

Matthew 5:33-48

Breaking out and Breaking in

There's a new building in Sydney. A bold new addition to the city skyline. It stands off to the side of the rest of the towering structures and boldly proclaims its status as a monument to the love of money and all it can buy.

And it goes by two names, both of them deeply ironic.

The first is Barangaroo One. The second is Crown tower.

It strikes me that naming a glittering tower of western opulence after Barangaroo, a strong indigenous leader who was deeply connected to the harbour, and who was uncomfortable about the domination of early European settlement, is a little on the nose. Barangaroo tower, really?

And then there's the other name it goes by, Crown Tower. Crown resorts, the company, and the man at its head, promised the city a wonderful utopia of employment and endless streams of wealth from off-shore high-rollers gambling away small fortunes in our backyard. Crown resorts, and the man at its head, who made sure the more modest earlier designs for the site were eclipsed by this soaring spire. Crown resorts, and the man at its head, who, as it turns out are a little bit dodgy, whose business model, as it turns out, is a little bit illegal, and who, as it turns out are not fit to hold a casino license in NSW, and possibly won't be welcome elsewhere anymore.

It turns out that powerful people with pots of money and a whole load of self-interest and political influence can't be trusted.

It turns out that those we trust to make decisions for our city seem to rely a little too much on the advice of self-interested people.

It also turns out that some leaders are really quite comfortable using inside knowledge and influence fill their own pockets, and others believe it's quite ordinary to spend public funds for personal and political gain.

It turns out that there is a time to listen and a time to not want to know about that.

It turns out men can't be trusted with intoxicated young women.

It turns out multinational corporations and the super-rich can't be trusted to pay their fair share of tax

But, as it turns out, neither can we. When the tax office conduct random audits of ordinary Australians, it turns out most of us don't exactly pay exactly what we should. And it's not just that we make the odd mistake, 80% of people, whose tax return was prepared by a professional tax agent weren't being entirely honest. We're all looking for those elusive loopholes that others seem use to get ahead.

And I can tell you, as someone who used to run a small business, that there are plenty of people who think a good way to get a discount is to pay cash because if they pay cash I, as a business owner, won't need to declare it as income. No-one needs to know. I don't need to pay my fair share of tax. And I'm pretty sure my experience wasn't isolated.

It turns out people are self-interested

We know it's true because we built a whole economic theory on the basis of self-interest, and it seems to pretty accurately explain and predict how people behave.

We observe and anticipate self-interest in people, in financial systems, in society. And some people even go so far as to claim that it's a good thing. That we SHOULD be looking after our own interests. It's the right thing to do.

But most people can see we need some kind of limit on self-interest. That it needs to be restrained. And so we build laws and a justice system to try and contain self-interest within acceptable bounds.

It doesn't always stop people finding sneaky ways to get what they want, but it kind of works, most of the time.

Jesus thinks this is a problem. That building structures to suppress our self-interest is not a fulfilling way to express our true humanity. He agrees with the Prophet Jeremiah that the "The heart is deceitful above all things." Jeremiah lamented that "The heart is deceitful above all things. and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

But there's something striking about Jesus' teaching here in the sermon on the Mount. At outlandish optimism that things could be better, not easy, but better. A breaking out of the cycle of destructive self-interest and a breaking in of a renewed way of being human that's as startling and confronting as a light shining in a dark place.

And so Jesus reminds us of the familiar rules that have come to dominate our understanding of how to behave and then he shows us how tired and broken down that system is with a new,

beating heart of flesh that desires good at its very core. A desire for good that rejoices in God's goodness, that flows from within instead of being imposed from the outside.

And, according to Jesus, it's a powerful force that brings glory to God, a force that maintains integrity in the face of evil. A force – a renewed humanity – that can even face up to self-interest with a radical and powerful other-person-centredness.

Jeremiah laments that the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Jesus says, "here's how it looks to live with a new heart."

You know that old law about not murdering people? A new heart fills that leaky legal cage up with a spirit of reconciliation.

You know that old law about not sleeping with someone else's spouse? A new heart won't even look twice.

