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Sermon 18 OCT 2020

OTL 3: Good-for-Nothing Christians

- Thank you, Pastor Tasha. May God bless the reading of the Word.
- Good morning church! Today is the THIRD Sunday in our sermon series called "On the Level," and we'll be finishing up this series next Sunday, the 25th of October, when, in addition to the morning service, we'll meet in the evening at 6pm on ZOOM, and we'll have a Second Helping Bible Study that will review all that we will have heard over the past four Sundays. We hope that you'll join us for that good time of discussion and fellowship—and of course for the Ayrshire Hub Gathering on the 21st—that's this coming Wednesday—watch for information on how to connect to Zoom for that.
- Once again, I believe this morning that God has something profound and life-changing to say to each and every one of us if we have ears to hear.
- This sermon series that we're in is called "On the Level" because we are looking at Jesus' sermon on the plain in Luke chapter 6—a sermon that Jesus preaches to the crowds in a "level place"—and as we have learned, the imagery of the "level place" is used by the Old Testament prophets to describe barren, desolate places in need of renewal.
- And as we saw on the first Sunday of this series, Jesus' sermon on the plain begins before Jesus has spoken a single word—Jesus preaches a

silent sermon through his actions, even before he has begun to preach out loud.

- Luke tells us that before Jesus begins his sermon on the plain, he climbs up to the mountaintop—but he doesn't stay on the mountaintop
- No, Jesus' calls his apostles and goes down FROM the mountaintop to the level place with those in need and pours his power out in order to transform the broken places and the lives of the people who dwell there
- And so Luke reminds us that Jesus' presence in the midst of a broken levelled world fulfils the words of the OT prophets who proclaimed that the renewal and revival of the level places, the wastelands, would take place through the arrival of the Kingdom of God.
- And so the disciples and the crowds gathered in this level place could testify that their eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
- And as we heard last week, when he speaks, Jesus echoes the voices of those godly prophets who spoke words of hope and judgement, blessings and woes
- We saw how Luke emphasises Jesus' prophetic role by introducing us to Anna, the prophetess, and telling us in chapter 4 about the way that Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth, where he calls himself a prophet,
- Luke tells us in chapter 3 of his gospel about the prophet, John the Baptist, who proclaims a baptism of repentance and forgiveness, who warns those who come to hear him of the wrath to come, but goes on to give specific instructions about what people should DO—HOW they should live—

PRACTICALLY— people ask him WHAT SHOULD WE DO? And he tells them

- And like John the Baptist in chapter 3, here in chapter 6 Jesus starts his sermon on the plain with prophetic words of blessings and woes, contrasting two WAYS of LIVING, but he doesn't end there—he goes on to give practical instructions about HOW his followers should LIVE— directions to be followed—and that's what we'll be looking at today, in this sermon called “Good for nothing Christians”
- But I want to tell you a story first
- I once heard of a busy young mother who had a 5-year-old son—let's call him “Johnny.” Now Johnny was a rambunctious little boy, and he could be quite a handful, especially when his mother was trying to run errands. One day, in the weeks before Christmas, Johnny's mother had an unusually tight schedule, and she had a lot of things she needed to get done to prepare for the coming season—house guests and that sort of thing. And Johnny's mother knew what a distraction and even a hindrance Johnny's behaviour could be, and so she thought it would be a good idea to have a little talk with Johnny before they got out in public and he caused a scene and kept her from accomplishing all she needed to. Johnny's mother had read lots of books about dealing with a strong-willed child from different experts in psychology and whatnot—and Johnny's mother knew what it would take to convince Johnny to cooperate and not be obstinate and disruptive that afternoon—and so she went straight to the most effective parenting technique that she knew of: bribery. And so she told Johnny, she said, “Now Johnny, Mama has a lot to get done today, and she's going to

need your help to do it all—and if you’ll be on your very best behaviour today, after we’re all done we’ll get you an ice cream cone—two scoops—and you can get it dipped in chocolate with sprinkles if you want—any way you’d like it.”

