

The Church's Corporate Practice

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[0 : 00] But let's turn now to our reading for this evening. And we're reading from Matthew's Gospel. So do turn your Bibles to Matthew chapter 5.

! We have visitor Bibles scattered around the place. If you'd like to take one of those if you don't have a Bible with you. Matthew chapter 5, page 810, if you're using the visitor Bible.

Matthew chapter 5. And we're reading from verse 11. This is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So Matthew 5, and beginning at verse 11.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

Rejoice and be glad. For your reward is great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth.

[1 : 09] But if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket but on a stand.

And it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

Do not think that I've come to abolish the law of the prophets. I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Amen.

Amen. Oh, may God bless his word to us tonight. again very clearly, lest anyone forget or be confused, that the primary task of the church is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. That was the Lord Jesus' command to his apostles as he ascended to glory. He gave them what we call the Great Commission. Go and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that I've commanded you. It is a ministry of proclamation, of teaching of the apostolic gospel alone that builds the church, the worldwide church of Jesus

[3 : 12] Christ, by calling people into the church to save them through the power of the gospel, which alone is the power to save and to transform human life. So make no mistake, proclamation is our first priority. That is not because spiritual things are more important than physical things.

These two things can't be separated. But it is because eternal things are infinitely more important than temporal things. So let's be very clear about that. Don't listen to people who say to you, no, no, no, the real work of the kingdom is all about now. It's not about the future. It's about making a real difference in this world. That just flatly contradicts the Lord Jesus, doesn't it?

Remember, he said very clearly, my kingdom is not of this world. And nor is the gospel merely about this world. It's about the new creation. It's about the eternal world to come. That is the message of the whole of the scriptures. If we forget that, then we have abandoned the true Christian faith altogether. So let me make that very, very clear right at the very beginning. But, and there is a but, but neither are we to forget that in the coming of Jesus, the eternal world, the life of the world to come has broken into our present world, this earthly world.

It's come into time and space, the time and space in which we live. Because the immortal God, the invisible God, he has revealed himself supremely in the flesh, in our humanity, in the incarnation. That's what John the apostle is speaking about in the beginning of his gospel, where he says, no one has ever seen God, but the only begotten one who is at the father's side, he has made him known.

[5 : 22] And he says, we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth. And that word means seen with the eyes, physically, actually seen in this world, in the flesh, on this earth. And it is the gospel of this Jesus Christ, God, the son, that has touched our lives, that has saved us, and that has

transformed us.

As individual believers, but also as the, as the church of Jesus Christ, we have been made ambassadors, ambassadors of God, living witnesses to his truth in this world, as that truth is made incarnate in us also.

And last time we were thinking about, about how that truth in our lives is part of what bears witness to the truth for life that is in the gospel.

We were thinking about Christian character, Christian conduct that commends the gospel. And we were looking to remember in Paul's words to Titus, where he's very, very clear, we are not saved by good works, of course not, but we are saved for good works.

So that, well, as Paul says, and as Peter says also, even opposers of the gospel will have nothing evil to say about us. But by contrast, they'll see that everything that we do serves to advance the gospel, to use that beautiful word, to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior, to show it off in all its beauty, the gospel of God our Savior. And that is our calling as believers.

[7 : 01] For our lives. To adorn the gospel. Because the alternative is too awful to contemplate, isn't it? That because of us, God's name should be, not adorned, but blasphemed among the nations.

That was the terrible charge, wasn't it, of God against his people so many times in the past. That was God's charge against Israel. God's name was blasphemed in the world instead of blessed and adored because of their behavior, their conduct. Some of you may remember, but I'll never forget some years ago, a terrible, terrible story in the news about a man in the United States who had captured a girl and imprisoned her in his house for some 28 years. He'd kept her as a slave. He'd had children by her. And all the time while he was doing that, enslaving this woman, using her, abusing her.

