

The Word of Freedom

A Sermon on Matthew 23:1-12 and 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13 by Nathan Nettleton, 5 November 2023

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Message

We we allow God's word to work in us, it lifts the burden of oppressive teaching from us.

Sermon

How many of you have trouble getting rid of unnecessary stuff that's been given to you by other people? You know the sort of thing – the hideous vase given to you as 21st present by Aunt Gretel, or the kitsch painting of the ducks that your grandfather lovingly gave you when you made the mistake of saying you liked it in a misguided attempt to be nice to the old man.

They are the sort of gifts you can get stuck with either because, although you hate them, they do have a sentimental attachment to the people who gave them to you, or perhaps simply because you never know when the giver is going to come around and notice whether or not it's still on display. They are the sort of thing that can become a burden, cluttering up your living space and seemingly cluttering up your life, but boy, they're hard to get rid of.

There are bigger things than that though that can clutter up your life and become a burden, and Jesus addressed some of them in the gospel reading we heard read earlier. Maybe you didn't notice – it's an easy reading to mishear.

It's very easy on first hearing that passage from Matthew's gospel to think that it is an account of Jesus giving the Pharisees a big angry serve. "They lay heavy burdens on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues." It does sound like some things he has said directly to the Pharisees on occasions, but if you read this one again you'll notice that he's talking about them, but not to them.

In this story Jesus is addressing the crowds and his disciples. He's speaking not too the Pharisees, but about them and about the things they have given the people, things which have become a burden and have cluttered up their lives. And it makes a big difference when you reread it with that in mind. Suddenly it is not so much a heavy word of judgment and condemnation, it is a word of grace and freedom.

You see what Jesus is recognising here is that the things people say and the things people teach – especially people we've been taught to listen to and respect – their sayings and teachings can become like Aunt Gretel's vase, something heavy and ugly that clutters up your life and weighs you down. So Jesus is saying that if the things you've been taught have become like chains on your ankles or a yoke on your shoulders, get rid of them. Let them go.

There will always be people – some of them well meaning, but others trying to keep things under tight control – who will try to get you to approach life in a certain way and they give you help, hints and instructions, and before you know it, you can't really move much at all because you are weighed down. Burdened.

But as Jesus said on another occasion, the truth will always set you free, so if you're finding that the things you've been taught and told are closing down your life rather than freeing you up for life, then get rid of them. They are a burden laid on your shoulders by others, and Jesus would have you free of them.

Have you been weighed down by teachings like "you're not really saved until you speak in tongues" or "only those who make the grade, those who are respectable, straight, married, sober, polite and gainfully employed will get into heaven"? Get rid of them. Such teachings are a burden, and Jesus would have you free of them.

Have you become fearful because of teachings like "God has crafted a plan for your life and if you mess it up, you're lost" or "once you're a Christian you'll always be able to hear God clearly and know exactly what to do"? Get rid of them. Such teachings are a burden, and Jesus would have you free of them.

Have you been confused by teachings like "God is on the side of the poor and so all Christians must give up all their possessions and all their pleasures," or at the other end of the spectrum, "God is spirit and so the state of this world is irrelevant – all that matters is the state of your soul,"? Get rid of them. Such teachings are a burden, and Jesus would have you free of them.

Are you anxious about always falling short of God's expectations, because you've been taught that God has set you free of the baggage of your past so that you can be as loving and patient and kind as Jesus, and so now you had better be consistently showing that or you're letting God down? Get rid of them. Such teachings are a burden, and Jesus would have you free of them.

Jesus would have you be free of the burdensome teachings of those who are so sure of their own righteousness that they seek to impose their worldview and their patterns of acceptable behaviour on everyone else. I spent last weekend at the inaugural gathering of the new Open Baptists Association, a movement that has become necessary because a small group of churches in New South Wales managed to impose their views about marriage on the whole state association. And one of the things that was clear to me was how much many of our sisters and brothers there have been weighed down by what has happened there. It is one thing to recognise and reject the oppressive and divisive nature of those teachings, but it is quite another to be able to break free of their impact.

But even good teaching from good people can become an oppressive burden if you take everything as a set of rules to be rigidly adhered to.

That's why the Apostle Paul, in the reading we heard from his letter to the church at Thessalonica, when he was urging people to be pure and blameless and lead a life worthy of God, links that directly with accepting God's Word and allowing it to work in you. He doesn't say, "here are the rules, do as I say, not as I do, obey these and you'll be right." He says "I give thanks that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you didn't just take it as our word, you took it as God's word that is at work within you."

Do you see the difference? A word that is laid on you as a rule to be obeyed is something that tries to oblige you to act in a certain way. If you like, it tries to bring about ethical behaviour by obligation.

But when God's word is released to work in you, it doesn't create rules and obligations, it creates character. It brings about ethical behaviour by transforming you inwardly. Rules are needed when there is something that needs to be restrained, something that needs to be weighed down so it can be kept under control. But when God's word has transformed you inwardly, there is nothing that needs restraining. You will be free to live in the unrestrained passion of your God-given love of life.

That's why each week when we come to worship, we spend time gathered around the Word of God, listening for what God is saying to us. We pray that God will send the Holy Spirit upon us so that the Word may take root in the secret places of our hearts and bear much fruit for God's glory. And then we listen for the Word of God in the readings from the Holy Scriptures. We don't ask God to read us the rules, we ask that the Word may take root in our hearts and bear much fruit.

We know that not every word in every reading is going to grip us and transform us every week. But by the time we've heard three readings and responded with a psalm, we've at least given ourselves the opportunity to hear something that will take root in us.

Even if the sermon is sometimes nothing but human words that amount to very little, the words of scripture have been given some chance of breaking through – the words of scripture that have been handed on from generation to generation because people have found them to be the words of life that take root and bear good harvests.

And that too is why we always follow the scripture readings with our "sermon of silence". It is intended to give the Word of God a chance to sit in our minds and begin to sink roots into our hearts before they are washed away in the next floodtide of words and noise and activity. Just as a gardener prepares the soil if she wants a flourishing crop, so we take time to prepare our hearts to allow God's word to sink strong roots and bear much fruit within us.

Words can be bearers of grace or imposers of burdens. But in the silence we will know God and the truth of God shall set us free. Thanks be to God.