- But Johnny said, “Naw, that’s alright. I don’t need an ice cream cone.”
- Johnny’s mother didn’t know what to think about that, so she tried again. She said, “Well, Johnny,” she said “how about we get you one of those Spider-Man comic books that you like so much?”
- “Naw, Mama, I don’t need a comic book,” Johnny said.
- “Well, then,” his Mama said, “we could stop at the toy store, and you could pick out a new Matchbox car or maybe a . . .”
- Johnny interrupted her and said, “I reckon I’ve got enough toys.”
- Now see, Johnny was a smart kid—he knew Christmas was coming—and he was at the age where he wasn’t sure if all this talk about Santa Claus was true or not, but he figured it was best to be on the safe side and not take any chances with that thing—and so when his Mom asked, “Well, Johnny, if you don’t want an ice cream or a comic book or a new toy, what DO you want?”
- Johnny said, “Mom, you don’t have to give me something to make me behave. I’ll BE good—I’ll be good, for nothing.”
- Now, Johnny didn’t know that when we use the phrase “good-for-nothing” we mean somebody or something that’s not good for anything—but Johnny meant he’d be good without getting anything in return for it—and as we look at what Jesus is saying here in these verses, I want to suggest that what Jesus is doing here is giving us practical instructions for living

as disciples, concrete examples of one of the two ways of living that we talked about last Sunday—you'll remember that we said that one way of living is one that hoards and keeps and fears and ignores the needs of others, while the other is a life that is emptied out, a life that has the same attitude as Jesus who pours out all that he is and all that he has for others—who exemplifies that godly love we call AGAPE

- And today I also want to suggest that those who live such a life might be described as “good-for-nothing Christians”—“good-for-nothing” not in the sense that we usually think of, but in the sense that young Johnny understood it,
- And I want us to consider three characteristics of “Good-for-nothing Christians” that arise from Jesus’ words here in the 6th chapter of Luke’s gospel—these are listed in your sermon notes, and the first is this:
 - Good-for-Nothing Christians give, expecting nothing from the receiver
 - Let’s look at the scripture, beginning with verse 27 together
 - 27 “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.
- The first thing I notice about this passage is that Jesus says “I say to you that listen”—and I’m reminded that listening is not the same thing as hearing—listening is active—listening requires that one be engaged in the conversation—

- You know, you don't even have to be able to hear to be able to listen—I know people who are deaf, people who have hearing impairments, total hearing loss, who are great listeners—that's deep if you don't think about it too much—
- But certainly Jesus is speaking to those who have ears to hear
- And what Jesus is suggesting here to those who listen is that a New kingdom—the Kingdom of God—brings with it a new economy—a new and different system of exchange for those who acknowledge its authority, for those who are citizens not of this world, not of an earthly Empire, for those who acknowledge that Jesus is Lord, and by implication, that Caesar is not
- What do I mean by this?
- Look at each of these examples in verses 27 through 31—these are about expenditure without return—giving without getting anything back
- Jesus says LOVE your Enemies—LOVE those who don't RETURN that love—those who hate us, those who RETURN hate for love, and Jesus tells us to do good to those who hate us
- Jesus speaks about curses, and physical attacks—things that take something from us—that cause us harm and loss—and Jesus says in return for that harm and loss we ought give what is ours and what is good—blessings and prayers and even our bodies and our possessions
- Now if you think about these situations—being hated, being cursed, being physically assaulted, being robbed—these are situations in which our natural response is to GET EVEN—to get something back in order to balance things out—because we're OWED something, we want to SETTLE

THE SCORE—we assume a reciprocal relationship with other people—if I give you something, you give me something in return—if you take something from me, I’m going to take something from you, if you withhold something from me, like love—if you hate me—then I’m going to withhold love from you—I’m going to hate you right back—this is common sense—this is how things work in the real world—this is human nature

- But Jesus is suggesting a way of living that is different—radically different
- One of the late 20th century’s most influential thinkers, Jacques Derrida, he was a philosopher and literary critic and —well, he thought and wrote about a lot of things—and one of the things he thought and wrote about was the idea of the “GIFT.”
- And you might think, “well that’s a silly thing—that couldn’t take long to think about—it’s a simple concept—you want to give somebody something and so you wrap it up and put a bow on it and give it to them—that’s a gift—end of story”
- But it isn’t that simple, it turns out
- Now maybe ideally it SHOULD be that you can just give someone something, BUT what Derrida noticed when he looked at the way people behave in organised cultures is that very often in real-life situations in societies—including ours, what he noticed was that a Gift is a DEBT
- A gift is a DEBT—think of when you receive something as a gift—someone gives you a present—something unexpected—maybe just because they were thinking of you or wanted to show their appreciation or affection—and you think—well I need to give them something back

