

How strong is the temptation, when we hear scriptural calls to “righteousness”, to hear them in moral terms! This morning Jesus declares, “...unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5.20). Does this not sound as if he’s saying, Unless you are better than even the scribes and the Pharisees, the kingdom of God will not be yours? That is, does it not sound, for those who know of the great moral achievements of the Pharisees and the scribes, that Jesus is declaring it to be scarcely possible that any could enter the kingdom of heaven? We do hear the Pharisees and the scribes, however, accused by Jesus of great hypocrisy (Matt 7.5; 22.18; 23.18-29) and this might cause us to imagine that where they have failed we might still yet succeed, and so rise to meet the high calling of Jesus. But we are still very much here in the realm of anxiety about moral achievement: am I *good* enough?

Moral achievement itself would not be a problem were it not that we’ve come to understand it as a *condition* of our good relationship to God. For from Jesus we’ve heard:

*... whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

*... For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.*

What does this suggest other than that there are rules, and breaking them puts us offside with God, while “whoever does them and teaches them” will be great in God’s kingdom? “Good” Protestants might feel a bit uneasy here, with half-understood thoughts about justification by grace through faith and not through works of the law, but Jesus seems pretty unambiguous: obey, or pay the consequences.

Now, it’s worth noting the force of what Jesus says, and why it is said just here. We have, over the last month or so, several times touched on what I’ve called the “unrighteousness” or “injustice” of God. Perhaps for some that has seemed a novel thought, but it has been noticed, and caused problems, almost from the beginning. The eight Beatitudes we’ve recently considered are surprising in that they speak blessings on various kinds of people, without any reference to law observance. There is no “Blessed are they who worship every week”; “Blessed are they who give a tenth of their income to the church”; “Blessed are they who don’t misrepresent their income or deductions on their tax returns”. Rather, the blessings are spoken upon those who lack, who cannot achieve, and who discover in this the promise and possibilities of God. Talk of forgiveness and mercy and of unmerited grace,

and also Paul’s explicit placing of faith before works, clearly caused many Christians and critics to think that in fact the old commandments no longer applied. Marcion, the second century arch-heretic actually re-wrote this text, reversing Jesus’ declaration: “Do you think that I came to fulfil the law and prophets? I came to abolish them, and not to fulfil them”.

-----

Yet, just re-asserting the moral demands of Jesus will not deal with the excesses of what we might call Christian libertarianism. The problem with the moralist approach to God’s laws and commandments is that it creates the fear of failure, or the fear of the consequences of failure. This often is the case in the “religious” sphere, but also in “secular” spheres as well. If I fail to get it right, and if getting it right really matters, then I will worry about being found out. Just as Adam and Eve suddenly realise that they’re naked and run to hide from God in the bushes, so a child fears it being discovered that she’s broken her mother’s favourite trinket, which she was expressly forbidden to touch, or an adult might wait anxiously to discover whether he did actually have one drink too many, as he sits in the line at a breathalyser roadblock. Breaking the rules can be the cause of anything from minor inconvenience to devastating embarrassment.

In order to get a sense of where we might find some control over the fearful effect divine and secular commandments can have over us, it’s worth drawing on a reflection from one of the letters of John:

*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love (1 John 4.18).*

“Love”, in contrast to enmity, is one of John’s favourite categories for talking about God in relation to us, but we could put it differently. When thinking about commandments, we can contrast gift and demand in the same way that love and enmity are contrasted by John. Whereas commandments generate anxiety, the gifts relieve anxiety. The relationship between gift and command is important here, not least because we tend to reverse the *divine* order and, in doing so, change the meaning of the command and turn the gift into a thing earned. A command generates anxiety because we imagine it to be a *precondition* to love: “Treat me right, do as I say, and I will love you.” Yet, gifts generate no fear, and no anxiety. A gift has no prior condition; it requires of us only its reception.

To get a sense of what difference this makes, consider what it means for Jesus himself, and for our understanding of what it means to say that Jesus was “without sin”. To think about Jesus as sinless is, for most of us, to think about him as having always done “the right thing”. Whether he is speaking a kind word or healing a cripple, or withdrawing from the crowds for prayer or angrily overturning tables in the Temple, we

presume that Jesus' actions can be justified in terms of what God rightly demands of us. That is, Jesus "fulfills the law" (5.17) by always doing the "right" thing.

