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Introduction

In many ways I have to admit to having a love /hate relationship with the NSW country town of Nimbin. The first time I went there, was in the early 90's when some of my bible college friends and I were passing through on a summer holiday. And we were having a conversation about who out of us, five clean cut girls and guys, would be the first one to be offered drugs and how long it would take to be offered them. So we got a huge laugh when we hadn't even got out of the car when one of us was offered a deal. A couple of times later, another friend that I had taken to Nimbin didn't even want to leave the car, it was just too different from what she was used to.

So I have a love/hate relationship with Nimbin. I love the fact that they are different. That they have tried to set up an alternative society. That many of them so believe in something that they get up and move to another location, they will look different, act different, be different. But what I don't like about Nimbin is that I think they have got it wrong. The tenets of what they believe, in free love, no rules, natural lifestyle is not going to be the ultimate solution to the big issues of life. Their community is not the model that will ultimately work in God's world.

Instead the model that will work in God's world is set down by Jesus in the sermon on the mount. This is a picture of a true Christian counter culture. A picture of the people of God, living in true harmony with each other and with their Creator. A true alternative society that doesn't remove itself from the society around us, but one that lives side by side with everyone else. But a society that will over time be salt and light to a world that is dark and decaying all around it.

This is a society that could turn the world upside down. This is a society that can make a difference. This is a society where we can be real, loving and Christian. And so over the next month or so, we are going to look at this Christian manifesto. We are going to look at how Jesus wanted us to live. And we are going to do this by studying what many have called, the greatest sermon ever told. The sermon on the mount, found in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. And it all starts with

1. A new community (verses 1-2)

Jesus has begun to preach a message of repentance and faith. Around the traps he has warned people to repent for the kingdom of heaven is near. He has healed the sick, touched the paralysed, reached out to those on the fringes and the crowds have flocked. 12 apostles have been chosen. And the people have been taught about how to restore their relationship with God.

And then he does something strange, very strange. He withdraws from the crowds. He goes up on a mountainside and when his disciples come to him, he teaches them. It doesn't say that he teaches the crowd, even though he does so elsewhere. But here he teaches his disciples and he starts this sermon by teaching them the Beatitudes. Which

are all about Christian Character. It is all about the values, the character, the qualities that the person who has given their life to Jesus needs to possess, once they allow God to take over.

Now if we just stop at that point for a second, I wonder what sort of character people think you have. Would people describe you as honest? Faithful? Mature? Righteous? Pure? Trustworthy? Gracious? Are you viewed as someone in your community with integrity? The crowds wanted something from Jesus so they flocked around him. But Jesus wanted disciples, Jesus wanted people of a truly Christian character. Jesus wanted to create a new community where people's lives reflected their faith in God. So while the crowds flocked, Jesus taught the disciples.

For there will always be two types of people who are attracted to Jesus. The first want to get something off him. They want to be healed, they want to be led, they want to be fed, they might even want to go to heaven. But the other type of person wants to change their character, they want to change their life. It starts when they give themselves wholly to Jesus, but it continues as they take up Jesus teaching, as they study it, as they allow it to penetrate their soul, their minds, their actions, and their personality.

The sermon on the mount is only for those who want to be taught, who want to be taught by God. It is not for the crowds who want their needs met, whatever those needs are. The sermon on the mount is for those who want their lives to count, their lives to count for God.

Which begs the question are you part of the crowd or part of the disciples? Do you want your life to count for God? If the answer is yes and I would hope for all of us it is. Then make sure you don't miss the next few sermons. They will not be easy to preach nor will they be easy to hear. They will not be easy, because Jesus demands that we must be perfect like our heavenly father is perfect. Jesus demands are high, higher than any of us are currently living. He wants a new community with

2. A new attitude (verses 3-11)

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God. If you want to be a part of this new community, this Kingdom of God on earth, then you need to be poor, spiritually poor. You have to realise that you can't make it on your own. You can't do it by yourself. You need God's help, God's grace, God's forgiveness. You need to repent of your current life and come to God to obtain his Kingdom.

So it doesn't come from good works, or going to Church, or being spiritual. It comes from being spiritually bankrupt on your own and so calling on God to come into your life and fill it with his riches. For that will then make you mourn, mourn for your sins, sob over this world, grieve at what our society has become as we have turned our back on God. And as we mourn, we will be comforted.

Which in turn will make us meek. Not weak, or proud, or self confident, but meek in the way we deal with others and with God. For there but the grace of God goes I, we will say to ourselves. I am no better than the next person. For we begin to see what we are truly like. As Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones once said "*The person who is truly meek is*

the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do. This makes him gentle, humble, sensitive and patient in all his dealings with others."