He used to go out on the streets preaching the gospel and handing out gospel tracts. Blaspheming the name of God.

And when he was found out and when it came to light. What a terrible, terrible message that was for the Christian church. But no, in absolute contrast to anything like that, we are to beautify the name of our salvation.

And that's the way it is to be, not just for us as individuals, but for the church corporately. Because not only is there great power in genuine Christian character, there is also great power, great witness, when genuine Christian community is seen and heard in this world.

[8 : 53] And the corporate message of the church is also inseparable, isn't it, from the medium that proclaims it. And so the church as a whole must advertise, must display, must embody the grace of God in Christ.

In the corporate life that we lead, just as we embody that on our lips, as we proclaim the message. Together, we are to be a church that publicizes the gospel's mercy.

And that really is what Jesus is talking about right here in Matthew chapter 5, in these famous verses in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Just let me read from verse 13 again. You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

It's no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden, nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

[10 : 08] Do not think I've come to abolish the law of the prophets. I've not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them. Now just think about that last verse there, verse 17.

It's very, very important for this aspect of mission as the living witness of a genuine community of faith. Jesus says He hasn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them.

And in the broader sense, of course, the law and the prophets is the story of God, the story of God's chosen people that He calls to be His own, through whom He wants to make Himself known to all the earth to bless all the nations.

Now if you go back way into the law, if you read Deuteronomy chapter 4, for example, you'll see that God gave His law, He gave His instruction for how to live truly holy lives, truly human lives. He gave those instructions to God's people for the sake of mission. So the surrounding nations would see, they would see this distinctive godly culture and they would say to themselves, what

great God is this that this people have and this people serve?

[11 : 20] When you get to the prophets, you find exactly the same thing. God's people were called to be light to the nations. It's exactly that language that's used, in fact, in Isaiah, repeatedly.

You are a light for the nations that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth, says the Lord, in Isaiah 49, verse 6. Now, of course, the prophets constantly lamented the fact that Israel failed, God's people failed so often in their task because of their sinfulness.

And Isaiah, in those chapters, is promising, isn't he, that one day God will at last send a true servant unbesmirched by sin, the Messiah, and He would not fail and He, at last, would bring His whole light to cover the earth.

But, of course, that would not mean that the role of God's people is somehow over. Christ came not to abolish God's plan for this world, but to fulfill it through His work of perfect salvation in Jesus and through the ambassadors, through the servants, renewed and transformed in Jesus, who would be a community, His church, the people of the risen Lord Jesus, indwelt by the Spirit of the perfect human risen Savior, to shine His light, at last, to the very ends of the earth.

And so you, my followers, my church, you are the light of this world, He says here in Matthew 5.

[12 : 55] And you can't be hidden, you see, that's impossible. You will shine, you will publicize a message to the world, you will show the world, and what they see of you will determine what they think of me.

That's what Jesus is saying here. And so the question, you see, for the church of Jesus Christ is, will the light, will the message that we shine together to the world from our communities, from our churches, to the city that we live in, to the nation that we live in, to the world, will it adorn, will it beautify the name of our Lord and Savior?

Or will it besmirch His wonderful name? Well, of course, we want it to be the former, don't we? We want verse 16 to be true of our churches, that people will see our good deeds and give glory to the Father in heaven.

We want our church to publicize the gospel's great mercy, don't we, in our corporate life? Just as we proclaim that gospel with our lips. And don't underestimate the power of genuine Christian community, of a distinctive Christian counterculture in this world.

We should be very confident, shouldn't we, in the power of genuine goodness to impress itself on a watching world because God's mercy really is genuinely winsome.

[14 : 25] It's winsome, of course, that doesn't mean that it will always win people to Christ because, of course, the human heart is perverse by nature.

The light shines, but remember Jesus' words? People love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. And the light of God's mercy when it shines in the world does often shame people. It does often arouse opposition. That's what Jesus is saying here in verse 11. Look, the amazing thing is that the gracious, merciful life that embodies everything that's described in the Beatitudes there, verses 1 to 10, it may lead to reviling, to persecution, to slander.

