Seeing Behind the Mask
Luke 6:37-45

So we're in the Sermon on mount. Jesus is addressing this great crowd and he's been spelling out the counter-cultural nature of his kingdom. He has turned upside down what we think a blessed life looks like – it doesn't consist in money, comfort, power or popularity - and, knowing that there are going to be people who turn against the disciples because they are his disciples, Jesus says 'and in response you are to love them.'

And then we get to this morning's passage. And we're going to see how Jesus moves from the issue of how we see and treat others, to the necessity of taking a good look at our own hearts.

Judging Judgmentalism
Having told the disciples that they are to love their enemies, and be merciful to others because God has been merciful to them he says in v37 'Judge not, and you will not be judged.' Which has got to be one of the best known – and most hopelessly interpreted verses in the whole bible. Because you can point something out to someone, you can suggest that their behavior isn't matching up to what it should be, or is at odds with what it means to be a Christian and the retort is: 'are you judging me?' 'You're not allowed to judge'. Which is kind of funny, because saying 'o you're so judgmental, who do you think you are to judge me?' is of course judgmental in its own right, isn't it? And you get people criticizing others for being judgmental, when the very nature of the criticism is judgmental: 'o those judgmental Christians'.

So what does Jesus means here? Because he can't mean it's always wrong to come to a judgment on something or someone else – Jesus does it himself – he takes on the Pharisees, he calls them hypocrites and snakes and blind guides, and you can't do that without making a judgment of someone else; and later the apostles take on false teachers, they call them wolves, and they tackle people's wrong behavior in the churches, and to do that you have to come to some sort of judgment about a person; and they exhort pastors and elders to contend for the faith and resist false teaching and false teachers, and you can't do that without making a decision, coming to a judgment about what's right or wrong. And so if it's impossible to be a responsible Christian without forming judgments on certain issues, what does Jesus mean here when he says 'judge not'?

Well, I think the order is telling. Jesus says, 'judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned.' You make a judgment about someone and you condemn them. And instead Jesus says 'don't condemn, forgive.'

You see he's not talking about making no judgments, full-stop, he's not talking about not exercising discernment over issues or people. Jesus is talking about an attitude of heart that is *always* judging others, always picking holes, always criticizing others and is always condemning them. And if you've never met someone like this you probably just haven't got out enough. Because the tragedy is we can all be like this – tut-tutting about this person and that person, finding fault with others and in our hearts condemning them.

And instead of that kind of attitude Jesus calls those who are a part of his kingdom to have a generosity of spirit towards others, that though you may correctly discern issues that are wrong, you choose to love that person and forgive them. But that doesn't mean things aren't wrong. It doesn't mean that they are just let off the hook and we pretend nothing's wrong or nothing's happened. No. But instead of a condemning attitude it seeks their restoration, and when this wrong had been personally directed against you, in place of condemning someone and holding this thing against them, you forgive them, Jesus says.

Now, forgiving someone who has hurt you doesn't mean that what they did to you doesn't matter, it doesn't excuse their sin, it doesn't make light of it. In fact when you choose to forgive someone – maybe a family member, or a colleague – you are making a right kind of judgment – what they did was wrong, but rather than hold this against them, it lets them go. It chooses not to give bitterness any ground to grow in. When you forgive someone it frees them, but it also frees you.

And instead of a judgmental, condemning attitude to others, Jesus calls us to this generosity of spirit: v38: 'give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap.'

Now I'm sure you've heard that applied to financial giving – you give and God will give back to you, and I think that's right as far as it goes, but this principle goes much further than just money. Jesus says this in this context of being judgmental and condemning, or being forgiving. And what he's saying is that those in His kingdom are going to be marked by an attitude to others that is gracious and generous, that gives – financial, yes, but also giving at the level of the heart. Of wanting the best for others and thinking the best of others. And the stunning thing is Jesus says if you are like that to others, the same will come back to you: don't judge and you won't be judged, don't condemn and you won't be condemned, forgive and you'll be forgiven, give and you'll receive.

