

Challenge

12th Sunday after Pentecost – August 22, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Jeremiah 31:33 (NRSV)

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (The Message)

I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed. I'll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands.

Matthew 5:6,7,21-22,43-45; 7:12 (NRSV)

⁶"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." . . . ⁷"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." . . . ²¹"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment . . . ⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." . . . ¹²"In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets."

In the last two weeks, we looked at Jesus' invitation to "repent and believe in the Good News" and his shocking open-armed welcome to God's banquet.

Today, we turn to Jesus' challenge to actually live as God's New Covenant people.

Laying down a challenge¹

Americans love a challenge. Many of us are glued to our televisions watching to see which of the Olympic athletes will rise to the challenge. We root for underdogs. We read stories to our children about little engines that could. We simply love a challenge!

It is easy to embrace Jesus' invitation and welcome, this open-armed call to turn toward God and enter God's great banquet hall. But do we really understand all that

Something we need to "unlearn"

There is a long-standing misconception among Christians about the Pharisees¹ and the Law. Many of us were taught mistakenly that the Pharisees led the Jews in an effort to keep every detail of God's Law so that they would be made right with God (or, as Christians often put it, so that they could earn their way into heaven).

But the Jews did not suppose that their behavior could make them right with God. For the Jews, God's great act of salvation was the Exodus from slavery in Egypt . . . and the Exodus happened *before* God gave the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The order here is crucial. It was salvation and then the Law; *not*, the Law and then salvation. Grace, *then* law. For the Jews, keeping God's Law (his instructions about how to live in right relationship with God) was what ought to follow God's acts of grace. By his grace, God had given them the covenant and the law. The proper and thankful response was to keep the covenant and obey the law.

In laying down his challenge to live as New Covenant people, Jesus was neither calling his disciples to a new standard of morality nor abandoning the Law they had been given. He was calling them to a renewed understanding that God's law was, and is, grounded in love, forgiveness, and mercy.

1. There were perhaps only 6,000 or so Pharisees in Jesus' day. Despite their small numbers, they wielded enormous influence as they were seen by most Jews to be the spiritual leaders of Israel, the keepers of God's Law. Paul, the apostle of Christ, was a Pharisee.

¹This four-part series (Invitation, Welcome, Challenge, and Summons) is based upon the writings of Bishop N.T. Wright. The fullest lay treatment of this is in his book, *The Challenge of Jesus*, Intervarsity Press, 1999. Copies are available in our bookstore, *Inspiration*. For those who want to go deeper, Wright's book, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Fortress Press, 1996) is the full-blown treatment. It is easier to read than you'd think!

this embrace implies? Are we tempted to hear the welcome without hearing the challenge that is implicit in a call to turn toward God and embrace Jesus as Lord? In announcing that God's kingdom was at hand (Mark 1:15), Jesus was proclaiming that a new world was breaking in upon them all. He challenged everyone who would listen to *be* the renewed people of God, true citizens of God's kingdom in thought and deed. This was to be the long-awaited new covenant and new heart that had been promised centuries before by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And it meant that life could never be the same for any of them . . . nor for any of us.

What do you desire?

We live as we desire to live. Even if we are burdened by bad choices we once made or by circumstances thrust upon us, the biblical view is that we live the sort of life that we wish to live. But there is a BIG problem here: though we are made in God's image, we do not naturally desire God nor the things of God. It is this lack of desire for God that underlies all the biblical talk about new hearts, new selves, new clothes, new creation, and the rest.

We sometimes use words such as "conversion" to describe this change of heart, this newly found desire for God. For without this rebirth, this renewal of our hearts, we will not live as God's New Covenant people. We won't even want to. Paul understood that in establishing new churches, he was really running around founding colonies of a new human race – a race with hearts turned toward God!

Christians often put too much emphasis on the timing of this rebirth. In truth, most Christians couldn't tell you the moment of their rebirth. (John Wesley thought he could, but then six months later told his brother he wasn't so sure!) I know that I could not. But I do know that today, I desire God. I want to walk in God's way, to live today and every day in a manner that is pleasing to God . . . and I pray every day that God will hold me close and keep the flame of desire burning strong.

If we are to embrace Jesus' challenge, if we are to live as God's New Covenant people, then we must desire it. Such desire cannot be found within us, it is a gift from God. It is a gift that we can pray for every day. Perhaps even the desire to pray for desire is a sign of our own rebirth.

