

MATTHEW 5:21-37
BEING A DISCIPLE

How do you introduce yourself to someone new? When I was a student, meeting new people in Edinburgh, there were three questions: What is your name? (that was easy) Where are you from? (that was slightly harder – an obscure Lanarkshire village) What are you doing/studying? (that was easy) Next time I met some of these people, I'd forgotten their names and usually where they were from, but could most often remember what they were "doing" – he is a law student; she is studying economics, and so on (or was it other way round!) We define ourselves by what we do. A friend of ours, her mother was coming to the stage of retiring and our friend was frightened for her mother; she was an architect and that was her whole identity; it was how she defined herself; "I am an architect; this is what I do!" When she was doing that no longer, and there was nothing left for her to do, her whole reason for living had gone. We define ourselves by what we do: I am... and a job comes after that.

"I am a disciple!" That's how we would best describe ourselves as Christians; it is a better description than to say "I am a member of the church"! "Disciple" is a better word, as we shall see. But then how do we describe what being a disciple is? We ask "What does a disciple do?" Then we make up a great long list of things that a disciple should do or should not do! A disciple is someone who (and if we were making up this list forty years ago) goes to church, reads the Bible, doesn't go to the pictures, doesn't wear make-up and so on. I'm not so sure that there's an easily identifiable list for 2017, but still we would define being a disciple by what we do. The disciple is someone who keeps the commands, reads the bible, prays, goes to church and does these things regularly.

But Jesus wants us to see ourselves in a different way, not as what we do, but as what we *are*! What kind of people are we? What will we be? That's the question Jesus asks in the Sermon on the Mount! It is a more difficult question, a more searching question; it is a question that takes us back to what makes us the people that we are, to our spiritual DNA. There are six examples of questions that Jesus asks of His disciples and they all lead to qualities that we should foster in ourselves. We will look at four today and two next week. They come from something we read last week: "*I tell...*" (*Matthew 5:20*) Wow! That's tough. The Pharisees were renowned for being sticklers; they were 'righteous' beyond anyone else! They kept the law like it was going out of fashion; nobody could get near them; they were twenty-seven points ahead of everyone else in the league! But Jesus said to His disciples, "you are to surpass that!" He gives six examples of what that looks like in real life. We surpass that by going deeper, to the attitudes behind the actions.

Each of these six examples begins in the same way: "*You have...*" (*Matthew 5:21*) and then there is an example; followed by "*But I...*" (*Matthew 5:22*) and Jesus goes on to take that law and make it deeper and bigger for the disciple. The best way to understand this is by looking at the first example. "*You have...*" (*Matthew 5:21f*) That's the sixth of the ten commandments: "Do not murder!" It is quite easy and straightforward; either you have done it or not and the Pharisees would boast that they had not broken this commandment at all, ever. But Jesus takes us to what lies behind the act of murder to the attitudes that give rise to that deed. "*But I...*" (*Matthew 5:22*) There are three descriptions of the same attitude of hatred: the first is being angry with someone, that leads on to "Raca", an Aramaic word for 'idiot' or 'blockhead', and then to call someone a fool in that sort of angry, spitting out way that we can do when we are trying to humiliate someone completely or make someone out to be rubbish. All of this gives away an attitude of hatred towards our brother, an attitude that needs to be mended before we come to worship. The attitude is deeper than the action; being the right kind of person surpasses doing the right thing! Jesus wants us to be the right kind of person; there is to be no hatred, no vicious anger in our hearts, no desire to rubbish other people. We are to treat everyone well, and if it does break down, to mend it with forgiveness and grace.

The second example is about adultery and Jesus talks about lust in our hearts; turn that around and it becomes a question about the purity of our love. The third example is about divorce and the question is all about love and loyalty. The fourth example is about taking oaths, an admission of failure in truthfulness and Jesus says “*Let your...*” (*Matthew 5:37*) Your word should be truthful and honest. The whole point of all of these examples is the kind of people we are. We can tick the box and say we have never done any of these: we have never committed adultery; we have never been the cause of a divorce; we have never told lies. The Pharisees could tick these boxes and would be proud to tick them. But Jesus is challenging us about the attitudes that underlie these actions and is saying that the kind of people we are matters more – that we are not people with hatred or lust in our hearts; that we are people who are faithful and loyal to our commitments especially in marriage; that we are people who tell the truth and whose word is totally reliable. This is the kind of people Jesus wants us to be.