You see, the distinctive, truly Christ-like counterculture of genuine Christianity, it is powerful, but it is a double-edged sword just because it embodies, it publicizes in the flesh the living truth of the true gospel, which is always a double-edged sword.

You see, to say that the Christian church is salt and light in the world is actually something that's very offensive, isn't it, to an unbelieving world because it implies that the world is decaying, that it's rotten, that it needs disinfecting and saving by salt.

[15 : 50] It implies that the world is dark and confused, that it needs enlightening from the Word of God. And when we tell people that often, it makes people angry, of course, doesn't it?

It makes people very offended. An honest, hard worker is always resented among colleagues who are lazy, who are dishonest because, well, he shows them up for what they are.

And that's why, you see, even gracious, godly, merciful communities are often opposed, are often persecuted. We know that. We hear regularly news from Christian brothers and sisters that we know in parts of the world who are doing nothing but good in their communities but are opposed.

It's not that their witness has no power. It's because it does have power. Power to expose, power to challenge. The challenge lies, the challenge falsehood with true faith, with true justice.

But at the same time, don't be despondent, the genuine, flavoursome seasoning of warm light that comes from the gospel, the mercy of the gospel lived out in the flesh, it is also supremely attractive.

[17:07] And it can, in the end, overcome even the most entrenched and prejudiced perversity and evil. And so we're called to shine, to publicize gospel mercy to the world and to do so in our lives together as we live as the community of heaven here on earth, the church of Jesus Christ.

And we're to do it not just as an evangelistic tactic, but as a genuine fruit of a faith that is real. And as that faith has taken root in our lives and expresses itself in the mercy of God, both individually, but also as a community of God's people.

Do you remember just recently when we were studying the letter of James, how in James chapter 2, it tells us so clearly, doesn't it, that real faith is a visible thing. It's visible publicly. It's publicized by our works.

The faith that feeds and clothes a brother in need. The faith that visits orphans and widows in their affliction. That fulfills the royal law, do you remember? Loving our neighbors as ourselves.

James is talking about that royal law of love. And of course, publicizing gospel mercy is at the very heart of God's law. The book of Leviticus, if you ever hear it mentioned today, is very often maligned, isn't it?

[18:32] It's obscure and ancient and just a text that has no relevance whatsoever for us today. Well, have a read of the book of Leviticus, if that's what you think. It is full, full, of the most merciful laws.

It commands to care for the widow, for the fatherless, the sojourner, to be generous to those who have got less than you have, to be just and fair and honest in all of your business dealings.

In fact, just let me read to you. Let me read to you some verses from Leviticus for yourself. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to the edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest, and you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes from your vineyard.

You shall leave them for the poor and the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. You shall not steal. You shall not deal falsely.

You shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely and so profane the honor of your God. I am the Lord. You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him.

[19:42] The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord. You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people and you shall not stand up or you shall stand, not stand up against the life of your neighbor.

I am the Lord. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor lest you incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Imagine the difference in our society if every bank, if every business, if every government department in fact, if all of us operated on the terms of Leviticus chapter 19 there.

Publicizing the mercy of the gospel of God was at the very heart of every command of God's law. And publicizing God's mercy was at the very heart of every part of Jesus' ministry, wasn't it?

[21:04] As he displayed in his own person the mercy of God's gracious law. read on in Matthew chapter 5 to see what he says about loving our neighbors. Not just our neighbors, but our enemies.

And going the second mile even with them, the ones who hate us. Read in the Gospels how Jesus' life matched his lips in every respect.

Think of his patient pleading with people, even with Judas as he was about to betray him. Think of his words on the cross. Father, forgive them.

And when we look at the early church you see the same pattern, don't you? You see that they too publicized gospel mercy. In Acts chapter 2 how they shared everything so there were none in need among them.