Now what does he mean by that? Does he mean others will treat us that way, or does he have God in mind? I think it's both. Put simply, what goes around comes around. If you are forever being critical of others you'll find that others are pretty critical of you, but if you cultivate an attitude of grace and generosity of spirit to others, you'll find the same coming back to you. But there's a second level here as well. And that is that God is gracious to those who are gracious, and He resists those who aren't. He blesses the generous and He withholds from the miserly. In 1 Peter 3:7 Peter has a word of warning to all husbands. He tells the husbands 'live with your wives in an understanding way' – be gracious towards her, be generous towards her, show her honour, he says and then he says 'so that your prayers may not be hindered.' You see God is a generous, giving, kind, forgiving God, and he blesses where he sees those characteristics flourishing and he withholds blessing – he turns away from the prayers of husbands - where he sees the opposite happening.

And to demonstrate this concept of getting a return on how you think of and treat others, Jesus uses this picture of when the people would go and buy grain:

they'd sit down at the grain merchant's with their bucket between their legs, and the grain merchant would fill their bucket with grain, but of course even though its filled to the top with grain, lots of that bucket is still air. ¾ grain, ¼ air. And Jesus says God won't just fill your bucket, in response to you being generous to others, God will fill it and then press down the grain and fill it again, and then he will shake the grain down some more and fill it again and then he'll make some holes in the top and fill it again, and he'll go on filling it until the grain makes a mound on the top and starts spilling over into your lap.

So don't be mean spirited or judgmental or condemning to others Jesus says, be generous, and you will find God being generous to you.

But here lies the problem. You see just as loving our enemies doesn't come naturally to us, generosity of spirit doesn't either. In fact it's a whole lot easier to be judgmental and condemning than to forgive. It's a whole lot easier to look out for number one than to have an attitude that gives and wants the best for others. And that should concern us, because as Jesus says in v43-44, 'no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit' and then he says in v45 'for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.' In other words the criticism and condemning of others that comes out of our mouths, the self-centredness that wants to keep rather than give, says a lot about the state of our hearts.

And so Jesus moves our attention from how we think of and speak of and treat others, to *why* we respond the way we do.

Lifting the mask

In v42, when Jesus is describing the kind of person who is quick to find fault with others but doesn't recognize his own faults, he calls such a person a hypocrite. Now that's a pejorative kind of word, isn't it? None of us want to be called a hypocrite. But ask yourself, what is a hypocrite – what does Jesus mean by that? Well, a hypocrite was the name given to an actor, a play actor. And these actors would wear masks, the kind of masks used as theatre symbols today – happy face, sad face - pretending to be someone else, pretending to be someone he wasn't, concealing his real self behind a mask. Now actors today don't wear masks, but with a really good actor you forget they're just playing a part, you believe they really are the character they're playing. You're taken in by their performance.

Last weekend Su and the girls and I re-watched the video of the drama we put on for the Discover Children's day here at church – Snakes Alive. And two of the characters were played by Mark Screeton and myself, and the acting was painful to watch. Because to all intents and purposes, despite a great script, it was Mark Screeton wearing a baseball cap back to front and Martin Slack wearing a false beard. We were fooling no-one. But a real actor, you believe the character, you believe the mask, you forget there is someone else behind it. And that's a hypocrite.

So why does Jesus use that as a picture of the person who finds faults with others? It's because there is this great danger that you and I present one image to the world, one public image, but underneath, behind the mask we are something else. Now you can do that knowing that's what you're doing, and you've got some insight, but worse still is to do that without realizing that's what you're doing.

And that's what Jesus is getting at with the illustration of the speck of dust in someone else's eye and the plank in our own. V41: 'Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but *do not notice* the log that is in your own eye?' You see, we can be so keen-sighted about other's faults and what's wrong with other people, like your husband or wife, or friends or colleagues, or even wider in the community out there, but we are oblivious to the fact, we don't even notice, that there is something seriously wrong with our own hearts.

Now Jesus knew all about wood: Joseph his adoptive father was a carpenter, so no doubt he knew what it was to get sawdust in the eye, this tiny speck that drives you crazy. But Jesus says 'yes but in comparison you've got a log, a tree-trunk of wood in yours'. And the word Jesus uses there means the loadbearing beam on a house. You see those buildings being built and the roof isn't on yet, just the beams, well, Jesus is saying we can be so concerned about how wrong someone else is, and all the time we have one of these massive beams in our eye, and we don't even realize it.

Now the difference in size between a speck of sawdust and a load-bearing beam is so great that Jesus can't mean ' hey you condemn someone else for this little sin but your sin is a million times worse.' No – the plank, this beam is more than just our individual sins, Jesus is talking here of our heart problem, we can be so quick to condemn others, it can even make us feel better about ourselves, and yet we don't even recognize there is something seriously wrong with our own hearts. We're not just wearing a mask for others, we even manage to convince ourselves.