- Think of when a business wants to give you “a free gift”—accept this toaster as our free gift when you sign up for whatever we’re offering—you better believe they expect something in return
- Or think about when you get a present associated with some occasion, like a birthday or Christmas—you think well, now I need to remember their birthday or give them a Christmas present—
- and it has to be sort of equal to the gift they gave you, you know? If you give someone a paperweight or a fridge magnet or a new facemask for their birthday, and when your birthday rolls around they give you a big-screen TV or a trip to DisneyWorld—you might be embarrassed, or maybe even offended, and you think you need to make up the difference somehow
- We see this behaviour in things as simple as getting a Christmas card—you get a Christmas card from somebody and you think, well now I need to make sure to send them one
- And people get their feelings hurt when this game isn’t played, when the rules aren’t followed—you know—well I gave them such and such and they didn’t give me ANYTHING. . . or ALL they gave ME was a pair of socks or a card and I spent all day picking out their gift. . . it’s not fair, it’s not even
- And I will guarantee you that the folks in Jesus’ audience were no different in this respect from us—their cultural expectations would have been much the same, because they were humans, in a human society, thinking and acting according to human patterns

- But Jesus speaks into their earthly situation with a heavenly message—his prophetic challenge calls them to a higher way of living, a higher way of thinking
- And what is being suggested by Jesus here is expenditure—giving-- without expectation of return—without getting even
- Imagine for a moment the ill-will, the anxiety, the resentment that would be eliminated if all people lived this way — think of it—people are in jail —people have been killed—wars have been fought for the sake of GETTING EVEN—oh, we gotta get even, we gotta settle the score—we’re not gonna give without getting something back
- So common sense, human nature, earthly morality, looks at these commands that Jesus gives—and that’s what they are –they are not suggestions—they are commands straight from Jesus himself—and thinks, this sounds crazy—this is a radical and foolish way to live
- But as the Apostle Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 1:18, (For) the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
- And do not think that this is simply about rich people giving away their possessions—that is an overly simplistic way to interpret what’s going on here—we saw this when we read about Jesus’ interaction with the rich young man in Matthew 19—you can give away all you have and still not be righteous
- What Jesus is suggesting here is a way of living that, regardless of the resources that we have—whether rich or poor from a cultural standpoint —a way of living that says all that I have is available for the purposes of

the Kingdom of God— all that I possess, all that I can do, all that I am and all that I ever will be, I do not consider my own but God's—

- Some of the richest—in terms of financial wealth, net worth—some of the wealthiest people I know have just such an attitude—they have lots of resources and count them all as available for the work of the Kingdom, and some of the poorest people I've ever met have an attitude of scarcity that clings to the few resources they believe they deserve and fears and resists the very idea of sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom—
- But what Jesus is commanding of his followers is first and foremost a command to LOVE—and the love he commands is AGAPE—that self-emptying, cross-embracing Godly love
- But the dominant culture tells us, as it told the crowds who listened to Jesus in the level place, to grab all we can and hold onto it, and to be afraid that someone might take it from us
- And that brings us to the second characteristic of Good-for-Nothing Christians
- Good-for-Nothing Christians Are counter-cultural
- Jesus says, beginning with verse 32
- 32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.
- Here Jesus talks about the kinds of things that “even sinners” do—and he might as well say, “everybody else” does these things—oh I remember

using that language with my parents when I was a teenager—“But everybody else is doing it—why can’t I?”—

- Jesus is saying “the dominant culture of the world around you” does these things—but you, you are called to be different
- Jesus here is contrasting those who live according to the values of the Kingdom of God and those who don’t—between Followers of Jesus and the world—sinners—the society in which they live—the culture
- And followers of Jesus live lives that run COUNTER to that CULTURE
- A follower of Jesus lives according to different values— A follower of Jesus IS different— the life of a follower of Jesus runs counter to the dominant culture—and if ours doesn’t, maybe we need to ask whether we’re actually living AS Christians, as followers of Jesus, as citizens of the Kingdom of God, or not
- I know, I know—I better be careful—that sounds extreme—and we don’t want to rock the boat—we don’t want to offend anybody
- But, I just believe, and I feel called to tell you, that
- People who ARE Followers of Jesus ought to live differently, ought to behave differently, ought to BE DIFFERENT from people who are NOT followers of Jesus
- And Jesus is saying here that following him, living in the Kingdom of God, under the Lordship of Christ, is about **living differently**—beyond the values and morals of the dominant culture—BEYOND the status quo—BEYOND common sense values—it’s counter-cultural—the call to follow Jesus, Paul says, is FOOLISHNESS to those who are perishing—a stumbling

block and a scandal—and it calls out for people who are willing to LIVE
OTHER-WISE