Or in Acts chapter 6 as they grew they instituted an organized relief effort for the widows, for those who genuinely had no economic support so they would not starve.

[22:11] Or Acts chapter 11 where you have the busy apostle Paul himself organizing a mercy mission to go and help the believers in Jerusalem that were suffering famine. It's the same love of mercy that you find in God's ancient law that you find writ large all through the New Testament.

Paul himself sums it up, doesn't he, in Galatians chapter 6 at the end. So then, wherever we have opportunity, he says, let us do good to everyone and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Of course, he says, we have special responsibilities to other Christians. They're our family forever, aren't they? Not just like our earthly family. But also, he says, we're to rejoice at every opportunity to do good to all.

And so it is throughout the whole New Testament. So it has been throughout the whole history of the Christian church. And you know, those people who are hostile to Christianity, they do need to be honest enough, don't they, to deal with these facts.

They need to have a read of, well, the book by secular historians like Tom Holland, his book *Dominion*, that speaks about the impact that Christianity has had for good in every place in the world.

[23 : 26] It was the impact of the Christian church that civilized the Roman Empire. Until the Christian church had no interest whatsoever in welfare. It was Christians, wasn't it, who took those babies that were left exposed to die because of the wrong sex or whatever reason it was.

And led to the whole concept of adopting babies, beginning orphanages and so on. In fact, it was the church's pervasive relief efforts that actually embarrassed the empire into starting to take notice of those in need.

The fourth century, the emperor Julian wrote that Christianity was spreading rampantly because the Christians had such a high reputation for their philanthropy. And it disturbed them very greatly because it showed up, the hollow callousness of their administration.

Here's what he wrote. It's disgraceful. The impious Galileans, that's his word for Christians, the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well.

All men see that our people lack aid from us. That's the power, you see, of a community, a Christian church publicizing real gospel mercy.

[24 : 45] Both to bring gladness to some and bitter resentment to others because it shows them up. It's the same story with the history of medicine. So many of the great medical and nursing advances came through the influence of the Christian church and Christian people determined to show the mercy of Christ for those who are suffering.

That's before, of course, the Rockefellers and Big Pharma and so on totally corrupted medicine and made it just about profit. One notable recent example of that is the whole hospice movement pioneered by Christian people, people like James Cicely Saunders here in the United Kingdom. Still today, Christians all over the world. An old friend of mine from medical school spends her time now going to developing parts of the world and seeking to develop hospices, care for those who are dying.

Seculars today in the West are not interested in that, are they? What have we heard this week? They're trying again, having just been defeated, to bring the assisted dying bill back to Parliament. They don't want to help people who are dying, they want to help them die. Think of the great social reformers in this country back from the 18th century and afterwards following the Industrial Revolution.

[26 : 00] Think of the improvements that were brought to factories, helping the boys who had to climb up chimneys, people working down the mines, reform of the gassiness in prisons.

So many of these were promoted and instituted by practicing Christians. Think of the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury. Think of the people of the Clapham sect.

Think of William Wilberforce. The abolition of slavery and on and on and on it goes. We could be here all night speaking of these. So many things that we take for granted here in our culture today came from the influence of Christians, from Christian churches seeking to publicize the mercy of God, to bless and to help the lives of other human beings.

That's why it's just so foolish, isn't it, of secularists today trying to destroy the vestiges of the faith that gave us so many of the things that we cherish today.

And sadly, our present government seem to continue to do so relentlessly, both up here in Holyrood and down there in Westminster. These things are seen not just on national scales, they're seen everywhere on a local scale.

[27 : 13] I remember reading a story about a South African landowner who had seen so much of the improvement that came when some of his workers became Christians that he actually funded and built a church on his land and employed a pastor.

And it was economically worthwhile for him to do it because he found that it increased his profits, his workers had less illness, they had less drunkenness, far, far more good work. He could see, all he was interested in was the bottom line, but he could see the effect of the Christian faith.

