

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Character

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning! In our society it's easy to invest our time in things that are not central, like achieving in sport, being fit, looking well dressed, earning lots of money, owning lots of impressive possessions. Yet we don't invest much time or thought on cultivating character. I find personally there are lots of pressures to distract me from growing in maturity of character. For those who follow Jesus, the development of character is a central goal, not one project that may happen on the side.

Jesus had a lot to say about character. This morning let's look at the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus portrays the kind of character he expects in those who follow him. We'll consider that theme after this next song.

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Recently I read an interesting book entitled 'Son of Hamas'. It was written by Mosab Hassan Yousef. Mosab tells his story as the son of one of the founders of the deadly terrorist group Hamas. He worked for the Palestinian terrorists and also the Israeli intelligence. Mosab was arrested and imprisoned by Israeli authorities. He saw the senseless cycle of violence, suicide bombings and revenge that goes on and on in Israel. Through a chance meeting with a British tourist, Mosab encountered the teaching of Jesus. He was given a New Testament, and he decided to read it.

Here is what Mosab writes: 'I began at the beginning, and when I got to the Sermon on the Mount, I thought, *Wow, this guy Jesus is really impressive! Everything he says is beautiful. What wisdom this man had.* I couldn't put the book down. Every verse seemed to touch a deep wound in my life. I was a very simple message, but somehow it had the power to heal my soul and give me hope. Never before had I heard anything like this, but I knew that this was the message I had been searching for all my life. Everything Jesus said on the pages of this book made perfect sense to me. There was power and beauty in this truth. Overwhelmed, I started to cry.'

When I read of Mosab's reaction to his discovery of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, I decided to look again at that famous Sermon. It's in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5 to 7. I've been challenged afresh by the straight words Jesus says as he paints a picture of what it means for people to follow Jesus. The teaching is still startling today: don't take revenge, love your enemies, don't be anxious about material things, trust God to provide for your needs, do not judge people, give to the needy, be people of prayer, be devoted to God even when that loyalty is costly. Here is a radical call to be conspicuously different, to be followers of Jesus whose lives make a positive difference.

Today I invite you to look with me at the opening words of the Sermon: esp. 5:1-10. These are the 8 'beatitudes', describing for us the character of people who follow Jesus. Jesus declares these people 'blessed' – in other words these are people Jesus sees as 'fortunate', and 'well off'. The character described is so different compared to what most people today value. In our world, still, what most people value the most is success, wealth, pushing for your own way, selfish ambition, long life, victory in battle. Jesus, in

contrast, is saying the ‘fortunate’ and ‘well off’ people are the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers, the merciful.

Jesus requires all who follow him to be people of character.

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This morning we’re considering the kind of character that Jesus expects in those who follow him. The introduction to the Sermon on the Mount paints a vivid picture of what that character looks like. The ideals portrayed in the ‘beatitudes’ are very high, but Jesus asks us to take these ideals seriously.

The people who are growing in this kind of character are people who **look back**. They look back on the cross, and see the suffering and sacrifice that Jesus went through for us. He died so we can be forgiven when we receive his mercy and grace. As we look back on our Saviour on the cross, we are full of gratitude, and we want to cultivate character and behaviour that expresses our thanks.

The people described here as ‘blessed’ also **look up**. They are focussed on God. The ‘poor in spirit’ are those who humbly depend on God, conscious of their need and weakness. The ‘mourners’ are people who are so loyal to God that they are prepared to suffer oppression and material disadvantage. They mourn, too, over their own failures before God and the sin and brokenness of the world. The ‘meek’ are those who are not pushy, but who are gentle, who are self-controlled, who rely patiently on God to work out his purposes. Those hungering and thirsting for ‘righteousness’ long for a relationship with God of obedience and trust. The ‘pure in heart’ are those who love God with undivided loyalty.

These people portrayed in the beatitudes long to know God, trust God, obey God, and show God’s character of mercy and peacemaking to a troubled world. They know that in this universe God is absolutely central, and human being, God’s image-bearers, are to be rightly and lovingly related to him. These people described are not worried about the opinions of people, for they want to please God more than anything else.

As I contemplate this description of the character of Jesus’ disciples, it makes me see again my own weakness and failure. It shows how often all God’s people fail to live up to the high demands of following Jesus. When I see that, it drives me to, again, look back on the cross of Jesus. I see my Saviour suffering and dying for my sin. I stand on level ground before the cross, along with everyone else, and I look to him for his forgiveness and mercy. That’s the unique and wonderful thing about Jesus: on the one hand he makes stern demands for my character and behaviour, but at the same time he offers tender grace and gentle mercy. Think, for example, of how Jesus dealt with the apostle Peter. Jesus expected Peter to be loyal and courageous even when admitting he was a friend of Jesus might lead to Peter’s arrest. When Peter failed and denied his Lord, Jesus showed him mercy and offered the chance for Peter to begin again as a servant of Jesus. That’s what Jesus is like: high expectations, yet tender kindness when we admit our failures and depend on him.

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Jesus calls all who follow him to be people of character. In the beatitudes, the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus paints a picture of the kind of character he expects. This character should be growing, not only in each disciple of Jesus, but also in the church, the community of those who follow Jesus.

The people described in these beatitudes look back on the cross of Jesus, They look up to God, with a deep desire to trust and obey God. Finally, these people **look forward**. They count on the promises Jesus has given that a new world is coming.

Look at how 6 of these 8 beatitudes describe some aspect of reward for God's people in that new world. The mourners will be comforted, the meek will inherit the earth, the merciful will be shown mercy, the pure in heart will see God (cf. vv.4-9). When the Lord Jesus returns, the eternal Kingdom of God will begin on earth. The present earth will be transformed into the place of beauty and delight that God always intended.

And those who follow Jesus are to begin now to show by the way we live what God's promised future will look like. It will be a world 'right-side up', instead of the upside down world we live in now due to our human rebellion against our Creator. God's people may have to endure hostility and persecution now for following Jesus, but the awareness of what is coming in the new world should cause us to 'rejoice and be glad' (v.12). It seems so hard for us to be glad when we suffer for following God's ways – but it is possible to be full of joy when we contemplate Jesus' promises about the new world that is to come.

Jesus calls us to be people of character. He calls us to belong to a local church, a community of Jesus' disciples, where together we grow in character. We're invited to live daringly, showing behaviour that is distinctly different to the world around us. If we grow in this character, we are what Jesus announces to be 'blessed', 'fortunate', 'well off'. This character will grow as we **look back, look up, and look forward**. And when we grow in this character, Jesus says we will function like salt – slowing down the rot and decay in the world. We will also shine God's bright light into dark corners, pointing people to God, encouraging them to join with us in worshipping God.

Jesus said: 'Let your light shine before people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.' (v.16) The words translated 'good deeds' could be translated 'beautiful actions'. God's people are live out our character as Jesus' disciples, showing the beauty and goodness of God as we invite people to worship God with us.

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Let me pray in the words attributed to Francis of Assisi, based on the beatitudes introducing the Sermon on the Mount:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
 where there is hatred, let me sow love;
 where there is injury, pardon;
 where there is doubt, faith;
 where there is despair, hope;
 where there is darkness, light;
 where there is sadness, joy.
 O divine Master,
 grant that I may not so much seek
 to be consoled as to console;
 to be understood as to understand;
 to be loved, as to love.
 For it is in giving that we receive,
 it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
 and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
 Amen.