

## ***Sacredise Daily Worship***

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:

12 - 18 February 2017

### **Thought for the Week:**

It is easy to go to church on Sunday and sing songs and pray prayers. It is easy to not steal, not kill, not commit adultery. But, simply obeying these laws does not bring life to us or to those around us. It is when we allow God to capture our hearts with the truth of the Gospel, when we allow God to continually and disturbingly challenge and grow our hearts that we find abundant life. When we live from the inside out, opening our hearts to Christ's love, and letting it guide our speech and actions, we become those who make a healing, restoring impact on the world around us. Then we find – and bring to others – fullness of life.

This living from the heart takes far more work and awareness than legalism. It requires us to allow God to constantly challenge our attitudes and convictions, to constantly transform our feelings and reactions, and to constantly call us to a higher standard. In this way of living we cannot rest in a future guarantee of heaven after we die. We are called to work to actively bring heaven into our world and our lives now through submitting to God's gracious transforming guidance. But one thing is sure. If we are courageous enough to embark on the journey of heart-driven living, we will discover a richness and a fullness to life, a deeper connectedness and a more gracious way of relating and living together.

This week we explore what it means to live from the inside out.

### **Sunday 12 February 2017**

**Reading:** Matthew 5:21-37

**Reflection:** It is a pity that so much of the Sermon on the Mount has been misunderstood. When you read Jesus' words, it's easy to assume that he's taking the law and making it more stringent – creating a higher level of legalism than the religious leaders. Those who view Christian faith primarily as a calling to purity often take Jesus' teaching this way. But, Jesus wasn't creating a new law, he

was trying to demonstrate the true meaning of the existing law. He was fulfilling the law's purpose – to reveal what a human life that is lived in the freedom of love for God and others looks like. The law was not meant to be a stick to force us to live well, but the guideline for hearts that are captivated by God and by love.

If you look at all the "laws" Jesus offers in today's reading you will see that he moves from outward observance to heart attitude in every case. Instead of focussing on murder, Jesus confronts anger. Instead of adultery, he confronts lust and the abuse of women in divorce. In place of vow-making, Jesus calls for a commitment of heart that requires no dramatic promises. The law can control the worst that human beings can do, but it cannot motivate people to live up to their best. Only a heart that is transformed by love can do that, and that is the essence of Jesus teaching.

How can you allow love to transform you a little more into your best self today?

**Practice for Today:** Love is not primarily something we say or even something we feel – in spite of it being a condition of the heart. Essentially love is an internal bias toward outward actions that bring life, justice, peace, and joy to those around us. When we truly love, we don't need a law to guide us to do what is right. To nurture this internal attitude, we act how we would if love was already fully formed within us. Today, practice doing acts of love for others, and allow this to grow love in your heart.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** May my heart be captivated by love, O God, and may my actions express this love outwardly.

### **Monday 13 February 2017**

**Reading:** Exodus 20:1-21

**Reflection:** For generations the Israelites had been living as slaves in a foreign country. They were captives, with little need for law (this was imposed by their captors), or organisation (which would only have threatened their oppressors and brought greater suffering – which is what happened when Moses showed up). Their focus had been on survival, not on thriving or creating a strong, unified nation. So, after the escape from Egypt, God's people had to learn what it

meant to be a free nation. The law was given to help them to find this new identity and to create a new, cohesive community.

As many commentators have noted, the first few commandments focus on love for God. In those days national identity was inseparably tied up with religious identity. This is why their love for God needed to stay pure and faithful. The second part of the list was all about how to treat one another. These basic rules ensured that they would learn to respect one another's freedom, refuse intentionally to oppress or harm each other, and find a common life in which everyone could thrive and grow. Rather than serve as a list that would restrict the lives of God's people, the Ten Commandments were intended to teach God's people how to live as free women and men. The problem came in when the Law became about the letter rather than about the heart. As soon as we fall into legalism the law stops being an agent of liberation and it becomes a tool of enslavement. This is what had happened in Jesus' time. But, if we can remember that the spirit of the law is a heart of liberation, love, and sharing life in healthy community, we can use it as a reference to check how well our heart is doing in the quest to love.

Check your heart against the commandments and ask yourself how you can use them to learn to love God and others better today.

