

The Reach of the Kingdom of God into Hearts

Talk to Children

[Begin with a story using props. Introduce two characters and show that they are having a disagreement. Invite the children to think about what each character would do in that situation while the remainder of the sermon is given.]

The law and love: now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

It is easy to read Jesus' statements beginning with "You have heard that it was said..." followed by "But I say to you..." -- as contrasting, or even replacing, prior teachings with his own. But Jesus neither erases nor replaces these teachings of the law. He uses the traditional teachings about murder, adultery, and prayer as grounds for building his teaching of righteous living. Using familiar, perhaps for some, even too familiar teachings, Jesus intensifies, clarifies and elaborates upon them for his listeners, extending these teachings into all areas of our life, even into our internal landscape.

In this way, Jesus does "not abolish but fulfill[s]" the law. No longer do the teachings on murder and adultery apply strictly to acts of murder and adultery. Instead, they can be used to investigate the motivations of our hearts as well as behaviours: anger, division, slander, pride, arrogance, lust, temptation.

Talk to Children

[Return to the story. Pose the question to the children, “Would it be easier for Character 1 to not retaliate to Character 2, or to not be angry with Character 2?”]

A Heart Aligned with Love

Perhaps Jesus' most notable extension of the law here is his internalization of the law, so that not only behaviour, but attitudes and emotions should be guided by love. Indeed, throughout Hebrew Scriptures, the law is to be taken to heart and not only outwardly observed. In this way, one can, “praise [God] with an upright heart, when [one] learns [his] righteous ordinances,” as the Psalmist writes. Jesus explains to his listeners the connection between outward acts and internal motivation. He draws parallels from murder to anger, and from adultery to lust. Indeed, this has been at the heart of the law all along. As we read this morning in Deuteronomy, “.. you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God.” It is one thing to behave correctly, Jesus says. It is another thing entirely for one's heart to be filled with and working towards love. It is easier to keep the commandment against murder than it is to avoid anger in one's heart. In this way, Jesus brings the human heart, too, into the conversation about the Kingdom of God. The righteousness belonging to this unfolding kingdom of God is more than following laws and behaving well. It requires and empowers a life surrendered to God and neighbor.

Talk to Children

[Return to the story. Ask the children, should the character pat himself on the back for not retaliating against the other character, when he is still really angry? Is he really in the right?]

The Reach of the Kingdom of God

Jesus reframes righteousness, exposing the internal compromises we make. We can pat ourselves on the back for avoiding outward bad behaviour, such as acts of violence and retaliation, of

malice and of betrayal. We are right to avoid these. But Jesus shifts our attention from behaviour we should avoid, to states of heart we are invited to cultivate, for the benefit of ourselves and others and to the glory of God. We must not forget the damage done to our own hearts and relationship with God when we harbour anger, resentment, lust, insult in our hearts. “For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations?” as Paul asks in the Epistle read this morning. The challenge that we must reconcile with anyone who has something against us or against whom we have some resentment, before we can be in harmony with the Kingdom of God, is confronting. This exposes the state of our human heart and invites us into alignment with the Kingdom of God by way of deeper surrender. This righteousness belonging to the Kingdom of God penetrates to the core of our being.

Jesus Christ’s coming and dwelling among humanity re-organises the relationships of the world and re-directs the internal trajectory of our lives. This is a life deep and wide, where light shines into every dark corner, not a flat life, reduced to avoiding misbehaviour. Jesus invites the disciples into a new way of life, not rejecting the ways they knew, but elaborating upon them. This way of life is about inward righteousness and direction of the thoughts of our hearts towards the things of God.

Talk to Children

[Complete the story. Have the character decide to forgive the other character, rather than stay angry.] *And they all lived happily ever after.*