We hear that from partners that we have in other countries today like our brother Imran working in Pakistan where they build schools and villages where they're seeking to bring clean water, where they want to show the mercy of God to poor people.

And as a result, people are asking them for Bibles to read about what it is that animates them for these things. Don't underestimate the power of true Christian community publicizing true gospel mercy.

Don't underestimate the power for a society to change and how desperately our society needs that light in its darkness. Our communities are so fractured.

[28 : 32] We've got growing sectarian and ethnic rivalries, haven't we? We've got the tragedy of family breakups, marriage troubles, children and young people so confused, so disillusioned in so many ways.

Where are they going to find light? Where are they going to see health and wholeness and what human life can really be? True humanity. They won't find it on YouTube.

They won't find it in all the self-help books in Amazon. But they should find it in the community of the church of Jesus Christ.

One historian wrote that the reason that Christianity made such an impact on the Roman Empire was that it offered a coherent culture that exhibited true, healthy humanity in a world of confusion and corruption.

isn't that what our world still needs so desperately today? And that's what we are for as the church of Jesus Christ.

[29 : 41] We're to be a pillar and buttress of truth in the world, in our life as well as in our lips. by what we are in Christ. We're to be a community pointing to where we're going.

A truly redeemed humanity for a truly recreated world. You see, the church of Jesus Christ is a recovery ward of all kinds of people who are being restored to true humanity in the image of Jesus. We're not any better than other people. We're just as sick as other people. But the difference is we have found a great physician who can bring true healing. And he's enrolled us into his recovery program.

He's promised us full restoration at last. And so surely we want to share that, don't we? Not as an evangelistic tactic, but just as a natural desire from our hearts.

Hearts that rejoice in the gospel mercy of Jesus. But of course it will nevertheless, won't it? It will speak powerfully to those who deep down know that they're made for something more.

[30 : 55] Something better than the fractured world that they live in, that they experience. I remember some years ago in America at a conference listening to the black American evangelist Bodhi Baucom who recently died.

Died earlier this year or last year I think. And he was telling us about how he came to faith and he was a man who never knew his father. His mother was a Buddhist, I think a drug addict.

He was brought up in the most bizarre and way out kind of lifestyle in Los Angeles. But somehow, somehow as a young man he told us how he got to know a Christian family.

And the sheer power of experiencing what it was like to be in their home, to be part of a stable, loving, godly home was what drew him to the gospel of Christ, what changed his life.

Just experiencing true humanity as it should be. Isn't that powerful? And there are so many stories like that.

[32 : 00] I was telling some of the students recently about evangelistic smacking. When I was a young boy on a Sunday afternoon, we had some students for lunch, and I was misbehaving as usual, and a smacking was required.

And during that process, one of the young student girls burst into tears and was very upset. And my mother thought, oh dear, she's very offended by what's happening.

So she asked her what was wrong. And she said, these were her words, I wish my parents had loved me enough to do that to me.

You see, she was seeing real love, loving discipline, just experiencing something of what true humanity is.

Don't underestimate the power of genuine Christian life, genuine Christian family, genuine Christian community, to publicize the mercy of God to a lost world, to a searching world.

[33 : 05] God's But what can we do? Of course, it depends who we are, it depends what our community needs are, it depends what we have.

Surely there are all kinds of things that we can do. We just need to think, we can all have open homes, can't we? We can all invite in that lonely person who's never known what it is to be part of a loving family.

But there's other things that we as Christians and churches can do to help marriages, to help people who are in a mess with their relationships, to help people who are in a mess with addiction. That's such a problem here in our own city. Scotland, Glasgow, top of the league, alas, only a nut. That's why we helped start ten years ago Hope for Addiction. Think of the scourge of abortion that we were hearing about a Wednesday night again.

