

## Going Back to the Beginning

PETER:

Then after He had said these things, one of His disciples, who was late, because he had been making sandwiches, crept in and whispered to Bartholomew 'so what did I miss'?

And Bartholomew whispered back what had transpired, how the rich young ruler had approached Jesus and the question he had asked, and the answer that he had heard, and how he had gone away in sorrow, and Phillip, the disciple who was late, was amazed at these words.

And Phillip considered these matters in his heart with trepidation, because he happened to have some investments in a fish paste company and he wondered if he was supposed to have cashed those in and give the money to the poor.

And Judas Iscariot, who was bored and ready for lunch, looked around and saw that Phillip was perturbed and said 'cheer up, it may never happen'. And Phillip told him the question of his heart and Judas stroked his beard knowingly.

"When the Teacher said to sell everything and give the money to the poor, he was referring to property and goods and the like" explained Judas, who was known to be good at numbers. "If your investment has not matured, it would be silly to cash it in. Over the long haul, properly managed, an investment of this nature will be more beneficial to the poor because properly financed companies provide jobs for people, and you can tithe on the income. Cashing it in now would be like, oh I don't know, chopping down a tree just because it happens to have no fruit on it at the specific moment you are hungry."

And Phillip, whose head was spinning, withdrew for a time to ponder, and did not hear Judas inquiring with interest about who was managing his money these days.

Meanwhile Andrew, having heard these words, started to wonder about the boat and nets he had left behind to follow Jesus, and whispered to his brother Simon, who was called Peter, "Did you sell our boat and nets when we left to follow Jesus?"

And Simon said "no, were we supposed to? He never said we should sell our boat and nets. Were we supposed to sell them? How are we supposed to find a buyer in this economy?"

And Andrew said "I know, fishing's not what it used to be, although I hear there's good money to be made supplying fish paste to the Romans".

And Andrew leaned over to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, and carefully inquired if they had made arrangements to sell their fishing boat or not, and they all started to talk about the fish paste market and how Romans ate the weirdest things until they were shushed by Phillip, who trying to work out his tax write-off if he donated his shares to the Leper colony.

And Andrew muttered to himself, "well, if He wanted us to sell up then He would have said, wouldn't he? Besides, we're not rich. Fishing is all we know. Teach a man to stop fishing and what do you get? I mean, what kind of person spends their life praying for daily bread? "

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EZRA:

I started to want to preach when I read “the Irresistible Revolution”. It is very possible that it changed my life forever. Something in that book resonated in me, and made sense to me. I don’t think that I fully understood what it was trying to say, or what it was that really resonated with me. I just thought in social justice terms: this person is helping the poor, healing the wounded, and loving the unloved. I read this book somewhere in grade eight.

In school at this time we had this massive project where we pick a hero, get quotes from them, and then as a class take all the quotes and make a play that we perform in front of hundreds of people. Some of you might have been there. These heroes include Martin Luther King Jr., Julia Butterfly Hill, and Paul Watson.

Throughout all of this, I was incredibly inspired by these heroes, and the trouble that they have gone through to get this far. So I was inspired to change the world, completely and utterly, and to fix at least one of the moral problems facing the world. And then I read “the Irresistible Revolution” and here was this book, talking about this young man, who is faced with questions about how the church worked, and why doesn’t this practice work with what the Bible tells us, and is there more, and where do I fit with all of this, all of which are questions I was just barely beginning to recognize inside myself. I just gobbled it up.

As I was reading it, I can remember almost uncontrollably quoting the book, or telling people ways that things I read in the book should be used in our daily lives. I was unstoppable, I loved it so much. Then my mom slowly kind of pushed me into the thought that I should write a sermon. That got me here.

Now, as I was prepping for this, I started reading the book over again, but more aware of the book this time. I began to realise that one of the things that got me so interested in the book is that it asks this question, the big question: “what if Jesus actually meant what he said?”

He meant it when he said “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”. He meant it when he said: “you have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist evildoers, but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak also, and if anyone forces you to run one mile, go also the second mile, give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you”. He even meant it when he said to the Rich Young Ruler that to enter the kingdom of heaven: “sell all your possessions and give to the poor”. Imagine that. Take Jesus seriously for a second, and think, can you imagine selling all that you have and giving to the poor, becoming poor yourself and not living with any of the comforts that we have now? That is what he is calling us to do. But, as Rich Mullins said “that is why God created highlighters, so we can highlight the parts that we like and ignore the rest.”

PETER:

The question about what happens if we take Jesus seriously has changed my life. Some might say that it has ruined my life. Viewed from a certain perspective, I left behind home,

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family, friends, church, employment, education, and the security of citizenship and nation to follow Jesus. Viewed from another perspective, I dropped my responsibilities to seek a few years of exciting work with CPT at a time when there were no jobs for people with English Literature degrees. I roughed it at some protests, staffed some blockades, and now am settling down nicely into married urban employed life...

So to hear Jesus talk again about this hardest, final commandment, this good news for the rich that is so hard, sits uncomfortably with me. Have I done my utmost? Can I call myself a follower of Jesus if I pick and choose the easy parts of the teaching? Will Jesus call me as a follower if I hold back?

At university, I was challenged to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, not as metaphor or rhetoric about a future life, but as intended for the world in which He spoke them. This challenge came not from my church, but from the disaffected anarchists that criticised the system that I cherished so much, that I considered to be instituted by God for the protection of the weak and the bearing of the sword. Their analysis was different. They listened to the voices of the disenfranchised and dispossessed, and believed them. They heard all the people saying that the World System did not work for them, and the wild prophetic claim that another world is possible.

