

BCC2: RIGHTEOUSNESS

Ephesians 5:8-20, Matthew 5:17-20 [MW20-06]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 09 February 2020

If someone asked you to define “righteousness”

- and in recognition that it is so hard to define said they would give you \$50 would you, could you, do it?
- what about if they offered \$1000 would that make any difference?
- now I haven't got any monetary incentives but I am wondering if anyone could have a crack at defining “righteousness” (space for answers ... and 'rewards')

“Righteousness” - it's hard enough just to say what it is, let alone put into practice!

- I like this working definition from Bible Scholar John Stott:
living a life that is worthy of our calling and fitting to our character as God's new society
- that seems straight forward and clear ... are you able to do that okay? hands up if on the other hand you think that it might be rather difficult to do?
- thank goodness we don't have to do it on our own we have the Holy Spirit to help us!

Our first reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, 5:8-20, is all good

- however this morning I would like us to concentrate, on verse 15 the first seven words, in the New Revised Standard Version:
Be very careful, then, how you live
- Be very careful, then, how you live that for me is “righteousness” that for me is what it all rests on, what is at the heart of everything
- “righteousness” is being very careful how you live

So I thought I'd do something different and give you the “homework” at the beginning

- I would like you, and I promise to do it too, to consider and respond to this: are you being careful how you live?

It's sort of an aside, but it goes along with all this:

- people are watching us ... make no mistake, people are watching us now some, for sure, are watching for when we fail, act like hypocrites go wrong or off the rails, so they can dismiss us and our faith
- others watch us because they are mildly curious and wonder, does Jesus maybe have something to offer?
- and others watch because they are actually looking for guidance in how to negotiate the treacherous waters of life in the 21st century
- it is ultimately a matter of life and death other people's fate may rest on how they observe us living
- a scary thought? challenging? huge responsibility? fortunately Paul gives us some pointers about how to live ...

The first one is in verse 16:

- *making the most of every opportunity*
make the most of every opportunity, make every minute count

Is that a challenge, prod, barb or what!?

- look at what you are doing every hour, every day, every week
are you putting your time and energy to good use, to the best purpose???
- a sharp reminder that the life of a Christian is not just about avoiding temptation
about not doing anything bad, just generally trucking along
- the life of a Christian is active, actively doing good
bringing light into people's lives, in the household, in the workplace, at school,
in the neighbourhood, in the community

The old Book of Common Prayer kind of picked this up in the General Confession

- some of you might be rather familiar with these words:
we have left undone those things which we ought to have done
- or in light of Ephesians 5:16
we have not made the most of our opportunities to live as God's people
- this is not so we can hit ourselves on the head and say 'woe is me'
rather it is an encouragement to keep our eyes open, be aware
seek out opportunities to be salt and light
- to ask ourselves how and where and with whom can we do that???

Perhaps this gives us an insight:

An ambitious young man asked an experienced salesman for the secret of his success in selling. The salesman said, "There's no great secret, you just have to jump at every opportunity that comes along." The young man replied, "But how can I tell when an opportunity is coming?" The salesman responded, "You can't. You have to keep jumping."

Verse 18 tells us: *Do not get drunk on wine ...*

- good advice, especially when you wake up the morning after
however as I thought about it, and remembered how people are watching us
and how we are supposed to take the lead, showing God's kingdom here and now
- perhaps we are being directed to model good and healthy ways of celebrating
of having a party, letting our hair down, enjoying the good things of life
- remember Jesus loved a good party as much as anyone
think of that wedding in Cana
only at his "parties" everyone had a good time and no one got hurt
- we are to be conscious of demonstrating "celebrating" in a way that brings life

Like this incident I read about:

A woman in a convalescent home was given a party to celebrate her one hundredth birthday. Her pastor came to offer his congratulations. Later the pastor said, "Her mind was keen and alert. When I arrived, she was completely caught up in the excitement of the birthday party." A reporter had come to interview her. And when he asked that high-spirited, one-hundred-year-old woman, 'Do you have any children?' she replied without hesitation, 'Not yet!'

Verse 19 says: *Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit
Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord ...*

- kind of sounds like a really good church service!
however it made me think even wider than that:
how do we as the body of Christ, the people of God in this place
speak to each other and relate to each other?
- are we always building each other up? sharing words and acts of encouragement?
when we have an issue with someone do we talk to them about it, reasonably?
when treated unfairly do we forgive and get on with life?

The sobering thought is this is just with people who are “us”

- part of our group, people who we know
if we can't treat each other well, what hope is there for the world!
- people looked at the followers of Jesus, the church, in Paul's day and said, “wow, see how they love one another”
it made an impact on those watching then, it can do so now
- what an impact we can make on those who are not “us”
on people outside our church, outside the church
by how we speak to them and relate to them

Here's something for us to be inspired by:

An anthropologist prospected a game to some children in an African tribe. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree, and told the children that whoever got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run, they all took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When the anthropologist asked the children why they had run like that, as one of them could have had all the fruits for themselves, they said: “Ubuntu – how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?” “Ubuntu” in the Xhosa culture means 'I am because we are'.

The final verse of our reading from Ephesians talks about

- *always giving thanks to God the Father for everything*
which seems to me to be about our attitude to life
- basically the choice seems to be between being thankful, grateful, content and complaining that things are not right, something is missing, always niggling

I think in Ephesians 5:20 Paul is encouraging us to have a positive attitude to life

- sure things may not always work out as we hope, and may even go horribly wrong yet God is always with us, and his Spirit gives comfort and encouragement
- how followers of Jesus react when things go badly, respond to “bad news” is a great testimony to the faith which we profess
and can also be something that brings life to those who are watching us

These verses I have highlighted seem to me to help us in “being careful how we live”

- Jesus' words in our gospel also highlight this
it's only a short reading, four verses, but one of those verses really packs a punch, in fact it stopped me in my reading
- you know how Jesus is usually scathing in his references to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law?
well here he holds them up as an example!!!
- Matthew 5:20 says:
You must obey God's commands better than the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law obey them
- this alerts us that Jesus is making a vitally important point
a point of life and death importance

There are commands that we are to obey, no ifs or buts or maybes

- yes “obey”, I know it's not a word liked much these days
“obey”! there is no option here for 'interpreting the scriptures'
or being 'guided' by the Spirit
- for followers of Jesus there are some hard and fast rules
there are indeed some things to which there is no exception

Jesus came to fulfill, or complete 'the Law'

- the Ten Commandments still apply in their full force and Jesus 'completes' this by saying:
Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself

It is never going to be okay to covet your neighbour's ox

- it is always wrong to take advantage of someone or ignore another's need
- God has standards for all people and expectations of us and this is a good thing, because no matter how they are worded whether it's "do this" or "don't do that"
- these commands and expectations help us in being careful how we live

For me, in light of reading Paul's words in the Letter to the Ephesians

- "righteousness" is linked to seven words: *be very careful, then, how you live*
John Stott wrote:
We all take care over the things which seem to us to matter ...
our job, our education, our home and family, our hobbies, our appearance.
So as Christians we must be watchful over our Christian life.

Earlier I asked you (and me), to take away with you and consider this:

- are you being careful how you live?
Ephesians 5, verses 16, 18, 19 and 20 give a good place to start
- I invite you to consider very carefully and honestly and come up with one thing you will make sure you do to take care of your Christian life

[Time for silent reflection ... "Amen"]