



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 7: Free From Hatred And Selfishness Into Love And Service

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” (Gal. 5:13-15)

Meditation: A Changed Man (Luke 19:1-10)

The tax collector knew the community despised him. He had sold out. A son of Israel, he had thrown his fortune in with the Roman overlords who governed the land, collecting for them their despised tax, and in the process doing quite nicely for himself through commissions and overcharging. And doing quite nicely for yourself was important; a man had to make his way in the world. Maybe those who looked down at him were simply envious that he had seized the opportunity first. He wasn't completely friendless; there were others who had been written off as well, not that they were necessarily the best company. Still, when they got together they could console themselves with a shared bitterness and cynicism towards the self-righteous prats who sneered at them in the street.

When he heard that Jesus was coming through town, he was intrigued, and wanted to see the man, to see what all the fuss was about. There certainly was some intrigue about the man. His actions were good and right, putting him in the class of those who looked down on him and others like him, but, rather scandalously, he seemed to prefer the company of the down-and-outs, the ne'er-do-wells, all “sinners” like him. The “better class of people” seemed to be terribly offended by him.

When he got to the street, it was clear that no way was anybody going to let this creep have a front row seat. A pity, because he was short of stature, and couldn't see over those who stood in front of him. So, spying a sycamore tree, he scuttled up into its shady branches and waited for Jesus to go past. Imagine how surprised he was when Jesus, stopping underneath his dangling feet, smiles quietly, looks up and speaks to him. “Zacchaeus, come down right now. I must stay at your house today.”

Jumping more than clambering down, the short man laughed with surprise and delight as he faced Jesus, embraced him, and kissed him. “Sure !,” he said, “Come right along!” But he was the only one in the crowd laughing—dark looks and surly faces everywhere spoke a silent disapproval and discontent. As the two disappeared down the street, muttering began its uttering. Of all the people in Jericho with whom Jesus could choose stay, any one of them would have been a more respectable host, and more worthy.

What a party there was at Zacchaeus' place. The regular crowd was there, but rather than sitting with them and mustering their bitterness and cynicism as usual, Zacchaeus wanted them to see and know something amazing. He wasn't interested in himself anymore. He wanted to do good for others. Half of his wealth he was giving away, to help those in desperate need. And then, of course, doing good would mean some undoing of wrongs. His prosperity had come at the expense of integrity. So, he was going to repay what he had improperly gained, and do it four-fold. He knew he was only required to add a 20% loading, but, heck!, *why be cheap about it?!*

Jesus was so pleased! He knew a wonderful thing had happened. Salvation had come to Zacchaeus, and had broken apart his mean and greedy heart. Selfishness, self-concern, self-protection, self-indulgence, and self-justification had all disappeared and in their place was a little man filled with big love. Somehow, meeting Jesus had changed his life. Jesus had come for this very thing, that people lost in the maze of themselves could be taken again to the wide open spaces of God and others.

What Must Be Done To Live?

Another rich person, one who perhaps had inherited his wealth, and who was known as an upstanding member of the community, sought Jesus out. "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18-30)

Jesus' answer was to remind the man of the commands—in particular the commands in the "second table" of the law, the commands about how we treat our neighbour. The man believed he had kept these laws since he had responsibility and accountability. However, when Jesus applied these laws to the very real situation of the man's wealth and the needs of people around him, the man resisted. Like the expert in the law in Luke 10:25-37, the law was great in principle but not so great in application! Like that law expert, the rich ruler was in effect saying, "Who is my neighbour to me?" Both men were religious and pious, and had an interest in eternal life. But they approached these matters from an essentially self-interested perspective.

Jesus asked the legal expert how he understood the law, and the man got it just right:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself." (Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18).

Do this and you will live. As Paul puts it in Galatians 5:13-15, our freedom in life is known and expressed in serving one another in love.

The Ecstatic God

For some people, spirituality seems to be about a kind of emotional or mental ecstasy. And it seems to be about withdrawal from others and escape from the world into an interior experience. In fact it is all about just the opposite. The literal meaning of ecstasy is "standing outside oneself". True ecstasy is essentially not self-interested.

The living God, who has made Himself known in Jesus Christ, has shown that He is the ecstatic God. He is God who stands outside Himself. That is to say, He is God who stands towards and for others. He expresses Himself always in going out to others, to serve them and do them good rather than seeking benefit and good for Himself. Human beings made in His image are also structured to be ecstatic in this way. And in fact, God has great delight in His eternal being as He moves out to others, and for us there is the deepest joy in not being absorbed by ourselves but living for others.

