

“Solid Living”

Matthew 5:31-48; John 18:33-38

Shouldn't we all want to live in the truth, in reality?

We used to speak differently. We used phrases like “Here’s how I see it,” or “My perspective is x,” or “Here’s how I think it is . . .” But in recent years, we hear talk of “my truth” or “your truth,” as if there is no objective reality, no truth outside ourselves and our perceptions. But there is . . . and we all know there is. We may not grasp it

well. We may make different claims about the nature of that objective reality . . . but the truth is still out there. And we have to do all we can to stand on the truth about reality. Otherwise, we risk spinning outward into more and more delusion, going further and further from God and his creation. As Martin Luther put it, “Peace if possible, truth at all costs.” A word from Michael Hannon on this:

Eventually, “my truth” and “your truth” are seen for what they really mean: No truth. And a culture without any grasp of truth is a culture without any connection to reality, a culture thus doomed to die. We can still avoid demise, but to do so, we need a hefty dose of metaphysics, a serious consideration of truth to serve as the guiding principle of our civilization.¹

The Good News about Jesus Christ is truth, objective truth. He was resurrected; it happened. These are our truth claims and on them we must stand, without shirking or falling into ambiguity or wordgames. Solid living has to begin on solid ground.

The Sermon on the Mount is all about living on solid ground, i.e., living now in the kingdom of God. So let’s take a closer look at one of the larger challenges that Jesus sets forth in the sermon: turning the other cheek!

The other cheek?

Rather than coming to the Sermon on the Mount seeking to learn what it really means to live in God’s kingdom, we too often look for a way out of the kingdom’s demands. Jason Byasee writes:

The phrases of the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar and beautiful we can almost forget how demanding they are. “Turn the other cheek.” “Go the second mile.” “Love your enemies.” “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” How lovely, how close to home, how ... impossible. Love your enemies? Respond to the fist by opening yourself up to more fists? Pray for your persecutors? As if that’s not enough, be perfect. The final command is given as an afterthought: “Oh yes, and besides all that, be flawless.” Right.

It is no wonder Christians have developed elaborate strategies for avoiding these commands, impossible and offensive as they are. Some historians tell us that Jesus’ admonition to turn the other cheek is buried in historical obscurata: it was an offensive gesture to Jews in the ancient world to be slapped with the back of the right hand. Turning the other cheek makes it impossible to be so slapped again. Suddenly the command seems historically distant and irrelevant to us. If you bind the hands of the text that way, sit back and listen for the congregation to exhale: “Whew, I was hoping Jesus didn’t mean it.” How can we rub the edges off the command to lend to everyone who asks? To love enemies? To be perfect? Here is how Christians have done it: These are spiritual admonitions, directed at our



¹ From Hannon’s short post in First Things journal, “Peace if Possible, Truth at All Costs,” Sep 9, 2011

souls, not at the outward manifestations of our bodies, which may have to hoard stuff, bomb our enemies, and settle for being spiritual slackers.²

Rather than retaliation, Jesus calls us to forgiveness. But how do we really become ready-and-willing forgivers? Here's an exercise to try: Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out.

Truly Solid Living

Assuming we desire to, as Jesus put it, "strive first for the Kingdom of God," what does such a life look like? What does it really mean to live as Jesus has challenged us to live?

The Sermon on the Mount is a picture of a world turned upside-down. It was profoundly counter-cultural 2,000 years ago and it is no less so now. Jesus challenges us to surrender our anger, to pray for those who persecute us, to be faithful to our spouses in our thoughts as well as our actions. Does it not seem profoundly naïve to suggest that the meek (the gentle) will inherit the earth? When Jesus says "turn the other cheek," is it an invitation to be a doormat? We certainly don't have the space here to address all the questions that these teachings raise, but we don't really need to right now. What we do need to do is to see that Jesus' challenge is far more radical than we might think. It is about much more than being nice.

Jesus' Galilean listeners ached to hear a call for revolution, violent if need be. But Jesus quickly and firmly turned their world upside-down. They wanted vengeance on the Romans and Jesus instead taught them about forgiveness and mercy. If a Roman ordered a disciple to carry his pack one mile, the disciple was to carry it two. Jesus called them all to a new way of being God's people, or at least it was new to them. N. T. Wright gets it correct when he says that Jesus challenged Israel to be Israel. In the same way, it is a challenge to Christians to be Christians, even if being Christian means something radically different from what we thought, even if being Christian demands a price we thought we'd never be willing to pay.

Jesus cannot be tamed. He does not allow us to stay in our comfort zones, waiting for others to step forward. He calls for us all to rise to the challenge "I am the way, the truth, and the life" Jesus is the way to the kingdom, to truly solid living: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). There is no other way, no other path, only Jesus: "No one comes to the Father except through me" (also 14:6). Jesus is now unambiguously clear about his identity with the Father: "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him" (14:7). In other words, when the disciples have seen Jesus, they have seen God!

There's something very important to notice about exactly what Jesus says. It is not his way that he is talking about – he is the way. He isn't speaking here of living as he lived or loving as he loved – Jesus is the way. Just as Jesus is the gateway for the sheep (John 10), he is the path to this place we call heaven. Jesus is the way to God because he is the truth of God and the life of God.

For the last couple of centuries, Jesus' simple and profound statement, "I am the way No one comes to the Father except through me" has been endlessly controversial. How arrogant! How exclusive! How divisive! Yet, Jesus' claim and the early Christians' claims about him are made abundantly clear in John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." If this is truly the truth (back to that again!), how could one claim to know God and yet disown Jesus?

² Jason Byassee, "Theological Perspective on Matthew 5:38–48," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 380–382.

When we begin to talk about the Christian truth claims in comparison to other religions and belief systems, the questions always boil down to this: Who is Jesus?

In closing, I share with you a meditation on today's "I am" statement written more than five centuries ago by Thomas à Kempis:

Follow thou me, I am the way and the truth and the life.

Without the way there is no going;
without the truth there is no knowing;
without the life there is no living.

I am the way which thou must follow;
the truth which thou must believe;
the life for which thou must hope.

I am the inviolable way; the infallible truth; the never ending life.

I am the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated.

If thou remain in my way thou shalt know the truth,
and the truth shall make thee free,
and thou shalt lay hold on eternal life."

What do you desire?

We live as we desire to live. Even if we are burdened by bad choices we once made or by circumstances thrust upon us, the biblical view is that we live the sort of life that we wish to live. But there is a BIG problem here: though we are made in God's image, we do not naturally desire God nor the things of God. It is this lack of desire for God that underlies all the biblical talk about new hearts, new selves, new clothes, new creation, and the rest.

We sometimes use words such as "conversion" to describe this change of heart, this newly found desire for God. For without this rebirth, this renewal of our hearts, we will not live as God's kingdom people. We won't even want to. Paul understood that in establishing new churches, he was really running around founding colonies of a new human race – a race with hearts turned toward God!

Christians often put too much emphasis on the timing of this rebirth. In truth, most Christians couldn't tell you the moment of their rebirth. (John Wesley thought he could, but then six months later told his brother he wasn't so sure!) I know that I could not. But I do know that today, I desire God. I want to walk in God's way, to live today and every day in a manner that is pleasing to God . . . and I pray every day that God will hold me close and keep the flame of desire burning strong.

If we are to embrace Jesus' challenge, if we are to live as kingdom people, then we must desire it. Such desire cannot be found within us, it is a gift from God. It is a gift that we can pray for every day. Perhaps even the desire to pray for desire is a sign of our own rebirth.