

Thought for Sunday 4th October

Have you ever been lost in the car, and then come across a signpost at a junction? That is such a relief isn't it? One time we were in just that situation, and we read the destination on the signpost and set off. We ended up in completely the wrong place; someone had turned the sign around so it was pointing to the wrong road.



When I was a teenager I did a lot of long distance running; and one year a few of us "did" the three peaks, in Yorkshire. It's 24 miles and 1,585m (5200ft) of vertical ascent, and the target is to walk it in under 12 hours. We decided to run it in under 6. And by the last peak, Ingleborough, I was on my own, tired, cold, and the mist had come down. I had no idea where the path was. I ran around on the top for a bit. I was getting colder and I knew that if I waited for the others I'd be suffering from exposure before they got there. So I decided to pick a path and run down, hoping that I was on the right path. When I hit a road, I was 6 miles from where I needed to be. I'd gone wrong. I'd picked the wrong path. At the start, the right path was a few feet away; but after I got further and further down it was 6 miles away.

In our passage (Matthew 21:33-45) Jesus is telling the religious leaders of the day that they have picked the wrong path. Their belief system, based on following rules and laws derived by years of debate, would never get them to the kingdom of God. Worse, they were turning the signposts around so that other people couldn't get to the right place either. Jesus tells it in start, painful word pictures familiar to the leaders from Isaiah 4 and Psalm 118.

Why?

What we see in these words of Jesus is the love of God in Jesus extended to people who are plotting to kill him. Instead of finding the right path, they're striding out in the wrong direction and telling others to follow them on that path. And Jesus cares about that.

When I hit that road, I started jogging in what I hoped was the right direction. But some kind person stopped and drove me to where I needed to be. I was so grateful - I'm not sure I would have made it on my own. Jesus is offering these religious leaders, and us, a free lift to the end point.

Well, this is an interesting historical lesson, isn't it? Let's apply it to you and I for a moment. Because we all have a tendency to look for rules, and following rules, and doing the right thing, to make us right with God. That way, we're in control. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Suppose someone says to you, "You're going to heaven when you die, aren't you?" How do you answer? Maybe you'd say; *"Well, I hope so"*.

What does that mean? *"I hope I've lived a good enough life that my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds"*, maybe? If so, Jesus says, that's the wrong path. It's the path the Pharisees were on. It starts out just a little away from the right path, but it ends up miles away from where we need to be.

I was talking some time ago to someone who said *"I don't think I'm good enough to be a Christian"*. Substitute the word *"Pharisee"* for *"Christian"* and it would fit; but no one can say they aren't good enough to be a Christian. Jesus spent time with prostitutes, thieves, outcasts from society. None of them could earn their way to heaven, and yet they were each welcomed by Jesus and so by God.

When Jesus says to the crowds, *"come to me"*, he includes everyone; the pimp and the thief and even the Pharisees who want him dead.

You may be someone who has led a good life, a moral life, who speaks out against anything you see which doesn't fit your moral code. But if you're relying on that to lead to your acceptance by God, you're on the wrong path.

Or maybe you think you're not good enough or have done things so terrible you will never be accepted by Jesus. Wrong again, says Jesus, it's never too late to get to the right place. Come to Jesus, just as you are, and rely on Him to get you there. Just come.

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