And that in turn will create in us a hunger and a thirst for righteousness. We will not put at the centre of our being, a desire for fame, or money, or success or riches. Instead we will want to please the one who has given us his grace. We will want to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness. So we will be hungry for the righteous teaching of the Bible. We will thirst for a filling within us of God's Holy Spirit. We will not dine at the junk food café. We will not skull down the bottle containing the spirit of this world. We will sit at Jesus table, drink from the stream of eternal life and we will be filled to overflowing.

And so our attitude to God will be that of recognising our spiritual poverty, of mourning our sins, meekly coming into his presence and desiring his righteousness and that in turn will affect our attitude toward others. That will open us up to be merciful of others. We have received mercy from God, so shouldn't we share that mercy with others?

It will place deep within our hearts a desire to act purely, rightly, truly. We will want to be transparent before others. We will not want to have mixed motives or be involved in hypocrisy. We will not be one thing on the inside and another on the outside, instead our actions and our motives will be pure.

Which in turn will lead us to be peacemakers in the Church and within our wider community. It is the devil who is the troublemaker, but it is God who wants us to be reconciled with Him and with each other, and that is what we will seek to do. But it is not peace at any price, it is not appeasement. It is peace around God's truth, God's way, God's Son Jesus.

But that will mean that we are opening ourselves up to persecution, because of our righteousness. Yes we try and live at peace with others, but at times others will refuse to live at peace with us. In fact being despised, rejected, slandered and persecuted is not abnormal for the Christian, but in fact it is very much the normal. For we crave for righteousness and others will crave for the very opposite.

But when we are abused or persecuted we are not to retaliate like an unbeliever, or sulk like a child, nor lick our wounds in self pity like a dog, or grin and bare it stoically or even pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. We are to rejoice and be glad. We might lose everything here on earth, and many Christians today are in fact doing that. But the kingdom of heaven is ours. Our reward is kept safe for us in heaven. For this is how God's people have always been treated.

You see the Christian does not withdraw from society, on the contrary he is in the real thick of it. Showing mercy to those whose lives have fallen apart. Sincere in his dealings with all those around them. Acting as a peacemaker. And yet often not being thanked for his efforts, but rather opposed, insulted and slandered.

For in this new community, there will be new attitudes. Attitudes that will make the Christian stand out from the crowd. That will turn the community upside down. It is

like we are living in upsy down town.

Have you heard the song upsy down town? It is on high rotation on Joshua's CD at the moment. So I'll tell you the lyrics. *In upsy down town, the sky is the sea, the rabbits in the nest where the birds should be. You walk up on your nose instead of on your toes. Down in upsy down town.*

So in the community that Jesus is painting for us today it is a bit like upsy down town. How we live is the opposite to the way everyone else lives. It involves a new community, a new attitude and then

3. New rewards.

For it is not the rich that are blessed it is the poor in spirit. It is not the happy who are rewarded but those who mourn their sins. It is not the proud who inherit the earth, but the meek. Not those who hunger and thirst for the finer things in life that are filled but those who hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God. And it is not the ones who hold onto their rights, who are self indulgent or war mongers or the powerful that in the end reap the rewards, but it is the merciful, the pure, the peacemakers and the persecuted who get the real rewards in life.

And those rewards are not happiness, or riches or power or status, no they are not the big ticket items in God's kingdom. Instead the things we should be aiming for are achieving a ticket to the kingdom of heaven, it is being called the sons, the daughters of God. It is seeing God, being shown his mercy, being filled with his righteousness, being comforted and inheriting his world.

These are the rewards that start now and last for all eternity. These are the blessings that stock market collapses, changes in fashion, burglars, thieves, fire and death cannot destroy. This is what God's kingdom is all about. This is what you and I have been made for, created for, shaped to receive. And so only these things move beyond happiness, to joy. Only these rewards, transcend laughter and give us hope. Only these gifts can be truly called blessings for they come direct to us from God and they fit us perfectly and fill our lives, our souls, our whole being.

So tell me why do we Christians still behave like everyone else? Why do we chase the great Australian dream along with everyone else? Why do we spend money like our neighbours, dress like our neighbours, watch the same TV programmes as our neighbours and act just like our neighbours when we should instead be trying to set up a new community, with new attitudes, because we are aware of God's new rewards?