You know that old law that gives you a clearly defined exit strategy from your sacred relational contracts? A new heart recognises a promise for what it is and follows through on its commitments to the ones who are yours to love.

And in today's passage, we see that a new heart confronts a shady system of convoluted promises with simple honesty. We see that a new heart confronts a spirit of vindictive and selfish retribution with generosity. And we see that a new heart confronts escalating animosity with a genuine desire for the good of those who are against you.

Oaths (33-37)

The first broken-down structure Jesus addresses in today's passage is the flimsy façade that we call promises.

Possibly the best advice any mother has given to her daughter is this, "never trust a man who says, "trust me"!". I worked with a teacher who liked to caricature his students. And he told me about one of the schools he used to work in. He said you always knew you were being lied to if a student started invoking a higher power, "I swear to God, sir". "I promise on my mother's grave, sir, I'm telling you the truth." He said that the more elaborate their insistence was that they were being honest, the more they were obviously lying.

Jesus doesn't have time for these layers of deception,

Let's look at verses 33-37 together, "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.'³⁴ But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne;³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King.³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black.³⁷ All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

It seems that the people in Jesus day did something similar to my friend's students. They'd become so used to lies and lying that they needed to find ways to seem more convincing. Maybe if I invoke heaven and earth, I'll seem more credible.

Jesus doesn't just say it's stupid, he says it's evil. I mean what power do you actually have over God or over your mother's grave, over heaven or over the earth. A more genuine and authentic expression of who you are as a person God has made and as a person God has poured his spirit into – with a renewed heart that desires the good – is to be a person of your word. Yes and no will suffice. A simple expression of your intention is all you need. And you'll come to be known as an honest person, a person of your word. And that might seem counter cultural. It's shining the light of the kingdom of heaven into your world and brings praise to your Father in heaven.

Retribution (38-42)

Next, Jesus confronts the ugly and vindictive sense of retribution that festers and thrives within the regulating framework of justice.

There are some cracking pieces of fiction about revenge.

A long time ago...before Disney sanitised fairy tales, Goldilocks got her comeuppance and was eaten by the three bears. The evil queen, who attempted to kill Snow White ended up being forced to wear a pair of iron shoes that were heated on burning coals and she had to dance until she died. In Little Red Riding Hood, both the girl and her grandmother are eaten by the wolf but then a huntsman arrives to save the day, cuts open the wolf's stomach, rescues Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother and then Red Riding Hood fills the wolf's stomach with rocks. When the wolf wakes up he falls over and dies...and then the huntsman skins the villain. When Cinderella finally marries the handsome prince, her stepmother and stepsisters turn up to the wedding. Cinderella's pigeon friend sees them and pecks out their eyes so that they live the rest of their lives blind.

The truth is we love a good tale of retribution. You'll find it even in some of the most popular kids and family movies. In the Lion King, When Simba finally confronts the evil scar for killing his

father and turning the pride lands into a wasteland, it's so satisfying when Simba throws him off a cliff to be devoured by hyenas. When Kevin McCallister is home alone, we savour every moment of sweet justice: every burned scalp; every crowbar to the chest; every flying pain tin to the face; every nail through the foot, when the wet bandits try to break in on Christmas eve. In the Princess Bride, we fall in love with the defeated and broken Inigo Montoya, whose only reason to live is to take revenge upon the six-fingered man who brutally murdered his father, "My name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my Father, prepare to die." These are kid's movies.

It feels right, it feels just to take retribution into your own hands and that's because we have a profound sense of justice deep inside. God put it there. And it's a good thing that our justice system restrains self-interest so that the little people aren't trampled all over. But Jesus reframes our interest in justice - he confronts the self-interest that so often drives our desire for retribution and says that a renewed heart is free to be wronged. In fact, a renewed heart, that shines the light of the dawning kingdom of heaven, is free to substitute retribution with generosity.

Have a read of verses 38 to 42 with me. ""You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'^[1] ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

Imagine responding to someone's injustice against you the way Jesus outlines here:

A colleague at your work is stealing food from the lunchroom fridge. Your yoghurt has gone missing again. You know who took it and you find a quiet moment to speak to the person. You say, "I noticed you enjoyed that berry yoghurt from the fridge the other day. I buy it all the time. I love it too. I'll bring in a packet of them tomorrow and put them in back of the fridge with your name on them. Grab one whenever you're hungry."

