

Commitment- the disciples challenge

Introduction.

Every year I try to sit and watch the Wimbledon Championship. I watch the players and I just realise that these players are so good, that even if I wanted to take up tennis I could never come anywhere near them no matter how committed I was, I would never be as good as these people.

In the 1st century AD a group of men called Scribes and Pharisees were widely revered as the religious elite. They raised religious fervour to an art form. They put the bar of spiritual expectations so high that others Jews felt inadequate. Into the cultural backdrop Jesus emerges. The day of his baptism a few eyebrows were raised when the heavens opened and they heard the words 'This is my beloved Son'. Then Jesus started to heal sickness and disease. The miracles of Jesus sent huge shock waves through the people, Controversy and curiosity followed Jesus. In this atmosphere Jesus delivered a high-powered message we call the Sermon on the Mount

The 20th Century Church leader John Wimber put it 'Jesus is insatiable. Everything we do please him, but nothing satisfies him. I have been satisfied with Jesus. He has not been satisfied with me. He keeps raising the standards. He walks in high places. He is generous but uncompromising in his call.' The standards of lifestyle Jesus sets are high, it's called commitment, and it's still a challenge for us today

Study 1.

Lassoing heaven

Introduction.

The expression 'I thought I'd died and gone to heaven' Is one of the ways of trying to express or explain a situation that results in such a sense of euphoria that it goes beyond description. It is just another example of how much of the Bible has passed into normal everyday conversation. The truth is that Jesus talked about heaven and made it sound as real as earth.

The Big Picture

1. Describe your image of heaven when you were a child?

2. What is your image of heaven now?

The Biblical Picture

Read Matthew Ch 5 v 10-12

3. How do you feel when you hear the statement, blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness. Blessed means 'truly happy' How can the persecuted be truly happy?

4. What kind of persecution do you think Jesus was talking about?

5. Jesus assures his followers that the persecutions and the sufferings of this life can't compare with the rewards and joys of heaven. How does the hope of heaven impact the way you live your life today?

6. Jesus gives his followers a sobering and tough piece of information when he tells them that they will pay a price for following him. In light of the world we live in, how are followers of Christ persecuted today?

7. In what ways might fully committed followers of Christ be a moral irritation in today's world?
 - a. In their places of work
 - b, in their homes
 - c. in friendships with, as of yet un-converted friends

Being in the picture

8. What can you do to stand firm even when persecution comes?

9. What are some of the outward signs do you think, that a Christ follower is smiling on the inside?

10. How do you think you would respond to a life-threatening, full-scale persecution of Christians?

11. What do you think you can do to prepare yourself to be able to stand for Jesus, and hang on for heaven no matter what the cost?

12. Jesus never asked us to be needlessly irritating. However he was clear that fully devoted followers will sometimes become moral irritations by virtue of their unwavering commitment to follow Him no matter what. Take time over the next week to think about the following

a. Are there ways which you are needlessly irritating others that might be driving those who are Christ seekers away? Do you need to change your behaviour?

b. Is there evidence in your life that you are an irritation because you have committed yourself to an uncompromising lifestyle of seeking Jesus? If so can you praise God for this, for your growth in discipleship.

Study 2

Growing a heart of faith.

Introduction

A few years ago we had some basketball hoops fitted in the church I was leading. One Friday evening I was there waiting for someone with not much to do, and with a basketball close at hand I decide to shoot a few hoops. I began to get to feeling quite good about this, then I went on a run of consecutive shots, I reached 6, and I thought that was pretty good. Till I looked up the world record for basketball free throw consecutive hoops is just over 2,000. I find that amazing.

Now try to image if God set the standard for entry into heaven on the ability to throw a ball through a hoop. What is God said, that he knew what the Guinness book of world record was, and then raised it ten fold. We might just walk away and say forget it. There is no possible way I could gain entry to heaven.

The Big picture

1. How would you feel towards God if he set an unreachable standard as the prerequisite for entering heaven?
2. How would you respond if someone came to you and asked, 'What must I do to enter heaven?'

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 5 v 17-20

3. Jesus spoke about not coming to abolish the 'Law and the Prophets', but rather to fulfil them. What does he mean by 'the Law and the Prophets', and how has Jesus fulfilled the Law and the Prophets?

