

Let us be better than that

Matthew 5.21-26

Rev Dr Jos M. Strengholt

In parliament, people of opposing parties hurl insults at each other, and they cannot even maintain the decorum of being polite and friendly.

On social media people send death threats to medical doctors, and politicians. Without holding back, we see people calling others idiots.

Our societies were never very perfect, but it seems that in the last few years, we have found ourselves in a downward spiral of anger, of attacking others, of uncivilised language. And we have not reached the bottom yet.

My opinion and my behaviour are the norm, and if others do not think and do as I do, it seems we have the right to treat the other as a stray dog.

If you roam a bit on social media you find this everywhere.



1. Jesus among the people

In order to teach people a better way of living, Jesus taught the masses that had followed him and who gathered around him.

If you read the beginning of the sermon on the mount, you may get the impression he only spoke to his small group of disciples. Matthew 5.1 says:

"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him."

So you might think he spoke to his small group of committed friends. The sermon on the mount for hardcore Christians.

But in the end of the sermon on the mount, in Matthew 7.28, we read that when "Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching."

So he addressed all people. What Jesus has to say is not just for the fanatics who get out of bed on Sunday morning to go to church - it is a message for all people. For the masses.

For a teacher to sit down, in those days, meant that he was truly going to speak his mind. It was serious if a teacher sat down. Just as in the early church, the preacher in a church would sit when he preached. (Great idea, a good soft lazy boy chair for me please.)



The masses wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. No wonder, he had just healed lots of people in Capernaum, so it seemed that He was the man they needed for their times.

We need a miracle-doer, to save us from diseases. To give us our food. We need someone to grow the economy.

And the people sitting on that mountain to listen to Jesus, they needed Him to get rid of their enemies. The Roman occupation was awful for them, and their own Jewish rulers were happily cooperating with those Romans.

The masses who gathered around Jesus were despised by those Jewish elites. They were defenceless when the rich tried to take the small plot of land they still had.

They were defenceless against the almighty tax-collectors. They could be thrown in prison for any small thing while the happy rich could do whatever they wanted.

We need Jesus to help us solve all those problems. He can do it. Did he not just heal by amazing miracles, the sick people? Did he not feed the hungry?

By the way, Jesus stopped his awesome healing ministry to teach people. Think of that. This shows at least that for Him, it is important what you think, how you think. Opinions matter and have impact.

But Jesus did not just want to put viewpoints into their brains. He wanted them to change their lifestyle.

And He began with great words.

You are blessed! Others may see you as poor in spirit, but you are blessed.

You need justice to be done, you hunger for it, but right now, even when justice is not done to you, you are already blessed.

People persecute you and put you in jail? You are blessed!

Blessed not because of being poor or spirit, or because of being persecuted, but because you have come to listen to Jesus. You chose to have Jesus in your midst.

You may feel low, and misused and hopeless, but with Jesus, your life is blessed.

Your circumstances may be problematic, but you have Jesus as your guide, as your helper, as the presence of God in your life. This is what Jesus told those masses on the mountain.

And the leaders of the people, the politicians and the rich and famous, they may consider themselves as great lights and as the flavour of the day, but you are the light of God, you are the people of God.

Because Jesus is in your midst. That makes all the difference.

2. Today

The elites of our nations may think they are great, that they are a city on a hill, the movers and shakers, but you only need to follow the stories in the media to laugh about this pretentious attitude.

We have our prince Edward, our Boris Johnson, we have our shining stars working for the TV program The Voice, we have our leading politician in Holland who seems to sometimes suffer from serious moments of forgetfulness.

For our examples for how to lead a good and happy life, let us not look at those people. Jesus is the light of the world. He is the salt of the earth. And those who gather around him, are also the light and the salt. They brighten the world, they give flavour to life.

We are the community around Jesus, we are the people listening to him on that mountain. And we are so encouraged by his blessings.

Blessings of forgiveness. Blessings of having God in our life. Blessings of having Jesus as our guide. The blessing of having brothers and sisters.

But some Christians are so overjoyed by those blessings, that they forget that Jesus had a few more things to say.

In our society, where it seems that we are being drawn down to the lowest common denominator, with the examples of our society-leaders, it is important to hear what Jesus has to say. When others go down, we go up.