Most of you won't be able to read the quote on the T-shirt I have chosen for today's sermon, taken from the Apostle Paul's letters and updated slightly. (Read the quote)

In the secular activist culture where I found myself after hearing Jesus' words and taking them seriously, there was a strong macho culture that Paul might have approved of, since it spurred us all on to what the Greeks might have called excellence or virtue, what the Victorians might have called thrift and hard work, and what we might call burnout, risk, and over-extension.

I had grown up in the middle of Christian community, dozens of people around all the time, families sharing space, food, and lives, with all the ups and downs of what was a counter-cultural and somewhat suspicious lifestyle in rural England. But for many of my peer group, university was their first experience of being together with other people who shared their values.

Following Jesus to me meant building community and sharing life with my "unchurched" friends. Meanwhile on Sundays I followed Jesus in another way at church. The two lives did not have much to do with each other. In church I worked at salvation of the soul. As an activist I worked at saving the world. My comrades in one camp were strangers to the other camp.

But radical economics and alternative community building was hard. Peers start to get jobs, want to travel, or settle down in relationships, with houses, babies, respectability. While some of us are fleeing the world's values and the capitalist economy, we were being pursued and overtaken.

It is hard to stay uncomfortable. It is hard to continue to feel righteous and holy during community meetings and another week of lentils and rice while people you grew up with are living the dream...

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But no matter where you are in your life, if you flip open your Bible to this chapter and verse, Jesus is still saying the same thing. The challenge is still the same. It does not get easier to answer. But I have gotten a lot better at ignoring it. As Soren Kierkegaard says:

“The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world? Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church’s prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament.”

EZRA: the way I see it is you have to always be renewing your faith, and your life. Perpetual reformation. Of course I haven’t lived as long in society and don’t have all the experiences that some of you have, but I think that you always have to be re evaluating, and making yourself uncomfortable again, live with someone who has had worse living conditions than you, and is in need of your love. Live with the uncomfortable for so long and with so much love and commitment that the comfortable will become uncomfortable, and you cannot live any other way. So that, when you look back to your life, instead of wishing for that comfort you left, you wish to save everyone in the same situation, from where they are and how they live, and tell them about the way God works. I also understand that living like God wishes does not just mean living with the poor, it can mean many more things, such as in social situations, how to live out life the way Jesus lived, and to be the one that says “no, that isn’t right. You can’t say that.” I understand that that’s hard. Sometimes you just want to “go along to get along.” I know that I’ve done it. It’s hard not to do. But you just have to keep doing it, even if it means you get shunned, or people don’t trust your opinions anymore. And yet you still need to contradict people with great love and compassion.

Compassion is an interesting word. We seem to take it to mean sympathy, but the literal meaning of the word is ‘suffer with’. Empathy. Not sympathy. If your comrade is in pain, it hurts. If you are with someone in grief, you are grieved. If your friend is in sorrow, you weep with them.

The Bible calls for us to have compassion upon all. If you truly feel compassion for someone, you cannot help but love them, and try to help them. You cannot then turn your back on that person and say “we cannot help them. There is no point in trying.” It is simply impossible to walk away from such suffering, with compassion for those suffering. And we must remember, we are not called to be comfortable. We are called to help, to love, to speak up to serve, but not to be comfortable. We must speak the truth, speak the gospel. We must comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. If the comfortable are not angry at you at the end, you have not spoken the truth.

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PETER: The story of the persistent widow is a personal favourite of mine. Luke spoils it a bit with his tl;dr explanation of the meaning - to always pray and not lose heart, but we don't need to skip to the end, we can savour the details.

I see this woman as someone acquainted with sorrow and hardship, but also aware of her rights, her dignity, and her worth. She is a widow, but she knows a different life, a different way of being. She does not accept that her widowhood requires her to be humble and poor. She acts entitled - and even though the judge admits to himself that he does not care for her rights or God's opinion, she gets her dues and goes away satisfied. She refuses to live in his world, she refuses to operate by his values. She does not seek a stronger judge or a higher court. She makes it happen herself. Her weakness, her insignificance makes her no threat, no enemy for this judge to deal with, just an annoyance whose persistence overcomes his patience. Our prayers must overcome the indifference and cynicism of the world.

George Bernard Shaw - "Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world. Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves. All progress, therefore, depends on unreasonable people"

The persistence of this widow is powerful enough to change the world, the tiny simple world of this parable of Jesus. Our world is changed by our actions in response to Jesus's words and example. The rules are changed. But there is a cost.

"The first thing to be disrupted by our commitment to nonviolence will not be the system, but our own lives." - Jim Douglass

EZRA:

I love this idea of living as the Bible says, and as Jesus did. It makes total sense to me. The one problem is that I am personally working on my courage. That is the main part. Other reasons include I am not old enough and not ready, and how and when this can and happen, but the main thing is my courage. I'm scared. Understandably. Living this kind of thing is scary! It has gotten people harassed, abused, jailed, tortured, and killed. People hate this kind of thing. It scares them to death! But we have to keep going, no matter how hard it is. In the early church, the church seems to have grown the most when most persecuted. Love the most when most hated. So we just need to persevere, to keep going. To continue. To love our enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Disarm those who hate you with your love. I know I will try, with all of my heart to do this. I pray that you will too.