Well, that's why many of you here have joined in with the ministry of Brephos to try and show the mercy, the kindness, the love of God to people who are caught up in the horror of abortion.

[34 : 19] We're all called, all of us, aren't we, in our own ways to publicize gospel mercy. And it may seem an impossible challenge to us, and of course, for us it is impossible, but we're not on our own, are we?

the God who called us to this as his people has put the spirit of his son, the spirit of perfect, vibrant, merciful, winsome, true humanity in our hearts and in our midst as a church.

He's shined the light of his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit so that we are able to shine that light out to others. God's It's a challenge, isn't it?

It's a great challenge to us as a church, but what a wonderful privilege it is to bear the light of the mercy of God to a world in terrible darkness.

What an encouragement as we struggle to live as churches and as Christian people that publicize gospel mercy to the world. Look at verse 16 there in Matthew 5 again, that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven.

[35 : 28] Isn't that something worth living for? Friends, let's be thinking constantly how in our lives together we can publicize gospel mercy to our city, to our nation.

It's part of our calling. It's part of the corporate mission of our church to adorn the gospel. It's part of the calling on all of us together as a church here in Glasgow.

So just as we finish, as we come to the end of this little series about our partnership in the church's corporate mission, let's just remind ourselves of the various aspects of that as we work together to make that truly fruitful corporate partnership.

First of all, we've got to remember why we have this mission at all. Why? Well, because Paul tells us there is one God and there's one way to know God only, the mediator, the one mediator, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he tells us, remember, that this God desires that all should come to a knowledge of the truth and be saved. He has given us a glorious task. And therefore together, we as the church, we are partners in that mission.

[36 : 43] Our corporate priority is to prioritize that gospel mindset. So that that task of mission is the driver in everything we do.

It's the decider in every decision that we make together as a church. Prioritize that gospel mindset. And then secondly, to that end, we're to pray for the real gospel means.

Remembering that only God can open the eyes of the spiritually blind, not us. But he commands that we pray that he does that. As we pray for the world, for those who need the gospel, as we pray for the workers who proclaim the gospel.

And as Paul constantly urges us, that we pray for the word itself, that it will have free course and be glorified as it should. And then having prayed for the workers, remember, we're told to provide the real gospel money.

We're to rejoice, to be generous in ensuring that that gospel work can be done without hindrance. And that is a privilege that God calls all of us to be part of. And we all also have a role, don't we, as we proclaim together the true gospel message.

[37 : 54] And that's true whether our role particularly is to be a teacher or an evangelist, a special role, speaking on behalf of others, or indeed whether it's the role that we all share in as we gather together around God's word as we're doing tonight.

When as Paul says, if we're doing that and the word of God is being clearly heard, then even a total outsider who knows nothing can come in among us and sense, yes, surely God is in this place, surely God is among these people and speaking.

We all share in that wonderful proclamation, just as we're all called to share in personifying that real gospel message in our individual lives, in our own winsome conduct, in lives that adorn the gospel message.

And as we've been thinking tonight, together, as a Christian community, as the church, publicizing that gospel mercy to our community, to our city, and to the world.

That's what it means. To be part of the church's corporate gospel mission, it's quite comprehensive, isn't it? When you think about it, it's all encompassing. Well, of course, it must be because you can't live your whole life for the cause of Christ without it taking over every part of our lives, whether that's our personal life or whether it's our corporate life.

[39 : 23] But if we really know, if we really understand the wonder of what is ours in Christ, we won't want it to be any other way, will we? And we need to keep reminding each other of that.

Amen. Well, let's pray as we close. But you, says Peter, are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Lord, once we knew no mercy, but now through your glorious Son, our Savior, we have received mercy in abundance.

To help us, we pray, to publicize that gospel mercy. And in so doing, in all that we are and in all that we do, adorn the doctrine of God our Savior, that people may see in us things that will point them to you and to praise our Father in heaven and to come to know him as their Father also.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.