4. Jesus appears to set an unreachable standard when he says 'Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.' How can our righteousness actually go beyond that of the religious leaders of Jesus day?

5. In Luke Ch 7 v 36-50 Jesus is at a meal with a theological professor called Simon. Take the time to read what happens, then answer the following question.

What can cause you to sometimes be so hardheaded those doctrines and religious teachings end up being more important than following Jesus and loving others?

6. In this story a sinful woman ends up being declared righteous, and a religious man is forced to confront his own unrighteousness. How does this story act as a key to help us understand the true nature of righteousness?

7. In light of this story, how can our righteousness exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees?

8. In Mark Ch 3 v 1-6 Jesus was invited to speak in a Jewish Synagogue, for all the wrong reasons. The people who invited him there didn't care about what he was going to say; they wanted to set him up for a spiritual sting. Read the passage and see how it worked. Then answer the following questions

9. As Jesus looked around the synagogue, he saw religious people with hearts of stone. What, do you think marks out the life of a person with a hardness of heart today?

10. What do you think marks out the life of a person who has a tender heart towards God?

11. What role do you think worship plays in developing a tender heart?

Being in the picture

12 Take time this week to ask yourself the following questions.

a. What needs to happen for a hard heart to be broken and become tender towards God and others?

b. What would a life look like if it were marked by a heart of worship?

13. If you know someone who has the lifestyle which seems to be in tune with God, and whose life bears the marks you have identified as being tender towards God, why not encourage that person this week. Send them a letter, e-mail twitter them text them, face book them, call them, send them a card, just saying how their life has impacted you. Be as creative as you can in expressing and delivering the gift of gratitude.

Study 3.

Fixing broken relationships

Introduction.

There is a kind of protocol, which governs certain things in life. Like how people should behave at concerts, the cinema, plays. We have an instinct about how people should obey, in that people shouldn't talk their way through a film in the Cinema. Some actions in public places are just rude, or a sign on public protest.

The big picture

1. How do you react when someone breaks one of the unwritten rules of etiquette?

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 5 v 21-26

2. Why do you think that Jesus begins his teaching on anger and harsh words with a quotation of the Old Testament commandment, 'do not murder'?

3. Jesus challenges us to look beyond overt sinful actions to the condition of our hearts. How can unresolved anger destroy our relationship with others?

4. How can unresolved anger towards others hurt our relationship with God?

5. How can harsh words damage our relationships with others and God?

6. Have you ever wished that you could take back some biting comments or harsh words?

7. Can you remember a time when you watched two people refuse to forgive each other? What were some of the consequences and results?

Being in the picture

8. Jesus used an illustration of settling accounts with an adversary before getting to court. Why does Jesus call us to seek reconciliation with such urgency?

9. How should we respond if the person we approach does not want to have the relationship restored?

10. When we choose to approach a brother or a sister who has something against us, what are some specific things that will help us do this in a healing way?

11. Over the week take time to read Matthew Ch 6 v 9-15. And answer the following questions.

a. How serious is Jesus about our need to extend forgiveness and seek healing in our relationships?

B.what is one relationship you need to work at restoring and healing?

C.why is it important for you to start healing this relationship today?

Study 4.

How to understand the difference between looking, loving and lusting.

Introduction

Don't you just marvel at the human ability to imagine? With the power of imagination, we can go places without moving a muscle. We can replay pleasant memories of the past without pushing a rewind button. We can paint pictures in our mind, we can stimulate creativity, and we can begin to imagine what life will be like when we get through tough times.

Imagination can help us develop vision for the future. Imagination is a marvellous gift from the hand of our creative God.

The Big picture

1. What are some of the benefits of having a good imagination?
2. How is imagination helpful in your line of work, or in the course of your day?

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 5 v 27-30

3. How can our imagination be used in ways that are not pleasing to God?
4. Why do you think Jesus makes a clear connection between the act of adultery and the practice of entering lustful thoughts?
5. How would you respond to a person who says. 'There is nothing wrong with entertaining lustful thoughts as long as you don't act on them'?
6. Jesus makes a distinction when he talks about men and women looking at each other. He seems to indicate that one is healthy, the other ways is destructive.

We have on a continuum line the following

God's ideal-----cultural norms-----lust controlled

What are some words or statements that would describe each of these three places on the continuum

- a. God's ideal
- b. Cultural norms
- c. Lust controlled heart.

