

The Big Picture

Part 2 – People

Matthew 12:1-14 (NIV)

¹ At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. ² When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." ³ He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry?" ⁴ He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread--which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. ⁵ Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? ⁶ I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. ⁸ For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." ⁹ Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, ¹⁰ and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" ¹¹ He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out?" ¹² How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." ¹³ Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

After last Sunday's message I had a couple of people come up to me a night confused as to where I was going with this preaching series and on reflection it's not a massively good sign for a communicator to have people confused about what they are trying to communicate, so let me try to be a little clearer. Where we are going with this series is the big picture of the Christian mission in the context of changing cultural values and particularly in the light of what is being called the marriage equality vote. Next week's message is entitled; "Same Sex Marriage and the Purpose of Right and Wrong". The week after that will be entitled; "A Power Greater than Culture". Today's message is entitled: *First Things First*".

But first we need to think a little about the nature of biblical faith.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

The word of God is living and active because the audience of the word of God, we human beings, is also living and active. There is no "one size fits all" message in the bible, instead there is an endless number of tailor made messages for living and active people. For those who have lost their way and betrayed their own beliefs and values there are messages of forgiveness, correction and the promise of a new day. For those who have been wronged or hurt, there are different messages of forgiveness and also of healing. For those who have broken relationships with other

people there are even more different messages of forgiveness and reconciliation and for those who have been abandoned there are messages of God's unfailing love and his promise that we will never be alone and so on and so on. Which is why in the next two weeks, when we will be asking the word of God two very different questions, which are; in the context of changing cultural values, 1. How do we treat people and 2. What is the purpose of truth, the word of God will speak two very different messages, and in the end our task will be to discover how these two very different messages are part of the one gospel. That doesn't sound too difficult does it?

So, first things first. Let's paint a picture of the heart of Jesus ministry. In the passage we read earlier ([Matthew 12](#)), Pharisees come up to Jesus to tell him that his disciples are a problem, they broke a Sabbath law about harvesting grain, but by word and action Jesus tells the pharisees that his disciples are not a problem, they are people and they were hungry. In [John chapter 4](#), Jesus speaks to a woman by a well, who by word and action believes that she is a problem. She hides away from other people and tries to drive Jesus away as well, because she knows she is broken and believes she is a problem. But by word and by deed Jesus treats her as a person, as a sister. In [Luke 7](#), a woman weeps over Jesus feet, wipes them with her hair and anoints him with costly perfume, while a Pharisee whispers to his friends that this woman is a problem, if Jesus only knew what kind of immoral life she has lived. But Jesus knew fully well about her life and he treats her like a person, praising her for her kindness. In [John chapter 8](#) the Pharisees drag a woman before Jesus telling him that she is a problem, she cheated on her husband, so what should happen to her? You know what happens next, Jesus challenges them to examine their own lives. Were their lives free of sin? Then throw the first stone. Jesus refuses to let them see her only as a problem and forces them to see her as a person.

In Jewish culture there were many groups of people who were considered problem people, like sinners and tax collectors, but these were groups of people that Jesus treated like people, people he ate and drank with ([Mark 2:15](#)). There were people with certain medical conditions like leprosy, who were treated like problems, you weren't allowed to go near them, but Jesus treated them like people and touched them and healed them ([Matthew 8:1-3](#)). Women were unable to participate in the life of the community if they were menstruating, they were considered a problem; they were to be avoided. In [Matthew 9](#) a woman who had been bleeding for 10 years seeks Jesus out and touches his cloak and is instantly healed because Jesus sees her not as a problem but as a person saying; *Take heart, daughter, "... Your faith has healed you* ([Matthew 9:22](#)). Non-Jews were another problem group, Jews were not allowed to associate with them, but when a Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant, Jesus did not treat him as a problem but as a person and healed his servant ([Matthew 8:5-10](#)).

I believe this gospel of grace with all my heart but sometimes I find myself compromising its great demands. A stranger came to me one day, someone had read information on our web site and came to me to ask why our church considered

their gay child a problem to talk about and not a person to be loved? During that conversation I found myself saying things like, your child is totally welcome here....but, there were these buts that kept coming out of my mouth, of course your child is welcome, but... the bible says, and we believe, that God's plan is only for men and woman to be sexually intimate. I remember in that conversation feeling very conflicted. My brain was telling me that I was holding faithfully to thousands of years of biblical understanding - but in my heart, as I sat with clearly distressed parent, I was feeling like a Pharisee. How had it come to pass that I, a follower of the one who refused to see problems but only saw people, when it came to the subject of homosexuality, I struggled to see people and only saw a problem. Could there be some Pharisee in me?

Jesus said

"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

(Matthew 16:6)

Which meant be careful about being influenced by them or becoming like them. So what makes a Pharisee? Well it seems that being in a community that feels under threat, creates the conditions for Pharisees. In Jesus day, Israel was under a huge amount of social and political threat and it made them feel defensive and they draw lines in the sand with very strict laws in the hope that it might give them some measure of control.

I know something about this:

"Young lady go to your room, you were to be back before midnight and it's now 2:30 in the morning. Your mother was beside herself, go to your room, you're grounded for a month!"

That is a small snap shot of our little family community years ago, when it was feeling under threat at the hands of our bafflingly rebellious daughter. To begin with our response to that threat was to become defensive and draw lines in the sand – we defended ourselves with laws. which worked for a while as a survival strategy but there was no future in it because as our daughter fought the rules she became less out daughter and more a problem, because under pressure, that's what law does, it turns us into Pharisees and instead of giving us life and a way through, it creates something darker. In our reading in Matthew 12:1-14, after Jesus tried to convince the Pharisees about offering grace to his disciples because they were hungry, and teaching them to see them as people rather than problems and teaching them that God desires mercy not sacrifice. As Jesus finishes this talk by compassionately healing a man, the Pharisees response is summed up in this really chilling verse.