**Practice for Today:** The great thing about freedom is that we are free to take risks, to learn and to make mistakes. The law can never allow these things, but in trying to make us "perfect" the law makes us lifeless. When the heart is free to learn and grow, it is also free to recognise where it still needs to change to become more whole and more able to liberate and love others. This is the gift of confession. Today, use the practice of confession to admit where growth is still needed in your heart, and invite God to forgive you and teach you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Forgive and teach me, O God, when my actions show that I still have not learned to love and liberate others.

## Tuesday 14 February 2017

**Reading:** James 2:1-13

**Reflection:** When we're talking about living from the inside out, a passage like today's reading from James can seem contradictory.

James seems quite hard on those who are wealthy. This is because the way we use our money reveals a lot about the state of our hearts. If we use whatever financial resources we have only to protect, pamper, or aggrandise ourselves, we are not living in love. And, if we treat those with money better just because they are wealthy, we are not living in love – not toward the poor against whom we discriminate, and not toward the wealthy whom we value only because of their money. A true life of love loves all people equally and seeks to treat all people with equal respect. There is no place for favouritism in God's Reign.

But, then James goes on about how we must not break the law if we want to avoid judgement. This may sound legalistic, but James' letter actually strives to point out that true faith, rooted in love for God and others, must be visible in action, and the law is the most basic standard of loving action. Once we have learned to live by love, we no longer need the law to guide us – which is why James calls it "the law that sets you free" (vs.12). The law's job is to train us in the basics of love so that we are ultimately freed from needing the law, because love has become second nature – and then we become free people who liberate others through our love for them.

How can God's commands guide you to love all people equally today?

**Practice for Today:** The most basic expression of love is to welcome and greet other people, taking care to really see them and notice their humanity. This is easy with those who are like us, but with others, especially the "shadow people" of our world, it can be much harder. However, if we want to grow in love, we need to practice the warm acceptance of greeting others. Today, greet and welcome everyone you meet with the same warmth and acceptance.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I welcome all with whom I interact, O God, I choose to show no favouritism.

## Wednesday 15 February 2017

**Reading:** Matthew 19:1-12

**Reflection:** Nothing reveals your heart like the quality of your relationships. This is why, when Jesus was questioned about

divorce, he spoke very strongly. At that time, women were considered lesser citizens. Divorce was easy for men, with devastating consequences for women. Jesus' teaching reveals that marriage is difficult for the "hard-hearted" because the vulnerability and intimacy that it requires is almost impossible for those whose hearts are closed. Unfortunately, the individualistic bias of today's world trains us in self-protection, and warns us against becoming vulnerable with another person. Nevertheless, for Jesus, the alternative to hard-heartedness is to live from the inside out, choosing to love sacrificially instead of using the loopholes in the law to protect us from love's sacrifices.

We must be careful not to take Jesus' words further than they were intended, though. He was responding to specific questions. He did not address issues of abuse, or situations where both partners recognise that the relationship has broken down beyond repair. To insist that a person remain in a marriage that is lifeless and soul-destroying or abusive is just as hard-hearted as insisting that men should be able to divorce their wives easily with no concern for their well-being. However, if we are to live in love, all such relationship decisions should be made from a place of concern for the other person, and with love as the goal. Which is why Jesus acknowledged how hard his teaching was for some to accept.

How can you allow vulnerable, sacrificial love to guide your relationships today?

**Practice for Today:** It can be very hard to be vulnerable in relationships, especially if we have been hurt in the past. No relationship is without its struggles, but when we learn to forgive quickly and often, and to ask for forgiveness quickly and often, we more easily find healing and preserve our intimacy than if we become self-protective. Today, try to make forgiveness a quick and frequent part of your life.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** May I choose forgiveness as a way to healing for my relationships, O God.

**Thursday 16 February 2017**

**Reading:** Psalm 119:33-40

**Reflection:** The longest Psalm in the Bible, Psalm 119, is a song in celebration of God's law. It may sound strange to hear the Psalmist asking God to teach him to obey God's Law, since laws are generally something that you either do or don't do - there isn't much thought involved. The Psalmist knew, though, that God's Law is really about having our hearts changed to align with God's intentions, values, and priorities. This transformation takes more than mindless obedience. It requires our minds to understand and our hearts to be captured by God's ways. This is why the Psalmist prays for understanding and for eagerness.