The Gospel of John shows us something of the ecstasy of the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son. Right at the start of the Gospel we read the mysterious words about the Word of God:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” (John 1:1-2)

In eternity God has not existed as a monad, but as a fellowship of persons who stand in a face-to-face relationship with each other. But more than this, as they stand in ecstatic relationship with each other, they seek also to move out from each other:

“Through him all things were made; without him was not anything made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” (John 1:3-4)

Creation comes about through the outward movement of God the Father and the Word-Son. But even more, when this humanity, created to live in ecstasy with God and one another, became ensnared in sin, so full of love for us was God that He sent His Son, who

“...became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

Rather than withdrawing from us in our sinfulness, Jesus came to the world like he came to Zacchaeus, and joined us where we were in the fullness of grace. And in that grace he worked, by death and resurrection, to bring back into ecstatic relationship with the Father:

“No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made Him known.” (John 1:18)

The Fatal Inward Curve And Its Cure

Wild boars have long teeth in their jaws that act like tusks. Over time, these teeth get longer, and grow upwards curving back. If they do not get ground down or broken by fighting, digging or accident, finally these tusks curve right back into the face of the boar, and puncture the skin, causing infection and finally death to the animal.

The essence of sin is what Luther described as people being *curvatus in se* — curved in upon themselves. Rather than standing outside ourselves towards others, we become fatally curved in on ourselves. The temptation to which the first couple fell was that of self-assertion, or self-standing. Independently from God their Creator, they foolishly asserted they could direct their own lives. Without reference to Him, they could determine what was right and wrong. Self-assertion immediately links itself with self-interest, self-protection, self-serving and self-justification. In sin’s grip we are completely unable, and unwilling, to break out the circle of self. All those we meet we view with a desire to know what they can offer us and what we may gain from them, even if they are not offering.

From this fatal interest in ourselves, others then also become a threat to us. Their needs, their interests, and their future may demand some kind of loss or lessening of what we had hoped for ourselves. And so, in one way or another, whether consciously or not, we start to view others as enemies, and to hate them. It may not be that we actively or consciously seek their destruction, but right at the heart of it is that, if

needs be, it would be better that they die rather than us. Paul described this in Titus 3:3.

“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. *We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.*”

John in his first letter too, calls a spade a spade. Love for the brothers and sisters is an essential outcome of knowing the love of God. To claim to love God and to not love others is to be a liar. Love of the world and the things of the world precludes the love of the Father. To pitilessly and greedily keep these things for oneself when a brother or sister is in need really raises the question as to whether the love of God is in such a person.

When Jesus came to the cross, there was a constant pressure on him to save himself (see Luke 23:35, 36, 39). The pressure was on for him to act in the same hateful self-interest that had led to this terrible event of his being crucified. The one true servant in the history of the world faced the hateful self-interest of humanity. However, not only were we killing him; he was serving us and his Father, and offering himself as a substitutionary sacrifice on our behalf. The Father was giving him for the salvation of the world. They had rich communion and joy in one another. But rather than keep that, they put it all on the line and went into the deepest and saddest separation and darkness, so that we could enter their joy and communion. Rather than save himself, and rather than calling on his Father to save him, he, with his Father, determined to do all that was needed for our salvation.

One man, hearing him pray for the forgiveness of his persecutors, was, like Zacchaeus, deeply affected and changed. What was it that brought him out of himself and his self-concern? (He had up to this time also been mocking Christ and thinking of himself.) It is the same thing that alone can change a person from fatal self-preoccupation into being a person of love for others. It is seeing the saving, other person focussed love of God in Christ. It is meeting God who stands outside Himself for us that changes us to stand outside of ourselves for Him and for others.

Paul tells us that love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Love flows deep and wide in us by the Spirit's working of the gospel in our lives. The most amazing things start to happen: rather than hating our enemies and wanting their destruction, we begin to love them, to pray for them, to bless them and to do them good. We want good for them. We ourselves would suffer for their good. In fact, if death were needed, something in us—the love of God!—moves us to accept this. “This is how we know what love is—Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.”

Of course, there is enough of the presence of sin in us for this to be something that is contradicted. But as we pray to the Lord to fill us with His Spirit, and to keep us from all sin, the Spirit shows us that the way of true joy and freedom is in the consideration of others ahead of ourselves. We delight to follow him, who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.