The Power, the Service and the Cost of Love
Matthew 5:6-12

We're looking at the Sermon on the Mount. And last week we saw how, from the great crowds that followed Jesus, some detached themselves from the crowd, responded to Jesus' call to repent, and came to him. And it was to them that Jesus taught this message. And it begins with what are called the Beatitudes – because each one begins with the word 'blessed'. But as we saw with the first three last week, the way Jesus understands what it means to be blessed is very different from the way the world sees it.

And as we're going to see again this morning, to be a follower of Jesus inevitably means you're going to be different from the crowd. It means you're going to live a changed, a countercultural life.

Read Matthew 5:6-12

The Power of Love
And love does have a certain power doesn't it? And, I'm not talking about the power of love to make you go all goey as you look into the eyes of your beloved, but about the power of what you love to direct your life. You see, listen to what Jesus says in v6, "Blessed are those who *hunger* and *thirst* for righteousness."

Now words can be cheap, and I can see a treacle tart and think, 'Hmm, my favourite, I'm suddenly feeling hungry' or you're in the office and the clock drags itself past ten-thirty and like Winnie-the-Pooh you think, 'I'm feeling a little 11 o'clock-ish'. But when Jesus uses the words hunger and thirst, he's using those words with all their force: real hunger and real thirst. And those are incredibly strong bodily desires. In fact, thirst, the kind of thirst you'll die from if you don't get water, is said to be the strongest of all physiological desires. You'll do *anything* to get water.

But Jesus isn't talking about physiological needs or wants is he? He's talking about what your heart wants – what your heart will do anything to get. You see, when you say that someone is hungry for something, like hungry for revenge; or hungry for success, you mean that this is what is driving them. You mean that this desire for revenge, or this longing for success, controls them in some way, and whether or not they know it, it determines the decisions they make in life, or how they see others, or what they do or don't do.

And if you use the language of the heart, you'd say this is what they *love* most. This is what has their heart. They want this at an ultimate level. And hungering and thirsting is exactly that, it's about what you most want, and what you most love.

And that has the power to pull you in one direction or another. Because your loves do – they determine the decisions you make, the time you spend, what you do or don't do in each area of your life. And if you love material possessions, or your leisure time, or sport, that love will pull you in certain directions and you'll structure your life around that. It's the power of love.

The question is, is your love properly directed?

In his book, You Are What You Love, the American philosopher James KA Smith writes, 'What do you want? That's the question. It is the first, last, and most fundamental question of Christian discipleship…. [When calling his disciples, Jesus doesn't ask], 'what do you know?' He doesn't even ask, 'what do you believe?' He asks, what do you want?' This is the most incisive, piercing question Jesus can ask of us precisely because we *are* what we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behaviour flow.'

You see Jesus knows that at the heart of what it means to be his disciple is what you will hunger and thirst for. To be a Christian means for your loves and longings and life to come into line with his, so that you love what God loves, and want what God wants, and desire what God desires.

But it's not just desires for your own life, is it? Each of us, even if we would struggle to articulate it, has a vision for how we think others' people's lives would best thrive and what a good and happy life for others would look like. So, in Bible language, everyone has a vision for the kingdom. It's just that everyone is looking for a different kind of kingdom.

If you've seen Les Miserables, you'll remember Cosette, as a girl, unloved and abused by Thenardier the innkeeper and his wife, singing her song 'Castle on a Cloud': And the first verse goes, 'There is a castle on a cloud/I like to go there in my sleep/Aren't any floors for me to sweep/Not in my castle on a cloud.' That's the place of her dreams - her vision of what she most wants for herself – no more floors to sweep. But listen to how the song ends: 'I know a place where no one's lost/I know a place where no one cries/Crying at all is not allowed/Not in my castle on a cloud.' And that's her dream world, her vision of life for others, what she most wants for them – no more lostness, no more crying. And we all have a castle on a cloud, a vision of a kingdom, of what life should look like for us and for others.

The question is, what version of the kingdom are you longing for? What are the loves of your heart, the things you most want, that set the direction and course of your life?

Well, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*." And in the Bible that word righteousness has three meanings. Firstly, it means to be in right standing with God. It's what we call *justification* – and God declaring us not guilty. Secondly, there is a righteousness of character and conduct – an inner righteousness of heart, that spills out in righteous living, that brings God pleasure. But thirdly, the Bible also talks of a social righteousness: a righteousness of how the poor, and the foreigner, and the widow and the orphan are treated. A righteousness of justice under the law, and integrity in business, and deliverance from oppression.