An ambitious person, looking for a promotion, is claiming credit for work you did. You find a quiet moment for a conversation. You say you're really pleased that people are recognising the results of the team's hard work on the project but that you believe it could have been even better. You point out some generalised shortcomings of the team dynamic and express clearly your genuine desire to lift everyone up - for each member of the team to more effectively contribute their personal skills and abilities to achieving a better outcome together. And you ask what you can do help facilitate this process. You offer to do more for this person than they are trying to take from you.

Jesus isn't advocating for a passively submissive approach to situations that undermine justice. He's advocating for an assertively generous response to other people's self-interest. And it's not just a passive-aggressive form of retribution either. It's a genuine expression of generosity that follows through with continued interest in the person – continued offers of service that promote the dignity of both of you.

Kirsty Burmeister is an American writer who's written about her experience of abuse in a church. The 'about' page of her website says, "I wrote a book about my experiences with a middle-aged stalker who wanted to execute me when I was eighteen and the church that was weirdly OK with that. You know, just your typical teenage shenanigans." While she confesses that she could never meet with her stalker, she does have a powerful testimony of courage in choosing to go the extra mile with the church that sheltered her abuser.

Years after the incident, having walked away from faith for a time, she started praying for the church. She came to a realisation that the behaviour of the church members who had enabled her abuse could only have been possible if they had deep wounds of their own. She came to the realisation that hidden wounds fester and she didn't want that to continue. After months of prayer for the church she decided to visit. It was a really brave thing to do and she stresses that it's not a course of action that would be positive for everyone – but it was her way of facing this damage directly. And she believes she gave them a gift.

She said it was an uncomfortable experience, that the people knew who she was and what had happened to her there and that they had to look at her and face it. She said that by reminding them of what had happened, she created an opportunity for them to acknowledge their role in the injustice. She was creating a space for repentance.

It wasn't an attack – she could have reacted that way, but instead she chose to love. And I agree with her, that "bringing evil to light so that people who've done evil can deal with the consequences of their actions is a loving act."

That morning, she sat through a Sunday school lesson and a worship service with people who had stood by and even actively contributed to a situation where she was almost murdered. She let a woman hug her, who once had cornered her to tell her she was "asking for it".

Now I know Kirsty's story isn't everyone's story of abuse. But I think that her response to injustice is an incredible and profound expression of Jesus' call to act generously toward those who do us wrong. She gave more to those people than they wanted to take from her.

Her response wasn't retaliation, retribution, or revenge. Her response wasn't to passively accept the injustice as her cross to bear. She's not a passive victim, stripped of her dignity. She is a

truth-teller, a peacemaker. And in her quiet act of truth-telling, she creates a space for healing and restoration for those who were her enemies.

The reason I tell you that story is because sometimes victims of abuse can read Jesus' teaching about turning the other cheek and assume he is implying that they need to just accept the abuse. And I think it's really important to highlight what Jesus is NOT saying as much as I believe it's important to outline what Jesus IS saying.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist an evil person", he's not saying abuse is OK. Jesus is not saying we should let injustice prevail. Jesus himself was extraordinarily forthright about injustice in his day. He called it out. It made him angry.

Jesus is not saying abuse is OK. He is saying that when we do respond to injustice, we have a choice between retaliation and generosity.

As good as it feels for justice to be served to those who deserve it. The light of the kingdom of heaven shines when a child of God draws on the riches of all he or she has in Christ and offers it generously to someone who doesn't deserve it.

Reacting with generosity instead of retribution is the kind of response that flows from a renewed heart. That shines the light of the dawning kingdom of heaven. And it will seem counter cultural. It's shining the light of the kingdom of heaven into your world and it brings praise to your Father in heaven.

