus; we can sing our hymns and mouth our pious quotes from the scriptures, but if we don't do what he says? ... To believe Jesus is to build your life on the actions he teaches you, like building your house on a sure foundation, dug deep and resting on rock. When the floods come, when the river overflows and sweeps all around you, your house remains standing. It withers the storm.

But to hear the words of Jesus, even to enthuse about them or to preach or write about them, without doing what he says, is like building your house on soft earth. It stands for a while, but when the river floods, it is swept away in the catastrophe.

God's program of salvation is that Jesus gathers disciples and teaches them. It is not a series of regulations making a code of law, but neither is it pious idealism to dream about while we wait for God to do something about saving this sorry world. It is the way, and Jesus the teacher is already guiding our feet into that way of peace and harmony with God. If we follow and obey him the world will mock or oppose our efforts, but we will be beginning to live in the kingdom of God.

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Jesus had gone to Capernaum, where he was approached by a delegation from a Roman centurion. In charge of about a hundred soldiers, this man would have been a junior officer in terms of the whole Roman army but an important figure in any local command

structure. (Being in Galilee, he may have been a centurion in retirement.) A servant of his was seriously ill, a man for whom he cared deeply, and he was asking Jesus to heal him.

The delegation, Israelites like Jesus, urged him to help, for the centurion was, they said, a good man, friendly to their people, who had even put up a building for their synagogue. Clearly, he was a man of some sensitivity, relating to servants and to the subject people as to fellow human beings.

As Jesus approached the centurion's house, he was met by another delegation. The man had taken the trouble to know the customs and sensitivities of a conquered people, and was willing, as far as his commission allowed him, to accept the place and role those customs gave him. He knew that Jewish practice forbade their going into foreigners' houses, and that even meeting and conversing with a foreigner might offend the sensitivities of Jesus' people, so he sent some friends with a further message.

"Master, I'm not a fit person for you to come into my house. And it's not necessary for you to meet me. Just give the word and my servant will be healed. I understand authority. I'm under authority myself, and when I give orders it's 'Go' and 'Do this' and my soldiers go and do as I say."

Here was the diametric opposite to the attitude of the Pharisees and the Jewish experts, who were so convinced of their fitness that they would pass judgement on Jesus. But this man who is unfit to receive him, humbly acknowledges it, and already stands in a relationship with Jesus that is right and true.

More than that, he trusts Jesus according to his own deepest habit of trust. Men in authority don't need to go and see that their orders are carried out. They know that the work will be done as commanded. And Jesus is a man in authority. The centurion recognised it, and that was his faith. It's a faith that can dispense with reassurances, gestures, rituals, knowing that Jesus has only to say the word and the servant will be healed. This was faith such as Jesus had not found "even in Israel", no-nonsense faith grounded in a man's practical experience, which had taught him how it works with people of real authority. When the little group returned to their friend, they found that his servant had been healed.

What was it that so impressed Jesus? Is it that faith is really all about rules and regulations, and keeping them with strict obedience, like in the army? I don't think so. It is a soldier's faith that Jesus commends, but such a faith does not point us to the law. To be sure, a soldier's life and routine is governed by regulations, all the way through the ranks, but it's just when a soldier's most important work begins

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that the regulations leave off and trusting obedience takes over. The regulations tell him whom to obey, but when it comes to the tasks he is actually given, in the barracks or in the town or in the fierce heat of battle, it's a matter of the soldier's relationship with the one who commands him.

You can't run an army, much less fight a battle, by rules alone, and, as a soldier knows, the successful commander, whether a sub-lieutenant or a four-star general, is not the one who wants the rules to run everything, but the one who, confident in the authority the regulations give him, gains the trust of his men and knows they will obey him. It's precisely because a soldier's life and work is not mapped out by regulations, but given him by an authority he has learnt to obey, and given most effectively, eliciting his most effective obedience, when it comes from a voice he trusts, that the centurion is able to show the faith that Jesus looks for – and praises when he finds it, unexpectedly in a gentile and a commander of the occupying forces.

The story of the centurion should teach us that faith and obedience are one. It should put an end to the more foolish of our “faith and works” controversies. There is no faith that does not issue in the works of obedience. Faith lives in the works it is commanded and inspired to do. That is why the centurion, the man who understands obedience, becomes a man of impressive faith. That is why faith in Jesus brings us to a master and teacher, to one whose teaching we learn to obey.