Part of what makes this section of Psalm 119 so encouraging is that it shows the benefits of observing God's ways. God's law brings happiness (v.35), life (vs.37), and goodness (v.39 & 40). This is why the writer values God's instructions more than money, or other things that he considers worthless. Legalistically applying the letter of the law does not bring us these benefits. But, when our hearts are captured, we know the joy and inspiration that comes from living the best possible life - no matter what the world may throw at us. Law and grace are not mutually exclusive, but legalism and grace are! If we use it well, the Law can lead us deeper into God's grace and love.

How can you learn to love God's Law in a life-giving, liberating way today?

**Practice for Today:** God's ways are clearly explained and modelled for us in the Scriptures. There is teaching that helps us to understand, and there are the stories of those who have lived God's way that inspire us and capture our hearts. If we long to love God's Law and enjoy its gifts, we will need to spend time in the Scriptures to learn to love God's instructions. Try to spend as much time reading the Bible as you can today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I read the Scriptures, O God, may they stir love for your ways in my heart.

**Friday 17 February 2017**

**Reading:** Galatians 5:2-6

**Reflection:** After yesterday's meditation on the benefits of the Law,

today's reading may seem like a contradiction, but it isn't. Paul's concern here is with how we find right relationship with God. A legalistic faith seeks to obey the Law in order to find favour with God. This views faith as a meritocracy in which the "holiest" or "purest" win the most of God's love and blessing. When we make our relationship with God about obeying the Law, we have no need of Christ because we believe that we can achieve righteousness and God's approval in our strength. But, the danger is that we inevitably start to cover up or ignore the broken and destructive parts of ourselves.

But, there's another way to see faith. Paul calls it "living by the Spirit". This happens when we know that our efforts and "purity" are meaningless, and that Christ's love, grace and life are the only things that can lead us to our best selves. We seek an intimate, transforming relationship with God through Jesus, and then we begin to work out our faith by seeking to love others more, as Jesus did - and then we fulfil the Law without even trying! This is why Paul says that what counts is "faith expressing itself in love". We don't obey the Law to get close to God. We get close to God and this leads us to obey the Law.

How can you allow your faith to be expressed in love today?

**Practice for Today:** One of the tests of love is how generous we are. When we truly live in love we cannot help but share whatever goodness we enjoy - whether it's spiritual, material, or relational. Love is always expressed in giving of ourselves and our resources for the sake of others. Today, allow your love to be seen as you give generously to those around you.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** As I grow in my love for you, O God, so I learn to love and give to others more and more generously.

### **Saturday 18 February 2017**

**Reading:** Matthew 7:1-12

**Reflection:** Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel confronts the very natural human tendency to judge others. The reason we cannot and should not judge anyone else is that we are blinded by our own sinfulness and brokenness. We are all too willing to project on to

others the evil within ourselves that we won't face, and then judge them for it. That's the log in our eye that keeps us from seeing ourselves and others clearly, and it must be removed. But, once we have removed the log from our eyes, it is very hard to judge another person, because we have seen how deserving we are of judgement ourselves.

However, this does not mean that we mustn't exercise discernment. When we have learned to see clearly, we will also see that some people are not interested in the work of spirituality - of growing closer to God and becoming their best selves. Although we can and must love these people, it is pointless to try to engage them in a spiritual quest, and so we should just let them be. For ourselves, though, there is God's promise that if we ask, seek and knock - and keep on doing these things - we will receive from God the good gifts of life, grace, joy, peace and God's empowering Spirit. Then, we will be able to treat others with the same kindness and goodness that we want for ourselves - which is the essence of the Law.

Our quest as Christ-followers is to learn to see ourselves truly - the good and the bad - so that we can be changed through relationship with God in Christ, and then we can share that love with others. How can you allow God's presence to teach you to see God, yourself and others more clearly, as God would see?

**Practice for Today:** One of the best ways to learn to see more clearly is through the practice of prayer. As we pray, we begin to sense God's perspective on our feelings and behaviours, on our circumstances, and on other people. Once we see, even just a little, as God does, we automatically begin to love, in our little way, as God does. Allow your prayers to lead you away from judgement and into love today.

**Breath-Prayer for Today:** Teach me to see as you see, O God, and to love as you love.

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