

Sunday 10th July 2022
Matthew 5:21-37
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Sermon keypoints:

- in the Kingdom, the King sets the culture
- in the kingdom, there is no place for anger, contempt, lust, unfaithfulness, dishonesty and manipulation
- in the Kingdom, we treasure one another

Let us take a moment to pray before we dig into God's word. Let us pray together:

Come Holy Spirit and, as we pray each week, soften our hearts that we might receive Your Word for us today.

Come Holy Spirit and create in us the kingdom of God.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

As Marion was alluding to in her prayer, there's been quite a lot on the go, obviously in politics, this past week and major changes coming and within government, within number 10 Downing Street and all because, obviously, the decisions, the ethics that lie behind those decisions have, at times, been very questionable, very poor and it really creates a culture, I think many people have said, which seems corrosive, really quite negative, some would probably go as far as to say a modicum of corrupt, and surely it all stems from leadership, from the heart and character of those in leadership, and hold on to that for a moment because we've now begun this series in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is teaching us about the way of the kingdom, that the life, the best life, the blessed life is found in the kingdom and that there's a radical welcome for anyone to share in that and, but when you're called into that, it's going to feel foolish and subversive because the ways of the kingdom often appear that way and if you share in that kingdom you're then called to be light and salt in the world by first being changed from the inside out.

Jumping back, culture is important in the kingdom as well but culture, whether we're talking about the culture of the kingdom or the culture of number 10 Downing Street, is a word that we band around but can mean a lot of different things by it. So, before you hear my definition of culture why not take just 20 or 30 seconds to talk to your neighbor next to you and come up with your own working definition of culture. What is culture? Okay, so over to you for 20 or 30 seconds.

So, probably a lot of ideas. I won't get you to shout it out because we can't probably be here forever and a day, but the working definition that I'm going to go with is something I picked up somewhere along the lines that, culture is the way things are done here. So, it's our practices, it's our traditions, our values, our expectations, the way things are done here, and that can apply to many different groups and situations. Yes, number 10 Downing Street or a place of work, it can apply to a church culture, it can apply to your family, your family has a culture, your group of friends have a culture, your area has a culture, your society and country has a culture and so, we all belong to many different cultures all at the same time. Now, we clearly are called to be the salt of the earth and

the light of the world and so we are to embody something of a kingdom culture in all those different spheres of life, and to help us know what that kingdom culture looks like and what it means practically, Jesus has given us the Sermon on the Mount to get very specific and in the previous couple of weeks He's crammed a lot into some very few verses but now He slows down to look at some very specific areas of life and that's His way of fulfilling the law, of filling it out, by giving it its true interpretation.

Now, before we get into the specifics, we need to know something that's very key if we want to live a kingdom culture in our own lives and as a church family because a couple of times in the passage Jesus is going to say this 'You have heard that it was said to the people long ago but I tell you....' You've heard in the law of the Old Testament, you've heard that and you've heard the various interpretations whether it be the Pharisees or the Sadducees or some other group. You've heard all that but I tell you, I tell you, and behind that phrase of a very bold claim, an incredible claim, a claim of authority that His way is the true way, greater than Moses, greater than the Pharisees and Sadducees who sought just to build on what Moses is saying but He's saying 'Actually, I'm kicking right back to the source, this is what it really meant.' and He's able to do that because He claims to be God, He claims to be the Lord of the lord, the king of all creation. And so, what Jesus is doing here is more than just rehashing some old laws, more than just making it harder or more difficult or feeling more burdensome, what Jesus is doing here is giving its true interpretation because, after all, in the kingdom the king sets the culture. A culture is the way things are done here. It's our values, it's our traditions, it's our practices, our expectations, and so, Jesus is setting the culture of the kingdom but He does it because any king should do it, to bring life in that kingdom, to enable all to know and share in that good life of the kingdom, and so, yes, it feels at first read when you hear this, as we went through that and Jean's reading it and I'm like 'Oh, why have I picked this passage?' but you go through it and you think at first this is really hard, this is really negative almost, but we need to remind ourselves that behind all this is the goodness of God's kingdom and as we go through that I'm going to try and bring that out for us today, because it's not just negative, it's to show what doesn't belong, so they know what does belong now.