Jesus did not come to forgive only. In our bible study on zoom this week, we spoke about this misconception of what the christian faith is.



Some people think that if you only ask God for forgiveness and you accept Jesus and Lord and Saviour, then all is fine. As if God then gives a free pass straight into heaven.

Well, let me tell you, forgiveness is hugely important and to be assured that eternal life is ours, is fantastic. But Jesus did not come to ensure that you and I will go to heaven one day and that's it.

Jesus came to bless you today, to change your life today, to make you experience heaven - the presence of God - today. And to make you today live as citizens of his Kingdom.

The Pharisees in Jesus' days were amazingly excellent at taking the sting out of the laws. For them it was all about the letter of the law.

"The law says, you shall not kill, and I did not kill anyone, so I am okay when I treat the masses in the country as dirt."

Jesus says that He did not come to abolish the law. He does not tell the masses that they can forget about the rules that their bad leaders hold in front of them.

They have always learned that they should not murder, but Jesus tells them now, that to not kill is not enough. Stop being mean to each other. Do not use bad language about other people. The fact that the politicians and the rich treat you badly, does not give you the right to treat them with disrespect.

What we believe is important. Our creed is important. But it must be said, Jesus did not come to teach people a creed, but He taught people a lifestyle.

If you are citizens of His Kingdom, then you have to know how to live, and that is what you must do. It is about doing.

Being a follower of Jesus means to believe in Him and to act as He tells us to.

3. Kingdom life

We live in a world where people treat each other badly and where people talk to each other badly. And if you are on the lower steps of the social ladder, you are often stepped upon and treated with disrespect.

We see this played out in The Netherlands. If you happen to have the wrong postcode, or the wrong surname, you have a fair chance of being singled out for bad treatment by the tax office.

Those people with the wrong postcodes are the types of people sitting around Jesus on the mountain, and to those people he has very practical advise for how to live his Kingdom life.

Jesus offers two remarkably specific and practical commands. The first one: be reconciled and make friends. Do not be angry at your brother. Do not insult your brother. Do not call your brother a fool.

People who are being stepped upon have this strange psychological need, to step down on someone else. People who are abused become abusers.

Break the chain, is what Jesus says to the masses of his followers. In his Kingdom we are to make friends, not enemies. We have to bless, not curse, we praise people and lift them up, we do not call them a moron.

The Greek for 'your fool' that Jesus uses, is: you moron. We have adopted this word directly from Greek into English.

We all know how easy it is, to vent our anger and frustrations, by being angry at others in return. Jesus says: don't. Make friends.

And secondly, if you have a real problem with someone else, solve it, do not wait till the other person takes action and demands his rights by going to court.

Jesus did not lecture on topics like predestination, transubstantiation, on the fact that He is consubstantial with the Father. Sure, important.

But he lectured on how to behave in church and in society. His words were meant for life inside the new community of his followers, these are Kingdom-rules to live by.

But He also talks about how to behave when a Roman soldier forces you to carry something for him for the legal distance of a mile. Jesus says: go an extra mile. Serve other people. Be kind and helpful.

Our society really suffers from anger at the government, anger at other groups in society, anger at refugees, anger at the weather, anger at anything. We are people with short fuses.

But Jesus commands us to break the chain of anger and unfriendliness.

"Yes but, I am right and the other is wrong!"

"Yes but I have my rights!"

The issue is not right or wrong, the issue is: what is best for you, and for the other, and for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus shows how for Him, the laws of God are for the welfare of all people, for the welfare of the community.

So the right answer to being treated badly, is to treat others better.



Have you been treated badly, recently? We all have examples. In our daily life we are often hurt and treated with disrespect. In many situations other people make you feel small.

But as Jesus-people we are supposed to respond by making other people feel good. That is the proper respons.

Conclusion

Imagine.

Imagine that as His followers, we do what Jesus says. To say kind words about people. To treat people with respect. To treat others as we would want to be treated.

To treat others as the amazing creatures that they are, reflecting something of the Creator.

Imagine that every day of the week, you say or write a few kind words to at least two or three people. With our small group here, we would positively impact on hundreds of people.

Yes, sometimes we have to swallow our pride, our anger, our frustration. But this is precisely what Jesus is asking us to do. As his people.

Amen.