And Jesus is saying that those who follow him will hunger and thirst for this righteousness of God. To be made right with him; to have an inner, humble, righteousness of heart, that shows itself in a righteousness of life; and a longing

for the kind of society that pleases and honours God. You see, if you remember the second Beatitude Jesus said, 'Blessed are those who mourn' – who mourn over sin and brokenness in their lives and others'. But a disciple of Jesus don't stop at mourning. You long for change, you hunger and thirst for it – for yourself and for others. And that longing for righteousness has the power to direct your life into the ways of God.

And then, Jesus says, that hunger will ultimately leave you satisfied. You see, the danger comes when you thirst after substitutes, thinking something else will satisfy you. And for a while it will. But ultimately, you end up dissatisfied, looking for the next thing, or the next relationship, or the next job – because this thing you thought was it can't bear the load of your expectations, and your heart become restless again. Listen to how CS Lewis put it: "It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

But when you hunger and thirst after righteousness, in all its forms, for yourself, and for others, you're blessed Jesus says, because you will be satisfied, you will be pleased, and infinite joy will be yours. And the reason he can say that is because one day you *will be* perfectly conformed to his image - the only truly Righteous one, and the inner righteousness you long for will be complete; *and* the day will come when all injustice and oppression will be vanquished and the kingdom will come in all its fullness. As Peter says, there will be a 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells' (2 Peter 3:13).

But if what you love has the power to channel and direct your life, then hungering and thirsting after righteousness is going to result in a certain kind of life.

The Service of Love

Look at the fifth Beatitude, v7, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.'

Now the way of the world is often not the way of mercy, is it? Instead, we like nothing better than to put people on a pedestal, and then knock them off again. And we enjoy the fall of someone who was once tall. And some sections of the media thrive on the cult of celebrity at the very same time as delighting in the downfall of celebrities. And in the world, revenge tastes better than forgiveness; and walking on the fallen is more fun than restoring them; and criticising someone is easier than speaking well of them.

But Jesus says it's not the vengeful, or the critical, or the one who picks holes in others who is blessed, but the merciful – those who forgive those who sin against them, and have compassion on the fallen and the broken. And the reason they're blessed, Jesus says, is that they too will receive mercy.

And at one level you know how this works in life, don't you. What goes around comes around, and the way you treat others is often the way you find others treating you. Speak well of others at work, care for your colleagues, and you'll find that coming back to you. But stab them in the back and you'd better watch yours. But there's another level Jesus is talking about: the level of ultimate mercy. That on the last day when we stand before God – when we should all stand condemned, those who have shown mercy will receive it.

Now why? Why the link between showing it and receiving it? Because if you show mercy to others, it's a pretty good indication that you know Jesus has shown mercy to you. Or to put it negatively, you can't claim to be Jesus disciple and received his mercy for yourself, and then not show it to others. But when you know that though you don't deserve it, Christ died for you, that you might be forgiven, you'll find it within you to forgive. And you can welcome others with grace, because Christ welcomed you. And you can lift up the fallen because Christ lifted you up. In short, you can be merciful, because you've experienced the truth that God is merciful.

So, when you hunger and thirst for more of God, the God of mercy, and his righteousness, you'll have a deep resource of mercy for others.

But then look at the next one. Verse 8, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' Now the writer to the Hebrews says, 'Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.' And to enter God's presence you have to be holy. The problem is, our hearts aren't. Jesus says that 'out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality' (Matt 15:19) and so on. So it's not that we're generally good people, and we just get caught off-guard by sin - rather it's our hearts that are the problem, and we love stuff and want stuff we shouldn't.

But when you've repented of your sin and come to Jesus, and you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you know that Christ has brought about a fundamental change in your heart. You know you've been converted. And now, Jesus says, you'll pursue heart purity.

But what is that? Does it simply mean that the pure in heart won't give ground for lust or pride or anger to grow in? Sure it does. But Jesus means something more as well. You see, to be pure in heart means to have an undivided heart. It means that your commitment to Jesus is a single-minded one. It means to love God will all your heart and soul and mind and strength. But here's the thing: when you love God with all your heart, you're also going to love your neighbour as yourself. You cannot love God and hate your fellow man. And so the man or the woman who is pure in heart won't use others, or promote themselves at the expense of others, or see others as expendable. Instead in your single-minded desire for God's kingdom to come, and your love for righteousness in all its forms, you'll work and serve and live for the good of others.