Jesus has taken a very different approach from the Pharisees. He is, rather than trying to narrow it down to something very specific or broaden it out to try and wriggle out of things, He's going to choose another path and that's going to, at times, feel really hard hitting and really quite challenging and, depending what we make of Jesus, will determine our response. So, before we get specific, can I ask you all this - Who is setting the culture of your life? Who's setting the culture in our church family, in your family, in your household? Is it Jesus? Is it Jesus? We might claim it to be Jesus but is it really Him? Because it's easy to say 'Yeah, it's Jesus, of course it's Jesus. I'm in church. It's got to be Jesus.' But is it Jesus? Have you resolved in your heart that the one who will set the culture for your life, for the life of our church, is Jesus? Not our traditions, not what's most comfortable or comes most naturally or easy to us. Is it going to be Jesus? And you need to make that decision for yourself if you're going to live the kingdom life and through you that life is going to be experienced by others as Jesus setting the culture of your life. So, let's get specific in our portion today.

We've got four little parts to look at and we read earlier 'You have heard that it was said 'You shall not murder' but I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment and anyone who says 'You fool' will be in danger of the fire of hell.' Now, when it comes to the teaching of the Pharisees, they narrowed it down to just physical homicide, the taking of a life, the killing of another, but Jesus says that the full application of the law 'You shall not murder' includes both anger and contempt and we might be tempted to say 'Why Jesus? How is that ever on the same scale?'

Before we get into that we do need to know that not all anger is wrong. God gets angry at sin. So, there can be a righteous anger. But how many of us are perfect like God such that more often than not our anger is only righteous? So, let's not let ourselves quite off the hook yet, okay, but let's note that there is a righteous anger. In thinking about anger and contempt Dallas Willard in his book *The Divine Conspiracy* wrote some very helpful material that I found this past week and so Willard says that 'anger often arises in us when our will is obstructed, when our will is obstructed, or when our life is interfered with'. So, that might be in a workplace and you're trying to do something and someone undermines you, undercuts you, doesn't do what you expect, and you get angry because what you expected, what you wanted done, isn't getting done. I feel this at times sometimes with my children. You might with your grandchildren or people in your community, that something is not done that you want it to be done that way and you get angry because your will has been obstructed, how you wanted life to go has been interfered with and so anger arises. But with that also comes something else because when your will is interfered with often what can arise, even unaware to us, is a will also to correct that, to get that person out of the way because they're obstructing your life and they're interfering with your life, we want to get them out of the way and if that anger is very strong there can be then a will to harm, a will to harm. Now, it might be physical but it might also be in a look. How many of us know, have given a look this past week because anger arose in us? And just with a look we wounded another in their heart. Or words. Proverbs says that there is power of life and death in our words or even silence, even silence. The cold treatment because we got angry and there's a will to harm that person, to make them know that you're angry at them and so, you treat them with the with silence.

Contempt is very similar. There's a will to harm within contempt because in contempt we want to exclude, we want to isolate, we want to write someone off and, actually, that brings harm too because God has made the human soul such that it needs to belong, it needs to belong, we each need to belong somewhere and know a sense of belonging and when we have contempt for someone, we end up excluding them, isolating them, cutting them off and that withers the soul. And so, there's a will to harm with contempt and that's why Jesus says in the kingdom there's no place for anger or contempt because, like murder, it has a will to harm and instead there should be the highest regard for one another, the highest regard such that He goes on to say if you know there's a broken relationship with someone you seek reconciliation and He gives the example of being at the altar with your offering and just leave it to go and be reconciled. And we think 'Ah, yeah, of course you'd do that. Of course, you would do that.' Let me

put that into context: I would have to be the equivalent would be me preaching probably my most important mark of the week and I put in many hours to be here, imagine just letting me thinking 'Oh, there's a broken relationship there and I've not done anything to try and reconcile that. Sorry guys, see later. I'm going to go and do something about that.' and you'd be like 'What is he on!' But that is literally. Or imagine me, put it in another context, we've had a number of weddings recently, imagine being at the front ready to exchange your vows 'Repeat after me ... Oh, hold on. I've just remembered there's that broken relationship and I haven't done anything.' Literally that is what Jesus is saying, that is how seriously we are to take our relationships with one another and with anyone that, if there's a break, we would pause even our wedding ceremony, that is what Jesus is teaching here, because we have to in the kingdom flee from anger and content and pursue the highest regard for one another. So, that's part one.