And isn't even more horrible, when in the Church, you see *power* and *pride* dressed up in the name of *God*? Where the model of leadership has often been the Pharisee rather than our Lord? For here is Jesus sitting on the mountainside talking about the need to be humble in spirit, the need to be meek, the need to be in mourning before God about the terrible *botch up* we've made of things and instead we build cathedrals, we dress up in ornate robes, we process up and down in purple finery; and if you asked the average Australian their perception of what the church is about it would be the absolute *opposite* of poor in spirit.

How have we got it so wrong? Why can the people of Nimbin leave their old culture behind and we seem so immersed in ours? And what can we do to turn it all around? To turn our community upside down? Well we need a

4. A new approach. (verses 13-16)

Jesus says we need to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. He says we as Christians should concentrate on passing the salt and turning on the light in God's world. So what does that mean? Well let's look firstly at salt.

The first thing about salt is that it makes you thirsty. If you have salt in your diet, you begin to thirst for water. And if we are going to be the salt of the earth then that will cause the people around us to thirst for the things of God. They will see our joy, they will notice our blessings and they will take note of our satisfaction, our thanksgiving, our fulfilment. And they will want what we have.

But the second thing about salt is that it is used as a seasoning. It is added in cooking and on the table to add flavour to the things that we eat. And likewise not only are we to make people thirsty for the things of God but we are to help add flavour to life. We are to show an interest in those around us. We are to add spice to other people's existence by showing them love, joy, peace, patience, goodness and self control.

And lastly salt also is a preservative. In Biblical times, there were no refrigerators and so salt was added so that food didn't decay so quickly. And so if we are salt to this world, when it starts to unravel, when it is beginning to decay, when morally it is going to the dogs, we Christians are to help in its preservation. We are to here to make a difference.

G.C. Campbell Morgan said nicely when he wrote, "*Jesus, looking out over the multitudes of His day, saw the corruption, the disintegration of life at every point, its break up, its spoliation; and because of His love of the multitudes, He knew the thing that they needed most was the salt in order that the corruption should be arrested.*"

So we are that salt. You and I are the ones who live in our community in a way that turns our community upside down. And we are also to be light. Light is there to expose the darkness. You see when you turn on a light the darkness is chased away. And so we are meant to shine our lights into the corners of this dark world, expose its poverty, its selfishness, its corruption, just by being the light around all this darkness.

As well as this light serves as a guide. Airport runways helps planes see their runway by the lights. When we try to drive in the dark without lights it is dangerous. Likewise we are to be guides to people who are in darkness. They are to see our way of life and be attracted to it. And lastly light is to be seen. There is no such thing as a secret Christian. We need to be a light at all times. But light shines not so much that people may see the light as that they may see other things because of the light. Our light shines not that people will be attracted to us but so they might see Jesus Christ and give God the praise he deserves.

So do you see what Jesus is saying? Like salt, our Christian community should silently being making a difference. We are living with a new attitude, we are

operating on different values that one by one touch people's lives. But as light we also work in an open, visible way. Sharing our faith, contrasting it with unbelief. Pointing them to Jesus.

Many of us lament the way our world is going. With its evil, its corruption, its relentless, its greed. But instead of throwing up our hands in horror and cursing the world's leaders, should we not be blaming ourselves, us as a community of believers. For we can't blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else. The real question is where is the salt? What are we doing as Christians?

We can do something that can make a difference. We in fact have been given the task of doing something that will make a difference. And it all starts with living a life of truly Christian character. It starts with both you and me changing not just our actions, but what's inside us. Its about coming to Jesus and letting him develop Christian character in us. For that is how we will change the world, that is how we will be salt and light to this world, that is how we make our Christian lives really count.

The preacher Ray Pritchard puts it this way: "We who follow Jesus Christ are to be a 'moral disinfectant' stopping the spread of evil. We are to be the conscience of the community, speaking out for what is true and right." Joe Aldrich, author of the book Life-Style Evangelism, put it like this: "Christians are to be good news before they share the good news." And Michael Green wrote in his commentary on these verses says , "If Christians are insipid they are useless to Christ. There should be a flavour of Christ-likeness, a sparkle of joy and unselfishness about him or her that is immensely attractive."

Friends we are to be part of a new community, that at the same time rubs shoulder to shoulder with our own Australian community. Our attitude is to be like salt, our actions like light. In the hope that those who live around might see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven. And if you do that, you and maybe your family and friends & community will see God, you all may be called sons and daughters of God, because yours will be the Kingdom of heaven. A Kingdom that will never, ever pass away.

Salt and Light - Amity/Raffles

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