And Jesus says, those who display that kind of heart purity are blessed, because they'll see God. So, the fight against porn, or bitterness, or self-promotion, or

godless ambition, will be worth it, because now, in this life, your relationship with God will deepen, as with the eyes of faith you behold God in ever more of his beauty; but also, in the life to come, you'll see him as he really is, as you stand in the presence of the only truly pure one.

But if to be pure in heart is more than just personal holiness, but also has this other person dimension, then those who love righteousness are going to care deeply about relationships: especially in the face of relationship breakdown.

Listen to the next Beatitude. Verse 9, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.' Now in 1938 Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, returned from meeting Hitler and declared 'Peace in our time.' The tragedy, of course, is that there is a difference between appeasement and peace. An appeaser caves in before evil, and tries to make peace with sin, whilst a peacemaker overcomes evil with good. And Jesus is saying that those who long for righteousness are going to be, not just peace*ful*, but peace*makers* – they are going to do all they can to reconcile people to God, through the gospel of peace, and bring people together where relationships have fractured.

In other words, Jesus' disciples don't spread division. But just think how revolutionary that must have sounded, in a culture where you had this group of revolutionaries, called the Zealots, dedicated to fomenting political and violent division.

But it's peacemakers, Jesus says, not zealots, who are blessed – because 'they shall be called sons of God.' Now, if you have kids, or even if you haven't, you know how this works. Because you find your children first imitating you and then resembling you. In fact Naomi, my eldest, says that all her bad qualities come from me. But when God sees you being a peacemaker he says, that's my boy, that's my girl. Why? Because whilst Satan is a troublemaker, God is the ultimate peacemaker. And the cross of Christ is the ultimate place of peace-making. Because it's there that the Prince of Peace, *the* Son of God, didn't appease sin, but defeated it, and in the process reconciled us to God and to each other. And so, when you *make* peace, and bring the shalom of God, that deep inner sense of wellbeing – to horizontal relationships, but also ultimately to the vertical relationship between others and God, you are reflecting the character of your heavenly Father. And when you do that, you're blessed.

But, if the cross tells us that sin is costly, it also reminds us that peace-making is too. And Jesus said that he didn't come to bring peace but a sword, because whenever you hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, and you love that more than the world and its ways, conflict is inevitable. Because not everyone is going to welcome the gospel of peace.

The Cost of Love

Look at verse 10, the last Beatitude: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of God.' Now I can almost guarantee that you don't look at those who are persecuted for their Christian faith and think, they are so blessed! We think to be blessed is to be popular, don't

we, and we count Facebook friends and Twitter followers. And we think the blessed are those who are influential and have people hanging on their words, and following their tips. And Jesus says, 'woe to you, when all people speak well of you' (Luke 6:26). And we think, no, I want everyone to speak well of me.

But, as counterintuitive as it seems, to love God with all your heart and to thirst after his righteousness, and to love your neighbour as yourself, does not mean that everyone will love you or like you. Rather, to live like that you will inevitably be distinctive – there will be something conspicuously different about your life – in a way that neither self-righteous religion or the world appreciates. And Jesus says that facing opposition will be the norm for his disciples – not being loved by all.

Now the hard truth, is you can face opposition for reasons other than righteousness' sake. You might just be being obnoxious, or lacking grace or social skills. In v11 Jesus says you're blessed when other think or speak or act against you *falsely* – not when you deserve it! And so when you do face opposition take a moment to reflect on why it's coming your way and is it genuinely on Jesus' account. But ultimately, as Peter says in 1 Peter 4, you shouldn't consider it strange if you do face trouble for your faith. Now it might have been strange in the West in the past, in the context of Christendom. But those days are long gone. Instead you and I should expect it, because you're not above your master.

And Jesus was opposed and spoken against, and as you identify with him, even though you seek to show mercy as he did, even though you seek to be a peacemaker, as he was, just like him, not everyone will like you. But it is by identifying with him that true joy comes. You see, in all its various forms, persecution tries to rob you: low grade stuff tries to undermine your reputation or your standing, either at work or among your peers. As it gets worse it seeks to rob you or your dignity, or possessions, or rights, or even of life. And our brothers and sisters in other countries face this as a daily reality. But in Christ you have the ultimate possession that no one can rob you of. And Jesus says you are can rejoice and be glad in the face of opposition, because, v12, "your reward is great in heaven."

So listen, if you love righteousness, if you hunger and thirst after God and his righteousness, you probably won't get your reward on earth, but Jesus says you'll be blessed, because the kingdom of heaven is yours. And when you love and value God above everything else, anything else as a reward would be loss. But to have the kingdom is to have everything.