The sinlessness of Jesus, then, is that he always did what was morally right, even, one tradition has it, to the point of doing right by his mother and not crying in the manger ("...the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes...")! We tend to look at Jesus and, presuming that what he does is "right", we try to distil rules and guidelines for ourselves, that *we* might know how to act: when *we* can be angry, when *we* can be tired or withdrawn, when *we* can verbally attack our opponents, as Jesus seemed to be justified to do from time to time. We ask ourselves, in all seriousness, "What would Jesus do?"

The point is that this whole approach, which is so natural and quite rampant in the church and also presumed to apply by the wider world, is thoroughly *moralistic*. We imagine that Jesus "did not sin" by always *knowing* what was the right thing to do and, by *doing* it, fulfilled the law. Whoever else does the same and teaches others this way will be great in God's kingdom.

-----

And yet all this misses the heart of what justifies Jesus before God and what will, therefore, also justify us. The moral tone of Jesus' words make his own life *look* like mere obedience to the law, but in fact its heart is somewhere else. Jesus is without sin, not in that he always does the right thing, but that he has himself – he *is* himself – from his relationship to God, and from this alone. Jesus is God's "Son" *before* he does anything, before he obeys a command. Obedience, for Jesus, is simply to accept this "Sonship", and to love God as he is loved. Obeying what else God might command is simply a response to the love which gives this Sonship. The righteousness which exceeds the works of the Pharisees and scribes is one which sees the commands of God *not* as a bargaining chip, but as the opportunity to give form to the material of love – a love which is already known and possessed and does not need to be earned. The love is already there, or promised, and needs now only to take particular shape.

Our typically moral approach to obeying the commandments begins with the *necessity* of obedience and of "righteousness", in order to achieve a right relationship with God. The *Christian* approach, which is *not* moralistic in this way, begins instead with the *non-necessity* of *sin* because the relationship has already been set in place. As such, there is nothing to be earned, and so nothing to fear losing, and so no impetus to sin. Moral failure is not about naughtiness or weak character or finding ourselves in diabolical situations in which we might make the wrong choice; it has to do with perceived needs and wants, or things lacking in our lives, and fears that these needs won't be met.

If we were to consider, for example, the 10 commandments, we do better to consider *why* we might keep these laws than the sheer fact that we must keep them. We would seek to have a "god before" the God of Israel because we thought Israel's God was not adequate for our needs. We would break

the Sabbath because we imagined that our well-being, and that of all the world, were more dependent upon our work than upon God's grace. We would seek an adulterous relationship because we thought our current relationship did not deliver for us. We would lie because we feared that the truth would bring us more harm.

We could go through each of the commandments and understand them not as simply things we have to do or not do, but invitations to find God, and our particular lot, to be a sufficient combination for a whole and significant human existence. With this God there is nothing to fear, and so no need to sin in order to tend to needs which we might believe God cannot meet. The particularly Christian reason for living according to the laws God lays down is not that we must impress God, but that it is unnecessary *not* to obey. There is no reason to sin, no *need* to pursue a different God, or lover, or to covet what someone else has, or to take another's life. God becomes sufficient – *who we are* before God becomes sufficient.

What God demands of us, and the only thing we finally need – that we be God's people and he be our God – is in fact what God has already given us. We, too, are offered a gift of adoption as daughters and sons of God, joined to Christ as the first offspring in a great family, and through Christ as brother we receive this God as "Father". God gives us what he demands – a life set in right relation to him, and simply looks to see whether, by living according to his law, we've actually begun to look like we've received his gift.

We *are* called to live righteous lives, in the sense of *moral* lives; but this is where we end up with God, and not how we get started with him. Blessed indeed are the poor in spirit, for they rest in the riches of the poverty of the spirit of Jesus Christ, and in that rest they enter the kingdom of God. By the grace of God's boundless love, may the number of these blessed ones ever increase. To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.