7. What are some of the primary sources of unhealthy sexual messages and images?

8. What can we do to reduce or cut off the supply line of these sources?

Being in the picture

9. What are some of the dangers or damaging results of living on the end of the continuum of a lust controlled heart?

10. What practical steps can be taken in each area listed below

a. Cutting off the supply of whatever encourages lust in our lives.

B. filling our minds with constructive images and information.

C. building healthy and integrity filled relationships that honour God.

11. Over this week take some time to identify one or two primary sources of destructive and unhealthy images. Think about what specific actions you can take to cut off the supply line of these harmful sources.

Study 5

How to love before an audience of One

Introduction.

We live in a world where performance is both valued and evaluated. We live in the midst of a performance centred world, and fame is a very fleeting thing, It can be here today and gone tomorrow. When we live to please others only, we will get their reward and applause, but we may miss the applause of God.

The Big picture

1. Who are some of the superstars that seem to have disappeared from the public spotlight over the past few years?
2. How might they feel when their time in the public spotlight is over?

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 6 v 1-18

3. Jesus clearly calls his followers to live before an audience of One. All we do should be to please God and not the people around us. However there is a human tendency, to do things to impress those around us
 - a. What specific warnings are given to Christ's followers in this passage?
 - b. Why do you think these warnings are so strong?
4. What do you think are some of the areas in which Christ's followers tend to perform for others rather than for God?
5. Can you identify one area in your life, which you sometimes do things to please people rather than God?
6. What do you think are some of the consequences we might face if we live our lives for people rather than for God?
7. Why do you think we are so caught up in seeking approval?
8. What eternal rewards might we gain if we seek only to please God secretly?

Being in the picture

9. In light of the scriptural invitation 'come near to God and he will come near to you' what are ways that you can open yourself up to meaningful encounters with the living God today?

10. At the heart of Jesus teaching here is the issue of motives. Over the next few days take time to ask yourself

What is the driving force in my life?

b. Do I seek to please God or people, in the following areas: giving, praying, fasting, serving, worship?

What needs to change in your heart to move you more towards pleasing God rather than people?

Study 6.

Dealing with worry

Introduction.

Not so long ago I was talking to a former lighthouse keeper at the Mull of Galloway, and he was trying to persuade me to fill in an application form for a charity event to abseil down the outside of the lighthouse. He told me that most people when they stand on the outside ledge of the lighthouse, and they are all strapped in and ready to go, they are all pretty much afraid. Some cover their fear with acts of bravado, but the fear is still there. They want to experience the thrill of the drop, but there is the other side, which says I'm afraid to do this.

Fear is a powerful emotion. Sometimes it short-circuits those decisions of faith that need to be made when we walk with God. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is offering encouragement to dive into a full devotion to God. Jesus offers us here some 'don't- worry- about- it' kinds of truths I want to give you so that you'll be able to enjoy the free fall and be fearful.

The Big picture

1. Describe those times when you experience fear or anxiety in your life?

The Biblical picture

Read Matthew Ch 6 v 25-34

2. According to the words of Jesus in this section why can we live a worry free life?

3. How have you seen faith in God remove or reduce worry in your life?

4. What drives us to spend so much time worrying about our physical well-being?

5. If we do spend more time caring for our outer appearance then our inner person, what can we do to grow more balanced in this area of life?

6. God also promises to care for his creation. How does your awareness of this commitment make you feel about his promise to provide for you?

7. What can you identify as some of the hurtful and negative results of worry and anxiety?

- a. emotionally
- b. physically
- c. relationally
- d. spiritually

8. Jesus says 'do not worry about what you will wear' Describe worry-free and anxiety free dressing?

9. Why is it difficult to stop worrying about these things?

10. If Jesus calls us to trust in our heavenly Father to meet our needs, how do we determine what we need and what we really want? Can you offer examples.

Being in the picture

11. Can you think of one need you have seen God meet this past year?

12. What is one serious need you have in your life right now? Is it hard trusting God to meet this need? If so why?

13. Can you identify one area of your life in which you are holding back, and having trouble giving it to God? Can you discuss in the group how each of you can seek to surrender these areas of your life to God

14. What can you do over the course of this week to shift the focus of the balance of your life into developing the inner life of faith?