Loving enemies

And the last ineffective restriction on self-interest that Jesus addresses is our parochial concept of loyalty. There's an expression of loyalty in patriotism. We're loyal to the flag, we're loyal to those who serve our country in the armed forces and to those who have died defending it. We might not be quite as patriotic as our American friends, but even in Australia, loyalty is a virtue we uphold and admire in people.

You also see loyalty expressed in the criminal underworld, if you've seen the movie the Godfather, you'll remember the opening scene, where Don Corleone, the Godfather, is being asked by a man to avenge his daughter's attackers. The man offers Corleone money but it's just insulting. What Corleone really wants is his loyalty. Loyalty has a tendency to define those worthy of our love. That's not necessarily a bad thing. The trouble is when loyalty starts to define those who are not worthy of our love. And so the beautiful command to "love your neighbour" becomes, "love your neighbour and hate your enemy."

Here's how Jesus addresses this reductionistic and self-interested understanding of God's command. Look at verses 43-48 with me. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor^[1] and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

If I were a 1st century Jew, I might love my fellow Jews but hate the Romans. As an Australian I might love my fellow Australians but hate illegal immigrants, for example. But Jesus won't have a bar of this parochial rendition of one of God's most significant commands. Love your neighbour was never meant to be exclusive.

Jesus wants us to love those who aren't like us too. And even more radical is the idea that we should extend that love to people who are actively against us. Those who we might call enemies, those who even persecute us. Jesus shows us something of the patient character of God, who sends his rain on the righteous and the unrighteous and calls us, as his people, to demonstrate that love...to EVERYONE.

He calls his people to a higher standard of love. A fuller expression of the love of God. Jesus anticipates his followers will be a light in the world. Instead of escalating the mounting tensions of warring factions in our world, his regenerative force of renewed humanity breaks out of the cycles of self-interest. In the radical, sacrificial, other-person-centred acts of people with renewed hearts, we see a breaking in of God's kingdom, even into this dark world we live in.

Loving others, even people who are different from you, even those who are opposed to, is the kind of response that flows from a renewed heart. That shines the light of the dawning kingdom of heaven. And it will seem counter cultural. It's shining the light of the kingdom of heaven into your world and it brings praise to your Father in heaven.

Conclusion

Jesus has some pretty high expectations of his followers, doesn't he? He expects them to be a force for change through self-sacrificial honesty and generosity and love. He expects us to reflect something of the perfection of God, like a stark and confronting light in a dark place.

And that's a very different approach to human flourishing than the one that seeks to merely impose boundaries on self-interest. Building structures to suppress our self-interest is not a

fulfilling way to express our true humanity, and it's certainly not a fulfilling way to reflect the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus isn't calling for anarchy, he's not saying we do away with all the rules. He knows they make life more manageable and that they often reflect God's intentions for us. It's just that rules are a clumsy and blunt instrument in bringing about the kind of rich human existence, at peace with God and at peace with each other, that God designed us for. Jesus has another vision for us. Not as caged animals trying to find a way out – or even as suppressed, creative individuals looking for a way to express our true selves.

No, Jesus' vision for us is a new way of being human – well actually it's a very old way of being human that we forgot – It's a vision for humanity that starts with an inward desire for the good God made us for. And in one hand Jesus he holds this vision out for us as a beautiful picture of what this kingdom he's bringing will be – while the other hand is nailed to a cross. Jesus paints a beautiful picture of a renewed humanity in a still broken world. Living Jesus' way has power to transform and overturn the dark cycles of injustice, distrust and discord but he never says it's going to be easy.

It's the poor in spirit, it's those who mourn, it's the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness who are blessed.

The picture Jesus paints of life as his follower is not an easy one to swallow. It's full of self-denial and other-person-centredness, it risks things being taken from us, with the expectation that we offer more of ourselves in return. It's peculiar.

But as unfamiliar as this picture of renewed humanity might feel to you, Jesus wants you to recognise yourself in it. Jesus wants you to see yourself and someone whose righteousness surpasses the pharisees. Jesus wants you to see yourself as someone with a renewed heart, as part of his regenerated humanity, breaking out of the cycles of self-interest and breaking into this world with the light of the kingdom of heaven.

I'll finish with Jesus' words to us, "You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."