Part two, Jesus goes on and says 'You have heard that it was said 'You shall not commit adultery' but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.' Again, the Pharisees narrowed it down, so it's literally the physical act of adultery and everything else, looks and conversation, all of that is fair game because you haven't physically done anything, so you're safe, you're good. But again, Jesus extends it out to include lust. Why? Well Willard has another helpful comment to say that 'to look upon a person for the purpose of lusting for them using their visual presence as a means of savoring the fantasized act has thereby committed adultery with them in your heart.' It's not until you get specific with that kind of language that you can really see the logic of Jesus teaching because, imagine your spouse or such like, looking at someone lustfully and you finding out about that. You would be hurt, you would feel betrayed because, after all, that is what adultery is, that breaking of a covenant, that unfaithfulness and so what Jesus says makes complete sense. Now Willard's quote helpfully puts it as both male and female. He, but also, we should note that attraction is not wrong, temptation isn't wrong either. Jesus was tempted in every way but he did not sin. But for us, sin is less than a heartbeat away and so we can very easily and quickly move from attraction and temptation to turning people into an object, a thing, a physical body, that is simply there for our pleasure even if only in our imagination, and Jesus says there's no place for this in the kingdom, there's no place for lust, just as there's no place for sex outside of marriage in the kingdom, and to do otherwise, to reject that teaching, is to put our desires, our wants above the ways of the kingdom and instead Jesus says we should be pursuing the respect and honor of one another, that we don't see people as things, as bodies, as possessions, but we see them as people made in the image of God, a person of great value and so they're not there to be used or to have or to make you feel comfortable or fulfilled or whatever it would be rather, you've to will their good rather than willing to have them or use them.

And again, He gives some points of application here. He goes on to speak of how important this is in the kingdom that you're to, apparently, pluck out your eye and cut off your hand, and I'm not sure any of us have done that recently so clearly, we must be disobeying scripture in some way, if we took it literally but Jesus, thankfully, has not been literal because the law also taught in the Old Testament that mutilation, self-

mutilation, was forbidden, so Jesus is simply using hyperbola to get our attention, to raise our awareness of how important this is, how important it is but the idea that the principle, the metaphor of maiming is still important, still helpful because, there might be things that we need to cut off, that fuel are lust. It could be certain books or magazines; it could be certain films. Gill and I we won't watch certain categories of films and if we know our film is going to include certain material, we won't go near that, not just because of lust but because of other factors too. We might limit certain sites and our internet access because either going to a certain shopping site might be unhelpful. Or it might be that actually the plain blatant pornographic sites are clearly out of bounds and unhelpful and just will raise that lust and are not embodying the respect and honor of the kingdom. But it can be in everyday ways that we just need to learn to cut off the things that might feed and fuel or lust. You might be just walking down the street and you notice someone, there's a degree of attraction, you notice that but it's then learning to bounce the eye off rather than linger and it becoming more developed, because sin is less than a heartbeat away and so, you learn just to bounce so that you're not feeling that and you're walking in the ways of the kingdom where we hold the highest respect and honour for one another.