And Jesus says before we can even begin to be the kind of person who can lovingly, graciously, kindly help others deal with their issues, and have them accept our help, we've got to recognize and deal with this problem of sin in our own hearts: v42: 'first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.'

But how can we possibly do that? If we've got this great beam, this log, this tree trunk obscuring our vision, affecting our judgment, how can we even begin to deal with the underlying issue of our heart? How can we – instead of wearing a mask, and being hypocrites, become people of integrity, who see what the issues with our own hearts are, and instead of bringing forth bad fruit bring forth good, who bring good treasure up out of their hearts instead of evil, who forgive and give rather than condemn and judge. How can we do that?

Nailing the Problem

Well Jesus gives us two pointers here as to how this issue of our heart is going to be dealt with.

The first one is Repentance. What Jesus is saying here is that you've got to take a long hard look at yourself, and realize you've got a problem: there's a log in your eye. This bad fruit that grows on the tree is because there's something wrong with the tree, Jesus says, there's something wrong with our hearts. So we have to recognize that the mask of the 'I've-got-it-together, sorted, middle-class, respectable me' is not the real me. But recognition alone isn't enough – Jesus says 'take the log out of your eye.' And that's repentance. It's deciding things aren't right and coming to God in repentance. This isn't about self-help and being a better you, it's about turning to Jesus.

And that's the second pointer Jesus gives us here – it matters who you turn to. V39: 'Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.' So Jesus is saying, you've got to choose your teacher wisely. Now, why does Jesus throw that line in, what has talk about teachers got to do with our attitudes to others telling us about the state of our own hearts?

Well, we don't really think about teachers or rabbis like this now, but back then, if you followed a rabbi, if you entered the equivalent of his training school, you'd come out the other end like that rabbi. You'd think like him, behave like him, respond like him, see the world like him. And if you pick the wrong person to be your guide in life, if you realize there's this deep seated underlying issue with your heart and you turn to the wrong person as your life guide, you're going to end up in a hole, in a worse state than you were in before: can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?

Some of you will have heard this story before, but a few years ago we spent a week walking in the Pyrenees. And we were taking this footpath along a mountain-side that began to get narrower and narrower and on one side was the cliff face, with rocks dripping water overhead, and on the other side was this sheer drop. And Katie our youngest was only about 4 and I was beginning to think, how are we going to get out of this one safely. But our problems were nothing in comparison to the young couple we bumped into round the next corner. They were on the same path, except the young lady was frozen by fear, and the husband - to try and coax her along the path - had blindfolded her with her a scarf. Narrow path, rocks overhead, sheer drop to the side. Now just imagine their chances of getting down that mountain safely if they were both blindfolded.

And Jesus is saying, 'look – you're blind', we are blinded by this log in our eye, 'so don't entrust yourself to a blind guide, don't entrust yourself to someone who can't see the real nature of the problem any better than you can'. To the crowd he's saying; don't entrust yourself to the Pharisees – follow them and you'll become just as negative and critical and judgmental and religious and self-righteous as them. To us he's saying don't entrust yourself to the thousands of different teachers who try and tell you this or that is the answer.

So who should we turn to? Where can we turn to find the grace that will take our hearts and transform them? Where can we go to find a solution to this log, this problem of sin in our hearts?

Well, of course Jesus does more than just talk about our problem, he does more than just provide a good example for us to follow and become like. When Jesus was crucified and nailed to the wood of the cross, when he was nailed to this load-bearing beam, he bore in his body the full weight of our beam, the full weight of our sin. He died on the cross to free us both from the penalty and the effects of our sinful hearts. And as we put our trust in Him and receive His grace and His love for us who don't deserve it, that transforms our hearts and our heart attitudes to all these others who don't deserve it either.

And when you realize that God has been merciful to you a sinner, with his Son dying on the beam of your sin, you find your heart warming with mercy to those who need it. The grace of God in Christ not only transforms your standing before God, it not only means you don't have anything to pretend about any more – so the play-actor's mask can drop, it also transforms how you see others: and instead of judgmentalism and condemnation, you can find grace and mercy and forgiveness for those who need it, because you know God has been gracious and merciful to you.