Living as New Covenant people

Assuming we desire to live as New Covenant people (see the text box), what does such a life look like? What does it really mean to live as Jesus has challenged us to live? Much of Jesus' ministry was devoted to answering these questions. The centerpiece of these teachings is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5-7.²

The Sermon on the Mount is a picture of a world turned upside-down. It was profoundly counter-cultural 2,000 years ago and it is no less so now. Jesus challenges us to surrender our anger, to pray for those who persecute us, to be faithful to our spouses in our thoughts as well as our actions. Does it not seem profoundly naïve to suggest that the meek (the gentle) will inherit the earth? When Jesus says "turn the other cheek," is it an invitation to be a doormat? We certainly don't have the space here to address all the questions that these teachings raise, but we don't really need to right now.³ What we *do* need to do is to see that Jesus' challenge is far more radical than we might think. It is about much more than being nice.

Jesus' Galilean listeners ached to hear a call for revolution, violent if need be. But Jesus quickly and firmly turned their world upside-down. They wanted vengeance on the Romans and Jesus instead taught them about forgiveness and mercy. If a Roman ordered a disciple to carry his pack one mile, the disciple was to carry it two. Jesus called them all to a new way of being God's people, or at least it was new to them. Wright gets it correct when he says that Jesus challenged Israel to *be* Israel. In the same way, it is a challenge to Christians to *be* Christians, even if being Christian means something radically different from what we thought, even if being Christian demands a price we thought we'd never be willing to pay.

Jesus cannot be tamed. He does not allow us to stay in our comfort zones, waiting for others to step forward. He calls for us all to rise to the challenge.

²Today's verses from Matthew (page 1) are a sampling from the Sermon on the Mount. This is the longest block of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels.

³Last August was devoted to a five-part sermon series on the Sermon on the Mount. The five background studies can be found at www.standrewcl.org. All the Background Studies (over 100!) I've written are posted there. While you are there, you can also register on-line for the fall Bible Academy!

Daily Bible Readings

(more on Jesus' challenge to his disciples)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Matthew 5 The Sermon on the Mount (Part 1)</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 6 The Sermon on the Mount (Part 2)</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 7 The Sermon on the Mount (Part 3)</p>	<p>Day 4 Deuteronomy 30:6-10; Jeremiah 32:38-40 More from the Old Testament on the renewal of the heart. (This is not just NT stuff! The renewal of the heart is the fulfillment of an OT promise.)</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 4:17-5:20 Paul contrasts the old life and the new.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Fall Bible Academy brochures are available today

The Fall Bible Academy session will begin the week of September 13. We will be offering the largest array of morning, afternoon, and evening classes yet. The newly redesigned Bible Academy brochure is available today at the Bible Academy's Ignition Sunday table in the Narthex. The classes include *From Resurrection to Right Now: Oh! The Places the Church Has Gone* with Rev. Kathryn Self; *From Buddhism to Mormonism: What Christianity is not!* with Scott Engle; *Boundaries: When to say YES, When to Say NO to take control of your life* with Rev. Linda Carmicle; *Meet the Prophets* with Frankey Commer; *Kingdom Living: 101* with Rev. Doug Meyer and Monty Moore; *The Gospel of Matthew* with Bob Baldrige; *Introducing Our Faith: The Living God* with Scott Engle; *The Balanced Life* with Eric Roberson; *Finding your Purpose: Exploring God's Plan for your Life* with Debbie Lyons; *The Lord's Prayer* with Cecil Taylor; and *Biblical Principles and Ethical Conduct in Corporate America* with Rev. Stan Seat.

You Can Register On-line at www.standrewccl.org!!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

There are two key themes in this week's study: (1) our need to desire God and the things of God and (2) embracing the radical challenge to our living that is explicit in Jesus' teachings.

1. You might discuss your own understandings of what it means to desire God and how we find such desire. You might share some stories of how it is that you've come to your own desire. Does this desire come and go? How important is this desire to living up to Jesus' challenge. Have you tried to live up to Jesus' challenge without the desire? Perhaps you thought you ought to rather than because you wanted to? What was the result?
2. It can be very difficult for us to see the radical nature of the Christian life. What do you think are the key characteristics of the Christian life? In which parts of your life does Jesus' challenge in the Sermon on the Mount run head-on into the "real world" and the "realities" of living the modern life. What do you find to be most radical in living as God's New Covenant people? Try to be specific and concrete. How can we begin to embrace Jesus' "counter-cultural" message? What are two or three concrete steps? Bear in mind that in all this, we are NOT to withdraw from the world. How can we be the "light to the world" if we are in hiding? God works through us, not in spite of us. We'll be talking more about this next week.