- And the church—both collectively and as the individuals within it—is called to raise its prophetic voice and call all who hear to repentance and forgiveness, to proclaim the good news of the gospel that changes lives
- The role of the church is not simply to be a reflection of the dominant culture in which it exists—the church is called neither to negotiate with nor capitulate to those who wield earthly power and influence in an attempt to re-create the church in their own image—the church must resist those who would bully her into submission, whether with the promise of gain or threat of harm
- I am reminded this morning of the powerful words of Dr Martin Luther King, who wrote some 60 years ago, in another sermon from Luke’s gospel, these words about the prophetic voice of the church, he said:
 - “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its **prophetic zeal**, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. . . .but if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men”
- But I cannot think of these words without thinking also of the prophetic last words Dr King spoke from an earthly pulpit, those words with which

he concluded his sermon one evening in a church in Tennessee in April of 1968, when he proclaimed to the gathered crowd:

- (audio) Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!
- Just a few hours later, Dr King was dead, struck down by an assassin's bullet. He was 39 years old. 39 years old.
- Living other-wise can be costly—Coming down from the mountaintop to the level place, critiquing the status quo, calling for people to live differently, proclaiming the glory of the coming of the Lord, can find you emptied out—it can get you locked up in a jail cell in Judaea or in Birmingham—it can lead to your head being served up on a platter—it can find you walking the Via Dolorosa and crucified on a hill called Mount Calvary—and it can find you lying lifeless in a pool of blood on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis
- But there is good news, and it's this
- One last characteristic of Good-for-Nothing Christians
- Good-for-Nothing Christians Trust God, not the world, for the return
- Jesus says, in verse 35:

- 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.
Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High;
- Jesus is talking here about a Divine return on investment—eternal dividends—a Good-for-Nothing Christian knows that God, not the world, is in charge of the reward—that it is God who provides
- When Pastor Tasha and I used to teach kids how to garden at Icebox Urban Farm back in Augusta Georgia, we’d talk to young kids who didn’t really know anything about gardening sometimes
- And we’d give them a packet of seeds—like this one (*shake*)
- And they’d open the packet and look at the seeds—and some of them are fun to look at—they’re different colours and shapes and the packet makes noise when you shake it
- And so the kids were happy to receive this neat gift—they appreciated being given something special
- And then we’d say, “Ok, now we’re going out to the garden and we’re going to take our seeds and bury them in the soil—and then you’ll all go home.”
- And some of the kids looked at us like we had lost our minds—“you just gave me this neat thing and you want me to throw it away—to bury it in the dirt and leave it there?”
- But some of the kids understood what would happen.
- But it took faith in the words we were speaking to them—for them to be able to sacrifice what they had—and to believe that there was a reason—to understand that unless a seed is planted in the soil and dies it cannot bear fruit

- You know planting a seed LOOKS like it's only expenditure, only sacrifice, only loss—it looks “good for nothing”—but to those who understand, who have ears to hear, to those who listen, it's much more than that—they know that God provides the harvest—and the Kingdom of God is like this
- I think this is what Jesus is calling us toward when he suggests that we be Good for nothing--
- Imagine a Good-for-Nothing church, made up of Good-for-Nothing Christians—
- Followers of Jesus who respond to the counter-cultural call of the gospel—who truly ARE the body of Christ—who understand that to be Good-for-Nothing is to be emptied out without expectation of return on our investment FROM the world,
- but leaving the return on investment, the payback, the reward, up to God—because that is how the kenotic Counter-cultural Kingdom of God works—through being emptied out for God and for others (living other-wise)—and leaving the return up to God, who gives generously and abundantly, and whose resources are unlimited—Blessed are the Good-for-Nothing Christians, for theirs is the Kingdom of God
- Imagine a good-for-nothing church that reclaims its prophetic voice and zeal--offering hope and healing to the Last, the least and the lost
- That doesn't spend its time and energy trying to please the first, the foremost and the found
- A good-for-nothing church who come down from the mountaintop and revive the level places, who call for repentance, who point the way to forgiveness, whose eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord

- I want to be part of a Good For Nothing church—I want to be a Good For Nothing Christian—maybe you do too. I hope so.
- Have good week — join us for our Ayrshire Hub Gathering on Wednesday evening if you can, and our prayer meeting on Wednesday morning—we look forward to worshipping with you again next Sunday. May God bless you and keep you until then.