You see the difference between being and doing? Take the picture of a tree: the thing we notice first about the tree is its fruit, either there is lots of fruit or none; we don't pay much attention to the root of the tree because we can't see it, it is hidden. Often the tree roots run for a long way, either deep underground or around the tree. Roots make the tree healthy; if the roots are poor, the rest of the tree is poor; if there is no fruit on the tree, then that is a sign that the roots are sick. For us, deeds, actions, the things that we do are the fruit, the things we see, or other people see in us. What Jesus is talking about in the Sermon on the Mount is the roots of the tree, the kind of people that we are, people who love God and love others, people who are kind, compassionate, honest, loyal and all sorts of other qualities. This is what makes us healthy disciples of Jesus, that we are the right kind of people inside and then the fruit will take care of itself!

Reading these words can be daunting! We read this and know that we never match up; we always fall short of these exacting demands. Here's the ideal picture of the disciple; here is something to aspire to, to aim for in life, to be the kind of person Jesus paints in these verses. But the other effect is to make us realise just how far we fall short of this ideal. We are a work in progress and that's what matters most; here is something to aspire to and it matters most that we aspire rather than always achieve. “I do not always do the will of God but I want to want to!” Let that sink in for a moment; it needs to be thought about. “I do not always do the will of God, but I want to want to!” That's what Jesus wants to see in us, the desire to be the right kind of people and to have love in our hearts. This is why disciple is a better word, because it suggests a person always learning, that there is always more to be; “member of the church” suggests we have arrived, job done, there is no more to be done!

We are living in a building site at the moment; we are all too well aware of that! Hall 1 is covered in both the rubbish that has been taken out of the Hall and the toilets and is covered in the raw materials to make a new hall! Then when we look in from the back street, we see the mess that is the back garden while the digger creates a path round the building. It is all a mess and we look forward to the day when it is done; till then the building is “a work in progress”. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul describes the church, the people, as “*God's building*” which someone has suggested is better read as “*God's building site*” because people-building is also a work in progress. God is still at work in us; we are not yet perfect; we still make mistakes, but we still aspire to be the kind of people Jesus wants us to be. Well, that's the challenge for us today, to be the right kind of people, people with the right attitudes inside.

Here's the thing that gets me about the Pharisees: Jesus holds them up as people who keep the law to the nth degree! They keep it and keep it and keep it and tell everyone who will listen how well they keep the law. But later in the story, something else happens. Jesus begins to annoy them; He challenges their authority and their place in society; He teaches something different. How do they react? They plot to kill Jesus: they plan His murder; there is a deep hatred in their hearts that begins to come out and it is all directed against Jesus and it leads

in the end to His death. They plot and plan to murder Jesus, drawing in Judas to betray Him and Pilate to give up all his principles to consign Jesus to death. At a human level, these are events that were “Inspired” by hatred in the hearts of the Pharisees! On the outside there were doing the right things, but inside they were the wrong kind of people.

Nothing of this is automatic: I’ve come across lots of people who would claim to be Christians, but they are angry towards their brothers and sisters in Christ, with even a deep hatred and suspicion of the fellow-Christians. They speak with arrogance; they gossip; they don’t seem to mind if they tell lies because it will advance their personal purpose. They are deeply unattractive people, but on the outside, they seem to be nice, decent, Christians. Underneath, the reality is very different. What damage do they do to the kingdom of God in the world because they turn people away by their attitudes and actions and people are repelled from the kingdom by what they see in people who do the right things on the outside, but inside are full of hatred and lies.

Go to the root of the tree. Make sure the root of the tree is healthy! Make sure that we are the right kind of people inside! We should be people who love, who are kind, compassionate, people who are loyal, faithful, trustworthy, honest. A disciple is... this is how that sentence needs to finish: someone who loves Jesus and loves others and is learning to be like Jesus. This is all about the people we are, being the right kind of people. Being the right kind of people, all kinds of other things are forgivable. God has not finished with us yet; we are a work in progress; the work we do is to get the roots right! What kind of people will we be?