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. (Matthew 12:14).

There is a darkness in law without grace, it is something to avoid at all costs. On the other hand there is a wonderful light in the grace and truth of Jesus (John 1:14),

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (John 1:4-5)

It was this grace and light that transformed our particular family crises. What we didn't know was that our daughter was being viciously bullied at school and she was unable to tell us. What changed everything was not more law, not better rules, it was totally God's grace, a totally surprising moment in which God deposited grace into her heart and she recognised herself as our daughter who we loved.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—(Ephesians 2:8)

Our churches mission, the gospel mission, is all about grace, it has always been about grace and it must continue to be about grace, but we need to acknowledge that grace is not without its difficulties. Grace is not cut and dried, it's not easily applied. Law on the other hand is clear and straightforward and in an era where the church feels threatened, there is a certain appeal in relying on clear and simple laws to tell us who to be and what to do. Yet, we need to resist that temptation, because it sends us down the same path the Pharisees walked and we cannot afford to lose the power of grace in the life of our church. The irony, which does not escape the biblical writers, is that in seeking to vigorously defend their faith, the original Pharisees actually damaged their faith and opened the door to the new movement of Jesus. Just let that sink in for a moment. *Father forgive them, they know not what they do!* (Luke 23:34)

Paul pretty much dedicates the entire letter to the Galatians to the issue of allowing law to move the church away from grace; these are few of the highlights.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—(Galatians 1:6)

Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 3:5)

Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, "The righteous will live by faith." (Galatians 3:11)

OK the song does say, grace is amazing, but what about truth and purity and holiness and obedience? What about the law? Jesus said I have not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Matthew 5:17). So how do all these biblical elements fit together? So here's the thing, the bible teaches us that Jesus is God in human form (John 1:14), and God is loving grace (1 John 4:16) and Jesus is the fullest expression of God's loving grace (John 1:14), while at the same time Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, (John 14:6, John 10:7). What all that means is that Grace, Christ's grace, is the way, the way into the law, the way into purity, the way into holiness and the way into obedience. And It doesn't work the other way around, you can't find God's grace working hard at obeying God's law, or being pure because it's a gift (Ephesians 2:8). Just look at the Pharisees they gave that a red hot go, not only was there no grace in them, there were some scary dark things as well.

I was praying during the week when God dropped this metaphor into my mind that I found helpful. That the church is like an icebreaker and the reinforced bow of the boat is grace. It is God's loving grace that cuts through the ice of our heart, the ice of our sin and the ice of our indifference. It is grace that leads the way, that comes first, but it is not the only part of the ship. The deck of the ship is God's law and gives us a place to stand. The superstructure is God's holiness keeping everything together. The design of the ship is God's purity moving us gracefully through the water. The engine is the power of God's spirit. But grace is the bow, and it comes before everything else, it has to.

There are thousands of testimonies about the power of grace and this is just one of them. Mark Johnston is an Australian with a far too familiar story. A childhood scarred by physical and sexual abuse which left him feeling hopeless and desperate and he turned to drugs to cope, but they only made things worse. By 19, Mark had attempted suicide numerous times and was put into seven drug-induced comas. He was self-harming and prone to violent fits of rage. Helpless and afraid, Mark's mother kicked him out of home and a Christian family took him in. As he slowly recovered from addiction, they invited him to church, but he refused again and again. Until his uncle, also an addict, started sharing the gospel with him.

One day, Mark decided to open up a bible and he read Psalm 72:14, which says; *For He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight* (Psalms 72:14). He watched in amazement as the face of God looked up at him through the pages and said, "I'm going to rescue you from oppression, violence and fraud because your blood is precious in my sight." That's grace, undeserved, unmerited, love pouring out from God and touching the heart of a person. From that moment, Mark picked up that bible like no other drug, reading it with the same urgency and desire with which he used to inject drugs. It was the first book he had ever read in his entire life.

Soon after his encounter with God, Mark entered the Transformations Discipleship Program on the Gold Coast, which really turned his life around. He completed the program in a little over a year, became a staff member of the program in south-east Queensland, where he helped pioneer a new campus. Today, Mark has a deep passion for discipleship, mentoring and recovery. He's sober and clean from drugs. He has a Diploma in Ministry and he regularly shares his testimony in churches, prisons and schools. He's also wrote a book entitled, *Marked by Mercy*, to provide encouragement and hope to drug addicts like himself and their families. He is a living testimony of the power of the grace of God.

So to finish up, whenever I reflect on that conversation, with the parent, who felt that our church, viewed their gay child as a problem, I feel troubled by my part in that conversation. God keeps bringing me back to the centrality of grace in the word of God and challenging me personally as well as challenging me theologically, that in my desire to defend the faith, I had not given grace its proper place in living out the gospel. It seems clear to me now that in the light of the life and teaching of Jesus

that anything that stops us from seeing someone as a person rather than a problem cannot be gospel. So I feel convicted, that if God granted me the opportunity I would hope to have a very different conversation. It would be all about grace and love and welcome. This time there would be no buts, no quid-quo-pros – no small print, no fudging, no seeing a problem and missing the person. It would have to be first and foremost filled with grace - wouldn't it?

Let's pray

Next week: Same Sex Marriage and the Purpose of truth.