Thirdly, Jesus says 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give for a certificate of divorce, it has been said. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife except for sexual immorality makes her the victim of adultery...' Now, this is an area of the law where the Pharisees had added extra rules and interpretations to try and wriggle a way out of it and so but even within the Pharisees there was disagreement. So, there's one school of thought that took the words of the law which said that a certificate of divorce could be given if a wife did something unseemly or indecently then a certificate of divorce could be given and there was one school that kept it quite narrow. There was another school that said even if she burnt the dinner then that was a good enough reason to issue a certificate of divorce. Which just seems completely ridiculous but literally that's that was the case, I'm not making this up, and Jesus narrows the understanding of divorce to say that, in the kingdom, there are exceptionally few reasons for divorce and He says here that one reason is sexual immorality, the breaking of a covenant because, literally, as I said earlier, that is the meaning of adultery, to break a covenant, to be unfaithful and that's why He goes on to say that if a man was to divorce his wife that would make her a victim of adultery because adultery is the breaking of a covenant, it's unfaithfulness which is why God with His people talks about their covenant breaking being an act of adultery. Now I guess more could be said. Some might want more to be said about divorce, particularly with the rates of divorce in our world today, but John Stott argued, quite helpfully I think, that to preach more on divorce could end up being unhelpful, might lead to greater pain, might lead to a degree of confusion because, in preaching, you have to paint with very broad brush strokes and so, he argued, actually, that it's better to have these kind of conversations as a conversation, as dialogue rather than say too much in preaching, but at the very least we can say that in the kingdom we're to pursue fidelity, lifelong fidelity, where we keep our promises and we embody the faithfulness of God.

Lastly, Jesus said 'Again you have heard that it was said to the people long ago do not break your oath but fulfill to the lord the oaths you have made but I tell you do not swear enough at all. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No.' Once more the Pharisees had added some wriggle room here and they basically said that well unless you use the name of God in your vow and oath then you don't really need to keep it, you can get out of it. So, they had this system, this elaborate way or and rules around this and vows and of course that is going to create a culture of distrust or lack of honesty, of not really being knowing if you can trust someone, if they're going to fulfill that vow, and Jesus said that this is completely abusing what the law says for, in fact, we should not be taking the Lord's name in vain anyway or invoking anything else because it belongs to God and ultimately you're only having to do that because you're dishonest people, you can't be trusted and so, you're trying to engender a greater degree of trust, we might even say you're trying to manipulate a greater degree of trust. So, instead, in the kingdom, pursue trust and in transparency by being a people who are so honest that you don't need to resort to adding more to your yes or no,

So, these are some of the ways that Jesus calls us to embody a kingdom culture and I suspect that the issues around anger and lust are the most pressing for us in our day and maybe in our own lives and there might be a conversation, there might be an incident from this past week where you feel a degree of challenge even now that the Holy Spirit is saying you know in that moment this past week and that look that you gave and that we comment or words, that was not of my kingdom and that'll feel challenging. But let's remember, as has been said before, God doesn't convict to make you small or to make you feel terrible about yourself. He convicts to bring life, to bring you into the life of the kingdom, the goodness of the kingdom and then, through that, others may experience the goodness of the kingdom. So, I encourage you if you're feeling challenged about something, if there's something drawn out from you then spend some time in prayer with the Lord later today. Go for a walk. Get some time alone in the room somewhere and just talk to Him. Ask for His grace to forgive but His grace also to enable you to make that right with a person and to keep on changing you.

Going through the material this week in preparation for today I was struck by one idea though that really, we could summarize all of these portions of scripture with this thought that yes, in the kingdom the king sets the culture but, in the kingdom, we treasure one another. In the kingdom we treasure one another. I think it summarizes all of what we've read because when we treasure. when we value one another. when we treat one another as precious, rather than resorting to anger and contempt or lust and unfaithfulness or manipulation and dishonesty, rather than any of those ways, we instead, we pursue the highest regard for one another where we seek reconciliation, where we hold one another with respect and honor, we seek the good of each other, we remain in lifelong fidelity, we pursue trust and transparency and honesty. These are all ways that we treasure one another and so embody the culture of the kingdom.

Now, we're going to stumble, we're going to get this wrong because none of us are fully mature, we're all on a journey towards the wholeness of the kingdom, but know this brothers and sisters, know this, we are called to treasure others because our God first

treasured us. You are so dear to Him that He came and died on a cross that there might be, instead of judgment, grace. Grace to forgive you. Grace to change you. Grace to help you put things right. Grace to hold you fast unto the end.

That is our God. That is our King. It's the marks of His Kingdom and it's the culture He calls us to embody in our own lives and in our shared life together, and I pray, I really do pray, that it might be so. Amen.